UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, MERCED

“Internet Meme Culture: Affective Response and Political Indoctrination”

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in

Interdisciplinary Humanities

by

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2022

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The Dissertation of Hannah Leah Maulden is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the help and encouragement I have received from my dissertation committee members, Manuel M. Martín-Rodriguez, Ken Yoshida, and Katherine Steele Brokaw. As my advisor, Manuel was there from the inception of this project and responded to many rambling emails and nonsensical spiels as I attempted to clarify my thoughts and discern exactly where I wanted my research to go. He was always supportive and provided useful feedback that helped me shape my ideas and research into the project it has become. Ken has also provided countless hours of conversation as I worked to define my research parameters and clarify my arguments and has provided much helpful feedback throughout the entire dissertation process. Similarly, Katherine provided useful suggestions that helped me better develop and refine my claims. I would also like to thank my external examiner, Anne Zanzucchi, who took time out of her busy schedule to read my dissertation and ask thoughtful questions that helped further clarify my argument.

During the final semester, I was supported by Graduate Dean's Dissertation Fellowship, which allowed me to focus all of my efforts on writing and complete my dissertation in a timely manner.

Finally, I would like to thank my partner, Damien Conoly, who has read, edited, and proofed almost every word I've written in the twelve years we've been together. He has talked me off of every metaphorical ledge (and there have been many) and encouraged me to keep going when I was ready to quit. I wouldn't have done this without you.

Curriculum Vitae

Education:

Ph.D. in Interdisciplinary Humanities *(May 2022)*
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Dissertation: "Internet Meme Culture: Affective Response and Political Indoctrination"
Advisor: Dr. Manuel Martín-Rodriguez

M.A. in Popular Culture *(August, 2015)*
Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH
Thesis: "Heroes and Villains: Political Rhetoric in Post-9/11 Popular Media"
Advisor: Dr. Marilyn Motz

B.A. in English (*May 2013*)
Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN
Thesis: "I've Made a Huge Mistake: *Arrested Development* as a Menippean Satire"
Advisor: Dr. David Lavery

Teaching Experience:

University of California, Merced
August 2015-Present

Instructor of Record for ENG 065: Literary Comedy. Responsibilities included creating a syllabus, planning curriculum, developing and presenting lectures and choosing texts, as well as developing assignments, quizzes, and exams. (Spring 2020)

Teaching Assistant for CCST 060: Introduction to Chicano Culture. Responsibilities included leading two discussion sections, as well as grading assignments, quizzes, and exams. (Fall 2015, Fall 2016, Fall 2017, Fall 2021)

Teaching Assistant for ENG 102: The Long Eighteenth Century. Responsibilities included leading two discussion sections, as well as grading assignments, blog responses, and exams. (Spring 2017, Spring 2021)

Teaching Assistant for ENG 101: Medieval and Renaissance Literature and Culture. Responsibilities included leading a discussion section, as well as grading assignments, blog responses, and exams. (Fall 2020)

Teaching Assistant for ENG 020: Introduction to Shakespeare. Responsibilities included leading two discussion sections, as well as grading assignments, blog responses, and exams. (Spring 2019)

Teaching Assistant for ENG 103: British and American Lit 1830-1940. Responsibilities included leading two discussion sections, as well as grading assignments, blog responses, and exams. (Fall 2019)

Teaching Assistant for ENG 057: Introduction to Poetry. Responsibilities included grading assignments, quizzes, and exams. (Spring, 2016)

Bowling Green State University
August 2013-May 2015

Instructor of Record for POPC 1600: Introduction to Popular Culture. Responsibilities included creating a syllabus, planning curriculum, and choosing texts, as well as developing assignments, quizzes, and exams. (Spring 2014, Fall 2014, Spring 2015)

Teaching Assistant for POPC 1600: Introduction to Popular Culture, a freshman-level course offered through the Popular Culture Department. Responsibilities included leading a discussion section as well as grading assignments, quizzes, and exams. (Fall 2013)

Research

Valley Roots Project – 20015-20017 – Associate Director, Playwright

As a founding member of the Valley Roots Project, a community-based research project supported by a grant from the Merced Center for the Humanities at UC Merced, I worked with a team to conduct ethnographic research with and about agricultural farmers and other agricultural workers in Merced County, which was turned into a series of plays for and about the agricultural community in the Central Valley in December of 2017.

Conference Presentations:

"'But Her Emails Though': Fandoms, Antifandoms, and Affective Economics in the 2016 Presidential Election." *48th Annual PCA-ACA National Conference*. Indianapolis, IN, April 2018.

"'Who lives? Who dies? Who tells your story?': Redefining America Through the Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Historical Narrative in the Broadway Musical Hamilton." *Stories We Tell: Forceful Discourses and the Veracity of Narrative(s)– Fourth Annual Interdisciplinary Humanities Graduate Student Conference*. University of California, Merced, April 2017.

"'Because "She's F**cking Funny': Stand-Up Comedy Social Norms and an Action Theory of [Comedic] Value." *47th Annual PCA-ACA National Conference*. San Diego, CA, April 2017.

"'Does She Give Us A Reasonable Chub?': Deconstruction of the Male Gaze Through Irony and Offense in '12 Angry Men Inside Amy Schumer." *(Un)Bound Horizons: Flights, Faults, Ruptures, and Rhythms of Interdisciplinary Humanities–Third Annual Interdisciplinary Humanities Graduate Student Conference.* University of California, Merced, April 2016

"Dispelling Stereotypes: Post 9/11 Arab American Stand-Up Comedy." *Ray Browne Conference on Critical and Cultural Studies.* Bowling Green State University, February 2015.

"The American Hero vs. The Faceless, Ambiguous Terrorist: Political Rhetoric in Post-9/11 Popular Media." *Ray Browne Conference on Critical and Cultural Studies*. Bowling Green State University, February 2014.

Professional and Service Experience:

Assessment as Pedagogy and Planning Learning Community, U.C. Merced – Fall, 2016 – Graduate Student Participant.

Through participation in a semester-long learning community that began with pre-semester workshops and included weekly meetings throughout the semester, I completed projects that developed my ability to assess and meet student learning needs. I also earned a certificate in Undergraduate Learning Outcomes Assessment: Pedagogy and Program Planning

BGSU Culture Club – 2013-2015 – Secretary for the Board of Directors (Volunteer)

Helped organize and execute the Ray Browne Conference on Critical and Cultural Studies, a national conference on critical and cultural studies at Bowling Green State University in 2014 and 2015, which won Educational Program of the Year at BGSU for the 2013-2014 school year.

Mission City Press – 2003-2008 – Editorial Assistant, Girl's Club Manager, Office Administrator

I was involved in every step of the publishing process for more than 10 books. Work included editing, proofreading, meeting with typesetters and printers, proofing final samples, and marketing. Collaborated with team members to develop an international girl's book club curriculum based on the novels published through Mission City Press. Responsible for writing catalog copy, proofing sample catalogs, and editing the catalog layout for 5 catalogs. Also responsible for large amounts of website copy, including the development of content for an entire new website.

Spring Hill Arts Center – 2002-2008 – Secretary for the Board of Directors, Copy Writer (Volunteer)

Kept books and records; organized board functions; communicated between departments; conducted outreach programs. Organized, produced, and directed numerous pageants, plays, and events. Wrote 3 brochures, as well as numerous newsletters and press releases, and helped maintain and write copy for the website of the Spring Hill Arts Center.

Abstract

In this dissertation, “Internet Meme Culture: Affective Response and Political Indoctrination,” I examine the affective power of internet memes. As there was no pre-existing theoretical framework by which to analyze internet memes, I use a combination of literary theory, art history, and image theory, as well as performance studies to create a framework which I then used to analyze both internet memes and the ways in which people were responding to these memes, both on and offline.

Internet memes often interpolate people into greater cultural memes, sometimes without their knowledge or consent. Internet memes are often encoded with certain information, ideas, and ideologies, and yet are frequently decoded by those who view into them completely different messages. This is due to the interpretive communities and reading strategies of each individual host as well as to the affective power of internet memes, which value emotional responses over intellectual ones and enable the spread of false information just as readily as accurate information.

The success of an internet meme has nothing to do with the relevance or factuality of the information contained therein but is based entirely on the affective response it generates within a host—that is, someone who interprets, appropriates, and redistributes it. Given the unpredictable nature of affect, these responses can be hard to quantify, understand, or even identify, and are often only recognized through the actions they produce within a person, further complicating the process.

Social media provide a stage for acting out social drama (breach, crisis, and redress, as outlined by Victor Turner) similar to both traditional theater and the real world, and internet memes are a means of enacting the first two stages of social drama. However, when enacted online, these social dramas are unable to reach the third and final stage—the redress. Unlike the theater, internet meme culture is not a vehicle of transformation. Whether through social activism meant to change the system or through radicalization meant to overthrow the system, no lasting change can be made through internet meme culture.

Introduction

LOLCats and MAGA Hats:

Understanding the Affective Power of Internet Memes

Postmodernism. Neo-capitalism. Rhizomatic flows. Convergence Culture. No matter what theories or movements one uses to describe the present moment, there is no denying that, in this age of social media influencers, hashtag activism, and competing 24-hour news cycles, information generated and circulated online does more than entertain those who consume it—it shapes the ideas, ideologies, and experiences of almost everyone on the planet. However, has proclaiming #BlackLlivesMatter on Twitter actually reduced the prevalence of police brutality against minority bodies? Has stating "Me Too!" and incriminating a handful of powerful men truly changed the lived experiences of working-class women (particularly BIPOC women)? Has attempting to "Make America Great Again," succeeded in increasing the quality of life for most Americans? Whether we wear a MAGA hat or a Pussy hat, are we all simply mindless hosts, replicating the contagious cultural memes we have been infected with?[1]

The affective power of internet memes is immense. By this, I mean that internet memes can elicit surprisingly strong reactions, which often promote emotional responses over intellectual ones. This would not be an issue if internet memes were nothing more than a harmless form of entertainment—images of cats or funny slogans—but they are

[1] I will go into greater detail about this later in the introduction, but it is important to note here that I will be differentiating between the term *meme* (used to discuss larger cultural phenomena) and the term *internet meme* (used to describe something generated and shared online). Both terms should not be confused with image macros (images with words superimposed upon them), which are only a single type of internet meme but are often colloquially described as "memes."

increasingly engaged with politics and matters of life and death. Internet memes have become key sources of information dissemination and acquisition in the United States, promoting political platforms, spreading news stories, and supplying life-saving (or life-threatening) health information.[2] And in doing this, internet memes help shape people's understanding of the world, influence their beliefs and ideologies, impact identity formation and performance, and have recently led to what some experts are calling "mass radicalization" (Stanton).

I will be using a myriad of theoretical frameworks to examine how internet memes are produced, disseminated, interpreted, appropriated, and re-disseminated online, and how these internet memes interpolate people into greater cultural memes, sometimes without their knowledge or consent. I will reveal how internet memes are often encoded with certain information, ideas, and ideologies, and yet are frequently decoded by those exposed to them into completely different messages. I argue that this breakdown between intended and received meanings is due the interpretive communities and reading strategies of each individual host as well as to the affective power of internet memes, which values emotional responses over intellectual ones and enables the spread of false information just as readily as accurate information.[3]

Unlike some early memologists, I do not treat memes (including internet memes) as active, living agents purposefully infecting and controlling the minds of their hosts—for me, this treatment reduces, if not completely denies, the agency of the host. However,

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[2] Although this claim could possibly be made for most of the Western world, I will be narrowing my scope to focus primarily on the United States, though in the final chapter I will look at the problematics of such narrow focus and how memes nor their affective responses are limited by national borders.

[3] I will be discussing my use of the term "host" later in this introduction. Though I am not completely on board with the metaphor of memes as viruses that infect their hosts, I do like the term "host" in certain instances, as it enables me to shift the analysis from the person reading, interpreting, adapting, and/or sharing the meme and onto the meme itself.

I do argue that the success of an internet meme has nothing to do with the relevance and factuality of the information contained therein, but instead is based on the affective response it generates within those who interpret, appropriate, and redistribute it. And, given the unpredictable nature of affect, responses can be hard to quantify, understand, or even identify and are often only recognized through the thoughts or actions they motivate within a person. These responses range from benign (sharing cat macros on Facebook), or even positive (drawing attention to social injustices, raising money for good causes, etc.) to extremely dangerous—up to and including radicalization that has, in the last decade, led to illegal activities, including extreme violence and acts of domestic terrorism.

In the next section, I will attempt to define affect and understand how it works. I will also clarify exactly what I mean by "affective responses," and discuss how memes generate them. I will then offer a brief history of the meme, from the inception of the concept by an evolutionary biologist to its transformation into the "internet meme" as we understand it today. I will also provide a brief study of media ecologies and some leading theories about mass media production, dissemination, and consumption. Finally, I will outline what to expect in the following chapters.

"The Capitalism of Like"—Internet Memes and Their Affective Responses

Affect, as a theoretical field of study, is credited to psychologist Silvan Tomkins, who, in his seminal 1962 work *Affect Imagery Consciousness* describes affects as the "'hard-wired,' preprogrammed, genetically transmitted mechanisms that exist in each of us and are responsible for the earliest form of emotional life" (Nathanson 58). When an affect has been triggered, "some definable stimulus has activated a mechanism which

then releases a *known pattern of biological events*" (49). In other words, affects themselves are hard to pin down, but are recognizable in the ways in which they *affect* the thoughts, feelings, or emotions (or other physiological response) of the person experiencing them.

Although difficult to define, the theoretical concept of *affect* is utilized today in many fields, from psychology to neuroscience to literary and cultural studies. The term has been used widely "to mark a minimal subjectivity that evades standard procedures for knowing the self and the social" (Cohn 563). Affect has been used as an umbrella term to describe more specific concepts such as moods, feelings, and emotions (Zhang 247), and yet "affect-related phenomenon is much broader than emotions" (249), which "circulate outside of the individual, irreducible to the more conceptual thoughts or even emotions an individual might have" (Cohn 563). Discussing his response to the art of painter Francis Bacon, Gilles Deleuze states, "there are no feelings… there are nothing but affects; that is, 'sensation'" (Deleuze 39). Deleuze suggests that affects are sensations that remain even when other, more recognizable physiological responses, such has feelings or emotions, are out of reach. Things can trigger an affective response, it seems, without triggering a specific mental state. These responses can be almost unconscious. Someone experiencing affect may not even understand what they are feeling, thinking, or doing in response to it.

Affective responses, then, are the physiological or mental states, or the actions triggered by the affect. The affective responses are what we notice, not the affect itself.

According to Ping Zhang, who examines affective concepts and their relationships in the context of information and communication technology, affect is "a

critical factor in human decisions and behaviors," and "is a fundamental aspect of being human, playing an integral role in human motivation […] influencing reflexes, perceptions, cognition, social judgments, and impacting various behaviors" (247), which "can explain a significant amount of variance in one's cognition and behavior, and can even have more explanatory power than cognition under certain circumstances" (248). For Zhang, these affects do not just influence moods, feelings, and emotions, but cognition and decision making as well. I would add to Zhang's list beliefs, mythologies, and ideologies, as well as the actions these understandings inspire.

Despite an abundance of research on the subject, *affect,* as a term has remained difficult to define—or, conversely, there are too many definitions of the term, all of which have been contested and critiqued. However, the definition put forth by Sara Ahmed is particularly salient within the context of this project. In her essay "Happy Objects," Ahmed describes affect as "sticky," arguing that affect "is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects" (29). According to Ahmed,

> We are moved by things. And in being moved, we make things. An object can be affective by virtue of its own location (the object might be here, which is where I experience this or that affect) and the timing of its appearance (the object might be now, which is when I experience this or that affect). To experience an object as being affective or sensational is to be directed not only towards an object, but to "whatever" is around that object,

> which includes what is behind the object, the confusions of its arrival. (33)

In "Happy Objects," Ahmed is looking specifically at things that make people happy, and how that happiness motivates people to do or believe specific things, or points people in particular directions. Happiness creates particularly strong affective responses, but so do more negative emotions.

In "Affective Economics," Ahmed argues that emotions "play a crucial role in the 'surfacing' of individual and collective bodies through the way in which emotions circulate between bodies and signs" (117). Looking specifically at fearmongering and hate speech as it pertains to the construction of Muslim asylum seekers by the media and within the minds of many Westerners, Ahmed argues that "emotions work as a form of capital: affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced only as an effect of its circulation" (120). She uses the term "economic" in order "to suggest that emotions circulate and are distributed across a social as well as psychic field" (120). Affect, then, is not an emotion, but it appeals to or produces emotional responses, depending on the presentation and circulation of certain signs (words, images… perhaps even memes). Within this framework of "affective economics," the way in which signs, bodies, or even facts are framed and/or spread generate specific types of affect which, in turn, produce a particular set of emotional responses. Ahmed argues that emotions also have affective power, which create social relations exhibited through a myriad of means, including political and social alliances.

Using Ahmed's framework, I argue that the appropriation and dissemination of internet memes function as a form of affective economics, in that the framing of certain

information, spread through internet memes, generates specific types of affect, which go beyond familiar types of information, such as fact, truth, or reason. This could be because of the composition of the internet meme (the use of humor or a striking image) or could be because the image was shared by a particular person (perhaps a loved one on Facebook) or on a particular platform that the user trusts or enjoys using (such as a specific channel on 4chan or Reddit). This affect, in turn, produces a particular set of physiological responses amongst specific audiences, which can then manifest in the form of particular political ideas and/or actions. As Ahmed states, "We are moved by things. And in being moved, we make things" (33). These alliances are based on emotion, as opposed to facts, which accounts for the tensions and discrepancies between information credibility and information reception and dissemination.

In *Psychopolitics,* Byung-Chul Han conflates affect and emotion. According to Han, affects and emotions refer to strictly subjective matters, whereas feelings refer to something objective (42). Feelings have a narrative, they are constative—one can have a "feeling," which they are able to articulate and understand—whereas neither emotion nor affect "admits an account," and both are strictly performative (42). I take this to mean that, in Han's understanding, affect is not as recognizable or understandable as a feeling. One *has* a feeling, while one *experiences* an affect. For Han,

> Emotions are steered by the limbic system, which is also where the drives are seated. They form the pre-reflexive, half-conscious, physico-instinctual level of action that escapes full awareness. Neoliberal psychopolitics seizes on emotion *in order to influence actions on this prereflexive*

> *level.*[4] By way of emotion, it manages to cut and operate deep inside. As such, emotion affords a highly efficient medium for psychopolitically steering the integral person, the person as a whole. (48).

I disagree with Han's conflation of affect and emotion—I believe that affect can manifest as an emotion but is not limited to emotional responses. While emotions are generally ascertainable, affect can remain undetectable apart from the actions or reactions it prompts from a person. One can feel anger or sadness, for example, and yet one might not be aware of feeling anything at all and still be moved towards certain thoughts or actions. I do find Han's conception of affect as something of a physiological reflex, capable of creating strong yet only half-conscious responses and reactions in those experiencing it, very similar to my understanding of the affective response generated by internet memes.

Helpful too is Han's understanding of affect's relationship to the digital world. He argues that "the digital medium is an affect medium," as it "fosters the *immediate* release of affect: catharsis" (42). "Simply on the basis of its temporality," Han claims, "digital communication conveys affect more than it transmits feelings" (42). I would go even further and argue that digital communication conveys affect more than it transmits anything else, including facts, events, or any other familiar types of information. According to Han, this has led to a new stage of capitalism, which he calls Emotional

[4] According to Han, we have moved from Foucault's biopolitics, which concerns the biological and the physical to psychopolitics, where "immaterial and non-physical forms of production are what determine the course of capitalism" (25).

Capitalism. Through digital media, neoliberalism exploits emotions as a recourse to heighten productivity (45). Today's consumers consume emotions over things (46).

Neoliberalism, which for Han is closely tied to digital spaces, social media influencers, and hashtag activism, is the "Capitalism of 'Like"' (15). According to Han, power, as it manifests today, is smart, "with a liberal, friendly appearance," which "stimulates and seduces" and is thus "more compelling than power that imposes, threatens and decrees. Its signal and seal is the *Like* button. Now, people subjugate themselves to domination by consuming and communicating—and they click *Like* all the while" (15). Han is looking specifically at the neoliberal structure developed through and encouraged by digital media—particularly the rise of social media influencers and online activism—but the same can be said of those attempting to function outside of the system, generating subversive information on Reddit forums and Incel websites to be shared in greater numbers through larger social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Whether creating paid content meant to sell products or subversive image macros meant to incite radicalization, I believe that all internet meme culture functions within this Capitalism of *Like*.

"A Unit of Cultural Transmission"—The Birth of the Meme

In the decades before our present neoliberal moment and the Capitalism of *Like*, the word "meme" had a very different meaning. The term was coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*. In the final chapter, Dawkins attempts to theorize a behavioral equivalent of the human gene. He argues that "all life evolves by the differential survival of replicating entities" (192). But for

Dawkins, DNA is not the only replicator evolving life on this planet. Imitation is yet another unit of replication. “We need a name for the new replicator,” he states, “a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation. ‘Mimeme’ comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like ‘gene’. I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to meme” (192). Dawkins cites “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches” (192) as examples of memes, but also includes religions as memes with extremely high survival values, as they “infect” entire societies with specific ideas and beliefs that encourage specific actions, which often affect and/or promote survival, such as those regarding sanitation, diet, and procreation.

Dawkins likens memes to genetic DNA—minute samples of cultural DNA, which are spread from person to person through both copy and imitation. These memes “propagate themselves in the meme-pool by leaping from brain to brain via imitation" (192). Choices of fashion, diet, and customs, as well as technology development and use are all spread through imitation.

According to Dawkins, there are three main characteristics of any successful meme: fidelity, fecundity, and longevity. Knobel and Lankshear elucidate:

> Fidelity refers to qualities of the meme that enable it to be readily copied and passed from mind to mind relatively intact. […] Fecundity refers to the rate at which an idea or pattern is copied and spread. The more quickly a meme spreads the more likely it is to capture robust and sustained attention and be replicated and distributed. […] Longevity

> is the third key characteristic of a successful meme. The longer a meme survives the more it can be copied and passed on to fresh minds, thereby ensuring its ongoing transmission. Longevity assumes optimal conditions for a meme's replication and innovation. (201-202)

For Dawkins and the theorists that followed in his footsteps, in order for an idea, belief, or action to become a meme, it must be easily read or understood (even, I might add, if the understanding decoded by the receiver is different from that encoded by the producer), appropriated, replicated, and/or copied, and then shared at a rate that enables the idea, belief, or action to endure within a culture for a significant amount of time.

"Thought Contagion"—the Definition and Study of the Meme

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, other theorists worked to develop Dawkins' memetics into a fully flushed-out theoretical framework for the study of cultural transmission, believing it could "pave the way for the kind of overarching framework for the humanities that the first form of evolution has provided for the biological sciences" (Gabora, 1).

In *Thought Contagion: How Belief Spreads Through Society,* Aaron Lynch describes meme transmission as a form of "thought contagion." Just as a virus that causes the infected to sneeze is more likely to spread than one that does not, Lynch argues that memes that encourage proselytism, as many religions and political ideologies do, are more successful at replicating, spreading, and enduring than those that do not.

Lynch identifies seven major patterns by which memes are spread and retained within a culture. “Quantity of parenthood,” describes how a meme that influences, either directly or indirectly, the birthrate of those who adopt it (such as the idea that birth control is amoral) will make it more likely to spread, as parents have more chances to impart the meme to their children. The “efficiency of parenthood” refers to how easily a meme is adopted by those who are exposed to it. For example, memes that encourage cultural separation (such as beliefs held by the Amish in the United States, which encourage them to live apart from mainstream society) minimizes the opportunity for outside influence while encouraging the spread of internal memes. “Proselytic” meme transmission occurs when the meme itself encourages its own proliferation, such as beliefs regarding the importance of religions conversion. “Preservational” meme transmission refers to ideas that encourage those who hold them to continue holding them, such as religious ideologies that promise damnation for those who disregard specific beliefs. “Adversative” memes are those that encourage aggression against other memes. For example, nationalism is often supported by decrying ideas or actions viewed as “unpatriotic.” “Cognitive” memes are memes perceived as logical by those exposed to them. These memes support “common sense” ideas, but, as what is considered “common sense” can be culturally and/or geographically specific, Lynch considers them a more passive form of cultural replication. Finally, “motivational” memes are those people adopt because doing so appears to promote some form of self-interest for the host. For Lynch, these memes are most often found self-replicating within parental, proselytic and preservational styles.

Much like his "cognitive" pattern of meme replication, Lynch's patterns of meme repetition and retention seem like common sense but remain predominantly unsubstantiated theories. Still, there is relevance in his claims, as internet memes that encourage proselytization, encourage aggression against other belief systems, or seem "common sense," do circulate wider and for longer than those that do not, even if the information they are spreading has been proven false.

As with Lynch's conception of the meme as a virus, Liane Gabora sees memes as active agents working to infect others, while the human host simply "becomes a meme-evolving agent via the emergence of an autocatalytic network of sparse, distributed memories" (1). According to Gabora, "[o]ne can think of a meme as a pattern of information that is or has been encoded in an individual's focus. It can be subjectively experienced as a sensation, idea, attitude, emotion, or combination of these, and it can direct implementation by the motor apparatus" (7).

Similarly, Juan Delius describes memes as "synaptic patterns that code cultural traits" (83), which can be viewed as "symbiotic" or "parasitic." For Delius, "[m]emes have to be viewed as independently evolving entities whose core habitat happens to be the brains of some high animals" (92). Although he did not draw on the metaphor of a virus, Daniel Dennett continues this idea that memes are active agents, claiming that "a scholar is just a library's way of making another library" (128). For Dennett, memes are almost living, conscious entities which make up the passive human brain: "[t]he haven all memes depend on reaching is the human mind, which is itself an artifact created when memes restructure a human brain to make it a better habitat for memes" (133).

Many scholars, however, have critiqued this conception of the meme as a virus (or any other active, living agent), arguing that this description fails to account for the agency of the human host. In *Spreadable Media,* Henry Jenkins, Joshua Green, and Sam Ford criticize the entire concept of the meme, arguing that "while the idea of the meme is a compelling one, it may not adequately account for how content circulates through participatory culture" (19). The idea of a "self-replicating" meme, according to the authors, ignores the fact that "culture is a human product and replicates through human agency" (19).

Others, though, continue to explore the concept of the meme while placing greater agency on the human host. Building on a definition of the meme as defined by Elan Moritz, Frances Heylighen asserts,

> A meme can be defined as an information pattern, held in an individual's memory, which is capable of being copied to another individual's memory. This includes anything that can be learned or remembered: ideas, knowledge, habits, beliefs, skills, images, etc. Memetics can then be defined as the theoretical and empirical science that studies the replication, spread and evolution of memes.

For Heylighen, the memetic life cycle consists of four stages, which determine the meme's fitness—how strong the meme is, how long it lasts, and how wide it travels. Stage One consists of Assimilation, in which a meme attracts the attention of a host. This means "either that the individual encounters a meme vehicle, or that he or she independently discovers it, by observation of outside phenomena or by thought, i.e.

recombination of existing cognitive elements. To be assimilated, the presented meme must be respectively *noticed*, *understood* and *accepted* by the host" (419). But instead of spreading like a virus into an unassuming host, "a host that has understood a new idea must also be willing to believe it or to take it serious" (419-20). The easier a meme is to assimilate, the more successful a meme will be; familiarity and simplicity are thus components of most highly successful memes.

Stage Two is Retention, in which the meme is retained in that hosts' (which can be comprised of a single person or an entire group) memory. "By definition, memes must remain some time in memory, otherwise they cannot be called memes. The longer the meme stays, the more opportunities it will have […] Just like assimilation, retention is characterized by strong selection, which few memes will survive. Indeed, most of the things we hear, see or understand during the day are not stored in memory for longer than a few hours" (420). Memes that are catchy and easy to remember (think earworms) or memes that are so prevalent that the host is exposed to them multiple times, are much more successful.

After retention comes Expression, in which the meme is externally expressed "in a language, through actions and behaviors, or by any other form of communication that can be interpreted by others" (421). This can be anything from posting an image or video online to acting out the tenets of a religion.

During the final state, Transmission, the meme is then shared with others. "To reach another individual, an expression needs a physical carrier or medium which is sufficiently stable to transmit the expression without too much loss or deformation" (422). This can be through teaching or parenting, as well as through writing,

performance, creating and sharing images, or any other actions performed by a host that can be recognized by others. Once transmitted, the meme is assimilated by a new host, starting the life cycle again.

Heylighen is writing in the 1980s and 90s, before social media. However, when applied to internet memes these four stages still hold true. The most successful internet memes are catchy, easy to understand and retain, and simple to appropriate and share.

To become a meme, according to Heylighen, an idea, habit, belief, skill, image, etc. must "be sufficiently salient to attract the host's attention," meaning that "the host recognizes the meme as something that can be represented in his or her cognitive system," as "the mind is not a blank slate on which any idea can be impressed. To be understood, a new idea or phenomenon must connect to cognitive structures that are already available to the individual" (419). Because a meme must be easily recognizable and understood to become a meme in the first place, they spread most successfully when easily recognized and/or understood by a potential host. Gabora argues that this happens through a process she calls "chunking."

> Frequently many memes get integrated into one through a process referred to in the psychological literature as 'chunking'[…] Chunking involves forming associations amongst previously-learned memes and establishing this constellation of associations as a new meme in long term memory; it is analogous to the formation of coadapted genes, or schemata […] Whereas chunking generally refers to the binding of semantically unrelated memes (as in the

> memorization of an arbitrary string of numbers), categorization involves the recognition of semantic relationships. […] Thus what constitutes a meme (and thus a feature) will differ amongst individuals, and within an individual over time. (7)

This chunking often happens in groupings, which Dawkins originally called "memeplexes," but Derek Gather describes as "Macromemes," or entire meme pools. As Gather explains,

> Memes are not transmitted independently. A religious education, for instance, imparts an enormous bundle of memes to an individual which are generally delivered all together or not at all. They are, to borrow from genetic terminology, `linked'. Indeed many of these memes may be dependent on each other […]. The process of growing up and living in a certain culture at a certain time means that an individual is very likely to share a vast quantity of memes with other individuals in the same circumstances. This is what may be termed the meme pool of that group or society. Where a society is highly pluralistic, several meme pools may coexist and partially overlap.

Both Gabora and Gather's theories were published in 1997, in the early days of internet culture and before the popularization of social media. Their ideas are still relevant and applicable within the study of memes today, though I would argue that these

macromemes or meme pools are no longer nearly as culturally and/or geographically specific. The internet—and social media in particular—allows chunking to take place on an international scale.

Memetics as an area of study began to break down in the early aughts, having never truly gained the momentum of other contemporary fields, such as that of postmodernity and postcolonial studies. Many cultural theorists regarded memetics as "as a weak metaphor of the strong scientific discipline genetics; a metaphor that breaks down in its attempt of transitioning from nature science to social science," arguing that all attempts "to establish Memetics as an overall ontology, has been an over-ambitious failure" (Vada). As the theoretical conception of memetic began to decline, however, another type of meme was slowly starting to develop—the Internet Meme.

From LOLCats to Rickrolling: The Rise of the Internet Meme

For memologists, any cultural artifact that is widely reproduced and disseminated can be considered a meme, from religious ideas and national flags to cultural fads like Pogs and the Macarena. However, the availability of a piece of culture does not assure its memification. Top-down inundation by religious groups, government officials, news organizations, or even brands and advertisers, do not necessarily produce a meme, though any of those groups are capable of doing so. To become a meme, a piece of culture must be appropriated, re-appropriated, copied, and shared on a horizontal level, from person to person, an act that became much easier with the rise of social media.

The term "meme" arrived in popular vernacular within the last two decades, just as the academic study of mimetics was waning. This new conception of the "meme"

refers to a very specific entity—the internet meme. In a 2017 article for *Politico Magazine* Ben Schreckinger breaks down the modern history of this particular meme:

> The Jesus fish is an ancient meme, and Uncle Sam is an early American meme. The planking fad, in which people lie flat on their fronts in weird places and pose for photographs, is a recent behavioral meme. The term came into popular parlance with the advent of the "internet meme," usually a photograph with a clever caption that is shared around the Web. Created anonymously, remixed endlessly and shared constantly, the most viral memes seem to materialize out of nowhere. But the typical internet meme doesn't exactly come from nowhere. Its' very Darwinian life cycle often begins among thousands of other memes on a group of obscure message boards frequented by the internet's most devoted users, mostly young men, who Photoshop captioned images for their own amusement. The most promising become popular on these boards, as users post their own variations on the theme, and end up crossing over to more mainstream platforms like Reddit and Tumblr, which are used by "normies," or normal people, and often drive what's popular on the internet at any given time. From there, the most successful memes start populating platforms that almost everyone uses, like

> Facebook, and a very select few, like LOLCats and Rickrolling, enter the cultural canon, becoming recognizable even to one's parents.

Even Schreckinger's definition, despite being only five years old, is already quite dated. The main type of internet meme Schreckinger highlights, the image macro—or "photograph with a clever caption"—no longer requires even a rudimentary understanding of photoshop, as internet meme generators are quite prevalent online, where numerous websites allow one to add their own text to popular macro images, or even upload their own images to meme. Most smart phones offer easy image and text editing software as well, making the process even simpler. As such, most internet memes are no longer created by a small, devoted group on messaging boards like 4chan and Reddit (though many still are, and I will be looking at these sites of development throughout this dissertation). Today, a much more diverse population is editing and even creating internet memes of their own, meaning that the messages and ideas included within these internet memes, as well as the ways in which they can be interpreted, have become much more nebulous.

I will be differentiating between the term *meme*, which I will use to identify larger cultural phenomena, as defined and studied by cultural theorists, and *internet meme*, which I will use to describe something generated and shared online, even if it often does not generate the level of dissemination and/or appropriation to become a larger cultural meme. Individual internet memes do not automatically become memes in the original sense, in that each one does not necessarily contain a piece of the larger cultural DNA. However, I would argue that the greater cultural understanding of internet memes as

such, particularly that of the image macro—a digital image with some form of text superimposed upon it—is itself a meme. In fact, the term "meme" is often used interchangeably with that of the image macro, yet they are only a single type of internet meme, which itself is only a single type of meme.

Further, as image macros and other internet memes are most often generated individually and shared with a limited number of people, most never fully imbed within the culture at large the way they must in order to become true memes. LOLcats and Rickrolling, mentioned by Schreckinger, as well as planking and the Ice Bucket Challenge are examples of internet memes that grew into larger cultural memes. Individual image macros posted on 4chan and Reddit or shared between friends, are not. Still, these individual internet memes are often used to induct people into greater cultural memes, sometimes without their knowledge. As they move from platform to platform, constantly being adapted, appropriated, updated, and shared, the ways in which these internet memes are interpreted is endless. So too is the influence that they exert.

Memes, individually and as meme pools, spread rapidly and widely online. As such, these pieces of culture must be easy to copy and/or reproduce. This means that most memes spread through social media, by their very nature, are extremely simple—they cannot carry complex ideas and/or ideologies within them. For example, being exposed to a certain belief system or even discussing it with others online will not impart the same level of understanding as having been raised with these ideas and enculturated with them over the course of many years. This does not mean that memes spread through social media (particularly through internet memes) are unable to evoke complex ideas and/or

ideologies within the meme's host, only that, depending on the host, these ideas and/or ideologies can vary greatly.

To put it in literary terms, memes shared through childrearing, in-depth education, and other long-term interactions will help develop a host's interpretive communities and reading strategies, influencing the ways in which memes are processed, interpreted, and expressed. However, as memes are appropriated, reappropriated, and shared quickly, often through social media, these memes rely on pre-existing interpretive communities and reading strategies within potential hosts. Thus, the ideas and/or ideologies contained within any meme are constantly in flux.

Over the years, the internet meme has evolved from benign images of cats into a form capable of scathing cultural and/or political critique. In fact, they have become an important source of information dissemination. The internet meme has been used to criticize both Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, and in 2016, became an influential part of the election process. Internet memes have called attention to issues of climate change and global inequality. They have been used to share health information regarding the Covid-19 pandemic and rally support for social movements, such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo.

However, unlike traditional sources of information dissemination, internet memes are not subject to oversight, and there is no one to ensure the information shared through internet memes is factual. In fact, studies have shown that incorrect information spreads just as quickly and widely as correct information. This, I argue, is because the success of an internet meme has nothing to do with the relevance and factuality of the information contained therein, but instead is based on the affective response it generates within those

who interpret, appropriate, and redistribute it. Further, internet memes are meant to be shared, falling in line with early memeticians' assertions that memes that encourage proselytism are more successful at replicating, spreading, and enduring than those that do not. The very nature of contemporary social media culture has programmed people to share what they think, feel, do, or see far and wide, enabling meme Expression (to barrow Heylighen's turn) in ways the memeticians of the 1980s and 1990s could not have imagined.

Mediation, Remediation, and Hypermediation—Internet Memes and Media Ecologies

To understand how contemporary memes (and internet memes in particular) are generated, read, and spread, as well as the enormous influence they seem to exert, a better understanding of media in general—particularly mass media—is helpful.

First published in 1964, Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, though now quite dated, is still considered one of the foundational works of media studies. In it he coined the now-familiar expression "the medium is the message." McLuhan is concerned with the materiality of consumption. Though he is looking at media, specifically, he has a very broad definition of what makes a medium. For McLuhan, language is a medium or form of technology, as it "is the extension of man in speech that enables the intellect to detach itself from the vastly wider reality. Without language […] human intelligence would have remained totally involved in the objects of its attention" (79). He sees media as extensions of the human body and argues that "all

technologies are extensions of our physical and nervous systems to increase power and speed" (90).

McLuhan is concerned with how the medium itself affects the ways in which it is read, arguing that old models of content analysis are not enough. "More and more we turn from the content of messages to study total effects," he writes, "Concern with effect rather than meaning is a basic change of our electric time, for effect involves the total situation, and not a single level of information movement" (26). McLuhan is not just concerned with what messages are being disseminated, but how—and how both the message and the medium work together to generate certain responses within the reader/viewer.

Writing in the 1950s and early 1960s, McLuhan is particularly interested in how television messages differ from more "traditional media," such as written or oral communication. And, despite the drastically different media landscape of today, the understanding that the medium can change the ways in which messages are read remains as true as ever. This idea can help us understand why, in a world of 24-hour news channels and a wide array of credible news sources available online, in printed newspapers, and on the radio, internet memes have nevertheless become a trusted source of information acquisition for millions of people.

In *Remediation: Understanding New Media,* Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin build on McLuhan's ideas, arguing that all communication technologies erase their presence from the viewer, creating a virtual reality that is indistinguishable from the reality it purports to represent (5). *Remediation* is the representation of one medium in another (45). This practice, they claim, is so widespread that it is possible to "identify a

spectrum of different ways in which digital media remediate their predecessors, a spectrum depending on the degree of perceived competition or rivalry between the new media and the old" (45). They claim that "all current media function as remediators"—it is not ever possible for any medium to function independently. Remediation provides "a means of interpreting the work of earlier media as well" (55). Remediation is also a dialectic process between two opposing cultural logics, the logic of transparency, and the logic of hypermediacy (21).

Transparency is the act of situated viewing. According to Bolter and Grusin, transparent applications "seek to get to the real by bravely denying the fact of mediation" (53). However, transparent technologies are always remediated, despite the fact that they deny mediation (54). Hypermediacy, on the other hand, highlights this constructed relationship between networks—both between media and between representations embedded in media. Hypermedia "seek the real by multiplying mediation so as to create a feeling of fullness, a satiety of experience, which can be taken as reality" (53).

Bolter and Grusin build on Marshal McLuhan's assertion that a medium is "any extension of ourselves" (McLuhan 2), claiming that the body itself is a medium (Bolter and Grusin 237). As such, the body is also remediated, and thus "can both enact and critique traditional beliefs about gender and self" (240). Whereas many traditional news sources claim to be impartial and unbiased (which can never be the case, according to Bolter and Grusin), I believe internet memes acknowledge their hypermediacy—they are generated and spread from person to person. The authenticity of this "grassroots" information dissemination is often more trusted, particularly when coming from already-trusted sources (whether from particular people or on particular platforms).

Niklas Luhmann makes a similar argument, claiming that everything is negotiated through mass media. “Whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live,” he states at the beginning of *The Reality of Mass Media*, “we know through the mass media” (1). According to Luhmann, the “knowledge acquired from the mass media merges together as if of its own accord into a self-reinforcing structure” (1). The media is a closed system—it creates reality, then comments on it (5, 117). So, although it is a closed system, mass media have interpolated almost all aspects of society into this closed system. Further, removing the veil from mass media—making its negotiation of reality apparent—does not decrease its power in any way (1, 39). This is because mass media “seem simultaneously to nurture and to undermine their own credibility. They ‘deconstruct’ themselves since they reproduce the constant contradiction of their constative and their performative textual components with their own operations” (39).

Mass media are not based on a true/false dichotomy, but on an information (new) and noninformation (old) dichotomy (29). As such, the constructedness of reality becomes irrelevant. *The Reality of Mass Media* was originally published in 1996, long before the proliferation of user-generated media online, and, as such, is also somewhat dated. But I argue that the turn from consumption to production by the general public is just another step in the process by which media negotiates reality. People generate internet memes based on information, that then inspire more information—responses to and rebukes of the original information, reports on the effects of the original information, etc.

Matthew Fuller also sees media as closed systems. In *Media Ecologies, Materialist Energies in Art and Technology,* he argues that media systems are ecologies able to be studied like any other ecological system. Media systems are made up of networks of interconnected objects and processes. The objects that make up these systems, "have poetics" and "make the world and take part in it, and at the same time, synthesize, block or make possible other worlds" (1). Borrowing Friedrich Nietzsche's "will to power," Fuller identifies a "medial will to power." While Neitzsche used the concept of the will to power to describe the force that motivates all human behavior, the medial will to power "is that which moves things across thresholds but cannot be defined by the states exemplified on either side of the threshold; it is what propels the fulfillment of what can momentarily be understood as a phase space but is not reducible to any steadiness of state" (63). I believe Fuller's "that which moves things across thresholds" is affect. According to Fuller, "all standard objects contain with them drives, propensities and affordances that are 'repressed' by their standard uses, by the grammar of operations within which they are fit" (167). Internet memes, then, contain drives, propensities—even desires of their own. This can be seen as an extension of early memeticians' description of memes as active agents working to spread independent of their hosts.

Although I disagree with this conception of the meme as an autonomous entity with its own will and desires (as I believe this conception of the meme strips the human "hosts" of their agency, which I do not see as the case), thinking about memes in this way can help articulate the ways in which memes spread and procreate at a speed that is difficult to control, sometimes at the detriment of their hosts. The internet meme, in particular, does often seem to possess a "mind of its own," spreading even when it does

so by harming its host. The Tide Pod Challenge, for example, which consisted of people claiming to eat laundry detergent pods, was an internet meme that seems to have arisen from satirical articles in *The Onion* and *CollegeHumor.com* in 2017, as well as a discussion on Reddit's "Forbidden Snacks" forum. Though it started as a joke, the Tide Pod Challenge did result in some consumption of the highly poisonous pods, mostly by young people. In the summer of 2021, the similarly dangerous Milk Crate Challenge went viral on social media site Tick Tock, with people posting short videos of themselves climbing podiums made from precariously stacked milk crates. Though almost every video ended with the person falling from the milk crate podium—and sometimes procuring serious injury in the process—the challenge was imitated hundreds of times and videos of the Milk Crate Challenge rapidly spread through multiple social media platforms. Statements from medical professionals and from Tick Tock's CEO, as well as numerous news articles outlining the serious injuries caused by this challenge, failed to put a stop to the dangerous meme. Even when prompting obviously dangerous behavior or containing information that has been proven false or even harmful, internet memes continue to spread. And they continue to generate affective responses in their hosts.

Jokes, Cartoon Characters, and Mass Radicalization: What Is to Come

In Chapter One, I will be using a combination of meme theory, humor theory, and audience reception theory to analyze how internet memes are read, interpreted, appropriated, and distributed, arguing that the affective power of internet memes—which encourage emotional responses over intellectual ones—promotes the spread of affective information over accurate information. By this, I do not mean that accurate information is

not affective, nor that it *cannot* be shared via internet memes, but that if the information shared does not create a strong affective response, it will not be internalized, appropriated, and reshared by enough people to become a larger cultural meme. Information that is most likely to be noted, remembered, appropriated, and redistributed has to be new, exciting, outrageous or in some other way able to create an affective response in those exposed to it. I chronicle the Pizzagate phenomenon—which started as an obscure joke on 4chan and grew into a conspiracy theory believed by hundreds, if not thousands of people—and how it influenced the QAnon conspiracy—which, in turn (and despite being proven false), has been believed by millions of people and has motivated a string of violent crimes throughout the United States and Canada.

In this chapter I will be interrogating one form of affect creation in particular: humor. As a meme container, humor is effective, in that it creates strong affective responses in most people, enabling those exposed to a meme to notice, consume, retain, and share it more easily. As a conduit of information, however, humor is terrible, as the ways of interpreting humor are endless and can be extremely unpredictable.

In Chapter Two, I will shift my focus to the use of images within internet memes. Examining the cartoon character Pepe the Frog, which became the unofficial mascot for Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, as well as a photograph of the bodies of Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his young daughter, which vent viral in June of 2019 and became the focal point of a larger cultural meme surrounding the U.S./Mexico border, I will interrogate exactly what images do and how the affect generated by images varies from that of verbal and/or written communication.

I argue that images are incapable of containing and spreading information on their own—they must rely on text to "anchor" them or on the reading strategies and interpretive communities of the viewer to provide meaning and/or decode information from them. However, as the affective responses generated by images are so strong, that affect is often mistaken for information, though any information garnered from an image comes from the ideas, ideologies, and mythologies of the viewer, making images unstable and open to endless interpretations. Despite all this, as images generate such strong affective responses, they are ideal candidates for virality and memification.

In the final chapter, I argue that the affective responses generated by internet memes can encourage those who are exposed to them to then embody and share them, not just through more internet memes, but through identity formation and performance. I will examine the intersections of misogyny and white nationalism, as they have shaped certain online spaces as well as the beliefs and identities of those who traffic these spaces. By working backwards, from the 2021 Capitol Riot to the online terror perpetrated by the Gamergate phenomenon and the real-world violence prompted by the Incel movement, I will explore the ways in which internet memes effect identity formation and performance, and how it can potentially lead to radicalization and acts of extremist violence.

I contend that the mask of benignity or humor assumed of internet memes can open people to ideas and/or ideologies they would otherwise reject and normalize, and that the "chunking" nature of memes can interpolate people into a myriad of belief systems at once, both of which work in tandem to radicalize those who come in contact with certain internet memes and/or the online spaces in which they are generated.

While the affective responses to some internet memes have proven strong enough to manifest in real world acts of violence and extremism, no prolonged changes have been made via online activism. There has, thankfully, been no overthrow of the government or Incel revolution, but there has also been no drastic shift in gender or race relations in the United States in the wake of the #BlackLivesMatter and #MeTo movements, proving that the ecology of social media movements and activism has, for the most part, remained online.[5] Ironically, the more people seem to be engaging in online activism and identity performance, the more they seem to be conditioned to keep these performances online. Protests in the street have quickly transitioned back to online bickering in the comments sections of Instagram posts and rebuttals to Tick Tock videos, all of which has only succeeded in further dividing people, instead of enacting any larger cultural changes.

Though there are plenty of studies citing the negative effects of social media, as of 2017, 69% of adults and 81% of teens use social media according to the Pew Research Center (Smith).[6] And attempts to derail and debunk the spread of misinformation through social networking sites has so far fallen short, which only acts to reconfirm my argument that short, catchy, affective snippets of information (whether accurate or not), will always spread faster than well-researched studies and longer, fact-checked news articles.

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[5] For an in-depth discussion of the #MeToo movement's failure to support marginalized communities, see Alison Phipps' *Me, Not You: The Trouble with Mainstream Feminism*.

[6] For more on the negative effects of social media, see Akram, Waseem, and Kumar's "A Study on Positive and Negative Effects of Social Media on Society" in *International Journal of Computer Sciences and Engineering* 5.10, Siddiqui, Shabnoor, and Singh's "Social Media its Impact with Positive and Negative Aspects" in *International Journal of Computer Applications Technology and Research* 5.2, and Abdulahi, Aida, Behrang Samadi, and Gharleghi's "A Study on the Negative Effects of Social Networking Sites Such as Facebook Among Asia Pacific University Scholars in Malaysia" in *International Journal of Business and Social Science* 5.10 (2014).

Although more research on sites of intervention needs to be conducted, I do believe that developing greater media literacy within the American population, as well as placing a stronger focus on critical reading and thinking skills in K-12 education, can help strengthen individuals' ability to identify and reject misinformation. In the meantime, examining the ways in which internet memes (particularly those spreading misinformation) are created, interpreted, adapted, appropriated, and spread can reveal the particular beliefs, ideologies, and mythologies inherent within the individuals or groups who are spreading them and can illuminate how people are processing, responding to, creating, and recreating truths, ideologies, and mythologies of their own. This, in turn, can create a greater understanding of people's needs, how to best to support those needs, and how to communicate factual information in ways that will be accepted and understood.

Chapter One

From Cheezburgers to Cheese Pizza:

Understanding the Interpretive Power of Internet Memes

A successful meme is an infectious meme.

Just as a virus that causes the host to sneeze will spread further and wider than one that does not, memes that encourage sharing, such as evangelical religions, are more successful at replicating, spreading, and enduring than memes that do not. Internet memes, by their very nature, are meant to be shared, making them more likely to become greater cultural memes than other types of information transmission. The easier an internet meme is to assimilate, retain, express, and transmit, the wider it will spread and the more successful it will become—and the more likely it will be to develop into a greater cultural meme. Sometimes, however, it can be difficult to ascertain exactly what enables a particular internet meme to grow popular enough to become a larger cultural phenomenon.

In January of 2007, software developer Eric Nakagawa was having a hard time and asked his friend Kari Unebasami to send him cute pictures to cheer him up. One of the pictures Unebasami sent was of a plump grey cat looking at the camera beseechingly, mouth open as if speaking. Above the image were the words "I CAN HAS CHEEZBURGER?"[7] The image, known as an "lolcat" macro, was one of many similar images of cats overlaid with misspelled and grammatically incorrect phrases popular on the website 4chan. Nakagawa was not sure why he found that particular image so funny,

[7] See Image 1 in List of Images starting on page 179.

but something about it caught his attention and lingered in his mind. As an out-of-work software developer, he easily created a website to host the image, calling it "I Can Has Cheezburger," after the macro. Within months, *icanhascheezburger.com* was receiving 200,000 unique visitors and a half-million page views each day (Rutkoff), with more than 500 daily submissions of user-generated "lolcats" (Langton). Nakagawa and Unebasami were able to monetize the sight early and were making an estimated $5,600 per week (Langton) before selling the company for $2 million in September of 2007 (Moses).

Many 4chan users were upset over what they saw as the theft and commodification of their lolcat macros, going so far as to send Nakagawa and Unebasami death threats (Wortham), and yet these lolcat macros continued to proliferate throughout the internet, on 4chan, icanhascheezburger.com, and beyond, until they were widely circulated on more popular websites, such as Myspace, Facebook, and Twitter. In 2009, Entertainment Weekly proclaimed I Can Has Cheezburger "the cutest distraction of the decade" (Miltner).

Although the term "meme" was not widely used to describe any type of internet phenomena at the time of icanhascheezburger.com's creation, lolcats is considered one of the first and most successful cases of internet meme monetization.[8] By 2014, the meme had spawned a product line, a Bible translation, multiple international art shows, an off–Broadway musical, and a television show (Miltner). Over fifteen years after the initial image was posted on 4chan, the original "I Can Has Cheezburger" lolcat is still widely

[8] The earliest use of the term "internet meme" and its application to internet macros I could find was a *Time.com* article by Lev Grossman published on July 12th, 2007—though I do not suggest that this is the first usage of the term. Grossman mentions the "internet meme," in italics and goes on to describe what an internet meme is but does not claim to have developed the application of the term to internet phenomena himself. All other articles I accessed from that period and earlier use terms such as "image macro," or "internet phenomena." The term "internet meme" does not seem to have become part of the mainstream vernacular until 2008, whereas most of the articles I accessed from mid 2008 and on employ the term.

recognizable and heavily circulated online and has evolved (as memes do) into hundreds of other highly successful cat memes.

The internet meme, as a form, has also evolved—from cute and funny images circulated online to a key form of information dissemination. Internet memes have become a way for politicians to share their political platforms and critique their opponents, for the CDC to disseminate life-saving knowledge during a pandemic, and for news organizations to share important information. But internet memes have also become the perfect conveyors of misinformation. A successful meme, after all, must be simple enough to be remembered, adapted, and shared. As such, the meanings encoded within internet memes are precarious, reliant on the interpretation and adaptation of each individual host. As they are interpreted, appropriated, and re-disseminated, the meanings within them change and shift, as are the ways in which they are read and interpreted. Something begun as a joke on an obscure message board can thus turn into a global conspiracy theory believed by millions of people.

In this chapter, I will utilize a combination of meme theory, humor theory, and audience reception theory to examine the ways in which internet memes are read, interpreted, appropriated, and distributed. I will argue that the affective power of internet memes—which promotes emotional responses over intellectual ones—encourages the spread of affective information over factual information. In fact, the very concepts of "fact" and "truth"—the understanding of what is true and what is not—is problematized by internet meme culture.

Truth, for many, has become emotionally constructed, based less of objective facts and figures than on affective responses. Information shared virally through internet

memes is more likely to inspire strong emotions and emotional reactions, regardless of its factual content, prompting people to develop their own understandings of what is true and what is not based on emotional responses, which can sometimes contradict factual truth.[9] This is because memes do not function on a true/false binary, but on an information (new) and noninformation (old) binary. It is not that factual or old information *cannot* be shared via internet memes, but that if information does not create a strong enough affective response within each host, it will not be internalized, appropriated, and reshared in numbers large enough to become a greater cultural meme. Information most likely to be noticed, retained, and shared by a host is, if not new, then often shocking or in some other way able to create an affective response in the host. For example, information that reinforces the pre-existing beliefs of a host is also more likely to be assimilated, retained, expressed, and transmitted.

In this chapter, I will focus on one form of affect creation in particular: humor. Humor is a perfect meme container, as it creates a strong affective response, enabling a host to notice, consume, and retain it. Humor is, however, a terrible conduit of information, as it offers endless avenues of interpretation. Examining the Pizzagate phenomenon, which started as a joke but grew into a conspiracy theory believed by hundreds, if not thousands of people, and how Pizzagate, in turn, influenced the QAnon conspiracy, which—despite being proven false—has been believed by millions of people and has motivated a string of violent crimes throughout the United States and Canada.

[9] This, in a sense, is what Hannah Arendt describes as "political truth," as opposed to "factual truth," in her 1967 essay "Truth in Politics."

From Cheezburgers to Cheese Pizza

On November 2, six days before the 2016 Presidential Election, a /pol/ user posted a comment claiming that any reference to pizza made by John Podesta (then chairman of Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign) in the leaked emails were code for pedophilia.[10] A further assertion claimed that "pizza" and "pasta" were code words for "little girls" and "little boys" (LaFrance). This seemingly preposterous claim does make a little sense within the context of a 4chan discussion, however, as 4chan has a history of proliferating child pornography, which posters often refer to as "CP" in order to evade detection. Over time, this code evolved into the words "cheese pizza" (Schreckinger). Despite any resemblance to 4chan's pedophilia code, however, those who initiated Pizzagate seem to have understood the ludicrousness of the claim and the initial /pol/ post does not seem to have been taken the claim seriously.

"It was absolutely a joke and a guy just made it up on the spot," Gregg Housh, an active 4chan user, told Ben Schreckinger at *Politico.com* in 2017. "I was on the thread and people thought it was hilarious and halfway through they were like, 'How can we get people to take this seriously?'" (Schreckinger). Whether started as a joke or not, /pol/ users ran with the idea, creating memes and charts that they then dispersed to broader audiences on r/The_Donald.[11] Reddit users then created an /r/Pizzagate subreddit to further develop the conspiracy. Twitter users with large followings started tweeting about the theory with the hashtag #Pizzagate and the conspiracy spread rapidly, despite being quickly discredited by the police, the FBI, and *The New York Times* (Schreckinger). To

[10] /pol/ is a "politically incorrect" forum on the website 4chan.org, which I will look at in more detail in the following chapters.

[11] A forum on the website Reddit.com (known as a subreddit) dedicated to the election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States. I will be examining this forum in greater detail in Chapter Two.

make matters worse, the story was also picked up by and spread on fake news sites, which were then shared by third parties unaware of the joke on both Facebook and Twitter.

The image macros and infographics used to spread the Pizzagate conspiracy were often eye-catching and memorable, with bright colors and pictures of children (sometimes with recognizable democratic politicians and/or political operatives), paired with screen caps from the leaked emails removed from context, with any mentions of children, pizza, pasta, or cheese highlighted. Disturbing images and graphics from musical and visual artists purportedly connected to Comet Ping Pong, the pizzeria at the heart of the conspiracy, were juxtaposed against images of children without any context given for their connection.

In one infographic, a photograph of a woman who is naked from the waist down and holding a piece of pizza in front of her so as to cover her crotch, appears next to an image of a baby in a highchair, face covered with pasta sauce.[12] Both, according to the graphic, are from the Instagram accounts of people who have tagged Comet Ping Pong or commented on one of the restaurant's Instagram posts at other times, in images that are completely unrelated.[13] Though, in reality, none of these images have anything to do with each other, the juxtaposition of highly sexual or disturbing images shared next to images of children will inevitable generate a strong affective response in almost all people, whether they believe or even understand the claims of the infographic. This is one reason,

[12] See Image 2 in List of Images starting on page 179.
[13] Many of the accounts mentioned in these memes have now been deleted or set to private, so accessing the posts in which Comit Ping Pong was tagged, or in which certain users commented on an image, is impossible. All that is available are the screencaps provided within the infographic, showing that a like, tag, or comment has occurred.

I believe, that the conspiracy continued to spread, despite numerous attempts to discredit it.

On December 4, 2016, a 28-year-old North Carolina man named Edgar Maddison Welch open fired on Comet Ping Pong, though no one was hurt. (Schreckinger). According to Adrienne LaFrance, in an article for *The Atlantic,*

> Shortly after Trump's election, as Pizzagate roared across the internet, Welch started binge-watching conspiracy-theory videos on YouTube. He tried to recruit help from at least two people to carry out a vigilante raid, texting them about his desire to sacrifice "the lives of a few for the lives of many" and to fight "a corrupt system that kidnaps, tortures and rapes babies and children in our own backyard." When Welch finally found himself inside the restaurant and understood that Comet Ping Pong was just a pizza shop, he set down his firearms, walked out the door, and surrendered to police, who had by then secured the perimeter. "The intel on this wasn't 100 percent," Welch told *The New York Times* after his arrest.

"The intel wasn't 100 percent," may seem like an understatement to many of us, but the information, as it appeared to Welch in the weeks following the initial Pizzagate explosion, seemed incredibly salient. Despite efforts made by law enforcement and news agencies to discredit the meme, Welch found claims legitimate enough to validate

crossing state lines with a 9-mm AR-15 rifle, a six-shot .38 caliber Colt revolver, and a shotgun, and firing into a populated pizza parlor.

Despite the fact that Welch was unable to find any damning evidence at the pizzeria, the Pizzagate phenomenon refused to die. As LaFrance articulates it,

> If you paid attention to the right voices on the right websites, you could see in real time how the core premises of Pizzagate were being recycled, revised, and reinterpreted. The millions of people paying attention to sites like 4chan and Reddit could continue to learn about that secretive and untouchable cabal; about its malign actions and intentions; about its ties to the left wing and specifically to Democrats and especially to Clinton; about its bloodlust and its moral degeneracy. You could also—and this would prove essential—read about a small but swelling band of underground American patriots fighting back.

As is the way with memes, Pizzagate adapted, spreading from host to host—and each host, in turn, interpreted the meme in their own way, based on their interpretive communities and reading strategies. Some saw the claim as the farce it was. Others thought that it was a ridiculous—albeit serious—claim. Still others, such as Welch, read truth into the claims.

Allegations of child abuse, after all, are extremely efficacious in that they generate strong emotional reactions, such as disgust and anger, in most people. The idea

that children are in danger can be a strong motivator, and a difficult one to forget. As such, the idea of a powerful group of people abusing children—even after Welch's discovery that Comet Ping Pong was not the front for a pedophilia ring—refused to die. Further encouraging this meme was the fact that those allegedly abusing children were politicians, celebrities, and/or figureheads many people were already predisposed to dislike and distrust—the meme, which implicated left-leaning politicians and figureheads, was mostly accepted and shared by those with conservative values.

On October 28, 2017, nearly a year after the original Pizzagate post appeared on 4chan, an anonymous poster, calling themselves "Q Clearance Patriot"—which would be shortened to Q in the months and years to follow—claimed to be a high-ranking government official with access to classified information.[14] In numerous posts made over the next few months, Q declared that that the world was being run by a secret group of Satan-worshiping pedophiles, including democratic politicians Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and Joe Biden, as well as Hollywood elites like Oprah Winfrey, Tom Hanks and Ellen DeGeneres, and even religious figures such as Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama (Roose).

According to Q, Donald Trump had been recruited by the military to expose the actions of this group and restore justice to America. Q's posts, full of clichés such as "I've said too much," "Follow the money," and "Some things must remain classified to the very end" (LaFrance), read like an elaborate joke. In fact, many people outside of the

[14] I am utilizing the gender-neutral form of "themselves" here, to signify a single person of unknown gender, though many people have speculated that Q is not a single person, but a group or people posting under a single moniker.

conspiracy have suggested that the initial posts were meant to be a parody of Trump by a detractor or a work of fan fiction by a single Trump supporter (LaFrance).

Regardless of Q's initial motivation, and despite the ludicrousness of the claims, the QAnon conspiracy, as it became known, continued to spread—and continued to be taken seriously by a significant portion of the population.[15] In December of 2020, NPR and Ipsos released a study claiming that 17% of Americans (more than 55 million people) believe the key claim of QAnon, which is that "a group of Satan-worshiping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control our politics and media" (Roose).

David Hayes, known as PrayingMedic to his followers, was one of the most well-known QAnon evangelists, with over 300,000 subscribers on both Twitter and YouTube as of June 2020 (LaFrance). Hayes would aggregate and analyze the information posted by Q on difficult-to-navigate sites like 4chan, 8chan, and 8kun, adding his own interpretations as he disseminated Q's messages to his following. Tracy Diaz, also known as TracyBeanz, was another popular QAnon evangelist, with 185,000 followers on Twitter and more than 100,000 YouTube subscribers (LaFrance). And Diaz should not be confused with a social media influencer with no real understanding of politics—before jumping on the QAnon train, she was an active Republican operative who worked for Texas Representative and former Presidential Candidate Ron Paul (Goforth).[16]

The QAnon meme continued to spread and so too did violent (and in one case, deadly) crimes associated with the movement.[17] As violence associated with the QAnon

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[15] Q, the name of the initial 4chan poster, and Anon, as in "anonymous," as everyone is on 4chan.
[16] A social media influencer is an online personality who regularly posts about a specific topic to topics on their preferred social media platforms and has generated a large following of people who pay close attention to their posts. They often leverage their large following to make money by posting sponsored content and advertisements.
[17] In June 2018, an Arizona man blocked a bridge near the Hoover Dam with an armored vehicle. In December of 2018, a California man was arrested with bomb-making supplies, allegedly wanting to blow

movement increased, Q was kicked off 4chan only to move to the more obscure imageboard 8chan. 8chan was shut down after being linked to a string of violent crimes, only to resurface a short time later under with new name: 8kun.[18]

Members of 8kun would wait for new "drops"—the name QAnon followers had given his posts. Q's followers then moved these drops to Facebook groups, Discord chatrooms, and Twitter threads, making the information much more accessible for those who might not know how to easily navigate 8kun. From there, these "drops" were discussed, analyzed, appropriated, and adapted before circulating even further throughout a myriad of social media platforms in the form of internet memes, first by prominent evangelists like Hayes and Diaz, then by a broader audience. Even on TikTok, the social media site known for spreading humorous videos and dance routines, videos with the hashtag #QAnon have garnered millions of views.

In October of 2020, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube began removing thousands of accounts, pages, and channels associated with the movement, and yet QAnon could not

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up a satanic statue in Illinois. In March of 2019, a Staten Island man murdered a member of a prominent crime family, believing him to be a child sex abuser and member of the "Deep State." In September of 2019, a QAnon follower allegedly smashed the Chapel of the Holy Hill in Sedona, AZ, in the belief that the Catholic church was supporting human trafficking. In December of 2019 a Colorado woman was arrested in Montana attempting to kidnap her daughter, who had been removed from her custody, from the "evil Satan worshippers" she had been placed with. In March of 2020, a Kentucky woman was charged with kidnapping her twin daughters from their legal guardian. In April of 2020, a California man was charged with intentionally derailing a freight train in Los Angeles in an attempt to "wake people up," to the truth of QAnon. Also in April of 2020, an Illinois woman was arrested in New York, having driven there to kill Joe Biden and Hillary Clinton. In June of 2020, a Boston man, accompanied by his 5 children, lead police on a 20-mile car chase while he livestreamed the event, talking about QAnon as his children pleaded for help. In July of 2020, a Canadian man rammed his truck through the gates of the prime minister's residence in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, claiming he was a member of the "Deep State." In August of 2020, a Texas woman was arrested for chasing and crashing into a car because she believed that she was chasing a pedophile. In October of 2020, a QAnon follower from Utah was arrested in Oregon for kidnapping her young son, of whom she did not have legal custody. (Beckett)

[18] The man who killed 51 worshippers at two New Zealand mosques on March 15, 2019 had posted a white-supremacist manifesto on 8chan. In April 2019, a man posted an anti-Semitic letter on 8chan before going on a murderous rampage through a synagogue in Poway, CA. Before carrying out a mass shooting at a Walmart in El Paso, TX in 2019, the alleged killer had posted a manifesto on 8chan (LaFrance). I will be examining this incident in more detail in the final chapter of this dissertation.

be stopped. The fervor of QAnon followers only grew after Trump lost the 2020 Presidential Election, as they widely believed the election had been rigged and that Trump was still the legitimate President of the United States. On January 6, 2021, as the joint session of Congress assembled to count electoral votes and formalize Joe Biden's victory in the election, a violent mob of Trump supporters stormed the capital, resulting in five deaths and more than 140 people injured.[19]

Despite the genuine harm QAnon has prompted, there is still something almost comical—and definitely parodic—about the conspiracy itself. For example, some of the acronyms used frequently by Q and their followers—such as CBTS ("calm before the storm") and WWG1WGA, ("where we go one, we go all")—stand for phrases that are used in the trailer for the 1996 film *White Squall* (LaFrance). Based on the 1962 book *The Last Voyage of the Albatross* by Charles Gieg Jr. and Felix Sutton, the film follows a group of high school and college aged boys who are sailing aboard a brigantine ship when faced with a massive storm. *White Squall*—as far as I can tell, having seen the film—has absolutely no connection to any aspect of the QAnon conspiracy, apart from the use of certain phrases in the trailer. CappaZack, a YouTube channel claiming to be "A one stop shop of Movie Trailers, TV Themes and Opening/Closing Credits, Studio Logos and More," posted a trailer for the film in 2010, long before QAnon existed. And yet the trailer's comment section is full of pro-QAnon comments. "Notice the Q in Squall. I'm going Easter egg Hunting!" wrote a commenter going by the name WWG1WGA in March of 2021. "Have faith. Do your part. Trust the plan. WWG1WGA!" posted someone named Phillip in early July of 2021.

[19] I will be examining the Capitol Riot more fully in Chapter 3.

Months after the failed coup on the capital, with none of Q's prophecies actualized, QAnon members were still rallying in the comments section of the trailer for a 25-year-old film. These comments could be meant as jokes, parodying the fervor of QAnon followers, and some probably are. But the ways in which these comments often devolve into arguments—QAnon detractors will make subcomments that poke fun at the original comment while the original commentor and those who support them will make subcomments defending their claims—does suggest many of these comments were not meant in jest.[20] As much as this feels like an elaborate joke, most QAnon followers were—as have been proven by the string of violent crimes committed—extremely serious.[21]

Internet memes rely heavily on the individual reading strategies and interpretive communities of each host to decode the information within them, making the ways in which a single meme can be read vary widely. Further, as exemplified above, even memes containing information that has been proven incorrect continue to proliferate online long after well-researched articles by accredited news organizations have discredited them. I believe that the fact information continues to spread—and to be accepted as truth—despite having been proven false, is due to the nature of internet

[20] A subcomment is a comment made on a preexisting comment in the comments section of a social media post or thread.

[21] I use the past-tense here, as, in the months following the failed coup on the capitol, QAnon conspiracies have quieted down a bit. There are still signs of life—the rallying cries in the comments section of the *White Squall* trailer on YouTube, for example. But Q has been conspicuously quiet, as has some of their most vocal supporters. This, however, does not mean the QAnon conspiracy is over. In April of 2021, Tracy Diaz was elected State Executive Committee Person for the Horry County, South Carolina Republican Party (Goforth). She is one of dozens of QAnon supporters elected to government office as of April 2021. And these positions are not relegated to highly conservative Red States, like South Carolina. In my hometown of San Luis Obispo, a fairly liberal college town on the Central Coast of California, Eve Dobler-Drew won a seat on the board of the San Luis Coastal Unified School District in November of 2020, after having "shared QAnon conspiracy videos, called Melinda Gates 'satanic,' claimed that George Soros had paid racial-justice protesters and pushed disinformation about LGBTQ 'conversion' therapy" (Bergengruen).

memes. Long, thought-out think pieces, no matter how well written and well researched, are never going to spread at the rate of short, humorous, upsetting, and/or otherwise visually stimulating bits of information that are easily adapted, appropriated, and shared. And yet the information shared within an internet meme is never going to be stable, as it is constantly open to interpretation and appropriation. Because of this, I argue, understanding the ways in which memes are read, interpreted, and appropriated has become paramount.

We Started as a Joke and Now We're Here: The Life Cycle of a Meme

In attempting to identify what makes a meme successful, Francis Heylighen theorizes a 4-staged life cycle of any successful meme. Although Heylighen is not looking at the internet meme specifically, I believe her theories are effective in describing the success of the internet meme as well.

The first stage of the lifecycle, according to Heylighen, is *assimilation*, in which the meme must be accepted by a person or group, who become the host of the meme. This means that the meme must first be noticed by a host. "Noticing requires that the meme vehicle be sufficiently salient to attract the host's attention. Understanding means that the host recognizes the meme as something that can be represented in his or her cognitive system" (419). For a meme to be "sufficiently salient," it must, in some way, connect to concepts, ideas, or beliefs already held by the host. And, I might add, a meme in some way generates affect within a host. This could be done through humor, which I will explore further later in this chapter, through the use of a particularly catchy image (and I will be examining the affective power of images in the next chapter) or through

outrage or indignation, such as the claim of child abuse generated by the Pizzagate and QAnon conspiracies. Q's initial posts on 4chan, for example, reinforced ideas that had already been established during #Pizzagate—and, on an even larger scale, reinforced popular ideas (and fears) regarding the untrustworthiness of politicians and other ruling powers in general. Further, those who frequented 4chan were often already exhibiting fringe ideologies and anti-establishment beliefs, making them more susceptible to the ideas put forth by Q.

The second stage of Heylighen's theory is *retention*, in which a meme is retained in that person or group's memory.

> By definition, memes must remain some time in memory, otherwise they cannot be called memes. The longer the meme stays, the more opportunities it will have to spread further by infecting other hosts. […] Just like assimilation, retention is characterized by strong selection, which few memes will survive. Indeed, most of the things we hear, see or understand during the day are not stored in memory for longer than a few hours. (Heylighen)

A meme must, then, be both flashy enough to catch a host's attention and memorable enough to remain in their consciousness at least long enough for the host to appropriate and disseminate the meme again. Claims about pedophilia, for example, are hard to ignore, as is the idea of an international cabal of satanic child abusers that includes well-known personalities.

Heylighen's third stage, *expression*, refers to the ways in which memes are then appropriated, reappropriated, and adapted by their hosts. "To be communicated to other individuals," Heylighen asserts, "a meme must emerge from its storage as memory pattern and enter into a physical shape that can be perceived by others..." This expression could be through laughter at a funny image macro, or it could outrage over child abuse allegations and subsequent the actions it inspires.

The final stage, *transmission*, examines the ways in which a meme/message is then shared with other people and/or groups. According to Heylighen, "the transmission stage is the one where the contrast between successful and unsuccessful memes is largest, and where selection may have the largest impact." Social media makes internet meme transmission easy—though many will be driven to create their own image macros, infographics, or other internet memes on a particular topic, millions more will simply share preestablished internet memes.

As internet memes need to be copied and passed from host to host relatively intact (though they are always adapting and evolving with each host), successful internet memes are generally short and/or simple, easily able to "infect" new hosts by first gaining their attention and then encoding into their memory in order to be appropriated and shared. The short, humorous, and grammatically incorrect (and thus memorable) lolspeak of lolcat memes, combined with images of adorable animals, which are both enjoyable to look at and fun to recreate, provide the perfect cocktail of virality needed to create a successful meme. Similarly, internet memes making bold claims that reinforce existing beliefs, particularly when combined with humor and/or eye-catching imagery (such as disturbing imagery paired with photographs of children), have proven extremely

successful at spreading information—even information that has been proven false, such as QAnon propaganda.

How Jokes Won an Election: The Affective Power of Humor

Although Nakagawa has never been able to articulate what drew him to the initial I Can Has Cheezburger macro, there is no doubt that the image, along with the myriad of viral cat memes that followed, have proven particularly infectious. Multiple studies of popular internet memes have shown that humor is a key factor in memetic success (Miltner). As Kate Miltner points out, "[o]ne of the most obvious generic 'expectations' for many Internet memes—LOLCats included—is that they be humorous in some way." But humor is not always benign, and its results can prove nearly impossible to predict.

The January 15, 2017, issue of *The New Yorker* featured an article by Emily Nussbaum titled "How Jokes Won the 2016 Election." In the article, Nussbaum hypothesized that how mainstream media depicted Donald Trump during the election process made him seem like a joke—thus less threatening than he truly was. In this sense, the use of humor deterred people from viewing Trump as an actual threat and acting against him. If this is true, and humor can both create and discourage certain responses, then how can a producer ensure that their humor generates the desired response by consumers? Is it even possible to anticipate what will make a meme elicit a specific response?

Generally, any examination of humor begins with an analysis of the dominant theories of how and why "humor works to produce a social effect or an experience of mirth" (Gournelos and Green xvii). The three main approaches to humor are incongruity theory, or the idea that "humor results from the unexpected by appropriate juxtaposition

of two or more frames of interpretation usually not associated with one another," superiority theory, or the theory "that people laugh at those they find to be inferior to themselves," and catharsis theory, which is the belief that "humor comes from a momentary eruption of relief of psychological or social tension" (xviii).

In the introduction to *A Decade of Dark Humor*, however, Ted Gournelos and Viveca Green offer a fourth approach, which they call ambivalence theory. They argue that ambivalence theory is "generated when an audience finds a text to be both attractive and repulsive" (xix). According to Gournelos and Green, the tension built through both attraction and repulsion is thus released through laughter (xxi). Although, for example, many found Trump's words and actions during his 2016 presidential campaign to be repulsive, there also seemed to be an attraction—news organizations were quick to report on every little thing he said and did, and the public was quick to discuss, analyze, and even laugh at it. Repulsion itself, it seems, can sometimes create attraction.

These approaches to humor are not mutually exclusive, but "can also complement or lead to one another, and many forms of contemporary humor rely upon all […] strategies to arouse audiences to laughter" (xviii). Superiority theory, then, can work in tandem with ambivalence theory, as it seems to have done in the case of Donald Trump. Perhaps some of the attraction felt towards him was based on the feelings of superiority that mocking him generated within both the media critiquing him and those who consumed it.

The issue with this type of theoretical approach to humor, then, is that intention and reception are not congruent, so it is impossible to assume all spectators will find a particular text humorous for the same reason—if they find it humorous at all. Sometimes,

as we see in the case of Pizzagate, jokes are taken at face value rather than perceived in the way the author intended. Or, making something into a joke, as was the case with Trump's presidential campaign, can make it seem less threatening and thus inspire less action against it.

Gournelos and Green assert that it is much less important to analyze how humor works than it is to examine what the use of humor accomplishes (xviii). They argue "much of humor's rhetorical power lies in its ability to delight others and move them to action (or inaction) through pleasing forms, its implications for undermining or supporting a political system should not be underestimated" (xviii). In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Mikhail Bakhtin made similar claims. Bakhtin argues

> Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it. (23)

Bakhtin is arguing that laughter, specifically, allows one to approach an object—or a subject, I would add—in a closer, more familiar way than one might otherwise. He

claims laughing at an object or subject allows for the absolutely free investigation of it. The same can also be said about the humor that causes such laughter.

Paraphrasing Bakhtin's theory of the Carnival, Henry Jenkins states, "[j]okes tend to cluster around points of friction or rupture within the social structure, around places where a dominant social discourse is already starting to give way to an emergent counter-discourse; jokes allow the comic expression of ideas that in other contexts might be regarded as threatening" (251). Jokes, or humor in general, I would argue, are privileged as particularly effective forms of discourse because they make the views or opinions being stated less threatening—thus humor has the power to be particularly subversive as it makes unthreatening the ideas, concepts, and beliefs that might otherwise alienate an audience.

Satire, a very specific form of humor, has a particularly long history of political and social critique. Sophia McClennen, building on the definition of satire set forth by Jonathan Gray, Jeffry J. Jones, and Ethan Thompson, argues,

> one of the prime elements of satire is that, through the performance of scrutiny and critique, the audience is asked to perform their own scrutiny and critique. Thus, one significant feature of satire is its call for an active audience. News may seem to offer viewers information, but satire does more. Satire asks the audience to take a piece of news and play with it, test it, reflect on it, and question it, "rather than simply consume it as information or 'truth' from authoritative sources." (74)

In *Colbert's America: Satire and Democracy*, McClennen examines how satire—particularly the satire of Stephen Colbert, and his television show, *The Colbert Report*—provided a way in which to challenge the generally accepted ideology of post-9/11 America in an "acceptable" way. Guided by the George W. Bush administration, the years directly following 9/11 brought about the reduction of civil liberties, the USA PATRIOT Act, wiretapping, and the rescinding of habeas corpus—among many other acts of governmental control. The post-9/11 political sphere valued affect over rationality and functioned on feelings and hunches instead of substantiated information—particularly the feeling of fear. Those who questioned the actions of the U.S. government or spoke out against the revoking of civil liberties were frequently branded as traitors, and often faced severe consequences. Thus, satire became the main form of social critique during the decade directly following 9/11.

McClennen builds on Henry Giroux's concept of "public pedagogy"—according to Giroux, democracy "depends on a public with a sense of civic agency and with a dedication to working to achieve the goals of a democratic, egalitarian society" (McClennen 2). Education occurs more and more outside of the classroom through social processes and cultural interactions. And, as education happens mostly outside of the classroom, it is necessary to pay close attention to that education—to examine how politics, media, and entertainment teach us to think about the world. Usually, what is learned outside of the classroom reinforces commercial/economic forces, justifies inequality, and supports the status quo (72). Because of this, critical pedagogy is needed. According to Giroux, critical pedagogies are "pedagogies that encourage reflection, the development of democratic sensibilities, and social commitment" (McClennen 3).

For McClennen, Colbert provided just such a pedagogy. “While political satire always has ethical goals,” she argues, “these come in a playful package that allows the audience a chance to ‘get it’ without feeling demeaned” (74). McClennen provides a delineation between satire, which “nourishes our democracy” (73), and “pseudo-satire,” or a-political irony. McClennen argues that “post-9/11 satire has been a very particular form of public pedagogy, one that is relatively unique since it communicates via the same media outlet that tends to offer reactionary and reductive public pedagogies” (73).

In *Is Satire Saving Our Nation? Mockery and American Politics*, McClennen builds on her earlier assertions regarding satire, but applies them to the arena of social media. In the present moment of twitter hashtags and viral internet memes, McClennen argues that, for Millennials, “satire is a constant and ongoing feature of how they understand and engage with political issues. For them, joking about politics can have serious consequences, and the standard line between serious politics and frivolous entertainment is blurred” (5). Satire, she claims, has played a significant part in shaping debate by critiquing structures of power where mainstream media either could not or would not—“[w]ith its witty mix of humor, critical thinking, and speaking truth to power, satire transformed our withering democracy into a robust demokracy [sic]” (6).

The issue with McClennen’s argument is that satire is also a reduction, as it often zeroes in on a single aspect of a given subject, utilizing irony and/or exaggeration to provide a humorous critique of the subject as a whole. To be read “correctly,” or as the satirist intended, satire needs a level of skill and understanding not available to everyone. McClennen, an educated academic, reads and interprets Colbert in a particular way. She is not, for example, interpreting the humor of *The Colbert Report* the same as

conservative members of the Bush Administration, who invited Colbert to speak at the 2006 White House Correspondents Dinner, believing him to be espousing beliefs similar to their own.

While McClennen hails Colbert's speech at the White House Correspondents Dinner as a successful execution of political satire and public pedagogy, it also provides a key example of how differently a piece of satire can be interpreted. Further, satire is an entirely broad category, and the satire of a novel or film is going to have a completely different effect than that of an internet meme. The satire presented in more-traditional forms of media—such as through books, or even films—often require the consumer to actively seek them out, further affecting the consumer's reception and interpretation. Usually, a consumer understands what they are electing to read or watch. And, while internet memes are often disseminated on message boards and chatrooms of like-minded people, they are also shared widely on social media to disparate populations. Not everyone consuming them recognize them for what they are in the same way someone who has actively chosen a book to read may. This causes the interpretation of humor spread through internet memes to become even more unstable.

Further, even when humor is interpreted the way in which the creator intended, there is still no guarantee that it will produce the desired affective response—there is no guarantee that the viewer will then behave in the way that the producer intended. McClennen sees satire as a form of public pedagogy, which encourages "reflection, the development of democratic sensibilities, and social commitment" (3). But if this is true, then one can argue that the reverse is also true: if humor makes an idea, argument, person, or thing more approachable and less threatening, it can also

prevent a greater understanding of said object or subject and even deter action. If humor creates an object of familiar contact, like Bakhtin claims, and thus clears the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it, it can also discourage investigation or obscure the findings. Humor can make something validly threatening seem less so, and thus remove the motivation to fight or flee from it. In this way, humor can also be inefficacious or even anti-pedagogical.

Understanding how any specific group reads and reacts to humor can offer insight into how certain memes will be interpreted. In his multiple analysis of memes, Limor Shifman argues that, as humor is tied to the context of its creators (be it a group of 4chan users or an entire nation), it is thus able to provide unique insight into a group. Humor can provide a mechanism by which to erect and maintain symbolic boundaries within a group, such as "asserting tastes, exploring identities and situations, and defining insiders and outsiders" (Miltner). According to Kate Miltner,

> In–jokes can take many shapes, from single words to entire systems of meaning. […] One related phenomenon is slangs, a form of linguistic humor. […] that is used for "bonding and 'sociability' through playfulness." Slangs are often specialized languages developed by a group for the purpose of in–group communication and identity marking, and can function as a source of humor on multiple levels. One way is through "accent humor," the exaggerated use of incorrect grammar and vocabulary. The other is through the reinterpretation of familiar words and phrases to create a

> code that is understandable only within a group context. The latter type of humor can be an essential element in creating group identity and solidarity in online communities; […] the group–specific meanings which arise out of humorous interaction can provide "central objects" around which online groups can define themselves.

For Shifman and Milter, humor—and the humor of memes in particular—is not just culturally dependent. It actively works to create culture by shoring up boundaries and encouraging certain types of identity formation. Humor, it seems, does something. And yet, what exactly that something is has proven extremely relative and depends on the readers' interpretive communities, reading strategies, and cultural literacies, among other things.

A Joke or An International Conspiracy: Why the Reading of Internet Memes Varies So Disparately

The ways in which people read and/or interpret any piece of culture—such as an internet meme—depends on their individual interpretive communities. Because of this, audience reception theory provides an excellent framework by which to examine how certain memes are constructed to try to minimize non-conforming interpretations, as well as how readings may nonetheless deviate from the expected reception.

In *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*—first published in English in 1982—Hans Jauss called for a "New Literary History," which examined literature both synchronically (how a text aligned with and/or subverted the horizon of expectations in the time and

place in which it was published) and diachronically (how a text has been read/received by different groups at different times).[22] According to Jauss, "the evolution of literature, like that of language […] [is] determined not only immanently through its own unique relationship of diachrony and synchrony, but also through its own unique relationship to the general process of history" (18). Jauss claimed that history was "the ongoing totalization of the past through aesthetic experience" (20).

Texts and their meanings, then are mediated both by the producers of the texts as well as the people who read them. If a text is important, either at the time of publishing or during a later period, it is because the text is able to speak to an era's readers, even though the meaning produced by the text changes with each era and its "horizon of expectation." Examining different eras in which a text has been popular illuminates the differences in past and present horizons of expectation (35). For Jauss, a "horizon of expectation" is simply the tools, references, mindsets, and/or means of understanding that readers use to interpret a text, including social and literary conventions.

Because texts are a mediation between production and reception, literary history is continuously in flux. "The experience of reading can liberate one from adaptations, prejudices, and predicaments of a lived praxis in that it compels one to a new perception of things" (41). By finding "moments in history when literary works toppled the taboos of the ruling morals or offered the reader new solutions for the moral casuistry of his lived praxis," one can see "the emancipation of mankind from its natural, religious, and

[22] Although many of the theories and theorists I will be discussing and utilizing in this section are somewhat dated at this point (and I will thus be using past tense when discussing them), I find them no less accurate today than they were then and particularly helpful when discussing ideas regarding reader response and audience reception theory. Many of the more-recent theorists simply build on these foundational texts.

social bonds" (45). For example, what made Voltaire's *Candide* popular in 18th-century France are not the same reasons that *Candide* is widely read in the U.S. today. Further, by examining *Candide's* popularity and how it was read and interpreted (and banned for its blasphemous and seditious content) in the decades after its publication can tell us something about the horizons of expectation in France during the latter half of the 18th century. By examining the ways in which the work is still relevant and read today can also illuminate current horizons of expectation—the ways in which *Candide's* political, religious, and social critique speaks to the current moment.

So too then can examining the ways in which *The Colbert Report* was read and interpreted in the years it was on the air speak to the horizons of expectation in post-9/11 America, from the scathing yet effective satire McClennen claims it to be, to the gentle ribbing of a fellow conservative, as those who invited Colbert to speak at the 2006 White House Correspondents Dinner must have read it. Thus, so too can the ways in which the Pizzagate and QAnon conspiracies have been interpreted in recent years provide insight into the understanding of certain demographics of the current U.S. population.

How do such drastically different readings of a larger cultural meme like QAnon arise at the same time? Perhaps it is because, as Wolfgang Iser argued, "[l]iterary texts initiate 'performances' of meaning rather than actually formulating meanings themselves" (27). In *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Iser claimed that literary texts do not contain meaning within themselves apart from the reader. But neither do the readers produce meaning solely within themselves. Instead, meaning is produced through the convergence of both text and reader. Meaning is less an inherent truth, waiting to be discovered, than an experience between the text and the reader (10).

Because readers incorporate a text into their own “treasure-house of experience” (24), a given text can produce many different yet equally valid interpretations (178). Nevertheless, the text is integral to the production of meaning, as the literary texts do contain “verifiable instructions for meaning production" (25).

Unlike Jauss, Iser was not concerned with overarching eras of reception. Instead, Iser was interested in individual responses to literature. For Iser, literary meaning was something private that each reader produces according to their own personal “repertoire.” Iser employed the term “repertoire” to describe what each reader brings to the text, including social and literary norms, as well as personal experiences that recodify the text (72). Some of the strategies that Iser noted are “background-foreground,” in which each person’s repertoire influences what aspects of the text are foregrounded, and which has moved to the background (93). Similarly, “theme-horizon” describes which elements of a text (narration, character, plot, etc.) are utilized to produce meaning (100). Those who were already critical of the Bush Administration, for example, may have automatically foregrounded the satirical nature of *The Colbert Report*, while those viewers who supported the Bush Administration and/or believed in the legitimacy of the accusations leveled against Barack Obama may choose to see the television show as a humorous reinforcement of their pre-existing beliefs.

Similarly, those who were already likely to dislike or mistrust Barack Obama and/or Hilary Clinton might more easily accept that they are part of an international cabal of Satanic pedophiles who control the world, no matter how preposterous the idea might seem to others. Further, those who come across QAnon memes on an imageboard known

for satire could (and most likely would) read them much differently than someone who sees the same memes shared by a trusted friend on Facebook or Twitter.

Stanly Fish took this idea of differing interpretations even further. Like Jauss and Iser, Fish argued that literary meaning is an experience. Unlike Jauss and Iser, however, Fish believed that meaning is not produced in the convergence of reader and text. Instead, a text has no meaning other than that brought to it by the reader. A text is simply a means to get the reader "to the next point," enabling readers' experiences (40). In turn, the readers' experiences, and the meanings they produce, are shaped by their interpretive communities. These interpretive communities "are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions" (171). Authors are not encoding meaning into their texts, but assuming what type of interpretive strategies an imagined reader will possess. Because of this, any interpretations of a text are theoretically correct—some interpretations only seem incorrect because "there is as yet no elaborated interpretive procedure for producing that text" (345). For Fish, seemingly crazy or "off-the-wall" interpretations were not only "not inimical to the system but essential to it and its operation" (357). Therefore, literary criticism is not the act of demonstrating the meaning inherent in a text but persuading others to join the critic's interpretive community (365-8).

Although Fish, like Jauss and Iser, was specifically discussing literature and literary theory, his arguments are not restricted to literary criticism. And any critique, be it of a fictional television show or a political argument or candidate—or an internet meme—is always an attempt to interpolate others into a certain interpretive community.

In the end, however, it is impossible to control the interpretive communities within a given population completely. Conversely, however, by understanding certain interpretive communities, it may be possible to predict the ways in which these communities will read certain internet memes, which could make it possible to frame certain pieces of information within an internet meme as to encourage a particular reading by a particular group—a thought I will return to in the conclusion of this chapter.

Differing interpretations are not necessarily bad, however. There is a long history of subversive or dissenting reading as a way to critique hegemonic social constructions. In *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*, Alan Sinfield provided examples of many differing readings of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Sidney, and Donne, along with examinations of the contemporary socio-historic-political situations that influenced those readings.

Sinfield argued that dominant culture never forms a fully concrete whole, as there are always subcultures, both enduring and developing, that exist against dominant cultures. The tension between the dominant and challenging cultures creates "faultlines" within the social edifice, often appearing in literature. These "faultlines" provide a place for readers' and critics' "dissidence." Sinfield preferred the term "dissident" over "subversive," as subversive can imply achievement—actual subversion—whereas dissidence implies only the refusal of an aspect of the dominant (49). Sinfield argued that "any text that achieves wide acceptability is, in fact, being read in diverse ways, producing diverse patterns of confirmation, negotiation, and perhaps even subversion" (94).

This is in line with Jauss' assertion that, if a text is considered important, it is because the text is still able to speak to an audience, even if the meaning changes with each era. For example, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* is constantly rewritten to make sense within the politics and/or ideology of a given era. These "faultlines" are why Shakespeare is still relevant today—they are "how Shakespeare comes to speak to people at different times: the plays have been continuously reinterpreted in attempts to co-opt the Bard for this or that worldview. This is not surprising or illegitimate; it is a key practice through which cultural contest proceeds" (11). *Othello'*s Desdemona is another example of a faultline. Desdemona is "a blank page for the version of her that they want. She is written into a script that is organized through the perceptions and needs of male dominance in heterosexuality and patriarchal relations" (54).

Stephen Colbert's conservative persona on *The Colbert Report* was not, exactly, a blank slate in the same sense as Shakespeare's Desdemona. But it was open to drastically different interpretations—as evidenced by his invitation to the 2006 White House Correspondents Dinner by the Bush Administration. Internet memes can be seen as an even more of a blank slate, as their origins are often unclear. Not only are the origins of most internet memes untraceable, they are also unimportant, at least when it comes to the reception and dissemination of the meme. To build on McLuhan's famous adage "the medium is the message," I would argue that for memes, the sender is often the message. Where and from whom a new host is exposed to an internet meme can greatly influence how that meme is read, regardless of who originated it. Had Edgar Welch, for example, been privy to the initial "joke" of Pizzagate on 4chan, he would have not taken the claims seriously and gone to such drastic measures.

Repertoires, strategies, and interpretive communities are not the only things that influence reception. Michel de Certeau, for example, was concerned with the materiality of consumption and the ways and which it affects reception. In *The Practice of Everyday Life,* de Certeau examined just that—everyday life. More specifically, he looked at the ways in which users consume (xi). He argued that the presence and circulation of consumable objects does not actually reveal anything about what those objects are for their users (xiii). For this reason, de Certeau was much more concerned with tactics than with strategies. For him, strategies are proper, planned, and proscribed, usually developed by the producers and/or those in power (xx), while tactics are not proper, they are simply everyday practices developed organically (xix).

In what is probably his most famous essay, "Walking in the City," de Certeau examined the tactics used by pedestrians on the streets of New York City, which are often not the strategies prescribed by city developers (93). Often, these pedestrians are "blind" to the bigger picture of the city, only seeing how the areas around them can be best utilized to their advantage (93). This framework can be applied to most objects people consume, from language to media and other forms of technology, though de Certeau did go on to apply this theory to reading, specifically. In "Reading as Poaching," he argued that "[t]he reader takes neither the position of the author nor an author's position. He invents in texts something different from what they 'intended.' He detaches them from their (lost or accessory) origin. He combines their fragments and creates something unknown in the space organized by their capacity for allowing an indefinite plurality of meanings" (169).

Much like Fish, de Certeau saw meaning coming from the consumer, not the producer or text itself. For de Certeau, the act of reading is inseparable from the written word.

> From analyses that follow the activity of reading in its detours, drifts across the page, metamorphoses and anamorphoses of the text produced by the travelling eye, imaginary or meditative flights taking off from a few words, overlapping of spaces on the militarily organized surfaces of the text, and ephemeral dances, it is at least clear, as a first result, that one cannot maintain the division separating the readable text (a book, image, etc.) from the act of reading. Whether it is a question of newspapers or Proust, the text has a meaning only through its readers; it changes along with them; it is ordered in accord with codes of perception that it does not control. It becomes a text only in its relation to the exteriority of the reader, by an interplay of implications and ruses between two sorts of "expectation" in combination: the expectation that organizes a readable space (a literality), and one that organizes a procedure necessary for the actualization of the work (a reading). (170-71)

de Certeau compared the way in which Barthes reads Proust in Stendhal's work—despite the fact that Stendhal died nearly thirty years before Proust was born—to the ways in which the viewer of a television news program may read the death of his own child into a particular news story, even if it is, in fact, completely unrelated (174). This is not

necessarily due to particular reading strategies or shared interpretive communities, but how consumers poach from other areas of life, be it literary works one has read, past life experiences, or any other combinations of factors.

Returning to our earlier examples, how one reads *The Colbert Report* would depend on how well versed one is on political satire, Stephen Colbert's earlier position as a reporter for *The Daily Show*, Comedy Central's more liberal-leaning politics, Colbert's performance at the 2006 White House Correspondents Dinner, and any number of other factors. If a consumer comes upon clips of *The Colbert Report* removed from any or all of these contexts (as one often does on social media), it is definitely possible to read the show as a humorous reinforcement of conservative values. Likewise, how people read the QAnon meme depends on many factors, including how well-informed they are of the origins of Pizzagate, their feelings about Democratic politicians and more liberal-leaning celebrities, their trust in politics and ruling powers in general, which news sources they consume, and any number of other factors.

Henry Jenkins's built on de Certeau's conception of poaching and applied it to media fandoms. Jenkins looked specifically at how people consume, interpret, appropriate, and respond to media. In *Textual Poachers*, he offered an ethnographic account of certain media fans—those who are particularly active and involved in what he describes as "participatory fandom."

Jenkins described himself as an "aca-fan," approaching fandom study both as an academic and as a fan himself. He attended fan events, interviewed fans, and examined fannish objects, such as zines, fan fiction, art, and videos.[23] Through his research, Jenkins

[23] A zine is a small, often self-published circulation of original or appropriated texts and images, particularly popular among fandoms before the rise of online communication.

identified and expounded upon five levels of participatory fandom activity: 1) Fandom involves a particular mode of reception; 2) Fandom involves a particular set of critical and interpretive practices; 3) Fandom constitutes a base for consumer activism; 4) Fandom possesses particular forms of cultural production, aesthetic traditions, and practices; 5) Fandom functions as an alternative social community.

According to Jenkins, these participatory fans are not "misreading" a text by focusing on subplots, developing alternative storylines, "shipping" two characters not romantically involved in the program, or disregarding some or many elements of the show, but are instead picking and choosing what they want to get out of a program and in doing so are becoming producers themselves. (33-47).

Jenkins relied heavily on de Certeau's idea of "poaching" (24-25) and compared fans to de Certeau's "nomadic readers" as they move fluidly between different media and fandoms (36). He also built on Ien Ang's idea of "emotional realism," whereas fans are able to connect to fantastical and/or hyper-unrealistic media programs based on the emotional truth the program exhibits (107). Jenkins' findings regarding the consumption and reception of television media can be easily compared to the ideas put forth by Jauss, Iser, and Fish.

Fans read and interpret the object of their fannish affection according to their own set of strategies, picking and choosing which aspects of the text to foreground, and which they move to the background. Similarly, fans choose which elements of a text (narration, character, plot, etc.) are utilized to produce meaning for them. Interpretive communities influence how particular pieces of media are read—there are often interpretations encouraged by a fandom, a "fanon," or fan cannon, and interpretations that are rejected

by the community as a whole. One can see a similar pattern when it comes to the reading of humorous texts. It may be easy to imagine certain meme enthusiasts who are traditionally educated, informed, left-leaning, and presumably acquainted with the satirical nature of internet memes—to read Pizzagate as the joke certain 4chan users developed it to be. But they were not the only people exposed to the meme. As the ideas were spread through Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and other forms of social media, those without the tools to read the meme as a joke began to develop the meme into a credible piece of information—credible enough for Welch to act on. Depending on how one came across the meme—including the way in which it was presented, for example, by *The New York Times* or a Facebook friend—shaped how the meme was interpreted. So, as I continue to ask, does that mean there was no way to control nor predict the ways in which the meme would be read?

More recently, Jonathan Gray has utilized audience reception to analyze fandom activity, though he examines what he calls fandoms' "Other"—the antifan. In "New Audiences, New Textualities Anti-Fans and Non-Fans," Gray argues that, like fans, anti-fans also "form social action groups or 'hatesites,' and can thus be just as organized as their fan counterparts" (71). As such, Gray believes "the anti-fan may provide an interesting window to issues of textuality and its place in society" (71).[24] He argues that "[s]tudying the anti-fan could also provide further insight into the nature of affective involvement, for many of us care as deeply (if not more so) about those texts that we dislike as we do about those that we like" (73). He offers the famous example of Salman

[24] Throughout his career, Gray changes his spelling from "anti-fan" to "antifan." Though I am including quotes with both spellings, I will consistently utilize the "antifan" spelling, as is in line with Gray's later work.

Rushdie, whose very life was threatened by the intense antifan reaction to his novel *The Satanic Verses*—sometimes by people who had not even read the work.

Gray builds on Gerard Genette's theory of "paratexts," which he describes as "semi-textual fragments that surround and position the work," such as "covers, prefaces, reviews, typeface, forewords, and afterwords, none of which is truly independent of the work, but all of which stand to inflect our interpretation of a text substantially" (72). Gray expands the definition of paratext to also include reviews of a work, media coverage, and other readers' responses. As such, the ways in which the Pizzagate and QAnon memes were presented on news sites and shared on social media, as well as the discourse surrounding those implicated, can be considered paratexts.

In "Antifandom and the Moral Text: Television Without Pity and Textual Dislike," Gray argues that antifan discourse is a sort of paratext, which can "overload" expectations of a given text (844). Quoting a study by Barker et al., Gray states that "this antifan discourse succeeds in 'predetermining and often limiting the frames through which many viewers could make sense of" a given text (844). Barker et al. examined the ways in which antifans of the film *Crash* utilized paratexts to shape how others experienced the film. Their findings demonstrated that, even if spectators did not agree with the antifans' arguments, once exposed to those arguments they were influenced by them when interpreting the film. These findings, in turn, indicate, "that antifandom can erect multiple barriers and filters to decoding, as the text splinters into multiple components or dimensions and the antifan either focuses on one or two dimensions alone or sets them at war with one another" (844).

Negative information about Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, as well as positive information regarding Donald Trump, function as form of "paratexts," shaping the way in which those who embraced the QAnon conspiracy read the meme. This also suggests that it is possible to shape the way in which a text is interpreted—at least in part—by controlling the paratexts that surround the text. For example, experiencing an episode of *The Colbert Report* in its entirety, during original airtime on Comedy Central, directly after another satirical news program, *The Daily Show*, would provide a frame for interpretation that was closer to the producers' intent than other frames. That viewing experience would be very different from watching a specific clip of the show in a different context, such as shared by a friend on social media. Controlling the numerous ways in which both professional media organizations and private citizens share, discuss, and thus frame a text—be it an episode of *The Colbert Report* or an internet meme about the QAnon conspiracy—seems to be a near-impossible task.

Where Do We Go From Here: From Jesus Christ to Disco Dancing—The Unstable and Unpredictable Lifecycle of the Meme.

In 1831, a man by the name of William Miller predicted the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, which he believed would be on October 22, 1844. When Jesus failed to arrive on the prescribed date, his followers, instead of dispersing, adapted. The "Millerites," as they were known, "became the Adventists, who in turn became the Seventh-day Adventists, who now boast a worldwide membership of more than 20 million" (LaFrance). This is what successful memes do—they adapt, evolve, and continue to spread. Christianity in general, as a cultural meme—or memeplex: a grouping

of many memes together, depending how you choose to look at it—has existed for over two-thousand years and has evolved into the world's leading religion, with two-and-a-half billion followers stretched over innumerable branches, denominations, and sects. Granted, the Seventh-day Adventist Church—and Christianity in general—has traditionally spread through prolonged exposure, from parents to children or from missionaries to the communities they lived with over the course of years, if not lifetimes. And, before the rise of new media in the 20th century, exposure to conflicting memes was often limited, if not absent altogether. Even still, the Christian meme has proven unstable, constantly evolving and adapting into branches, such as Catholicism, Protestantism, and Orthodoxy, and then into even smaller sects and denominations—such as the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which adapted and continued to reproduce, even after Miller's predictions failed to manifest.

Comparing the QAnon conspiracy to the Christian religion may seem hyperbolic—and probable sacrilegious to many—but the conspiracy seems to have created within its followers a religious zeal similar to that found within many Christian organizations. Will the QAnon conspiracy prove like the Millerites and continue to adapt and spread—perhaps even transforming into an international religion with millions of followers? Or will it go the way of Pogs, Disco, and other cultural fads that have lapsed into oblivion? Or will it do something completely different and unpredictable? The answer is impossible to predict, as how any cultural meme is read, interpreted, adapted, and spread is impossible to predict.

The lifecycle of a meme—*assimilation, retention, expression,* and *transmission*—is greatly condensed within the life of internet memes, which are spread much quicker

and more widely than cultural memes could traditionally. Internet memes, shared via social media to thousands and sometimes millions of people at once, are exposed to disparate groups, each with their own interpretive communities and reading strategies. And yet, over the last decade, internet memes have become a preferred form of information dissemination and acquisition and have greatly contributed the ways in which larger cultural memes—such as QAnon, yes, but also beliefs about religion, patriotism, American politics, and global health crises, to name just a few—are understood and acted upon. Because internet memes do not function on a true/false binary, but on an information (new) and noninformation (old) binary, the internet memes most likely to spread are those that are new, shocking, humorous, or in some other way efficacious.

The use of humor, popular within internet memes due to its efficaciousness, complicates and destabilizes the information contained within even further. Though humor makes for a successful internet meme, humorous internet memes offer even more means of interpretation, making the information disseminated therein even more unstable. However, understanding certain interpretive communities and their reading strategies—such as those only consume news and information from particular sites, organizations, and people—can help negotiate the countless ways a single internet meme can be interpreted and thus help counter the spread of misinformation. While it may be impossible to stop the spread of false information altogether, predicting the ways in which a particular community will read certain internet memes could make it possible to frame certain pieces of information within an internet meme as to encourage a particular

reading by a particular group. This, then, could help counter the misinformation spread through internet memes with factual information.

In the next chapter, I will focus on another form of affect creation popular within internet memes: the image. In the following pages, I will examine ways in which images are generated, adapted, and interpreted—in other words, what they do, how they do it, and who gets to decide this. An image can both provide the appearance of irrefutable information and destabilize that information at the same time, making the image as good at producing successful memes as humor, and yet just as effective in transmitting misinformation.

Chapter Two—The Image:

Memes, Metapictures, and Multiple Levels of Meaning

In a 2017 picture for *Politico Magazine,* Matt Braynard, a former Director of Technology for Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, stands in the middle of his home office, arrogantly staring down the camera. He exudes relaxed confidence, hands tucked into the pockets of his tailored suit pants and lips curled up in the barest hint of a smirk. From a framed poster on the wall behind Braynard, Ann Coulter gazes out over her naked shoulder with a look that, on any other woman, might be considered sultry. Half obscured by Braynard's body hangs an enlarged, framed picture of the cover art for Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead.* The adjacent wall is adorned with a large black and white photograph of the man standing before tanks in Tiananmen Square. Both a laptop and computer monitor on Braynard's desk, as well as the corner of the television screen just visible at the left edge of the photograph, display electoral maps covered in red dots, signifying Trump's election-night victories. A bookshelf to the right is topped with strategy games such as *Othello* and *Settlers of Catan*. Braynard is obviously a man who understands the importance of visual messages (though, perhaps, not the art of subtlety).[25]

Braynard only spent five months as Director of Technology for Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign—from October of 2015 to March of 2016—and the reason for his departure has never been officially disclosed. But the emphasis on constructing visual narratives and rhetoric continued to be an essential element of Trump's campaign,

[25] See Image 3 in List of Images starting on page 179.

through both official and unofficial channels. In fact, an online subset of Trump supporters, calling themselves "The 1st Deplorables," went as far as to claim credit for Trump's victory. They asserted that, by spreading pro-Trump and anti-Clinton rhetoric through internet memes online, they won the 2016 election for Trump. Their assertion may be grandiose, but there is no denying the influence that the production and distribution of political internet memes—especially image macros—had in that election. Pro-Trump and anti-Clinton internet memes were shared millions of times on social media throughout the election process and were often treated by the general public as valid sources of news. The 1st Deplorables labeled their campaign "The Great Meme War," and with the election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States, they declared themselves victorious.

In this chapter, I will be examining a particular type of internet meme—those involving images. These viral images are copied, recreated, and spread throughout a culture, both on and offline, often with widely varying interpretations, appropriations, and redisseminations. Virality, however, is not all it takes to create an internet meme. Just as abundance does not necessarily equal virality, virality does not necessarily imply memification. An image can be widespread within a culture without going viral. Modern American culture, for example, is inundated with advertisements and company branding. For a brand or advertisement to go viral, it must be shared laterally, from person to person. Some adds do go viral, particularly if they are humorous or in some other way provocative. For a viral image to become a meme, however, there is a second level of participation involved, over and above simply sharing the image.[26] There must be a level

[26] Obviously, these ideas about virality and memification can be applied to much more than just images.

of adoption, appropriation, and embodiment by its host as it is shared in order for something to become an internet meme.

For example, a photograph of the bodies of Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his young daughter, who passed away tragically while trying to cross the border from Mexico into the U.S., and which I will also be analyzing later in this chapter, went viral in June of 2019. But the image did not become an internet meme, in that the image itself was not adapted, appropriated, and reshaped as it was shared—though interpretations of the image were.

On the other hand, Pepe the Frog, a benign cartoon character turned unofficial mascot for Donald Trump's 2016 Presidential Campaign, has become the quintessential internet meme. Images of Pepe have been adapted, appropriated, and shared online millions of times, as has the interpretation and understanding of who or what Pepe is. He has been heralded as both a symbol of free speech and of hate speech—a silly tool for internet trolls and a dangerous icon of racism, xenophobia, and extremist violence. Though the photograph—because it is a photograph—appears to contain and spread an unbiased representation of reality (the border crisis), and the Pepe meme—as a cartoon that is constantly altered and utilized in extremely biased ways—appears to be less stable or able to convey information and spread ideologies, both images work in the same way and are doing similar things.

I believe images are not, in and of themselves, containers of ideology—they are simply able to evoke the pre-existing ideologies of the viewer in a way that words alone

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Tweets often go viral and can become internet memes when adapted and appropriated enough, as can hashtags, or even sayings. In the final chapter, for example, I will look at the phrase "Subscribe to PewDiePie," which itself became a meme.

cannot. Images generate very specific affective responses and, because of this, they are often mistaken for conduits of factual information and/or depictions of unbiased reality. I argue that neither of these images actually contain information of their own, relying instead on the ideas, ideologies, and/or prior knowledge of each viewer to make sense of them.

While the image of Martínez Ramírez and his daughter cannot be considered an internet meme itself, I do believe that it has contributed to a larger cultural meme—that of the U.S./Mexico border. As previously noted, a meme is any cultural artifact that is widely reproduced and disseminated, such as a religious icon or national flag—both of which carry ideology and create strong affective responses in many people who encounter them, whether they share the national and/or religious sentiment meant to be expressed by the original meme producer or not. Moreover, these affective responses can vary greatly. Christian imagery and performance might create a sense of love or comfort for those who practice the religion, but for members of the Queer community, for example, these same images and rituals may symbolize rejection and/or persecution and create a nearly opposite affective response. The U.S./Mexico border is another such meme, which can create a sense of protection against outside invasion or be seen as a site of exclusion and oppression, depending on the beliefs of the person exposed to the meme. As such, the photograph of Martínez Ramírez presents a myriad of meanings entangled within the single image.

In this chapter, I will be drawing on a number of theoretical frameworks to examine exactly what images do, and how the affect generated by images can vary from that of verbal and/or written communication. Looking first at the cartoonish Pepe meme

and then the photograph of Martínez Ramírez, I will argue that the affective capabilities of these images make them ideal candidates for virality and memification, but that no real information is encoded within them, making them unstable and open to endless interpretations. Though the information decoded from images can be very unstable, analyzing how images are interpreted, adapted, and spread can reveal the particular beliefs, ideologies, and mythologies inherent within the individuals or groups who are spreading them and can illuminate how people are processing, responding to, creating, and recreating truths, ideologies, mythologies or even realities of their own.

The 1st Deplorables, Pepe the Frog, and The Great Meme War

On June 27, 2015, eleven days after Donald Trump announced his intention to run for President of the United States, r/The_Donald—a forum on the website Reddit.com (known as a subreddit)—was created. While much of the mainstream media initially treated Trump's campaign announcement as a joke, members of the r/The_Donald subreddit and "/pol/"—a "politically incorrect" forum on 4Chan—set about making Trumps' presidency a reality (Schreckinger). During the election campaign, the r/The_Donald subreddit became so popular that it overwhelmed the front page of Reddit and forced the site's CEO to change the entire website's algorithm in order to limit the influence of any single subreddit (Martin). The members of the r/The_Donald subreddit and the /pol/ forum began The Great Meme War, ostensibly against anyone not already in support of Trump. The leader of this great battalion—a cartoon frog.

Pepe the Frog is a cartoon character from the comic strip *Boy's Club,* created by artist Matt Furie in the 2005, first as a Myspace zine, then later as a collection of trade

paperbacks (Serwer). In one strip, Pepe is caught urinating with his pants all the way down around his ankles. Later, his roommate asks him about it. In the final panel of the strip, Pepe responds "Feels good man," with a happy look on his face.[27] This single panel was eventually removed from the context of the comic strip and developed into an internet meme, which was used as a positive response to anything that "feels good man," first on Myspace, then on other networking sites and message boards (Serwer).

According to Furie, this innocent use of the Pepe the Frog meme was still popular among youth as of 2016. He claimed to regularly receive emails from high school kids asking permission to use the image of Pepe on their shirts and club paraphernalia (Serwer). Eventually, Pepe the Frog's usage evolved (or devolved) even further. On an episode of the podcast *Reply All*, hosts P.J. Vog and Alex Goldman attempt to trace the evolution of the Pepe meme. According to Vog and Goldman, Pepe the Frog gained popularity on 4chan.org, a website known for producing memes. One of the early rules of 4chan prevented the same image from being posted twice, ostensibly to prevent the site from being overrun with the same images over and over. Because of this rule, 4chan users would adapt and remake an image (such as Pepe) in numerous ways, eventually creating their own in-joke about "rare Pepes"—pictures of Pepe in different settings or with different words overlaying the image.

Like with all successful internet memes, however, these Pepe memes ultimately went viral, culminating in shares and retweets by celebrities such as Katy Perry and Nicki Minaj (Furie). To keep the Pepe meme from being appropriated by the masses, 4chan users began to generate extremely offensive "rare Pepes," inserting Pepe into violent,

[27] See Image 4 in List of Images starting on page 179.

sexually explicit, racist, and/or misogynistic scenes, in the hopes of making him less accessible to mainstream audiences. (Vog and Goldman). The motivations behind these early "offensive Pepes" is unclear, and are thought to have been, at least in part, simply meant for trolling.[28] However, this new image of Pepe quickly drew another group of fans—those who fully embraced the racist, misogynistic new persona of the frog. Images of Pepe in Nazi or neo-Nazi uniforms, participating in lynchings or acts of terrorism, began to proliferate on alt-right and white nationalist blogs and websites.[29] When Donald Trump announced his bid for the presidency on a highly nativistic, anti-immigration platform, these alt-right and white nationalists rallied behind him, with Pepe as their mascot.

Along with pro-Trump and anti-Clinton iconography, The 1st Deplorables continued to generate and spread images of Pepe the Frog. Eventually, the spread of highly offensive Pepe memes led both Hillary Clinton and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) to proclaim Pepe the Frog a symbol of hate speech. This only seemed to encourage the proliferation of Pepe images across the web. Just a few of the memes presented on the ADL's website include images of the original Pepe with his happy expression superimposed in front of the burning Twin Towers and a concentration camp, and re-imaginings of Pepe as Osama Bin Laden and as a member of the Ku Klux Klan.

Despite this controversy, the Trump campaign staff—including Trump himself—embraced Pepe the Frog. According to Braynard, young staffers would spread these memes amongst themselves as morale boosters during the election (Schreckinger). In

[28] Trolling, in this sense, refers to purposefully causing offense, rather than representing the true ideology of the meme creator

[29] See Image 5 in List of Images starting on page 179.

October 2015, Trump tweeted a cartoon of himself as Pepe the Frog, standing at a podium in front of an American Flag with the caption "You can't Stump the Trump," a slogan popular on 4chan. In September of 2016, Donald Trump's son, Donald Trump Jr., posted an Instagram image of a mock film poster, parodying the film *The Expendables*, titled "The Deplorables." The image features the heads of Trump and some of his most prominent supporters (including his son, Donald Trump Jr.) superimposed on the bodies from the original *The Expendables* film poster. Directly behind Trump's left shoulder is the head of Pepe the Frog, smiling happily beneath a coif of yellow hair. In the caption accompanying the Instagram post, Trump Jr. states, "I am honored to be grouped with the hard working [sic] men and women of this great nation that have supported @realdonaldtrump and know that he can fix the mess created by politicians in Washington."

Though both the images shared by the Trumps feature seemingly inoffensive depictions of Pepe, the meme's relationship with white nationalism and hate speech had become too prominent to be ignored—particularly by the time Trump Jr. shared his image on Instagram. The use of Pepe the Frog can be seen as a strategic attempt to speak to multiple groups at one time through the double messaging potential of the internet meme—as internet memes are appropriated and shared, a single internet meme can appear to be a self-contained unit while also speaking to those who are aware of its history and context. Because of the ambiguous nature of internet memes—and Pepe the Frog in particular—the Trumps could simultaneously appear to be in solidarity with the white nationalist and alt-right groups producing offensive Pepe Memes, while also

appearing “inoffensive” and removed from the racist rhetoric of white nationalism and the alt-right.

“Pepe is love,” claimed Furie in an essay written for *Time Magazine* in October of 2016. The article, part of a multi-platform campaign in conjunction with the ADL, was an attempt by Furie to reclaim Pepe the Frog as the benign cartoon character who simply loves to urinate with his pants down. In May of 2017, after the campaign to save Pepe proved unsuccessful, Furie published a single-page *Boys Club* comic strip in a compilation for Free Comic Book Day. Within the strip, Pepe the Frog has died and is officially laid to rest by the rest of the *Boys Club* gang (Sanders). As soon as the strip was released, r/The_Donald filled with posts claiming that Pepe the Frog was not, nor ever would be dead. Furie may have killed *his* Pepe, but for r/The_Donald and others who have appropriated Pepe for their own use, the meme will never die.

From God to Pepe the Frog: The Problem of the Image

The question of images—what they do, how they do it, and who gets to decide this—was around long before the conception of the “viral image” came about. In fact, wars had been waged over this question of the image for millennia before photography was even invented. In *From Akhenaten to Moses: Ancient Egypt and Religious Change*, Jan Assmann discusses the clash between ancient Egyptians and Israelites over their differing beliefs about the image:

> For Egypt, the greatest horror was the destruction or abduction of the cult images. In the eyes of the Israelites, the erection of images meant the destruction of divine

> presence; in the eyes of the Egyptians, this same effect was attained by the destruction of images. In Egypt, iconoclasm was the most terrible religious crime; in Israel, the most terrible religious crime was idolatry. (76)

The Egyptians believed that images were able to draw or create a divine presence, while the Israelites believed that to erect an image of God was to disrupt His divine presence. What they both agreed on, however, was the understanding that images are powerful. It is undeniable that visual images do *something*—something that words alone cannot always do. But what, and how—these are questions that still have no concrete answers.

In *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology,* W.J.T. Mitchell asserts that "the critical study of the icon begins with the idea that human beings are created 'in the image and likeness' of their creator and culminates, rather less grandly, in the modern science of 'image-making' in advertising and propaganda" (2). For Mitchell, the study of iconology "turned out to be, not just the science of icons, but the political psychology of icons, the study of iconophobia, iconophilia, and the struggle between iconoclasm and idolatry" (3). Mitchell points to how certain protestant groups—particularly the Puritans—associated pagan fetishism with Catholic idolatry, suggesting "that there is a similarity, not just among different sorts of image worship, but among different varieties of iconoclasm" (197). The image holds equal power for both those who venerate it and those who wish to destroy it.

Mitchell critiques "the tyranny of the picture," as he calls it, or the way in which the West has valued pictorial realism, prizing photographic evidence over all else (37-40), and argues that an image can be just as verbal as it is visual and mental images are

just as real as pictorial images (149). According to Mitchell, "the senses, the aesthetic modes, and the act of representation itself continue to fall back into the history from which we would like to redeem them," (149). In other words, both texts and images arise within their own historical contexts, all of which are instituted by particular discursive practices, meaning that neither verbal nor pictorial images have an essential identity of their own—they are all rooted within the historical context from which they arise. For Mitchell, the "redemption of imagination lies in accepting the fact that we create much of our world out of dialogue between verbal and pictorial representations" and "nature already informs both sides of the conversation" (46), meaning that the two cannot be truly separated. Verbal images create pictorial mages—in our minds if nowhere else—and we understand pictorial images through verbal processing. If someone is shown an image of a mountain, they will understand it to be a "mountain" in whatever language they speak—according to whatever concept of "mountain" that language enables. Vice versa, if someone is told of a mountain, they will form an image of a mountain in their mind, even if each person creates their own specific mountain image depending on their experiences, expectations, and understanding of what a mountain is.

Jacques Rancière makes a similar claim, arguing that an image is never a simple representation of reality. In *The Future of the Image*, Rancière asserts that every image is a depiction of the relationship between the sayable and the visible, the visible and the signification, the visible and the invisible (6). The sentence is more than merely the sayable, and the image is more than merely the visible (46). The image refers to two different things, "the simple relationship that produces the likeness of an original: not necessarily its faithful copy, but simply what suffices to stand in for it," as well as "the

interplay of operations that produces what we call art: or precisely an alteration of resemblance" (6). He presents the idea of "the sentence-image," by which he means,

> the combination of two functions that are to be defined aesthetically—that is, by the way in which they undo the representative relation between text and image. The text's part in the representative schema was the conceptual linking of actions, while the image's was the supplement of presence that imparted flesh and substance to it. […] It is the unit that divides the chaotic force of the great parataxis into phrasal power of continuity and imaging power of rupture. (46).

The sentence-image vacillates between lethargy and energy (46), between consensus and chaos (47), between the dialectic and the symbolic (56-58), between continuity and fragmentation, between articulation and inarticulateness, between heterogeneous media, forms, and surfaces (106), and, perhaps, between the visible and the sayable. Rancière claims that the visible is the present, while the sayable is the representable—the narrative, plot, or action of a film, for instance. Therefore, the sayable orders or directs the visible (46). For Rancière, images themselves cannot be separated from the narratives that surround them. Once known, these narratives create specific responses to the images they reference. Once connected, the visible and the sayable cannot be separated.

Taking this idea further, as many semioticians have argued, once a person attains language, and words become attached to *things*—whether they be images, like cartoon frogs, concrete entities such as mountains, or obscure feelings, such as love—the word

and the thing it represents cannot be separated. English speakers will always think of the word "mountain" upon seeing a mountain and will always picture a mountain upon hearing the word "mountain." Trying to articulate *things*, either verbally, mentally, or through writing, will always create a tension or vacillation between the word and the thing itself—or an image of the thing. Trying to analyze what images *do*, then becomes inseparable from what words do. There is no doubt, however, that images do *something* all on their own, and this is where Rancière's sentence-image falls short.

Though Jean Baudrillard published his ideas before Rancière or Mitchel, his conception of the image could prove more suitable than either of theirs, which is why I am situating his arguments here and not closer to the beginning of my theoretical discussion. In *Simulacra and Simulations*, Baudrillard argues that images have completely moved beyond any depiction or representation of reality and are now mere simulations. In fact, for Baudrillard, reality itself is now a simulation, based on the breakdown of images, which has happened in four stages. During the first stage, images—which he describes as simulacrum—merely reflect reality as it is. In the second stage, faith in that representation is called into question, as people begin to mistrust the simulacrum's depiction of reality. During the third stage, the simulacrum completely masks reality—the only reality accessible is that simulated by the image. In this final stage—the stage we are living in now—reality disappears completely. The simulacrum is all that is left. Reality is only the simulation of simulacrum, no longer based on anything "real." This transition into complete simulation has happened over the course of three specific time periods and, according to Baudrillard, humanity is now living in the third

and final stage, which is identified by this complete lack of differentiation between simulation and reality.

Baudrillard's concept of images, I believe, moves beyond visual depictions and representations as I've discussed so far, and also encapsulates mental images, as well as the images we are constantly processing through sight and articulating with language. As people have become more alienated from their labor, and as they have moved further and further away from nature and into man-made (and thus socially constructed) cities and societies, they have also moved away from reality, until reality (in the present moment of post-modernity, according to Baudrillard) has ceased to exist completely.

Baudrillard was writing in the 1980s and 90s, and his ideas went out of vogue among 21st-century academics, who have placed greater emphasis on the study of "real-world" conditions, such as the physical effects of colonization and late-stage capitalism. However, in some ways, Baudrillard's assertions have proven extremely prescient and could perfectly articulate the present moment of internet-meme obsession, in which internet memes can be seen as shaping—if not completely creating—reality. For Americans who do not live near nor have spent time at the U.S./Mexico border, for example, any understanding of this border is based on the news they consume, images they are exposed to, and the border-related internet memes they come across. The U.S./Mexico border meme, then, is not necessarily a reality, but a conception based on the simulacra one is exposed to in relation to the U.S./Mexico border.

What Baudrillard fails to do is successfully separate images from language. In fact, the two are so closely related within Baudrillard's argument that the move away from reality and towards images has also signified a move away from any language that

could articulate, thus reinstate reality. And yet I still contend that images do *something* that words alone cannot. Images are integral in shaping popular conceptions of the border. A photograph of dead bodies, for example, can generate feelings and cross boundaries that words alone cannot, even words describing the same scene, and thus creating a mental image of the same thing. This is why, for example, the use of Martínez Ramírez's photograph by news organizations was so contested, when written articles describing the event were not (a phenomenon I will be examining in more detail later in the chapter). But *how* these images (or simulacra) work or the ways in which they encourage particular simulations are not questions Baudrillard is able to answer.

Mitchell, however, proves particularly concerned with these questions. In *What Do Pictures Want?* he changes his line of inquiry from what images *do* to what they *want* (33). His argument builds from the assertion that pictures, by which he includes all visual images, "are things that have been marked with all the stigmata of personhood and animation: they exhibit both physical and virtual bodies; they speak to us, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively, or they look back at us silently across a 'gulf unabridged by language'" (30).

Mitchell argues that pictures have their own desires, that they "want equal rights with language, not to be turned into language" (47). However, he continues by asserting,

> What pictures want, then, is not to be interpreted, decoded, worshipped, smashed, exposed, or demystified by their beholders, or to enthrall their beholders. They may not ever want to be granted subjectivity or personhood by well-meaning commentators who think that humanness is the

> greatest compliment they could pay pictures. […] What pictures want in the last instance, then, is simply to be asked what they want, with the understanding that the answer may well be, nothing at all. (49)

Mitchell is attempting to challenge the idea that images are the manifestations of underlying ideologies. He suggests that images want to be stripped of all preconceived ideas, historicity, and/or subjectivity the viewer brings to the table. They simply want to be seen solely as the images they are without any contextualization.

For Mitchell, images may not actually want to be interpreted at all. But, one cannot help but ask, are people capable of giving images that level of objectivity? One may be able to look upon an image without knowing and thus employing its historicity or the context of its creation. However, as I discussed in the previous chapter, people will always bring their own knowledge, understanding, and subjectivity into the "reading" of a text. This includes the viewing of an image. Images, like any other texts, will always be understood through a reader's particular set of reading strategies and interpretive communities, influenced by any paratext surrounding the image that the reader has been exposed to. I believe that, while an image may not be the manifestation of a singular underlying ideology, it can and often will evoke the underlying ideologies of a viewer.

Further, is it even possible for a spectator to truly to see the visible without interpreting it through the sayable? Can one "read" an image without trying to articulate the meaning of that image, at least in one's own mind? And if so, does an image removed from any and all context still have power? The image of Pepe the Frog does seem to hold some sort of power, even removed from the contexts given to it by The 1st Deplorables

and The Great Meme War. Much like the initial "I Can Has Cheezburger" macro, which inspired Eric Nakagawa to launch the LOLcat website that went on to accrue millions of adaptations and shares, the "Feels good man" panel of *Boy's Club* did *something* within at least some of those who were exposed to it—something that inspired all the adaptations, interpretations, and shares required for the image macro to become a full-fledged internet meme, first on Myspace and other message boards, then on 4chan, where users were inspired to adapt and edit the image for no other reason than to continue re-posting it on the site. There, Pepe the Frog eventually morphed into the (highly contested) cultural meme it is today.

For many people, myself included, who are familiar with Pepe's sordid history, the very image of Pepe—even in the most benign of settings—calls to mind racism, xenophobia, misogyny, and myriad other extremist ideologies, and can come across as hate speech. Once exposed to the paratexts surrounding the frog, it is nearly impossible not to be influenced by them. Removed from that context, however, what power does Pepe have? How would someone completely unaware of Pepe's history read an image of the frog? This is impossible to predict and would be predicated upon this person's own ideas and understanding of images—and cartoons in particular—as well as frogs. If they recognize the image as a frog at all—to me, removed from all contexts, Pepe looks more like an alien than an anthropomorphic frog standing on his hind legs, and before I was aware of his history and the ways in which he was being used by hate groups, images of him barely caught my attention. It would also be dependent on the image of Pepe this person was exposed to.

Obviously, an image of Pepe with a swastika on his arm and an assault rifle in his hand could potentially inspire much stronger feelings in many people (though positive or negative would depend on that person's beliefs and affiliations) than a simple picture of Pepe's face against a white background. Even those with no prior knowledge of the Pepe meme will recognize it as racist when Pepe is wearing a swastika or at a lynching. This is not a new argument—once one has been exposed to a violent, homophobic, racist, or otherwise offensive Pepe meme, all other images of Pepe the Frog will be interpreted, at least marginally, by that frame of reference. In this way, not all images are created equal, and some hold much more affective potential than others.

The more detailed a picture is, the easier one may attach a narrative to it. And some simple images can create more affect than others. The image of a gun for example—guns being a highly contested topic in the United States—can inspire feelings of fear or revulsion in some people while inspiring a sense of pride or safety in others. Because of the preexisting discourse surrounding guns, I argue, the average American will have an easier time creating a narrative around the image of a gun, whether positive or negative, than an image of a frog. The stronger the image—the more affective power it has—the easier it is for those who view it to process it verbally and give it a narrative and decode information from it—and for that image to be retained in their mind and reproduced as a meme. The swastika is an even more potent example. Though an extremely simple image, it is attached to a well-known and extremely powerful history with a great number or narratives surrounding it. The swastika—like many symbols—walks a very thin line between the visible and the verbal, between what can be considered

an image and what can be considered a word. Still, the swastika requires previous knowledge to be read as anything other than a series of interconnected lines.

Roland Barthes is concerned with this relationship between the visible and the verbal. But, for Barthes, the visible and the verbal are inherently different. In *Image, Music, Text,* Barthes attempts to theorize how people read and/or interpret visual images. Barthes believes that all images have multiple meanings—they are all polysemous (38-39). Similar to those studying reception theory, Barthes argues that how people interpret an image depends on their own personal knowledge of their symbolic and/or cultural values. Each individual reading "depends on the different kinds of knowledge—practical, national, cultural, aesthetic—invested in the image" (46). However, according to Barthes, adding text to an image provides "anchorage," limiting the range of possible interpretations of the image, and preventing hyper-personal interpretations based on personal history and/or values (*Image, Music, Text* 39). This is because "the text directs the reader through the signifieds of the image, causing him to avoid some and receive others, by means of an often-subtle dispatching, it remote-controls him towards a meaning chosen in advance" (40). Because of this, text has a *repressive* value as well—it possesses the ability to repress certain interpretations while encouraging others (40). Technology further aids in this shaping of interpretations—"the more technology develops the diffusion of information (and notably of images), the more it provides the means of masking the constructed meaning under the appearance of the given meaning" (46). The problem with Barthes' argument here is that he fails to acknowledge that words are also polysemous and have the ability to destabilize as well as anchor an image.

Yes, for those without prior personal knowledge of him, the image of Pepe the Frog would be no more a symbol of hate speech than that of his amphibian brother Kermit, but even those who do know the history of the meme will interpret it differently, depending on their values and cultural knowledge. While some have characterized the image as a symbol of hate speech, others see it as a symbol of national pride and traditional values. When paired with text (Pepe is often seen touting racial and homophobic slurs) or easily recognizable symbols (such as a swastika, which I believe functions just as well as text in anchoring an image), the meaning of the image seems to become a lot less contestable. However, those who themselves harbor homophobic sentiments will respond very differently to a homophobic Pepe meme than those who do not. In this way, words do not always anchor a text. In fact, words can actively work to destabilize an image, as is the case with the line "ceci n'est pas une pipe" below the image of the pipe in René Magritte's *Les trahison des images*, which I will be examining closer in the next section.

Ceci N'est Pas Une Frog: Metapictures, or the Relationship Between Representation and Responsibility

In *Picture Theory*, Mitchell provides an excellent framework for examining the relationship between the visible and the verbal. He looks at the relationship that images have with verbal discourse—particularly the space that exists between the sayable and the visible. Mitchell utilizes "metapictures"—pictures about pictures—to look at this relationship between the visible and the sayable. A metapicture involves "discursive or contextual self-reference; its reflexivity depends upon its insertion into a reflection on the

nature of visual representation" (57), thus it "says" something about how pictures are processed and read. According to Mitchell,

> Pictorial self-reference is […] not exclusively a formal, internal feature that distinguishes some pictures, but a pragmatic, functional feature, a matter of use and context. Any picture that is used to reflect on the nature of pictures is a metapicture. […] the use of metapictures as instruments in the understanding of pictures seems inevitably to call into question the self-understanding of the observer. This destabilizing of identity is to some extent a phenomenological issue, a transaction between pictures and observers activated by the internal structure effects of multistability: the shifting of figure and ground, the switching of aspects, the display of pictorial paradox and forms of nonsense. (57)

Mitchell cites the Duck-Rabbit—a picture that can read as either a duck or a rabbit, depending on how one views it—as a classic example of a metapicture.[30] The Duck-Rabbit is not a picture that draws attention to itself as an image per se, but it does draw attention to the ways in which people look at and make meaning of images. In other words, the Duck-Rabbit calls attention to the way in which an observer understands images and can make that observer more aware of their own interpretive strategies.

[30] See Image 6 in List of Images starting on page 179.

Looking at an image that has obvious multiple interpretations available to choose from draws attention to the myriad ways in which all images can be seen and interpreted—reinforcing the idea that all images are polysemous. I take this claim even further and argue images are polysemous because they contain no real information of their own and are completely reliant on the interpretive strategies of the viewer.

For Mitchell, metapictures make visible the "metalanguage" of images, revealing the relationship between representations and discourse—the overlapping of visual and verbal experiences (83). Mitchell asserts,

> Metapictures elicit, not just a double vision, but a double voice, and a double relation between language and visual experience. If every picture only makes sense inside a discursive frame, and 'outside' of descriptive, interpretive language, metapictures call into question the relation of language to image as an inside-outside structure. They interrogate the authority of the speaking subject over the seen image. […] It isn't simply that the words contradict the image, and vice versa, but that the very identities of words and images, the sayable and the seeable, begin to shimmer and shift into the composition, as if the image could speak and the words were on display. (68)

The "ceci n'est pas une pipe"— or "this is not a pipe" in English—below Magritte's painting of a pipe, for example, is not provocative because it contradicts the image above it, but because it calls attention to the fact that the image on the page is a *representation*

of a pipe, not the real thing. Calling attention to the pipe as a representation, in turn, calls attention to the viewer's perception of the representation as an actual pipe. In other words, Magritte's *Les trahison des images* deconstructs the relationship between the image and the discourse surrounding the image.[31]

Mitchell wants to think of representation not as a type of object—like a painting of a pipe—but as a process, an activity, or set of relationships (420). Mitchell asks us to consider representation "as a multidimensional and heterogeneous terrain, a collage or patchwork quilt assembled over time out of fragments" (419). Further complicating this construction of representation, Mitchell asserts that this quilt is "torn, folded, wrinkled, covered with accidental stains, traces, of the bodies it has enfolded" (419). In other words, representation is not a one-to-one procedure, but a set of distinct, complicated, uneven processes.

Mitchell considers these processes a "suturing together of politics, economics, semiotics, and aesthetics, its ragged, improvised transitions between codes and conventions, between media and genres, between sensory channels and imagined experiences are constitutive of its totality" (419). For example, representation is not simply the painting of a pipe. Representation includes the ways in which the artist understands, experiences, and constructs the pipe in their mind, as well as their understanding and relationship to the medium of choice, along with a myriad of other factors. In this way, Magritte's *Les trahison des images* is not a pipe, but one specific representation of a pipe by a particular person at a singular moment in time. Issues can arise, then, when someone views the image of Magritte's pipe and does not see it as one

[31] See Image 7 in List of Images starting on page 179.

such representation, but as stand-in for all pipes everywhere, in every form. Or, as someone may see an image of Pepe, in whatever context, and see it not for the individual image it is, but as representative of a greater narrative. Few would think of Pepe as a stand-in for all frogs, perhaps, but many will see his image as representative of the Trump Presidency, The 1st Deplorables, and/or other a myriad of other racist, homophobic, xenophobic campaigns. In fact, I argue that it would be nearly impossible not to do so after being exposed to the paratexts surrounding the Pepe meme.

Perhaps this is why, according to Mitchell, representation is also always linked to responsibility. One cannot exist without the other. To Mitchell, "representation is a form, an act of taking responsibility; it is a response, in the musical sense, an answering echo to the previous presentation or representation. […] Responsibility is representation and vice versa" (421). A representation is a response to whatever artifact the artist is attempting to represent. Because of this, the very act of representing the artifact is an act of responsibility—or irresponsibility, if the artist chooses to misrepresent, conditionally represent, or abstractly represent the artifact. Even when the artist attempts a realistic depiction of the artifact, there will always be gaps or breaks between representation and responsibility.

Mitchell claims that art, culture, and ideology explore and exploit these gaps between representation and responsibility (421). Art, in fact, is often purposefully irresponsible in its representation. The breaks and/or gaps generated through irresponsible representations work to illuminate the relationship between the visible and the sayable. While I agree, I think Mitchell may give artists more power than they actually have. I would contend that the responsibility of representation is not simply that

of the artist, but also of the viewer, who is responsible for deciding what an image represents as well.

Much like *Les trahison des images* and the Duck-Rabbit, many internet memes — particularly image macros—can also be seen as a form of metapictures, which illuminate the relationship between the visible and the sayable. Image macros—words superimposed on images, a popular form of internet meme—can work to destabilize or highlight the ways in which the images themselves are interpreted. Image macros are not considered—at least by many—as art, but they do exploit the gaps between representation and responsibility, as they are inherently self-referential. The very potency of an image macro resides within the act of acknowledging it as such. Any new words superimposed on a popular image macro gain much of their humor—and affective power—from understanding the context of the original image, the text, or the original macro that image was attached to before it was appropriated, reappropriated and shared countless times. Someone exposed to an internet meme for the first time will not have the same response as someone familiar with its history—a benign image of Pepe, for example, will often inspire very little concern from people unfamiliar with the meme.

Further, the "Feels good man" on an image of Pepe experiencing or enacting an act of violence can call attention to the violence within the image and make the viewer more conscious of their own understanding of violence and its relationship with what feels good. It could also, however, encourage the conflation of violence and feeling good within a potential viewer. As I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, it is impossible to predict all possible interpretations of an internet meme.

Internet memes containing images make interpretations vary even more, as the discrepancies between words and images make no sense outside of specific cultural contexts. (An image of Pepe, to someone unfamiliar with the cartoon character, may not even recognize him as a frog). As such, when internet memes reach wider, disparate audiences, the gaps between representation and reality can go unnoticed and the representation is taken for reality—particularly by people or groups with less media literacy or understanding of how internet memes work. Most people have received very little—if any—media literacy training. As such, it can be difficult for some to ascertain what types of online media to trustworthy and what aren't. This can then make it hard to differentiate between trustworthy information and misinformation. Especially if containing a photograph, internet memes often claim, even if only by implication, to be representations of reality, showing things exactly as they are—a phenomenon I will be examining further later in the next section of this chapter.

Numerous websites, such as *knowyourmeme.com, memedump.com,* and *memebase.com*, have gained notoriety as sites that provide the history and context of particular internet memes for those not in the know. However, contextualizing memes is not always an easy activity. As memes go viral and become part of the cultural lexicon, they are removed from their original context(s) in order to adapt and evolve into something easily accessible to a mainstream audience. Throughout the lifecycle of a meme, it is adapted by multiple groups for a diverse set of purposes. By the time a meme finally reaches mainstream audiences, there are already multiple contexts and meanings inherent within the single image. Pepe the Frog is a perfect example of this evolving

lifecycle of a meme. By the time he came into the mainstream cultural lexicon, he was no longer just a frog, but many different things to many different people.

The Death of Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and the Power of Photography

On June 24th, 2019, the bodies of Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his 2-year-old daughter, Valeria, were found on the bank of the Rio Grande, having drowned in an attempt to swim across the river from Mexico into the United States. Mexican journalist Julia Le Duc captured a now-iconic photograph of the bodies, which was published in the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada* the following day. Within twenty-four hours, the image had gone viral, having been picked up by the Associated Press and republished in countless online articles, newspapers, and national television news shows.[32]

The New York Times, who chose to publish the image on the front page of the print newspaper, as well as online, also published an article online explaining exactly how and why they made this decision. Beth Flynn, the deputy photo editor for *The New York Times*, said the editors decided to use the image, after a two-hour-long discussion, because it represented the reality of the situation at the U.S./Mexico border—a reality they had been documenting in writing for a while. "It's important for our readers to see and understand that," Flynn said (Takenaga). Tom Jolly, the associate masthead editor who oversees *The New York Times*'*s* print operations, agreed, adding that the staff "felt that yes, this photo was an iconic moment that represented something bigger than just the

[32] Although I am providing a list of images in the back of this dissertation, I will not be including the image of Martínez Ramírez and his daughter, as I do not want to reinscribe the harm I believe that this image and images like it can cause.

image itself" (Takenaga). *The New York Times*' editorial staff, it seems, believed that the visual image of dead bodies would create much more of an impact—would demonstrate the border crisis in a way that words alone simply could not.

Many readers disagreed with the editors' decision to use the image, calling it "humiliating," "disrespectful," and only motivated by the desire to sell newspapers. Yet other commenters pointed out that the photo told an important story, one that *should* evoke very strong emotions, and hopefully, actions. As one commenter put it, "During the 1960s, the evening news was filled with footage of our dead and injured soldiers being dragged out of combat. These photos helped stop the war. And that is precisely why the ensuing wars have banned these very pictures, because the deep and raw truth is impossible to reconcile in a civilized society." Obviously, this comment is the opinion of a single person, and there are numerous reasons one could cite for the end of the war in Vietnam. But it *is* undeniable that images from Vietnam influenced public opinion of the war in the U.S—the Vietnam War is considered the first televised war, in that images and video of the war proliferated through televised media as never before, and, as a result, it also motivated the largest and most organized anti-war movement in American history to date.

What all commentators seemed to agree on is the affective power of the visual image. This, I believe, is why visual images are so integral in the conception and reception of internet memes.[33] From icons like the American flag or the Christian cross, to silly pictures spread online, the affective power of images allows them to carry

[33] As I have noted before, not all internet memes contain images. However, I would argue that most do, or use images and or videos to spread, and that internet memes shared with or through images tend to travel wider and remain prevalent for longer.

multiple, often conflicting ideological messages, thus allowing the viewer to decode the messages in a myriad of ways, appropriating, reappropriating, and sharing the visual image until it eventually develops into a meme. Even photographs, oft considered a clear and unbiased presentation of facts and events, can be appropriated, reappropriated, and memified. In fact, it is the photograph's assumed representation of an unbiased reality that encourages the viewer to assign their own meaning to the image without question, thus encouraging the viewer to appropriate, reappropriate, and share, eventually leading to memification.

Barthes believes that the photograph, in particular, creates a very specific response from the viewer. He is interested in what sets photography apart from all other forms of representation. According to Barthes, "the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially" (*Camera Lucida* 4), because the photograph essentially erases itself. The photograph is rarely distinguished from its referent—we forget that we are looking at a photograph and only see the image depicted. Similar to Mitchell's critique of "the tyranny of the picture," Barthes illuminates "the myth of photographic 'naturalness,'"—the way in which photographs create a sense of *being-there* without actually having been there (*Image, Music, Text* 44).

Barthes describes the photograph as "a message without a code" (*Image, Music, Text* 17). Because of this, the photograph offers two simultaneous messages. There is a message without a code, which is the photographic analog or the supposedly "unbiased" image of reality itself (19). But there is also a message with a code, depicted through the way the image is treated (choice, technical treatment, framing, layout), as well as through the rhetoric surrounding the image (19). When treatment of the photograph is concealed,

denotation and connotation can become conflated by the viewer—"the photograph allows the photographer *to conceal elusively* the preparations to which he subjects the scene to be recorded" (21). Thus, the denoted message of the photographic image naturalizes the symbolic message (45). Examining the duality of connotation within certain photographs, he notes that there is a "co-presence of two discontinuous elements, heterogeneous in that they did not belong to the same world" (*Camera Lucida,* 23).

Barthes uses the term *studium* to refer to the most obvious or accessible range of meanings within a photograph, which are always present and available to a large group of people at once. The *studium* is produced culturally, often by "the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions" within a photograph (26). But there is also a second element to certain photographs, which, "will break (or punctuate) the *studium"* (26). This second element,

> rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces [the viewer]. A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument: the word suits me all the better in that it also refers to the notion of punctuation, and because the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points; precisely, these marks, these wounds are so many *points*. This second element which will disturb the *studium* I shall therefore call *punctum*; for *punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice. A photograph's

> *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me). (26-27)

The *punctum* is also a connotation, but an extremely private one, which is sudden, unexpected, but recognized and remembered. Because the *punctum* is not produced culturally, it is not manufactured. It arises within the viewer, not from any recognizable symbolic meaning within an image itself. If it were created through a culturally recognizable/symbolic system, it would be a *studium*, not a *punctum*. The *punctum* is produced within the spectator, not by the photographer. In fact, it comes from details utterly uncontrollable by the photographer.

The issue with Barthes' theory of *punctum*, for me, is that it shrouds images in a mystery they do not necessarily contain. Yes, there are responses to an image that are more obvious, accessible, and thus expected. But I believe that even the more specific, personal responses to an image are also culturally generated, coming from a person's lived experiences, reading strategies, and interpretive communities. Think of the example de Certeau put forth—of how the viewer of a television news program may read the death of his own child into a particular news story. Yes, that is a highly specific, private, unexpected response. But it did not come out of nowhere. It came from the lived experience of the viewer.

As previously discussed, adding text to an image provides "anchorage," limiting the range of possible interpretations of the image, and preventing hyper-personal interpretations based on personal history and/or values (*Image, Music, Text* 39). However, as I have also demonstrated, text can also destabilize the meanings interpretable within an image, calling attention to the unreliability of a photograph, for

example. But that text is still leading the viewer to a particular conclusion. The captions accompanying the photograph of Martínez Ramírez and his daughter are meant to contextualize the image and lead the viewer into certain understandings about the U.S./Mexico border. Similarly, although the "ceci n'est pas une pipe" below the image of the pipe in René Magritte's *Les trahison des images* does work to destabilize the image, this destabilization is the goal of the artist. The text only destabilizes certain meanings while encouraging others. The viewer is being led to question the relationship between representation and reality the same way that the viewer of a photograph is encouraged to interpret it a certain way by any attached caption. Obviously, no interpretation is assured, but text is effective in pointing a spectator towards certain readings.

Technology further aids in this shaping of interpretations—"the more technology develops the diffusion of information (and notably of images), the more it provides the means of masking the constructed meaning under the appearance of the given meaning" (46). In the end, however, despite the technology or text accompanying it, it is ideology that shapes how images are read. Ideology is the "common domain of the signifieds of connotation" (49). Mythologies, in turn, create ways to talk about ideology—and, I argue, larger cultural memes. Barthes cites Italianicity as an example of mythology, arguing, "*Italianicity* is not Italy, it is the condensed essence of everything that could be Italian, from spaghetti to painting" (48). According to Barthes, "[w]e need mythologies, such as Italianicity, as a specialized language to talk about the ideas (true or false is not the issue here) of images; otherwise, we lose their precise meanings in the other Derrida-esque meanings of the words" (48). Thus, mythologies are developed as a tool to talk (and think) about images, ideologies, and memes.

For those who are not aware of the context, the photograph of Martínez Ramírez and his daughter would most likely inspire some sort of reaction. Pictures of dead bodies—especially children—generally do. But the picture would no longer represent a bigger mythology—a border crisis out of control—and would not necessarily motivate the viewer into any particular kind of thoughts or actions. People would simply see an image of bodies—much like they would in a book or museum. Further decontextualized than that, even, as books and museums generally offer some sort of framing for images. The image of Martínez Ramírez and his daughter would be removed from any and all context, without the pretension or expectation of action. But, combined with the mythology of the border, the image becomes more powerful—or at least more affective in pushing the viewer into a particular train of thought and/or action. The mental image one has of the U.S./Mexico border can be just as powerful as a picture of the actual border.

Taking Mitchell's argument a step further, I would argue that a mental image can be even more powerful than a visual one, as the mental image and its surrounding mythology is what gives the visual image its power, or at least directs it. For example, some of the news articles about the death of Martínez Ramírez chose more benign images of the Rio Grande, which, removed from context, appear to be nothing more than images of a serene, scenic river. But within the context of deaths by drowning, even benign images of the Rio Grande can seem threatening. Even an image as provocative as the one of Martínez Ramírez and his daughter, removed from context, presents no message other than, perhaps, the precarity of life. Only within the historical context of a failed border crossing does the image contain its power to motivate action around the border crisis.

When I look at the picture of Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his daughter, it is hard not to feel *something*. It does feel like something has risen from the scene, shot out of it like an arrow, and pierced me. And this strong affective response is easily misidentified as *punctum.* But it is not. The feelings this image elicit from me, although strong, are highly constructed, anchored by the words or texts that accompany the photo when it is shared online. This combines with the mythology of the U.S./Mexico border as I understand it, a highly contested site of struggle and imagery depicted continuously by the media. That is not to say everyone has the exact same response to the image. In the comments of *The New York Times* article, many people placed blame on the U.S. government—due to how the border crisis is being handled by the U.S. government and/or due to the U.S.'s interference in Latin American politics, causing many of the humanitarian crises that necessitated border crossing in the first place. Still, many other commentators placed the blame on the father himself—due to his decision to cross the border illegally—and/or on Mexico for not taking better care of its citizens.

Susan Sontag builds on Barthes' theories regarding photography. Sontag agrees that photography is seen as a means of making "real," but questions whose reality is being displayed. Looking specifically at war photography, Sontag points out how a single photograph can be used to make numerous, often contradictory proclamations (13). What makes photography dangerous is that it is credited as objective while it is actually very subjective, contextual, and easily manipulatable (39). In this way, photography does not so much portray reality as create it.

> Photographs that everyone recognizes are now a constituent part of what society chooses to think about, or declares that

> it has chosen to think about. It calls these ideas
> "memories," and that is, over the long run, a fiction.
> Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as collective
> memory - part of the same family of spurious notions as
> collective guilt. But there is collective instruction. (85)

For Sontag, memory is always individual and producible—it dies with each person. What we consider to be collective "memory" is, in fact, a stipulation. Collective "memory" is a social construction, which claims "*this* is important and this is the story about how it happened, with pictures that lock the story in our minds" (86). Historical moments are actually ideologies, substantiated by images, which are meant to trigger specific thoughts and feelings (86). Whether it is an image of Martin Luther King speaking to the crowd at the Lincoln Memorial, or of people falling from the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001—or of Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his daughter's failed attempt to cross the Rio Grande—the image is not enabling us to remembering an event, but to reproduce an ideology.

In this way, collective memories can be thought of as larger cultural memes, memes which stipulate how a population is supposed to conceive of and conceptualize historical events and people. Whether the image of Martínez Ramírez and his daughter serves to prove that border crossing should be made easier or that people should not be trying to cross the border at all, the image presents the "historical moment" of a border in crisis. It serves to further develop the U.S./Mexico border as a concept in the American (and Western) psyche—as a meme. All one must do is type "immigration meme" into the Google search bar to come up with thousands of internet memes (particularly image

macros) that range in ideology from conservative to liberal, often using the same pictures to support both sides of the argument.

Obviously, not all memes are spread through visual imaging. However, it is undeniable that visual images do *something*—something that words alone cannot do. It is also evident that images alone—with no context given—do not provoke or evoke any specific response. Even with textural "anchorage," a certain response is not guaranteed, though it is much more likely. Thus, it is the relationship between the visible and the verbal, the visual and the sayable, that give images their power.

Conclusion: Finding the Truth in False Information

There is no denying that internet memes were a powerful tool in the 2016 Presidential Election. Political internet memes were generated and shared millions of times on Facebook alone in the year prior to the election. Some internet memes contained factual information regarding politicians' voting records or stances on particular issues. Others, however, often appeared completely removed from any original context by the time they were disseminated amongst mass audiences on Facebook. Internet memes that labeled Clinton "Killery" or "Hitlery," for example, became quite popular, though they were most often shared without any context as to why or how Clinton was a killer and/or in some way related to Hitler. Perhaps they were once meant to reference the 2012 Benghazi attacks, or perhaps they were simply meant to play on the name "Hillary" and its similarity to the words "Hitler" and "Killer"—without context it is impossible to know

for sure. Often accompanying extremely unflattering pictures of Clinton, these memes spread feelings and emotions (and affect), instead of facts.[34]

Charles Johnson, who describes himself as a general in the Great Meme War, and who claims to have close ties within Trump's political operation, told Schreckinger that, after the election, he fielded about a dozen phone calls from Washington regarding the political possibilities of memes. "If you're trying to win an election and you have a million dollars to spend on political ads or $100,000 to spend on trolling," he stated, "I would advise everyone to spend the hundred thousand on the troll" (Schreckinger). According to two former members of Trump's campaign staff, staffers would constantly monitor social media trends, watching Reddit and 4chan as well as mainstream sites. They would pass along anything that seemed particularly catchy to social media director Dan Scavino (Schreckinger). One staffer claims that a major goal of the campaign was to constantly push the "prevailing sentiment on social media in favor of Trump" (Schreckinger).

Internet memes—particularly ones that contain photographs—often seem to be a transparent representation of reality. Border memes, utilizing the image of Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his daughter, claim to depict something real and or truthful about what is going on at the border between the United States and Mexico. But the truth is, the image is only powerful when combined with the mythology and ideology already surrounding border politics. As I have demonstrated, internet memes do not function on a real/fictional or true/false dichotomy, so all these immigration internet memes differentiate is new from old—new information, ideology, and/or mythology regarding

[34] For some samples of memes that do compare Clinton to Hitler and implicate her in the Benghazi attacks, see Image 8 in List of Images starting on page 179.

the U.S. border control and immigration policy. Despite this, my critique of internet meme culture should not be seen as iconoclastic. Internet memes may not function as a "true/false" dichotomy, but that does not mean there is not a certain type of truth inherent to them. The question then becomes, "whose truth is being represented?"[35]

Serge Grusinski privileges the visible over the verbal in both creating hegemonic regimes and subverting them. In *Images at War: Mexico from Columbus to Blade Runner (1492-2019),* Grusinski states that "the control of the image is worth as much as that of energy; and the war over images is as important as the war over oil" (3). Examining the history of colonized Mexico, Grusinski concludes that images were extremely important and influential to colonization (12), used to validate colonialism, make meaning out of foreign epistemologies, and to spread Christianity. In turn, indigenous peoples used images to subvert, appropriate, and resist Western epistemologies/religion through the appropriation and reconfiguration of colonial imagery. For Grusinski, our current moment (as of 2000, when the book was written) and resulting proliferation of media and images is a result of colonization and the ways in which the colonized have "written back" to those in power. Those who knowingly share internet memes containing information that has been proven false by accredited news organizations can be understood as "writing back" to a culture—or government, even—that they feel does not represent them. Those who share false information, then, can still be seen as sharing truth—they are sharing what is true to them and for them at a particular moment in time.

The spread of images and information, whether "true" or not, is a sign of challenging dominant thought and/or ideology. As such, border memes, whether they

[35] A question posed by Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others.*

represent pro-immigration or anti-immigration policy, reveal the truths, ideologies, and mythologies inherent to certain people or groups. And by looking at these memes, one can see how people are processing, responding to, creating, and recreating truths, ideologies, and mythologies of their own. I will be examining this in more detail in the final chapter.

Chapter Three

The Making of a Swarm:

Misogyny, White Nationalism, and the Radicalization of America's Alt Right

"Subscribe to PewDiePie."

This is an easily recognizable meme for many who spent time on social media platforms like YouTube, 4chan, and Reddit in the last few years. It started as the slogan of Felix Kjellberg, a Swedish YouTuber who goes by the name PewDiePie, and who would say "Subscribe to PewDiePie" at the end of each video. It then became a battle cry in the war between the followers of Kjellberg and the Indian record company T-Series, in late 2018 and early 2019, for the title of the most-subscribed channel on YouTube. "Subscribe to PewDiePie" was the slogan of Kjellberg's following, repeated in YouTube videos, internet memes, and on messaging boards. Kjellberg's supporters took out a Times Square billboard and reportedly hacked into 50,000 personal printers around the world in order to print the phrase "Subscribe to PewDiePie." This saying eventually became an internet meme in its own right, as people adapted it and appropriated for many different situations. "Subscribe to PewDiePie" has become something people say ironically as the sign off for their own videos, and has, in the words of Kevin Roose at the *New York Time*s, "morphed into a kind of all-purpose cultural bat signal for the young and internet-absorbed."

"Remember, lads, subscribe to PewDiePie," is also what Brenton Harrison Tarrant said at the beginning of his Facebook Livestream on March 15th, 2019, before entering a mosque in the suburbs of Christchurch, New Zealand and open firing on the

Muslims gathered for Friday Prayer (Evans). Tarrant killed 44 people and wounded 45 at the Al Noor Mosque in Riccarton before moving to the Linwood Islamic Centre, killing seven more people and wounding five. Minutes before the massacre, Tarrant posted a link to the impending livestream on the website 8chan, along with a 78-paged manifesto and the proclamation, "time to stop shitposting and time to make a real life effort" [sic] (Romano "How the Christchurch Shooter Used Memes to Spread Hate"). He also shared this manifesto and the link to the livestream on Twitter. The 17-minute livestream, which I have elected not to watch, begins on Tarrant's trip to the Al Noor Mosque and ends as he drives away, logging the first shooting as if it were, in the words of Aja Romano, "a first-person shooter video game" and causes the event to "feel normalized, as if it were just an average video game demo by the average meme-happy gamer" ("How the Christchurch Shooter Used Memes to Spread Hate").

Radicalization is not new, nor are acts of terrorism and extremist violence. However, the internet—and social media in particular—has made the act of radicalization much simpler and more widespread. Internet memes have the capacity to interpolate people into radicalized, extremist ideologies from the comfort of their own homes. Tarrant is neither the first to turn his online radicalization into real-world extremist violence, nor is he the most recent. I have opened the chapter with him because his writing and actions display a key understanding of the affective power of internet memes and their radicalizing potential, which is what I will be focusing on throughout this chapter.

Until now, I have focused my research on predominantly American internet memes, as well as the ways in which they are read in the U.S. and the influence they hold

in American popular culture. However, as the internet is not constrained by national borders, the study of internet memes cannot be so limited either. While a certain meme may be most popular in a specific geographic local or in a particular language, its influence is never that clear cut. Further, as Jane Coastan writes for *Vox*, "America has a central role in the Christchurch shooter's manifesto. He claims he used guns to stir up America's debate over gun rights versus safety in hopes of dividing the country over racial and cultural lines." Though Tarrant himself is from Grafton, New South Wales, Australia and committed his acts of extremist violence in New Zealand, the influence of U.S. culture is obvious throughout his manifesto.

The manifesto itself reads like an internet meme compilation, full of internet meme references, shitposts, and copypasta.[36] In a multiple choice question in the middle of the *FAQ* section of the manifesto, Tarrant describes himself as "a biggot,racist,xenophobe,islamaphobe,nazi,fascist!" [sic], and offers the possible answers:

> A. Compliments will get you nowhere.
>
> B. That isn't a question.
>
> C. What the fuck did you just fucking say about me, you little bitch? I'll have you know I graduated top of my class in the Navy Seals, and I've been involved in numerous secret raids on Al-Quaeda, and I have over 300 confirmed kills. I am trained in gorilla [sic] warfare and I'm the top sniper in the entire US armed forces. (Evans)

[36] A "shitpost" refers to a deliberately upsetting or off-topic comment posted on social media, usually meant to upset others or distract from the actual topic of discussion. "Copypasta" refers to a large block of text that has been copied and pasted (hence "copy-pasta") over and over, across many internet sites. It is often used to annoy others and disrupt online discussions.

The final answer to this question continues for another 226 words, which are just as illogical as the rest. This entire question, like most of the manifesto, is nonsensical, meant to confuse those unfamiliar with the flippant and absurd modes of conversation often found on sites like Reddit, 4chan, 8chan and similar, while attracting and rewarding those who are. For those in the know, answer C is an easily recognizable piece of copypasta, which is thought to have originated on 4chan in 2010 (Evans). For others, however, the answer seemed like a clue and led to erroneous assertions by law enforcement that the shooter was somehow related to someone in the U.S. Military, despite the fact that his exaggerated claims make no sense and would require the person in question to be affiliated with both the United States Navy and Marine Corps.

Within the same *FAQ* section, Tarrant blames "video games,music,literature,cinema" [sic] for teaching him violence and extremism, claiming that "Spyro the dragon taught me ethno-nationalism. Fortnight trained me to be a killer and to floss on the corpses of my enemies."[37] Spyro the Dragon 3, or *Spyro: Year of the Dragon,* is a 2000 platform game that follows the titular character as he travels to several "Forgotten Worlds" in search of the magical dragon eggs stolen by an evil sorceress. Other than the celebration of "the year of the dragon," at the beginning of the game and the effort to restore the stolen dragon eggs to the realm of the dragons, the game has very little in the way of ethno-nationalist sentiment, but it is a popular game that has been memed quite a bit and will be recognized by those Tarrant is writing for. *Fortnight* is a massive multiplayer online (MMO) sandbox survival and third-person shooter videogame

[37] The Floss is a dance move popularized on social media, in which a person repeatedly swings their arms—held straight, with clenched fists—from side to side, moving from the back of their body to the front.

released in 2017. In MMO games, such as Fortnight, players can and often do program their avatars to floss over the dead bodies of their in-game enemies.

Although the claim that *Fortnight* trained him to be a killer seems a little more substantial, it still should not be taken at face value and could be read as a tongue-in-cheek critique of the claims that violent video games can lead to violent behavior—a popular meme itself.[38] More likely, then, Tarrant is making the opposite claim—that his violent and extremist tendencies did not come from the influence of popular videogames. Within the manifesto, Tarrant also credits Candace Owens, conservative American author, talk show host, political commentator, activist, and all-around popular conservative figurehead, with his radicalization, claiming that "[e]ach time she spoke I was stunned by her insights and her own views helped push me further and further into the belief of violence over meekness. Though I will have to disavow some of her beliefs, the extreme actions she calls for are too much, even for my tastes." This, too, should be read tongue-in-cheek, as Owens, despite espousing extremely conservative opinions, is herself a black woman and has never expressed any desire for overt violence against people of color.

In truth, Tarrant's radicalization likely had more to do with his online activity. Though he had traveled widely and met in person with a few European white nationalist groups, he was primarily active on extreme right-wing discussion boards on 4chan and 8chan, and told investigators that YouTube provided a "significant source of information and inspiration" for him (Perry). In turn, Tarrant hoped that his actions would contribute

[38] I use the term "meme" here as this claim that violent video games make those who play them more violent is not just an assertion made by concerned parents (which has been debunked), but has also been appropriated by different groups and shared in an often tongue-in-cheek manner through internet memes, as we see here.

to the radicalization of others online and lead to more extremist action. In the initial post on 8chan, which contained his manifesto and the link to his livestream, Tarrant writes,

> Well lads it's time to stop shitposting and time to make a real life effort post. I will carry out the attack against the invaders, and will even live stream the attack via facebook. […] It's been a long ride and despite all your rampant faggotry, fecklessness and degeneracy, you are all top blokes and the best bunch of cobbers a man could ask for. I have provided links to my writings below, please do your part by spreading my message, making memes and shitposting as you usually do. If I don't survive the attack, goodbye, godbless and I will see you in Valhalla. (Evans)

Tarrant himself seems to understand the power that internet memes possess in sharing and shaping ideology. He mentions the shitposting often found on Incel forums and uses popular phrases, including homophobic language, before encouraging others to share his message through memes and continue the process of radicalization.

In this chapter, I will be looking at this process of online, meme-driven radicalization. I will examine the intersections of misogyny and white nationalism, as they have shaped certain online spaces as well as the beliefs and identities of those who traffic these spaces before moving to larger social media sites—often in the form of internet memes—and influencing a substantial subset of conservative Americans that makes up the alt-right. I will examine the ways in which internet memes affect identity formation and performance, sometimes encouraging people into extremist and radical

ideologies as well as prompting violence and terrorism. I will utilize research on radicalization, identity formation, and performance to examine online radicalization and harassment campaigns, as well as to analyze my own research on Incel.net, which included a close reading of all introduction, membership, and administration pages, as well as the top 100 highest rated posts on the "Quality Central," "General Discussion," and "Real Life Stories" forums as of July, 2020.

I argue that the affective responses generated by internet memes can encourage those who are exposed to them to then embody and share them, not just through more internet memes, but through identity formation and performance in real-world spaces.[39] I will also look at the "chunking" nature of memes, and how this chunking enables memes to interpolate people into a myriad of belief systems at once.

In "The Origin and Evolution of Culture and Creativity," Liane Gabora writes that memes "fool potential hosts into believing they want or need or identify with them by attaching themselves to supporting memes that we already identify with, or that represent things we need or want" (26). Memes often appeal to things people already like, know, and/or believe, relating new ideas to those already accepted, making it easier for a host to accept the new meme. In fact, the related memes are often so enmeshed that it is possible for someone to become interpolated into new ideas, beliefs, or ideologies without even realizing it. Tarrant, for example, mentions the *Spyro* and *Fortnite* games, and calls out the phrase "Subscribe to PewDiePie" as a means of catching the attention of those who are already familiar with them—generally young white men, the specific group Tarrant is

[39] As established in the Introduction, I will be using the term "internet meme" to describe traditional image macros shared among friends as well as to address anything generating, circulated, appropriated, and shared online, including ideologies such as those shared by Incel groups and online phenomena such as Gamergate.

speaking to and attempting to radicalize—in the hopes of spreading his white nationalist ideology. This group also makes up the bulk of those who have participated in Incel communities, Gamergate, and pro-Trump internet forums.

In this chapter I will explore the larger Incel movement, which has been spread through and encouraged by both Gamergate and a subset of online pro-Trump groups.[40] Men are often led to Incel groups out of dissatisfaction with their romantic lives, where they are also sometimes indoctrinated with xenophobic, racist, and/or nationalistic ideology without even realizing it. These radical ideologies can then prompt acts of real-world violence. I argue that the affect generated by internet memes produce responses strong enough to create ruptures in society, such as the instances of extremist violence I will be discussing throughout this chapter. In this way, the semiotics of social media often function like that of the theater. Unlike theater however, which is considered by many as a vehicle for transformation and social change, social media activism is incapable of reaching the third stage of social drama in which reconciliation or transformation takes place.

The Social Drama of the "Me Too" Movement—Memes as Sites of Performance

Internet memes, and the larger cultural memes they are often attached to, can be seen as a means of performing what Victor Turner calls "social dramas." Turner claims that all parts of social life are "pregnant" with these "social dramas" (11). According to

[40] The Incel movement is a subset of predominantly young, straight, white men who have found themselves "involuntary celibate," and blame women for their lack of sexual activity. I will go into greater detail about the history and intricacies of the Incel movement later, here I will rely on the definition put forth by Jia Tolentino at *The New Yorker*, as a "violent political ideology around the injustice of young, beautiful women refusing to have sex with them," which is often enmeshed with white supremacist ideology.

Turner, social dramas are made up of three stages. The first stage includes a *breach* of some sort, be it of rules or of etiquette. The second stage involves *crises,* in which the community chooses sides—there will be those who align themselves with the violator and those who align themselves with the status quo (10). The social drama ends with a third stage—a "mode of redress," which provides a way to deal with the breach, be it through reconciliation or bifurcation (11). According to Turner, these social dramas happen in every culture, at every level, from family fights to national revolutions and international wars (10-11). As humanity has progressed, "we have become somewhat more adept in devising cultural modes of confronting, understanding, assigning meaning to; and sometimes coping with crisis" (11). The judicial process provided by the legal system, as well as the ritual processes provided by religious institutions, work to patch up quarrels, "mend" broken social ties, and "seal up punctures" in the "social fabric" (10).

The arts also play an important role in every stage of the social drama. Theater has its roots in social drama, Turner argues.

> By means of such genres as theater, including puppetry and shadow theatre, dance dramas, and professional story-telling, performances are presented which prove a community's weaknesses, call its leaders to account, desacralize its most cherished values and beliefs, portray its characteristic conflicts and suggest remedies for them, and generally take stock of its current situation in the known world. (11)

In other words, theater, as well as other forms of art, create a non-judicial, non-religious avenue to produce breaches, cope with crises, and develop means of redress and/or reintegration.

Richard Schechner, a friend and colleague of Turner, expands on these theories of performance and social drama. Much like Turner, Schechner arrives at an inclusive conception of performance, which includes everything from ritualized behavior to everyday action and large-scale theatrical events (1). Schechner finds it hard to define the term "performance," as "the boundaries separating it on the one side from theater and on the other everyday life are arbitrary" (44). He is, however, able to differentiate ritualized animal behavior from that of primates (especially humans), arguing that, while the rituals of lower animals are indeed prototypes for primate performances, the self-consciousness of human performance is what sets it apart from that of other animals (52). Although animals can be thought of as "performing" in a certain rudimentary sense, performance, in Schechner's conception, involves conscious decisions and the ability to change one's performance depending on the social situation.

Schechner argues that Turner's social drama framework—"breach, crisis, redressive action and reintegration"—is "a universal dramatic structure parallel to social process: drama is that art whose subject, structure and action is social process" (121). Theater becomes the perfect venue for this, as theater, at its core, is about transformation (66). He claims that "the basic transformation from raw to cooked is a paradigm of culture-making: the transformation from natural into human. At its deepest level this is what theater is 'about,' the ability to frame and control, to change from raw to cooked, the most problematic (violent, dangerous, sexual, taboo) items of human interaction"

(123). Through the theater, humanity can process, better understand, and thus better act on traditionally taboo subjects.

Building on Turner and Schechner's theories, I argue that the internet, and social media in particular, provide a stage for acting out social drama similar to that of traditional theater, and that internet memes are a means of enacting each stage of the social drama. In this way, internet memes and the meme culture developed around them are not only a means of spreading and radicalizing conservative ideas, but can also be seen to encourage social progress and justice. Memes such as "Me Too" and #BlackLivesMatter, can be seen as both creating breaches within society and illuminating breaches that are already there. Whether the "Me Too" movement created a breach in the generally accepted behavior of men—particularly men in power—or it simply brought a pre-existing breach (of sexual violence and/or gender inequality) to public attention, a breach now exists.

Moving to the second stage of social drama, sides were taken. Women all over the world stood up and told their stories of sexual misconduct and sexual assault. Others argued against the movement, creating the hashtag #NotAllMen. However, one of the main issues with internet meme culture, I argue, is that it is not able to reach the third stage of social drama. There is no redress, no bifurcation or reconciliation. Yes, a few powerful men have been incriminated through the "Me Too" movement, but very little has actually changed in the lives of most women. Gender inequality and sexual misconduct are still issues most women face on a regular basis.[41] This is because internet

[41] For an in-depth discussion of the exclusive nature of the "Me Too" movement and its inability to address the issues of poor women and women of color, see Alison Phipps' *Me, Not You*.

meme culture is not a vehicle of transformation. In fact, the very core of meme culture is repetition—the ability to spread without too much change. Internet memes do this through reduction, by taking complex and nuanced ideas and reducing them down—down to a slogan, a hashtag, or an image. This makes the ideas and/or ideologies contained within the internet meme open to interpretation based on the worldview (interpretive communities, reading strategies, etc.) of each individual host.

Internet memes, most-often simplified as they travel from person to person, produce new and different meanings in each host. The simplicity of most internet memes, as well as their lack of a single context for interpretation, prevent them from making any lasting, transformative change, prohibiting any real redress in the process. Even when internet memes culminate in acts of extremist violence—and a full-scale riot on the nation's capitol—no long-lasting change is achieved.

The Making of a Swarm—The Semiotics of Social Media

While, as I have demonstrated, the semiotics of social media often function like that of the theater, social media activism is not able to reach the third stage of social drama in which reconciliation or transformation takes place. Why is this?

In *The Semiotics of Theater*, Erika Fischer-Lichte outlines the basic assumption of theater: that "A represents X while S looks on" (13). There is a fundamental understanding that what happens on stage is not real—that the beliefs stated or actions committed are not to be taken seriously. Fischer-Lichte believes that theater differs from other cultural signs because of the "special function which it alone fulfills." Fischer-Lichte, acknowledges that "theatrical signs are [...] always signs which may be

characterized by the fact that they have the same material construction as the primary signs which they signify—a crown can signify a crown, a nod of the head can mean a nod of the head, and a scream a scream, etc." (9). Thus, a gun on stage will be recognizable as a gun to the audience. However, that audience is not going to react to the on-stage brandishing of a gun the same way they would react to a gun brandished near them while they are in a bank. Therefore, though similar, the signs of the theater are fundamentally different than those of the real world.

Describing the complicated semiotic process by which meaning is made, Fischer-Lichte argues that meaning "arises when a sign is related by its user to something within a context of signs; the meaning can change if the sign is (a) inserted into a different semiotic context; (b) related to something else; or (c) used by another user. In other words, the meaning of the sign changes if one of the three dimensions changes" (2). So, a sign may be understood one way in one context (a gun brandished in a play) and very differently in another context (a gun brandished in a bank).

To further complicate the matter, the gun may have very different meanings to individual audience members, depending on their own experiences. Additionally, even though these theatrical signs may contain the same material construction as the primary signs which they signify, they are still governed by the overarching conception of theater. This is because theater involves a "doubling up" of culture that is only understood by those who understand the culture depicted on stage as well as the performativity of theater. Theater thus "reflects the reality of the culture in which it originates in a double sense of the word: it depicts that reality and presents it in such a depiction for reflective thought" (10). Not all theatrical performances are sites of transformation just as not all

audience members are transformed in the same way, if at all, through any given performance. However, a general understanding of what theater is and an openness to its transformative potential can help prompt audience members into interpreting the performance in a particular or desired way and responding with a particular or desired set of actions.

Unlike the theatrical stage and its accepted code of signs and signifieds, mass media—particularly social media—are not always conceptualized as sites of performance, even though the semiotics of social media often function like that of the theater. Discussing the differences between the performance of gender in everyday life and theatrical performances, Judith Butler argues, "one can maintain one's sense of reality in the face of this temporary challenge to our existing ontological assumptions about gender arrangements; the various conventions which announce that 'this is only a play' allows strict lines to be drawn between the performance and life" (527).

In the theater, there is a distinct understanding of artifice. The audience knows that the identities on stage are constructed through performance. However, when people perform the same identity markers off the stage, the performative aspects often become veiled. As such, an audience member may be accepting of a man who performs drag on stage, with the understanding that that particular gender performance is only that—a performance. However, when that same audience member sees a person dressed in drag, or in any other way exhibiting a non-normative gender performance, on the street or on the bus, the performance becomes threatening because it calls to attention the ways in which gender is always a social construction, only reified through performance. This threat, when met in-person, has the potential to prompt violence—as the long history of

hate crimes against queer, trans, and other non-gender-confirming bodies can attest—but it also has the ability to create an empathetic connection between two people, leading to understanding and acceptance. Either way, a form of redress can occur. When presented with the image of a gender-non-conforming person on social media, however, a threatened individual is unable to explain the breach as a performance, unable to lash out at what they see as a threat, and making an empathetic connection with this person is much more difficult. Instead, outrage is generated but has nowhere to go. Their outrage may align with the outrage of others online, and perhaps even radicalize into extremism. It may even rupture into real-world actions, but it is still a very individual outrage, and as such no large-scale redress (or systemic change) can occur.

The issue, then—the reason why social media activism can never reach the third stage of social drama—is that it is neither the theater nor the real world, though it is often treated by those who traverse it as both. Social media activity does not feature the same understanding of performativity as the theater, nor does it create the same experiential affect as in-person exchanges. I am not arguing that affect cannot be generated online—this entire project is a claim to the opposite. What I do believe is that the affect generated online, particularly through internet memes, is quite different from that which is generated through in-person meetings, where a myriad of non-verbal communication methods take place, making empathy much easier to establish.

In *In the Swarm*, Byung-Chul Han likens the digital masses forming through social media to a "swarm." Building on Gustave Le Bon's assertion that "the divine right of masses is about to replace the divine right of kings," Han argues that the divine right of

masses is now being replaced by the divine right of the digital swarm. As Han articulates it,

> Waves of outrage mobilize and bundle attention very efficiently. However, their fluidity and volatility make them unsuited to shaping public discourse or public space. They are too uncontrollable, incalculable, inconstant, ephemeral, and amorphous for that. They well up abruptly—and they dissipate just as soon. They are like smart mobs. They lack the stability, consistency, and continuity that are indispensable for civil exchange. Accordingly, they defy integration into a stable discursive context. Waves of outrage often occur in response to events of only meager social or political relevance. […] Today's fits of outrage are extremely fleeting and scattered. Outrage lacks the mass—the gravitation—that is necessary for action. It generates no future (7-8).

A swarm is not a cohesive unit—a single mass—but group of isolated individuals each working with their own goals in mind. While the digital swarm works to self-expose and self-monitor, it is not capable of formulating any lasting change, as it is incapable of reaching any single end goal.

Han, much more a theorist than a social scientist, offers little in the way of examples or proof to back up his claims. However, the internet memes I will be examining in this chapter confirm Han's assertions, as do the memes I have analyzed in

the previous two chapters. Internet memes generate a strong affective response, prompting momentary outrage and sometimes even real-world activism (or extremism), but rarely result in any true systemic changes. Internet memes can and have caused momentary eruptions: the extremist violence of Tarrant and The Capitol Riot, or the revelations of the "Me Too" movement, but no redress can occur, as each individual member of the swarm is functioning with their own individual set of motivations and goals. Groups can neither split nor reconcile, only bicker online.

In the next section, I will apply these claims to specific internet memes, highlighting the ways in which these memes have caused breaches in society, yet have brought about no real-world change. I will trace recent acts of alt-right violence back to earlier online radicalization, particularly within the Incel movement, and how their misogynistic beliefs relate to and encourage white nationalist ideologies, arguing that, within many of these online spaces, racism, xenophobia, homophobia and misogyny become extremely interconnected, making it difficult to discuss one without the others. One might be drawn to these online spaces for a particular reason—loneliness and despair over the state of their romantic lives, or lack thereof, in the case of Incels—but are quickly exposed to, and often indoctrinated into other extremist ideologies. These ideologies create breaches, but can offer no real solutions, only more violence.

One Thing Leads to Another: Incels, Gamergate, and the Alt-Right

On January 6, 2021, a mob of Donald Trump supporters stormed the United States Capitol. Trump had lost the national election the previous November, though he was still vocal in his refusal to concede the presidency to Joe Biden. Prompted by Trump

himself, as well as right-wing media, these Trump supporters believed that the election had been a fraud and hoped to overturn the results by disrupting the joint sessions of Congress as they assembled to count the electoral votes, which would formalize Biden's victory. The Capitol Riot—which resulted in five deaths, more than 140 injuries, over 700 felony charges, and at least one conviction as of March, 2022—did not come about suddenly, but was years in the making.

The actions of Trump's online alt-right support base have been discussed and analyzed in the previous chapters, as well as the bizarre and dangerous conspiracy theories which have arisen therein. But many saw in the Capitol Riot a history that went back even further. "Seeing some people say this in private to protect themselves so I'll say it out loud: there is a direct line from the game industry and media's failure in addressing gamergate to the right wing terrorism we're seeing today. Period," tweeted Shayna Moon, video game producer and senior tech manager at Sony Santa Monica Studio. She was not alone. Her tweet received 1,943 Retweets, 584 Quote Tweets and 8,598 Likes. Although white supremacy, bigotry, and misogyny (key motivating factors for many of the subset of Trump supporters who stormed the Capitol) have been present in the U.S. since the country's inception, and white nationalist groups have been active online for decades, the methods of indoctrination and organization prototyped during Gamergate were greatly utilized by Trump's online supporters in both the 2016 and 2020 elections.

Similar to the QAnon conspiracy discussed in Chapter One, Gamergate would seem a radical but insignificant internet meme if not for the lasting effects it has had on internet culture and online activism. The beginning of Gamergate lies with an

independent game designer by the name of Zoe Quinn, who released a game titled *Depression Quest* in early 2013. Though the game was obviously amateur in style, some critics praised the ways in which Quinn brought attention to issues surrounding depression, as well as the "artsiness" of the game—Caitlin Dewey with *Newsweek* calls the game "more a story or a piece of interactive art" than a traditional video game. It was not until nearly two years later, however, that the game and its designer attracted wide-spread internet attention. In August of 2014, Quinn's ex-boyfriend, Eron Gjoni, wrote a post on his personal blog claiming that Quinn had garnered positive reviews for the game by offering sexual favors to videogame journalists, including Kotaku writer Nathan Grayson.

Though these accusations were quickly proven false—none of the men Gjoni had accused Quinn of sleeping with had even reviewed the game—the issue gained traction when retweeted by celebrities like Adam Baldwin and highlighted on Breitbart News. Soon, tens of thousands of angry gamers (almost exclusively young men) had taken to Twitter, Reddit, and 4chan to decry what they saw as a lack of ethics in videogame journalism. While the movement was ostensibly about ethics in games journalism, few journalists became targets within the movement. In fact, the only games journalists that the Gamergate community went after were women. From September 1 to October 23, 2014, Quinn received over 10,400 tweets using the #Gamergate hashtag, while Grayson, who was a journalist actually employed by the gaming site Kotaku, only received 732 (Wofford). Grayson faced no serious consequences from the Gamergate community and still writes for Kotaku as of 2021 (Dewey). Quinn, on the other hand, was doxxed, that

is, had her personal information, including her home address, posted online. Naked pictures of Quinn soon appeared online as well, along with rape and death threats.

Within days of the initial actions taken against Quinn, feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian was attacked after posting a video on YouTube about women in gaming. Sarkeesian and many of the other people implicated by Gamergate were slandered and doxxed for critiquing the misogynist nature of many games and calling for gaming to be a more inclusive space for women, queer people and people of color.[42] Between September 1 and October 23, 2014, Sarkeesian was bombarded with 35,188 tweets using the #GamerGate hashtag (Wafford). She too was doxxed and forced to leave her home after receiving rape and death threats. Photoshopped images of her face, bloody and bruised, began appearing online, spread through internet memes. In the end, an in-depth study of the #Gamergate hashtag on Twitter from September 1 and October 23, 2014, commissioned by *Newsweek*, found that the hashtag was used far more to harass women in gaming than to critique journalists (Wofford).

Gamergate did not stop with harassment, either. The Gamergate community encouraged corporations to drop advertising from games publications they deemed unethical without any proof of unethical behavior (in the end, not one breach of ethics was ever uncovered by Gamergate). Many companies did halt advertising on game sites to appease the online activists, however. The tech company Intel and car manufacture Mercedes, two of the corporations to stop advertising on Kotaku, later acknowledged that they had no understanding of the politics of Gamergate and reinstated advertisements (Romano “What We Still Haven't Learned from Gamergate”).

[42] For samples of the memes circulated regarding Sarkeesian, see Images 9 and 10 in List of Images starting on page 179.

Gamergate exemplified not only how online actions result in real-world consequences, but that online abusers and bullies almost always face no real-world consequences of their own—a lesson that led directly into the trolling and meme campaigns present in the 2016 election two years later. It also initiated the pushback by some online communities against what they decried as "Social Justice Warriors," or those who were calling for a more inclusive spaces for women, queer people and people of color—both online and offline. It should come as no surprise that Reddit's biggest pro-Trump forum, which has been well documented throughout this dissertation, heavily overlapped with its biggest Gamergate forum (Romano "What We Still Haven't Learned from Gamergate"). While Gamergate was a great primer for how organized, large-scale online trolling can result in offline activities, to trace the beginnings online extremism we need to go back even further.

Less than three months prior to the initial post by Gjoni that launched Gamergate, 22-year-old Elliot Rodger killed six people and injured fourteen in Isla Vista, California—an attempt to wage what he called a "War on Women" (Tolentino et al). On May 23, 2014, Rodger stabbed his three roommates to death before driving to a nearby sorority house, where he shot three young women, killing two and injuring a third (Brzuszkiewicz 10).[43] Rodger then drove through the city of Isla Vista, shooting several pedestrians, killing one and running over several others with his car (10). He eventually crashed his car and was dead of a self-inflicted gunshot would when found by the police (10). After the stabbings, but before the shootings, Rodger uploaded a video on his YouTube channel, titled "Elliot Rodger's Retribution," and emailed a 141-page, 100,000-

[43] Two of the men stabbed were confirmed as living with Rodger. It was never made clear if the third victim was living in the apartment or only visiting (Brzuszkiewicz 10).

word manifesto, titled "My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger" to his parents, a few acquaintances, and his therapist (Brzuszkiewicz 8). Within the manifesto, Rodger describes anger over his inability to find a girlfriend, which had led to a hatred of women and contempt for couples—particularly interracial couples (Brzuszkiewicz 10).[44] Rodger asserts that that, in his ideal world, all women would be quarantined in concentration camps, where men would be free to avail themselves of sexual favors whenever they wanted. In this world, according to Rodger, "the man's mind can develop to greater heights than ever before. Future generations will live their lives free of having to worry about the barbarity of sex and women, which will enable them to expand their intelligence and advance the human race to a state of perfect civilization." (Brzuszkiewicz 11).

Though Rodger's manifesto was not as internet meme-laden as Tarrant's, he did espouse allegiance with a greater cultural meme—he was active in and inspired by online participation in Incel groups, "[a] diverse and loose-knit movement drawn together by two things: a burning misogyny and a nearly cultlike belief that sex is a necessity that should be guaranteed to young men" (Ling).[45] The Incel community and ideology can be

[44] All three of the roommates Rodger stabbed to death were of Chinese descent, which could imply further racial motivations for at least those three murders and exemplify the often interconnectedness of misogyny and racism.

[45] While today Incel groups are hotbeds of misogyny and proposed violence against women, the initial term was coined by a queer woman who, going by the name Alana online, launched a website called *Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project* in 1993, which was eventually shortened to "Incel" in her newsletter. Alana's participation on the website ceased around 2000, but the term lived on. Until the early 2010s, two distinct types of Incel forums and websites developed simultaneously. The first type "emphasized support for those unable to find romantic connections," while others were "becoming increasingly militant and hostile to women" (Brzuszkiewicz 2). Within a decade, Incel sites were almost exclusively made up of this angry, misogynistic subset. Further, increasingly radical Incel ideologies were appearing online on non-Incel specific platforms such as 4chan and Reddit (3). In 2012, the "men's rights" subreddit r/TheRedPill was created. By 2016, Reddit's Incel community had over 40,000 members (3). While many of the forums have been banned or subject to sanctions—meaning that it would be subject to tighter controls designed to limit the spread of hateful content—new Reddit forums and 4chan channels are created regularly and the Incel community has also migrated to their own sites like Incels.co and Incels.net, where they are not subjected

considered a larger cultural meme, but it is spread through internet memes, such as hashtags, image macros, and the like. Elliot Rodger himself became a popular meme within the Incel community after his death. His picture is often used as user avatars and "Going Elliot Rodger," or "Going ET" is often used to discuss and/or encourage similar violence.[46]

Incel ideology exerts a "unique form of hybrid masculinity, in which involuntary celibates distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity while simultaneously reproducing it through their nostalgia narratives of a utopian pre-feminist past and their derogatory, violent rhetoric against women and non-incel men" (Brzuszkiewicz 5). For Incels, women are the ultimate cause of all their suffering. "They are the ones who have UNJUSTLY made our lives a living hell," writes a recent poster on Incel.net, "We need to focus more on our hatred of women. Hatred is power." (Tolentino et al). Incel.net describes itself as "a support website for people who lack romantic relationships and sex," though it reads more like a support website for those wishing to espouse misogynist ideology and discuss violence against women.

This website, like most Incel sites, is comprised largely of in-group terminology. The term "redpilling," for example, is the act of accepting the truth that "people universally follow naturally predetermined laws, all women go for the most alpha (aggressive, dominant, physically strong, influential, wealthy, powerful etc.) man therefore one can compensate for poor genes by becoming an alpha, hitting the gym etc." The term comes from the popular 1999 film *The Matrix,* "in which the protagonist Neo is

to oversight and moderation.

[46] One post on a popular Incel website from 2017 stated "if you go ER you'll basically be immortalized and live on forever since people will speak about you for decades," basically encouraging others to follow in Rodger's footsteps. (Ling).

offered one of two pills: the blue pill would allow him to continue to live in a sort of happy ignorance, while the red pill would show him the world as it really is" (Brzuszkiewicz 6). The Blue Pill, in this instance, according to Incel.net, is the continued belief "that all people are different, couple matching is based on personal compatibility and genetic flaws are redeemable if you are kind and respectful towards women." There is also a Black Pill, which represents accepting that these things cannot be changed, according to Incel.net, and understanding that "acquired status is inferior to inherent genetically predetermined status and women can only be truly attracted to men with superior genes." This, then, leads to the understanding that kindness, sensibility, and respect towards women are pointless. Because of this belief, "[h]ostility towards women is legitimized to the point of becoming the most distinctive feature of these environments (Brzuszkiewicz 5).

This, then, can lead to the so-called "Rape Pill," which is not mentioned on Incel.net—at least not on the registration page where the others are listed, or any of the posts I came across —but is described by Sara Brzuszkiewicz as the belief among some Incel groups that "interactions between men and women can only be coercive, and so for two reasons. First, because women are not capable of making rational decisions, so it is men's right and duty to decide for them. Secondly, because sexual relations should be based on a power mechanism, according to which the male is dominant and the woman is submissive" (7). Although this idea seems extreme in its sentiment and is not mentioned anywhere that I could find on Incel.net, the conception of sex as a power relation in which most men are inherently on the losing end is a core component of almost every post I came across.

Though most men on Incel.net described themselves as fat, unattractive, having no job, or in some other way lacking in social capital, which they perceived as an unfair chance of fate, almost all had no compunction in judging women by the same standards they were angry over having been applied to them. A post from July 18, 2021, with two thousand views, describes the women the poster witnessed at a crowded entertainment event. “Woman in front of me was there with her boyfriend. Fat as fuck (calling her a 2 would be generous), while her boyfriend was probably a 6 or 7” he writes, continuing,

> Woman behind me was also fat as fuck (I didn't get a good look at her face, because if I looked at her, I would've wanted to slap the shit outta her, so probably a 1 or a 2). Loud as shit; every fifteen seconds you'd hear her screaming at the top of her lungs. Couldn't understand what she was saying most of the time because of her fat cheeks blocking the words from leaving her mouth. Me and the people next to me would glance over at each other and roll our eyes every time she did it, as if to say "what the fuck is wrong with this bitch?" Women around 20 feet to my left were fairly attractive. I still wouldn't swipe right if I saw their profiles on a dating app, but they weren't morbidly obese.

This post is representative of most content I found on Incel.net. In not one post did I see any awareness of the relationship between the ways in which these Incels felt they were

being unfairly treated by women and the ways in which they themselves were talking and thinking about women.

Incels on this cite claim their hostility towards women comes from the unfair fact that women are only attracted to good-looking, wealthy, or otherwise "alpha" men, and Incels are thus excluded from the dating pool because of their appearance or personalities. And yet the only women desired on this site are young and attractive. Undesirable women are treated with the same level of contempt that most Incels reported to have experienced themselves. This obvious cognitive dissonance, along with the often poorly written posts on these sites, make it easy to dismiss the Incel meme as the fringe ideology of a few deranged young men. Their numbers, however, are growing, as is the real-world violence they have enacted. Since 2014, there have been at least eight mass murders committed by self-identified Incels, resulting in 61 known deaths and countless injuries and they have been increasingly identified as a terrorist threat by both government organizations and news media. And, through events such as Gamergate and participation by Incels in alt-right groups online, these ideas are only continuing to proliferate.

Further, the misogyny found on this site and others like it is often interspersed with white nationalist sentiment and other forms of racism and xenophobia, which are then spread to other areas of the internet, joining and influencing a subset of conservative American politics often referred to as the "alt-right." While Incel ideologies have led to breaches in society and acts of real-world violence, no real resolutions have been established, which has led to more breaches, such as Gamergate and the Capitol Riot. These breaches build on each other, and will continue to happen because no real redress

has yet been achieved. After the Capitol Riot in January of 2021, many experts began calling the actions of the far right a case of mass radicalization (Allam; Stanton).

Internet Memes as Peer-to-Peer Grooming: Radicalization and the Alt-Right

"Historically, mass radicalization took time," claims Michael Jensen, "But that's not our reality anymore" (Stanton). Jensen leads the domestic radicalization team at the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism and is considered an expert on extremism. "This tent that used to be sort of 'far-right extremists' has gotten a lot broader," says Mary McCord, a law professor at Georgetown University and a former federal prosecutor who oversaw terrorism cases. "To me, a former counterterrorism official, that's a radicalization process" (Allam). Jensen, McCord, and many others have begun describing the rise in right-wing extremism over the last half-decade—beginning with the presidential campaign of Donald Trump in 2015 and climaxing (though not ending) with the Capitol Riot of January 2021—as mass radicalization.[47] While experts agree that there is not a specific social or economic profile for radicalization, most people who are radicalized experience triggering events or other grievances—including personal or political, real or imagined—that prompt acceptance of extremist ideas (Smith ii, 8, 18; Decety et al 519; Jahnke et al 309).

In writing about the radicalization taking place inside Incel communities in particular, Sara Brzuszkiewicz utilizes the concept of "radical milieus"—communities in which radicalization takes place. For Brzuszkiewicz, a "radical milieu" describes "an

[47] Radicalization as an area of study is quite broad and the term has been defined in many ways over the years. By the term radicalization, I mean the process by which an individual or group is inducted into extremist ideology. This includes changes in feelings, beliefs, and behaviors that "increasingly justify political violence" (Jahnke 309).

environment that, while not physically violent itself, shares core elements of the terrorists' perspective and experiences," which "provide the breeding and recruiting ground, as well as direct and indirect support to those individuals who might continue their process of radicalization to the point of committing actual attacks" (9).

According to Brzuszkiewic, the practice of grooming within the Incel radical milieu has a particular set of characteristics—particularly reciprocal, peer-to-peer grooming not found in other radical milieus: "[p]eer-to-peer pressure, in synergy with the value attributed to the actions of incel 'heroes' like Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian, seems to have remarkable radicalization potential" (10).[48] She called this "horizontal radicalization," which "abandons the hierarchical structure of other ideologies and social movements" (10). This horizontal radicalization is similar to the ways in which most memes spread—unilaterally from person to person—and, I would argue, is not limited to Incel forums. Prompted by the targeting algorithms on sites like Facebook and Instagram, which I will explore in more detail in the next section, incendiary right-wing internet memes also spread from person to person in an extremely proficient manner, encouraging peer-to-peer radicalization on a very large scale.

For Brzuszkiewicz, this is a vicious cycle in which "the incel radical milieu [or Facebook algorithm, I would add] functions as a legitimizing and radicalizing environment," where "tangible violence consolidates the role of incel [or alt-right] online communities" as radical milieus (12). To put this in the language I have been utilizing so far, this horizontal radicalization can be seen as a means of inducting others into certain interpretive communities. However, as Stanley Fish published his ideas about interpretive

[48] On 23 April 2018, Minassian—a self-identified incel—drove a van into pedestrians in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, killing ten people and injuring sixteen (Brzuszkiewicz 8).

communities before the development of affect theory, his process is a highly cognitive one, concerned with how readers process and respond to information. Internet memes, I believe, are much more dependent on the transmission of affect over information. As such, I am concerned with how the readers of memes process and respond to affect, sometimes in ways that seem to contradict the information being shared. The contradictory nature of Incel ideology, for example, comes from the valuing of affect over information, enabling peer-to-peer radicalization (or induction into a specific interpretive community) even when the information being shared is contradictory, nonsensical, or contains beliefs the host did not previously subscribe to.[49]

In an interview with *Vox,* one Reddit user discussed his introduction to Incel ideology, which began on the Reddit forum r/TheRedPill. He claimed that he had previously considered himself socially progressive but witnessing his father struggle through a messy divorce made him more open to the anti-feminist messages he found on r/TheRedPill (Romano "How the Alt-Right's Sexism Lures Men into White Supremacy"). "I was grateful for the community to be raising points that affected my father and my life," he told *Vox,* especially the way in which the forum reinforced his idea that feminists blamed straight white men for all of the world's problems (Romano "How the Alt-Right's Sexism Lures Men into White Supremacy"). Incel forums, for him, became "a basic form of support in acknowledging that men are allowed to be emotional, flawed humans" (Romano "How the Alt-Right's Sexism Lures Men into White Supremacy"). He is not alone.

[49] While I generally try not to make value judgements about specific ideas or ideologies, most of the posts I analyzed on Incel.net truly were nonsencicle, in that they did not make any logical sense—they often contradicted themselves, and were usually quite poorly written, with so many grammar errors and misspellings that I sometimes struggled to understand what the poster was trying to say.

In an article for *Foreign Policy,* Justin Ling finds that, based on their own self-reported histories, many Incels have been or are currently bullied in school. Most are unhappy with their weight, height, and/or looks and report low self-esteem, depression, and a perceived inability to make friends (Ling). However, these communities "often propagate the shaming and bullying they claim to see in the outside world" (Ling). This is a way of radicalizing community members and is similar to the "horizontal radicalization" Brzuszkiewicz notes, in which peer-to-peer grooming takes place through reinforcing both the idea that these young men are undesirable losers according to the world's standards and that there is nothing they can do about it short of attempting to completely disrupt the system through acts of political violence.

While studies have shown that many men are initially drawn to Incel spaces in search of support, the male entitlement promoted in these spaces can easily be mutated into white nationalist and white supremacist ideologies as well. In many of these communities, men do not see themselves as misogynistic, but as fighting a war against the emasculation and sexual repression brought about by feminism (Romano "How the Alt-Right's Sexism Lures Men into White Supremacy"). This sense of oppression and entitlement also translates into a sense of persecution by other groups that are seen to threaten the power of straight, white men, including immigrants, people of color, and queer people. In this way, the Incel ideology can be seen less as a single meme, and more as a memeplex, memepool, or macromeme (similar to religious indoctrination) as discussed in the Introduction.

Much of the terminology of Incel in-groups is racially coded, for example. While a "Chad" is the quintessential anti-Inceler—an attractive, charismatic, successful man

who has no trouble getting women to sleep with him, he is also unquestionably white. Attractive, charismatic, successful men of other races, nationalities, and ethnicities can exist, but they are often given highly racialized nicknames, such as "Tyrone," "Chang," "Chadpreet," and "Chaddam" (Brzuszkiewicz 7). Incels themselves have given other names to those amongst their ranks who are not white, such as "Currycell," or "Ricecel" (Brzuszkiewicz 7).

The anonymous nature of these sites often make it hard to tell the age, race, ethnicity and/or national makeup of any given community member, but most of these terms seem to have been coined by white members and can be read as extremely xenophobic and often outright racist. While many members claim that the terms are benign and that the Incel community at large is not racist, the normalization of terms such as these within the community normalize other ideas as well.

A popular contributor on Incel.net, who goes by the name "lordofincels," posted a list of "Incel Laws" to Incel.net on July 2, 2019, which included a law of racial equality. The same day, in another post on the cite, the same user posted a list of "solutions" he would like to see the Incel community develop that included the "Aryanization of males," in which all men would be genetically modified to have more Aryan features. Cognitive dissonance such as this is common on the site and does not just normalize but encourages white supremacy and white nationalism along with misogyny. And while some will point out that these posts are often made in jest, meant to be ironic or as a form of shitposting, the very act of turning these ideas into jokes further works towards normalizing them.[50]

[50] "Just locker room talk" has become a popular phrase and way to minimize the impact of sexist or misogynist language, particularly since the 2016 release of an Access Hollywood video in which Donald Trump makes extremely sexual and predatory comments about women. By explaining his comments (or anyone else's) as a joke, the impact of his words and actions appear less threatening and the ideas presented

These male-centric online communities have also continued to popularize the concept of the "Social Justice Warrior" (SJW)—someone seen to be fighting a politically correct war against straight white men. This ideology, which positions straight white men as the persecuted minority, fighting a war against feminists, minorities, immigrants, queer people, and anyone else threatening the traditional "American" way of life, situates the Incel community squarely within the alt-right movement, which flourished during Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and throughout his presidency. The blend of misogyny, white supremacy, and nationalism within the alt-right has led to what some have described as nothing more than a "rebranding of the white nationalist movement" (Matthews).

The Incel community is predominantly—though not exclusively—made up of young, white men: nearly identical to the community who participated in Gamergate. However, the makeup of the alt-right as a whole, including those who participated in the Capitol Riot, and those who support the QAnon conspiracy, is much more diverse. While still predominantly white, gender and age vary more widely. Radicalization, it seems, is not contained within the radical milieus of certain online spaces.

The spread of racist and xenophobic propaganda is in no way a new phenomenon. From the Crusades to colonialism and slavery to the Holocaust, the last millennium alone is rife with examples of how racist and xenophobic propaganda led to extreme violence and mass radicalization. However, with the popularity and wide usage of social media, enabled by the internet, these messages now have the opportunity to spread like never before. In the first chapter, I offered a tentative outline of this process—how online

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become more easily accepted.

memes, such as Pizzagate and QAnon, move from certain online spaces, such as Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan, where the audience is small, homogenous, and more likely to share interpretive communities and reading strategies, to more popular social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, where larger, more heterogeneous populations begin to read their own meanings into these memes. However, although these larger and often older audiences are less likely to share interpretive communities and reading strategies, this does not mean they cannot often be led to a desired interpretation. Further, the targeting algorithms of these popular sites ensure that those exposed to radicalizing information are done so often, making it seem like the information they are receiving is more prevalent or widespread than it is in actuality.

"Carol's Journey to QAnon" and "Stop the Steal"—Facebook Algorithms and Mass Radicalization

Describing what he terms the "Slow Red Pill," *The Guardian*'s Joshua Citarella writes about the slow radicalization of Instagram users through popular internet meme accounts. The Instagram pages, at first view, appear to be average, ordinary Republican meme accounts, which "repost high-performing content from big Republican pages […] and use the popularity of these images to accumulate a following of Fox, Breitbart and Turning Point USA type viewers" (Citarella). Once a week or so, these accounts will post what is considered "extreme content"—including racist caricatures and white nationalist ideology. According to Citarella, these Red-Pill posts do not stay up long and are followed by the posting of more generalized conservative content for a week or two, when another piece of "extreme content" is again posted then deleted.

By focusing mostly on mainstream conservative content, these sites can build a follower base of 30,000 to 40,000 members. “This process would continue for months, maybe a year,” Citarella writes, then,

> Towards the end of the account’s lifespan, the admins would dial up the ratio of radical content dramatically. Posts would frame shifting demographics as a “Great Replacement” orchestrated by nefarious transnational elites or describe how climate change would soon force harsh decisions about the distribution of scarce resources in the global north. Ultimately, they would put forward that, against the scale of the coming crisis, civil unrest and violence were not only permissible, but necessary.

This is by no means a strategy singular to American politics. Citarella points to similar tactics used by the Myanmar military to spread anti-Rohingya messaging on both Facebook and Instagram in 2018, which proved to be extremely successful. More than 700,000 Rohingya ended up fleeing the country within in a year, which the United Nations called “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing” (Mozur). According to Facebook’s head of cybersecurity policy, Nathaniel Gleicher, the company found “clear and deliberate attempts to covertly spread propaganda that were directly linked to the Myanmar military” (Mozur).

Large scale usage, easy share capabilities, and lax oversight are not the only reasons Facebook was—and still is—able to encourage instances of mass radicalization. Frances Haugen, former Facebook engineer turned company whistleblower, testified

before Congress in October of 2021 on this very topic, and released thousands of pages of related Facebook documents dated from 2017 to 2021. The Facebook Papers, as they are called—including research conducted by the company and internal conversations—were made available to *The Atlantic, The New York Times, The Washington Post, NBC,* and other news organizations. These papers, along with Haugen's testimony, suggest that the algorithms and recommendation systems used by the platform are capable of pushing users to extremist ideas (Zadrozny). The Facebook Papers confirm that Facebook is not simply a passive tool by which users can transmit information, but is itself a catalyst, amplifying extremism and misinformation, inciting violence, and encouraging radicalization and political polarization (LaFrance).

In one prime example from the papers, a Facebook employee whose name has been redacted within the documents, conducted a study on polarization in 2019, which she titled "Carol's Journey to QAnon." On July 2, 2019, the researcher created an account for a fake woman named Carol Smith, a conservative mom from North Carolina (Mac and Frenkel). The account had no profile photo, but included interests such as parenting and Christianity, as well as civics and community. She followed the Facebook pages for *Fox News* and *Sinclair Broadcasting*, as well as then-president Donald Trump. Without "Carol" interacting with anything related to the conspiracy, Facebook recommended pages and groups related to QAnon within days (Mac and Frenkel). Carol—or the researcher controlling her account—never followed any recommended QAnon groups, but Facebook's algorithm continued to push her towards similar pages and groups (Zadrozny). Within a week, Caro's feed was full of "extreme, conspiratorial and graphic content groups" (Mac and Frenkel), including pages and groups that violated

Facebook's own rules regarding hate speech and disinformation (Zadrozny). "Carol's Journey to QAnon" concluded that Facebook's recommendation tools pushed users towards extremism (Zadrozny).

The same researcher also conducted polarization experiments with a left-leaning account and found that Facebook's algorithms also "fed it 'low quality' memes and political misinformation" (Mac and Frenkel). In her exit note, written to her colleagues in explanation for her resignation from the company and included in the Facebook Papers, the researcher claimed that Facebook was "knowingly exposing users to risks of integrity harms" (Mac and Frenkel). "We've known for over a year now that our recommendation systems can very quickly lead users down the path to conspiracy theories and groups," she wrote. "In the meantime, the fringe group/set of beliefs has grown to national prominence with QAnon congressional candidates and QAnon hashtags and groups trending in the mainstream" (Mac and Frenkel).

A major reason for this push towards extremism many users experienced was a change made to Facebook's algorithm in 2017. Facebook's popularity with young people had declined drastically in the previous years, with the introduction of Instagram (now owned by Facebook's parent company, Meta), Snapchat and TickTock. As such, Facebook features a much older user community than other social media, often with a lower media literacy level, and people are posting new material much less frequently on the platform (LaFrance). To deal with this shift, Facebook has leaned into the algorithm, pushing Facebook Groups as well as the platform's resharing capabilities to keep up engagement, making the spread of extremism and misinformation all the more likely.[51]

[51] A Facebook Group, according to the company, is "a place to connect with the people who share your interests." They can be created by anyone and can be either private (limited only to the people you invite)

For this reason, the Facebook algorithm was changed to give the emoji reaction "anger" five times more weight than that of the "like" button This meant that posts which inspired anger were much more likely to show up on a user's feed than those that did not. Facebook rightly assumed that posts prompting strong emotions, such as anger, would engage users much more than those that did not (Lima). Per the Facebook Papers, the "angry," "wow," and "haha" emojis—those given the most weight—were more likely to occur on "toxic" content and misinformation (Lima). Posts that received largely "angry" reactions were "substantially more likely to go against community standards" (LaFrance). When the weight of the angry reaction was set to zero in 2020, Facebook data scientists found that users were exposed to less "disturbing" content, less "graphic violence," and less misinformation (Lima).

The Facebook Papers consistently demonstrated how Facebook's algorithms "pushed some users into 'rabbit holes,' increasingly narrow echo chambers where violent conspiracy theories thrived. People radicalized through these rabbit holes make up a small slice of total users, but at Facebook's scale, that can mean millions of individuals" (Zadrozny). While both the Facebook Papers and spokespeople for the company have confirmed that the weight of the "angry" emoji continues to remain at zero—at least as of October 2021—Facebook continues to host "an algorithmic ecosystem in which users are pushed toward ever more extreme content, and where Facebook knowingly exposes its users to conspiracy theories, disinformation, and incitement to violence" (LaFrance).

The reason for this may, in part, be due to the ways in which memes—and internet memes in particular—work. A successful meme is one that can catch the

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or open for anyone who wishes to join. Open groups are often suggested to others by showing up in the feeds of people with like-minded interests.

attention of its host and remain in the host's consciousness long enough to be shared. Thus, a successful meme is one that is catchy—that creates a certain affective response within those who come across it. It stands to reason that posts that receive an "angry," "wow," or "haha" reaction are more likely to generate that affective response. So, even within an algorithmic ecosystem in which those responses are weighted at zero, they are more likely to be noticed, read, remembered, and shared.

The rise of the "Stop the Steal" campaign is another example of Facebook's power to spread misinformation and incite extremism—even without the bump of a strong "angry" emoji —though this example was unfortunately not a controlled experiment by in-house researchers, but the movement that prompted the Capitol Riot.

On November 2, 2020—the day after the presidential election, when the results of the election had yet to be calculated—an unknown Facebook user created a group titled "Stop the Steal." "Democrats are scheming to disenfranchise and nullify Republican votes. It's up to us, the American people, to fight and to put a stop to it," the group's manifesto stated (LaFrance). This group—and the idea behind it—spread rapidly, even after the change had been made to Facebook's algorithm to reduce the spread of misinformation. Within 24 hours of creation, the group had 333,000 members (LaFrance). Facebook eventually shut the page down, citing the fear that the group was inciting violence, but by that point the movement had already reached close to half a million people.

Once a successful meme has gone viral it is extremely difficult to stop, especially one as sensational and provocative as the idea that an election had been rigged. This idea, after all, played perfectly into the already existing beliefs asserted by the QAnon

conspiracy—that an international cabal, run by liberals, was controlling politics and preventing the reelection of Donald Trump, "the people's president." Soon, other Facebook groups were created and even though many of those were also removed, the movement continued to rally on the platform, with posts such as NO EXCUSES! NO RETREAT! NO SURRENDER! TAKE THE STREETS! TAKE BACK OUR COUNTRY! 1/6/2021=7/4/1776" and "Grow a pair of balls and take back your government!" (LaFrance).

The Capitol Riot was organized largely on Facebook, and many of those who stormed the Capitol on January 6, 2021 chose to live stream the riot on Facebook, share their participation in Instagram and Snapchat stories, and/or post pictures on the platforms, despite the fact that they were participating in illegal—and treasonous—activities. Even after the failed attempt to prevent the inauguration of Joe Biden and the lack of any evidence pointing towards election fraud, some groups have continued to believe and spread misinformation online. Many continue to see themselves as Christians and patriotic nationalists, fighting for an American way of life threatened by the liberal agenda of a select few coastal elites, if not an international cabal of satanic pedophiles.

VSCO Girls and Incel Boys—Meme Culture and Identity Performance

Obviously, media-influenced identity formation is not specific to Incel groups, the alt-right, or certain online spaces. Depiction of people, politics, and society in general by popular culture can always affect and shape how people see themselves and the world. Historically, however, identify performance and civic actions have been connected to social institutions, civic groups, and religious organizations (political parties, unions,

churches, etc.), which were often inherited from parents. But this relationship began to shift in the 1970s, due to economic, social, and political changes—globalization, neoliberalism and neo-capitalism, privatization of goods and services, availability of personal technology and the internet, among other things (Hink 4).

Society has become more fluid, allowing individuals the ability to choose their own social groups and institutions. Mass media, particularly social media, have allowed individuals a wider choice of worldviews, activities, and ethical systems than they might have had when growing up in a culture without the internet (4). People are now able to "pick and choose" from multiple groups, living out identities across a myriad of institutional settings (5).

These identity performances can be rather benign, from "the basic white girl," of the early 2010s, who wore Ugg boots and always had Starbucks in her hand, to the "VSCO girl" popularized on social media in 2019, wearing scrunchies, a pukka shell necklace, and Birkenstock sandals, drinking from a hydro flask. These contemporary identity markers often begin as a joke, spread as internet memes through social media. But these identities can also be political, such as the liberal feminist who shares a "Me Too" story of sexual assault and/or proclaims #BlackLivesMatter in the face of police brutality.

None of these meme identity markers are bad, necessarily. But to become an internet meme, a piece of culture must be appropriated, re-appropriated, copied, and shared on a horizontal level, from person to person online.[52] As such, the piece of culture

[52] This idea of organic horizontal, peer-to-peer transmission of memes *is* problematized by algorithms, which can make the spread of a meme appear more organic than is actually the case. Still, meme retention, appropriation, and dissemination does have to happen on a person-to-person level, whether prompted by the individual, algorithms, advertisers, or other forms of oversight.

must be easy to copy and/or reproduce. This means that internet memes, by their very nature, are often extremely simple—it can be difficult to carry complex ideas and/or ideologies and still spread quickly and widely enough to become an internet meme.[53] So social movements that become internet memes, such as the "Me Too" movement, naturally lose complexity as they are memeified. It is not that the "Me Too" movement, or any other internet meme, cannot generate complex ideas or prompt complex actions from those exposed to it, only that those complexities are generated by the meme's host (for lack of a better term), and dependent on the host's reading strategies and interpretive communities.

As information shared through internet memes is necessarily limited, yet extremely affective, often with very little space for nuance, frame crystallization can happen—or at least appear to happen—quite quickly.[54] Positions on and beliefs about complex and nuanced social issues are shaped by larger community associations, such as religious and/or political affiliations. Framing the fight against climate change, for example, as a cause championed by the left positions most politically conservative groups to automatically question if not out-right oppose climate action. Positioning the Pro-Life movement as a central motivating factor within Evangelical Christian politics has prompted many Christians to vote for politicians that they do not otherwise align with simply because that politician has chosen an anti-abortion stance.

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[53] As opposed to larger cultural memes that were traditionally spread through years of inculturation by family, religious leaders, and other community members and were thus able to contain more complexity and nuance.

[54] Framing crystallization occurs a group reaches a consensus on how they view an issue. The way in which an issue is framed within a group is integral to the way in which those within the group identify with the issue.

In the same way, “Unite the Rite” rallies and movements to bring together disparate conservative groups who felt singled out and left out by Obama-era politics—including Incels and white nationalist groups, as well more mainstream conservatives—often oversimplified issues faced by those who felt persecuted by the more liberal, progressive policies of Obama. The alt-right may contain a varied group of people from all over the country—and sometimes the world—but the camaraderie found on websites like Facebook, Reddit and 4chan enable them to take social cues from each other, appropriating, re-appropriating, copying, and sharing ideologies, creating and performing identities based on shared feelings of victimization and persecution as well as a nostalgia for a romanticized America of the past that they are seeking to restore. This, in turn, may have enabled the mass radicalization that prompted the Capitol Riot. However, this mass radicalization has still resulted in disparate ideas, beliefs, and understandings among the radicalized as to the problems facing the country and the solutions to those problems. Instead of a mob, this radicalized mass is much closer to Han’s idea of a swarm, each with their own ideas, motivations, and desires. As such, no real resolution has been, nor can be, reached.

“Perfumance”—Queering Performance Theory as a Break from Meme Culture

From the Incel movement to Gamergate and The Capitol Riot, internet memes have proven extremely effective at shaping the beliefs and identities of those who are exposed to them and influencing how those beliefs and identities are performed in real-world settings. As I have demonstrated, these memes are capable of creating ruptures in society, encouraging radicalization and prompting acts of extremist violence, yet social

media activism has also proven incapable of creating any real, lasting social change. With a conclusion such as this, it is easy to give up hope. Is there any chance of creating lasting social change in a media-obsessed society, where internet memes are a preferred vehicle for information acquisition and dissemination? In the previous chapter, I suggested changing the ways in which we view memes—from vehicles of misinformation to artifacts that transmit the specific, individual truths of those who produce and spread them. Another intervention may be found in the queering of performance theory.

In *Perform or Else*, Jon McKenzie attempts to queer—and thus complicate—the very idea of performance. McKenzie claims that performatives and performances not only shape our current systems and styles, but are, in fact, "in the midst of becoming the onto-historical conditions for saying and seeing anything at all" (176). These performatives and performances "form the basic tactical units, the BTUs, of power/knowledge formation," which guide basically all processes of modern life, from individual identity markers such as class, racial, ethnic, gender and sexual designations, to "large-scale instillations of technologies, organizations, and cultures" (171). McKenzie argues that

> Performance produces a new subject of knowledge… Hyphenated identities, transgendered bodies, digital avatars, the Human Genome Project—these suggest that the performative subject is constructed as fragmented rather than unified, decentered rather than centered, virtual as well as actual. Similarly, performative objects are unstable rather than fixed, simulated rather than real. They

> do not occupy a single, "proper" place in knowledge, there is no such thing as the thing-in-itself. Instead, objects are produced and maintained through a variety of sociotechnical systems, overcoded with many discourses and situated in many sites of practice. (18)

Although *Perform or Else* was written in 2001, before the rise of social media and the complete saturation of cultural memes, his description of the moves made in performance theory—and thus conceptions of performance in general—in the 20th century could easily be applied to contemporary meme culture.

McKenzie looks at how this performance stratum has affected every aspect of modern life, which "extends beyond knowledge" (14), establishing new epistemologies—even new types of people. His answer to the problem of performatives and performances as a locus of power and control, is to queer performance theory (203). He argues that we must shift our focus "from the forms of knowledge to the forces of power," which involves a shift in senses, from sight and hearing, the Hegelian senses that "provide the critical distance between subject and object that is necessary for the formation of objective knowledge" (201), to include the sense of smell. He cites repression of the sense of smell as "closely associated with homo erectus, with a certain becoming human" (202). Thus, re-embracing the sense of smell is a way of maneuvering around the repressive qualities of performance. McKenzie dubs this queering of performance theory through a sense of smell "Perfumance."

"Perfumance" is "a displaced, disjointed performance" (228), in which "one does not simply perform as an actor, engineer, manager, etc.," but "perfumes, disintegrates,

becomes other via a mechanic process of invention, intervention, in(ter)vention" (228). Perfumance "is characteristically nimble, light and joyful," as it is based on the "coming together of discourses and practices from different performance paradigms," which "creates countless incongruities, odd paradoxes and even outright absurdities" (229).

McKenzie's theory of "Perfumance," at times, can seem overly theoretical and impossible to apply to real-life situations. However, it provides a helpful approach to both recognizing and challenging the overbearing presence of internet meme culture in two ways.

First, the reintroduction of smell, a sense wholly inaccessible through mass media, requires a move away from online communication and towards more physical means of interaction. Although I argue that meme culture extends beyond the confines of the internet and can also incapsulate other types of easily reproducible culture, such as religious and/or political performance, memes are most open to reinterpretation and appropriation online. Physical information is often shared at a much slower rate than that of digital information. Further, when information is shared in person, more cues, such as body language, tactile sensation, and of course smell, are available to help process the information.

Second, to understand and acknowledge "Perfumance" is to understand and acknowledge the aforementioned "coming together of discourses and practices from different performance paradigms," which "creates countless incongruities, odd paradoxes and even outright absurdities" (229). That is, to understand and acknowledge "Perfumance" is to embrace the reductions, appropriations, and differing meanings

inherent within meme culture—to fully embrace media performance as just that—a performance.

"Perfumance" could get us closer to a more cohesive semiotics of social media as a sight of performance. This, in turn, could possibly enable those who are exposed to content through social media to treat it as such—with the understanding that online spaces are sites of performance and thus not everything one is exposed to online is a clear representation of reality, and that real-world changes must be enacted in real-world spaces through real-world actions, not simply through "Likes" and "Shares."

Conclusion:
Escaping the Capitalism of *Like*

The affective power of internet memes should not be underestimated. They help shape people's understanding of the world and influence their beliefs and ideologies, as well as impact identity formation and performance. The affect generated by internet memes produce responses strong enough to create ruptures in society, demonstrated by the instances of violence and attempted violence I have chronicled throughout the previous chapters.

I have shown how internet memes often interpolate people into greater cultural memes, sometimes without their knowledge or consent. I have looked at the ways that internet memes are often encoded with certain information, ideas, and ideologies, and yet are frequently decoded by those who see them into completely different messages, arguing that this is due to the interpretive communities and reading strategies of each individual host as well as the affective power of internet memes, which value emotional responses over intellectual ones and enable the spread of false information just as readily as accurate information.

I have suggested that the appropriation and dissemination of internet memes function as a form of affective economics—to borrow a term from Sara Ahmed—in that the information shared through internet memes generates specific types of affect, which, in turn, function as a type of capital. The affect created by internet memes then produces a particular set of physiological responses within an audience, which can be an individual person or a group, that can then manifest in a specific set of political ideas or actions.

In fact, I have argued that the success of an internet meme has nothing to do with the relevance or factuality of the information contained therein but is based entirely on the affective response it generates within a host—that is, someone who interprets, appropriates, and redistributes it. Given the unpredictable nature of affect, these responses can be hard to quantify, understand, or even identify, and are often only recognized through the actions they produce within a person, further complicating the process.

In the first chapter, I focused on humor, which I claim makes a particularly potent vehicle for memes, as it creates a strong affective response, enabling a host to notice, consume, retain, and spread the meme at a much higher rate. Humor is, I argue, a terrible conduit for information, as it offers endless avenues of interpretation. And yet humor is very effective at generating affective responses in those who are exposed to it—things that are funny are more often noticed and more often remembered, making them much more likely to go viral and become memes.

Focusing on the Pizzagate and QAnon conspiracies, I examined how misinformation continues to spread, and continues to generate strong affective responses, even after proven false. This is because, I claim, articles from peer-reviewed journals or long think pieces in accredited newspapers or magazines—no matter how well written and well researched—are never going to spread at the rate of short, humorous, upsetting, and/or visually stimulating bits of information, which are easily adapted, appropriated, and shared as internet memes.

Building on McLuhan's claim that "the medium is the message," I argue that for memes, the sender is the message. Where and from whom a new host is exposed to an

internet meme can greatly influence how that meme is read and the affective response it generates. Internet memes received from trusted people or trusted websites will be accepted more much often than internet memes produced by other sources, even if those sources are credible, such as government organizations or peer-reviewed journals.

In Chapter Two, I examined another particularly effective vehicle for internet meme transmission—images. Looking at both the Pepe the Frog meme and a viral photograph from the U.S./Mexico border, I demonstrated how images can generate certain affective responses that words alone often cannot. Images, I claim, contain no information of their own, but rely completely on the reading strategies and interpretive communities of the viewer. The image-specific affect generated by pictures (be they photographs, artistic renderings, or any other type of representation), is strong, however, and often experienced as information acquisition and treated as such, though all information garnered from an image is either anchored by accompanying text or comes from the pre-existing ideas, beliefs, and/or understandings of the viewer.

This, I believe, is why visual images are so integral in the conception and reception of internet memes. This affective power allows images to produce multiple, often conflicting messages, as it prompts the viewers to decode the image in innumerable ways. Although they are terrible means of information dissemination, the strong affective responses created by images make them, like humor, ideal candidates for virality and memification.

In Chapter Three, I took the study of internet meme affect even further, examining instances of online radicalization. I argued that the affective responses generated by internet memes can encourage those who are exposed to them to then

embody and share them, not just through more internet memes, but through identity formation and performance in real-world spaces, enabling them to become larger cultural memes. The horizontal radicalization generated through internet memes, which are spread unilaterally from person to person, is further encouraged through targeting algorithms on sites such as Facebook and Instagram, which enable peer-to-peer radicalization on a very large scale.

I conclude that social media provide a stage for acting out social drama similar to that of traditional theater, and that internet memes are a means of enacting the first two stages of social drama, as outlined by Victor Turner and Richard Schechner. However, when enacted online, these social dramas are unable to reach the third and final stage—the redress. There can be no reconciliation or bifurcation. Unlike the theater, internet meme culture is not a vehicle of transformation. In fact, the very core of internet meme culture is the ability to spread without too much change. Obviously, memes are adapted and appropriated constantly, changing a little with each new interpretation and share, but if they were to change too much, memes would no longer be recognizable and would thus no longer be memes at all.

Internet memes do this through reduction, by taking complex and nuanced ideas and reducing them down—often to a single image, slogan, or hashtag. As the actual information, ideas, and/or ideologies contained within each internet meme are greatly reduced from that of many other types of memes, internet memes are often much more open to interpretation based on the worldview (interpretive communities, reading strategies, etc.) of each individual host. The simplicity of most internet memes, as well as their lack of a single context for interpretation, prevent them from making any lasting,

transformative change, prohibiting any real redress in the process. Even when the memes culminate in acts of extremist violence—such as a mass shooting or a full-scale riot on the nation's capitol—no long-lasting change can be achieved. Violent ruptures, I argue, are all internet memes are capable of inspiring.

"When We Act, We Create Our Own Reality" —How Mass Media Has Shaped Our Understandings of Truth and Reality

Internet memes are not the only, nor the first, means of communication that rely on a very reduced or flattened form of information dissemination. Slogans, for example, have been used as a way to spread nationalist, political, and religious ideas to large populations for thousands of years.[55] In the introduction to *Slogans: Subjection, Subversion, and the Politics of Neoliberalism*, Nicolette Makovicky, Anne-Christine Trémon, and Sheyla S. Zandonai argue that slogans need to be understood more as a "mode of action and social practice" (5) than as a traditional form of rhetoric, and are actually more closely related to linguistic units such as magic spells or ritual formulas (9).

The authors demonstrate how slogans are utilized as a form of neoliberal discourse that work to normalize social, economic, and political processes (12). Like internet memes, slogans are constantly going through a process of decontextualization and recontextualization— they are recycled over and over, moving from one historical situation to another, migrating between cultures, genres, tropes, and ethical/ideological regimes (3). As such, a slogan should not be seen as literal or final, but instead as

[55] See Robert E. Denton Jr.'s "The Rhetorical Functions of Slogans: Classifications and Characteristics." *Communication Quarterly*, 28:2(1980) 10-18

dependent on context and the interpretation of the reader (5). Similar to internet memes, slogans are subject to the uses and meanings imbued upon them by those who are exposed to them—they are "recycled from one historical situation to another; they migrate between different cultural genres and tropes, and between different ethical and ideological regimes" (3).

In discussing the slogan "Subscribe to PewDiePie," in the final chapter, I have demonstrated how a slogan can actually become an internet meme. In fact, many successful contemporary slogans do. Much like a meme, a slogan that is effective (and affective) enough to function in the way its originator intended and inspire the desired beliefs and actions amongst a population will also be effective (and affective) enough to garner subversion and appropriation, to be used in ways the originator did not intend—to become a meme.

While slogans continue to be a popular means of disseminating and subverting ideas, new means of communication developed during the 20th century—particularly the rise of mass media—completely changed the ways in which people lived and interacted with each other. Radio and television broadcasts created a normalizing effect on American culture, homogenizing traditionally disparate populations and introducing social norms on a national scale. Television, in particular, enabled the proliferation of images like never before. Much of the Western world, for example, were able to see first-hand the realities of war from the comfort of their living rooms when images from Vietnam began dominating the news in the late 1960s. The influx of information made possible through mass media changed the very ways in which people conceived of and reacted to the world—to the point that, by the 1980s, postmodernist theorists began to

question the very nature of reality. Jean Baudrillard, for example, claimed that society, as of the late 1980s and 1990s, had replaced all reality and meaning with symbols and signs, and that human experience had become only a simulation of what was once reality. Faith in a singular, discernable reality has only declined since.

"We're an empire now," an unnamed senior advisor to President George W. Bush told Ron Suskind with *The New York Times* in the summer of 2002, "and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."[56]

This aide condemned Suskind and other journalists who were critiquing the Bush Administration, calling them a "reality-based community" overly concerned with facts and truths, who believed there to be a singular, discernible reality and that solutions to the world's problems could emerge from their "judicious study" of that "discernible reality" (Suskind). The aide, in turn, saw the Bush Administration as the creator of realities.

This assertion can be read against Hannah Arendt's ideas about lying in politics as she outlined them in an article for *The New Yorker* in 1968. According to Arendt, the liar is the only true political actor, as the truth teller simply points to a discernable fact, while the liar is actively trying to change reality. For Arendt, though, there does seem to be an existent, discernable reality that the liar is trying to change. One is not a liar, after all, unless there is a truth they are purposefully refuting. The unnamed Bush aide, in turn, seems much more critical of that idea, perhaps moving closer to Baudrillard's claim that

[56] Over the last 20 years, this quote has been often attributed to Karl Rove, White House Deputy Chief of Staff during the Second Bush Administration, though he has repeatedly denied it.

society was only a simulation of what was once real.[57] For Baudrillard and the Bush advisor, reality was not (or at least was no longer) an intrinsic, discernable *thing* one could reach and understand if they simply studied it judiciously enough—if there is any reality at all, it is created through the beliefs and actions of individuals (or governments).

Baudrillard and his postmodern ideas went out of vogue during the years of the Second Bush Administration. With the rise of postcolonial studies, many critiqued the ability of white, European men to call subjectivity into question while those (non-Europeans, women, people of color, members of the LGBT+ community, etc.) who had just begun to gain subjectivity were finally having their voices and experiences heard and validated. The Bush Administration, however, continued to embrace subjectivity, treating reality not as a set of discernable, objective truths, but as something to be shaped, molded, or even created from nothing.

From Operation Iraqi Freedom—supposedly motivated by weapons of mass destruction thought to be in Saddam Hussein's possession—to the suspension of habeas corpus and other the "extra-legal" activities of the USA Patriot Act, the White House manufactured consent (keeping the president's approval ratings high enough to garner reelection) by working in tandem with film, television, and news production companies in the years directly following 9/11, reinforcing Bush administration rhetoric through popular media in order to shape reality as they saw fit.[58] [59]

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[57] Baudrillard's article "L'Esprit du Terrorisme," about the constructedness of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, had been translated into English and published in *Harper's Bizarre* in February of 2002. It is likely the aide was familiar with, if not outright referencing Baudrillard's ideas.

[58] "Extra-legal" is a term coined by Judith Butler in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*

[59] For specifics on how post-9/11 popular culture reinforced Bush administration rhetoric and shaped popular beliefs, see Butler's *Precarious Life*, as well as David Simpson's *9/11: Culture of Commemoration,* and Laura Shepherd's "Veiled References: Constructions of Gender in The Bush Administration Discourse on the Attacks on Afghanistan Post-9/11," in *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 8.1 (2006): 19-41. This is by no means a complete list, only the works I have accessed most recently.

By boldly stating “We’re an empire now,” the Bush aide implied that it was the singular power of the United States government that enabled them to shape or even create reality as they saw fit. In the subsequent decades, however, this ability to shape reality has moved beyond the bounds of the powerful and in-charge, and into the hands of everyday citizens. This “Capitalism of *Like*” as Byung-Chul Han calls it, where “people subjugate themselves to domination by consuming and communicating—and they click *Like* all the while” (15), has given everyone the ability to shape and share their own individual realities through internet memes.

And, while the Bush administration worked in tandem with the media—facilitating FBI and CIA consultants for film and television productions, for example, in order to shape public ideas about these agencies—the Trump Administration took the opposite approach. From the beginning of Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign, he and his aides actively worked to discredit news organizations and sow distrust of mainstream media amongst the American people. Grassroots and fringe news organizations, as well as news spread from person-to-person in the form of internet memes, became the most trusted sources of information for many Americans.

Although there is no proof that the Trump campaign were responsible, even in part, for The Great Meme War of 2016, they did actively monitor and encourage the spread of Pro-Trump and Anti-Hillary memes online throughout the 2016 election. This discreditation of mainstream news organizations—those who experience the most oversight, employ fact checkers, and are thus held the most accountable for the information they report—further encouraged a shift away from national confidence in a singular, discernible reality that could be studied, understood, and reported upon.

On top of this, social media influencers in the 2010s began working with private companies, corporations, and organizations, as well as government agencies, to create branded and sponsored content posted to social media sites, often without clearly communicating that paid advertisements or marketing were taking place. Posts could appear to represent the personal preferences of the content creator, or to be memes created just for fun, when they were, in fact, paid advertisements.[60] People now shape their realities around the internet memes that receive the most "Likes" and shares on their social media feeds. The Capitalism of *Like* indeed.

From "Idiotism" to "Perfumance"—Possible Sites of Intervention and Further Research

So where does that leave us? Is there any way to stop—or at least limit—the dependance on internet memes as a valid form of information acquisition and dissemination? The issues I have illuminated here are massive in scale and extremely complex. As such, there are no quick or simple solutions. There are, however, possible means of intervention, though more research will be required.

One possible means of intervention is to stop looking at memes as vehicles for the spread of misinformation and view them instead as a democratic means of "writing back" to power by populations who feel underserved and unrepresented—to view memes as a form of critiquing the Western tyranny of facts, data, and science over other ways of knowing and truth making. Those who knowingly share internet memes containing

[60] This has changed somewhat in recent years; content creators and social media influencers are now required to clearly state when a post features sponsored content. This does not always happen, however, and those most likely to get away with not disclosing sponsored content are, ironically, often the influencers with the largest followings and the most cultural capital—those most likely to influence others.

information that has been proven false by accredited news organizations and scientifically proven data can be understood as "writing back" to a culture—or government, even—that they feel does not represent them. Those who share false information, then, can still be seen as sharing a particular type of truth—the truth of their own affective responses to certain experiences. They are sharing what is true to them and for them at a particular moment in time. Even when those writing back are actually in the majority and most represented by their government, feelings of oppression have been known to create the same chemicals in the brain and similar physiological responses as those found in the bodies of people struggling under actual oppression.[61] In this way, memes, even when containing misinformation, can be seen as offering a form of truth—the truth of a specific affective response, as it is experienced within an individual host.

While this way of approaching internet memes works in theory, it is less useful when applied to real misinformation being spread online, which could potentially cause harm to those who would believe it, or information meant to radicalize and/or promote and spread hate and/or violence. Yes, memes that spread hate and/or misinformation can illuminate certain ideas, ideologies, and understandings of the world, which can then prompt interventions into the communities spreading them.

In a way, Incel websites do illuminate a certain truth—the truth of the alienated young men who are active on these sites. While it is true that straight white men make up the bulk of those in power across the Western world, the reality is that this group is still representative of a small number of straight white men—those with money, connections, looks, and other forms of power. White privilege only goes so far for poor, disabled, or

[61] See "The Psychology of Repression and Polarization," by Elizabeth R. Nugent, published in *World Politics*, Volume 72, Number 2, April 2020. (291-334)

otherwise disadvantaged white people who have also been exploited by the system. However, understanding where this group is coming from and how their realities have come into existence does not change the fact that they are actively spreading hate and misinformation. Incels are guilty of spreading radically untrue and contradictory ideologies and beliefs and promoting acts of violence. Looking at Incel sites solely as production houses for alternative truths and new, subversive ideas ignores the violence and potential danger these sites and those who visit them represent.

Another possible solution, then—once understanding of a group has been established—is attempting to counter misinformation online with factual information in a way that a particular group will respond to. Understanding certain interpretive communities and their reading strategies can help identify the possible ways in which an individual internet meme may be understood by that community. This, in turn, could make it possible to frame information in a certain way, as to help encourage a specific reading by a particular group. Many people are already making strides in this direction. Individuals, as well as news and government organizations, do generate easily accessible, highly spreadable infographics with accurate information from credible sources, using language and/or images that will resonate with a particular group in the hopes that the credible information is accepted over misinformation. The very nature of "accurate" and "credible" has been called into question, however. Sites traditionally believed to be credible—such as peer-reviewed journals, media organizations known to employ fact checkers, and government institutions like the CDC—have lost credibility with many Americans.

The Unbiased Science Podcast is a podcast featuring a licensed immunologist and a public health scientist, both of whom have Ph.D.s and who debunk science and health-related misconceptions through their podcast as well as infographics and other internet memes they generate and share online on their Instagram account. The comments on their Instagram posts, especially posts regarding Covid-19 vaccinations and other contested scientific information, feature many who disagree with and disparage their claims, even though the doctors rigorously cite every source and only report findings from credible sources such as licensed clinical trials, as well as use language that is easily understood by those not in a medical field. The comment sections of most posts often devolve into arguments between the doctors themselves (and those who appreciate what they do) and those who disagree with them.

While their information may be credible and helpful to many, it seems that most of the people who follow and support The Unbiased Science Podcast already have faith in the mainstream science community, while detractors will disagree with them no matter how much information is cited to support their claims and how that information is presented. As such, these credible internet memes—from The Unbiased Science Podcast or the countless others working to produce similar content—do little to change people's minds. All these internet memes seem to do is further flood the internet with more information to choose from, while people are predisposed to choose to believe information that reinforces preexisting opinions.

More helpful, possibly, is Jon McKenzie's theory of "perfumance," which I discussed in Chapter Three. Although written in 2001, before the rise of social media and internet meme culture, McKenzie provides a helpful approach to both recognizing and

challenging the overbearing presence of social media—and internet memes. Reintroducing a sense of smell into the "performance" of information acquisition and meaning making—something completely inaccessible through social media—requires a move away from online communication and towards more physical modes of interaction.

When information is shared in person, more cues, such as tone and presentation, body language, tactile sensation, and other non-verbal forms of communication—such as smell—are available to help process what people are seeing and hearing. Further, to understand and acknowledge "perfumance" is to understand and acknowledge that communication is the "coming together of discourses and practices from different performance paradigms," which, in turn, create "countless incongruities, odd paradoxes and even outright absurdities" (229). To understand and acknowledge "perfumance" is to embrace the reductions, appropriations, and differing meanings inherent within meme culture—to fully embrace media performance as just that—a performance. In this way, "perfumance" does get us closer to a more cohesive semiotics of social media.

However, as I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation, acknowledging the constructedness and performativity inherent in social media does not actually decrease its power in any way. This is because internet memes often "deconstruct themselves," to borrow a term from Niklas Luhmann. By acknowledging their own hypermediacy, obviously mediated forms of information transmission—such as internet memes—can appear more legitimate than types of media that claim to be unbiased or unmediated. When those responsible for overseeing and validating or invalidating information are no longer trusted, the means of information transmission with no oversight can become more trusted.

And, though the idea of moving communication offline may be a good one, embracing in-person communication to the point of completely opting out of online communication is not something most people can do, as many jobs require some form of online communication and social media has become an integral way for people to remain connected to friends and family. Further, opting out of social media may be helpful to the individual doing so, but does not change the larger issues regarding the way information is created and disseminated online. I can stop spending time on social media sites, for example, but this will do absolutely nothing to negotiate the spread of misinformation or stop the radicalization happening on Incel websites and forums.

Han himself offers another possible way to escape the Capitalism of *Like*—Idiotism. For Han, intelligence does not exercise free choice, but can only "select among the offerings the system affords" (85). This is because intelligence "follows the logic of the system," and thus has "no access to what is wholly Other" (85). Idiotism, in contrast, "represents a practice of freedom" (83). This is because the very nature of the idiot is "unallied, un-networks, and uninformed" (83)—the idiot fails to communicate at all, which in turn disrupts "the neoliberal power of domination: total communication and total surveillance" (83).

Han traces the word idiot back to the root it shares with idiosyncratic. The very nature of idiosyncratism refuses sameness, refuses to become a cog in the neoliberal wheel. To build on Han's idea, idiosyncratism refuses the interpolating power of any single interpretive community. In fact, it refuses to become anything. In *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study,* Stefano Harney and Fred Moten

offer a similar suggestion. They do not argue for idiotism, per se, but for a purposeful refusal of agency and subjecthood. The answer, for them, is

> not finishing oneself, not passing, not completing; it's about allowing subjectivity to be unlawfully overcome by others, a radical passion and passivity such that one becomes unfit for subjection, because one does not possess the kind of agency that can hold the regulatory forces of subjecthood, and one cannot initiate the auto-interpolative torque that biopower subjection requires and rewards. (28)

Harney and Moten are writing through the theoretical lens of Afro-Pessimism, which understands humanity as realized only through an irreconcilable distinction between humanness and blackness. As such, Afro-Pessimist thought suggest that black people will never achieve true subjectivity within the current neoliberal system, which is predicated upon their othering, and thus often advocates for a purposeful refusal of neoliberal subjecthood. Making the purposeful choice, for example, to reject the intelligence of neoliberalism and become an idiot.

This refusal of subjecthood is reminiscent of Baudrillard's claims and the questioning of subjectivity put forth by postmodernist thinkers. And it generates the same set of problems. To begin with, some popular figures, such as Donald Trump and Boris Johnson, seem to have already embraced this conception of idiotism as a form of descension, with wildly successful results that continue to position them squarely within traditional neoliberal regimes of power. By positioning themselves as the outsider—the idiot—they have appealed to those who feel alienated from mainstream society—or the

society of the intellectual left, at least. And yet these men are still reinscribing traditional power structures through their performance (or simulation) of idiotism, and actually represent the interests of those already in power. Nothing new or subversive is taking place.

Further, while it may be easy to question subjectivity in theory, what does a refusal of subjectivity look like in practice? Baudrillard, Han, Harney, and Moten are all published authors and academics who are currently working or have worked—Han is now retired; Baudrillard has passed away—within established universities, meaning that even they, in practice, have embraced their neoliberal subjectivity.[62] Additionally, the refusal of subjectivity and the embracing of idiotism, even in part, seems much easier from the positions of power these men inhabit (as well as men like Trump and Johnson). Many people without the resources and intelligence of these men do not have the option of refusing subjectivity, even when that subjectivity others, alienates, or in another way oppresses them. Much like how capitalism was an issue identified by Karl Marx, a middle-class academic—those working in the factories he studied often did not have the time or privilege to worry about the exploitation of their labor as they were too concerned with survival—the critique of subjectivity is often the concern of those who have already achieved that subjectivity, at least in part.

Which again prompts the question of where this information leaves us. Is everything just terrible and getting worse with no chance of improvement? While I am not overly optimistic about the future of online communication, there are a few changes I

[62] Though Stefano Harney was fired from Singapore Management University after giving all his students an A in protest of the university's grading policies, which can be seen as an example of refusing certain aspects of subjecthood—at least the subjecthood of a good professor who follows the university's grading curve

believe may help negate some of the damage caused by misinformation and the inherent subjectivity of internet meme culture, though they will require further research.

First, the introduction of more comprehensive media literacy programs for both children and adults could possibly help consolidate some of the disparate interpretive communities currently in place in the U.S. I have utilized the language and theory of literary analysis throughout this project, and I have done so purposefully. After all, almost everyone who has experienced at least some primary education in this country has been taught how to read—and then to think about what they are reading. From a young age, students are encouraged to write book reports, summarizing and analyzing literature, history, and other subjects. Yet most students get no such education on how to analyze the images and information they are exposed to online.

Very little media literacy is offered in school, even though most students spend a large amount of time online. And while we enculturate our young in how to become functional and productive members of society, in how to behave at school and other public spaces, and how to interact with others in person in healthy and pro-social ways, we are not teaching them how to exist and function in online spaces—where more and more of their time is spent and where a large portion of many students' identities are developed and shared with others—in a similar fashion.

Non-digital natives (such as older adults) often receive even less media literacy training—in fact, most have received absolutely no help in how to navigate online spaces and negotiate the information found therein. Further research into the efficacy of media literacy programs in both public-school systems and adult education programs could offer one possible solution to the disparate levels of media literacy in this country and help

create common ground between the myriad interpretative communities competing to shape reality for many Americans.

Another avenue of future research that could prove fruitful is an examination of the labor and exploitation involved in internet meme production and dissimilation, as well as the economic benefits of misinformation. I have employed Han's conception of a Capitalism of *Like* to discuss internet meme culture for multiple reasons. On one hand, the term highlights how information (and affect) circulate and motivate in ways similar to economic forces, where "like" and "share" have become the capital of internet meme culture. However, the term "Capitalism of *Like*" also highlights the labor that goes into internet meme production and dissemination—labor that most who generate memes are never compensated for financially.

While social media companies themselves make large sums in advertising from the labor of their users, few content creators are able to monetize their own work in the same way. Even those who do succeed in monetizing their accounts make much less than the social media companies who exploit them. The idea that companies like Meta are actively making money from the spread of false information, even while claiming to combat it, is a subject I have only touched on in this dissertation and deserves a more thorough examination in the future.[63] The Facebook Papers demonstrate that, no matter what claim to the opposite social media companies may make, they are aware of what they are doing and actively supporting the spread of misinformation while simultaneously exploiting content creators. Whether through government sanctions and involvement or

[63] Meta is the parent company of both Facebook and Instagram

third-party interventions, more oversight needs to be established, as we cannot rely on the very companies that are actively profiting from internet meme culture to regulate it.

While refusing neoliberal subjecthood—or even opting out of social media communication—is not an option for most people, providing comprehensive media literacy training as well as more outside oversight of social media may be a start. To borrow another slogan, which has itself become a meme—that of the 1980s cartoon *G.I. Joe*—"knowing is half the battle." A better understanding of how information is generated and disseminated through internet memes, as well as how that information is then interpreted and appropriated by those who consume these memes, is hopefully one step closer to escaping the Capitalism of *Like.*

List of Images

(Image 1)



The Original "I Can Haze Cheezburger" image, licensed to Cheezburger, Inc., though the original creator is unknown.

(Image 2)



Pizzagate Infographic, accessed via knowyourmeme.com. Original creator unknown.

(Image 3)



Photograph of Matt Braynard, by Jesse Dittmar for *Politico Magazine.*

(Image 4)



Original panel from the *Boy's Club* zine by Matt Furie.

(Image 5)



List of offensive Pepe the Frog memes provided by the The Anti-Defamation League. Original creators unknown.

(Image 6)



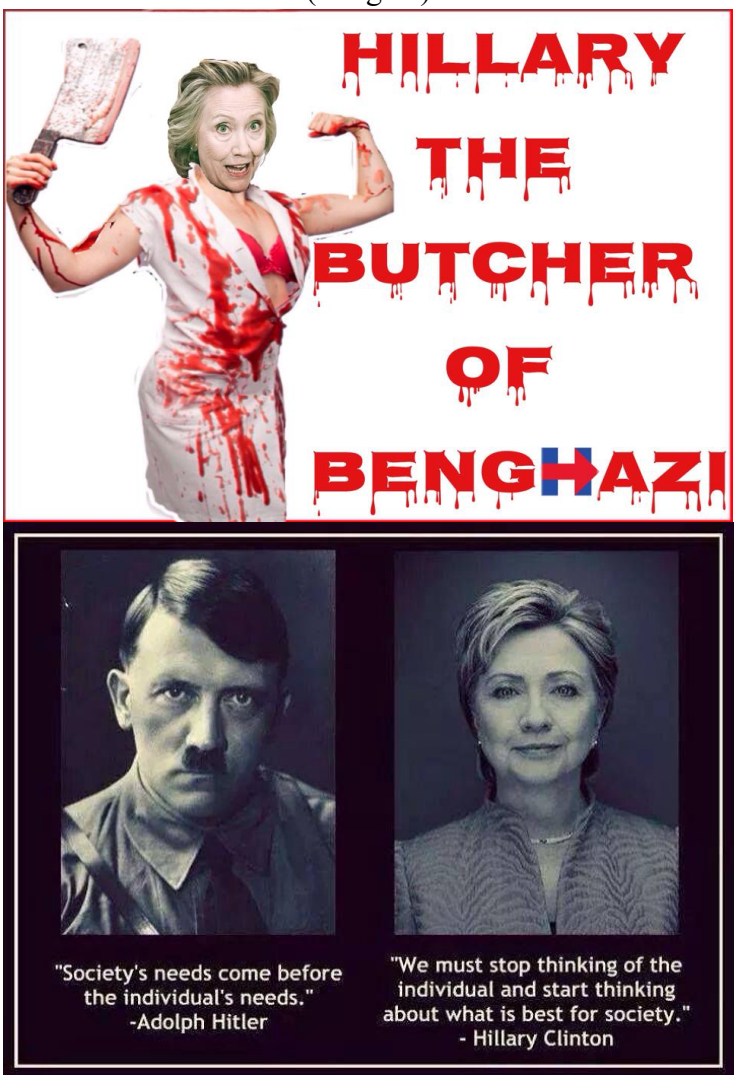
"Kaninchen und Ente" ("Rabbit and Duck") from the 23 October 1892 issue of *Fliegende Blätter*, accessed via Wikipedia.

(Image 7)



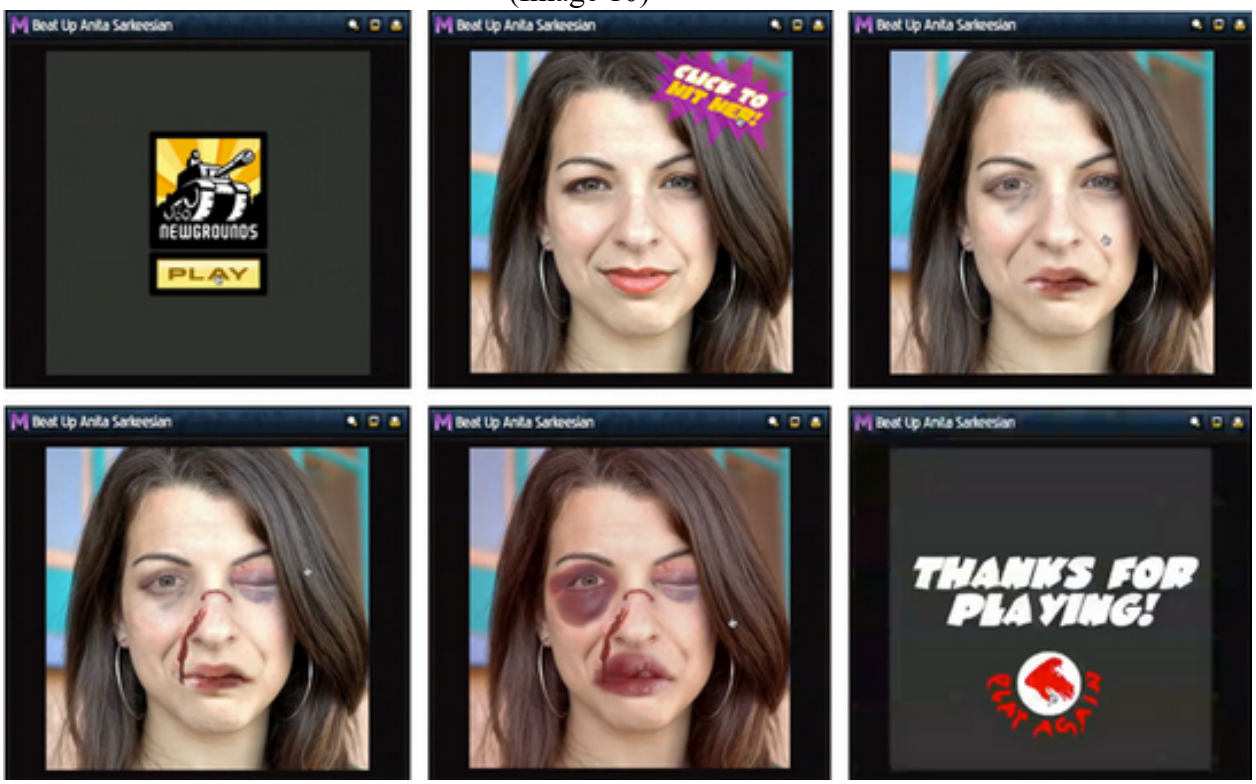
Image of René Magritte's "Les trahison des images."

(Image 8)



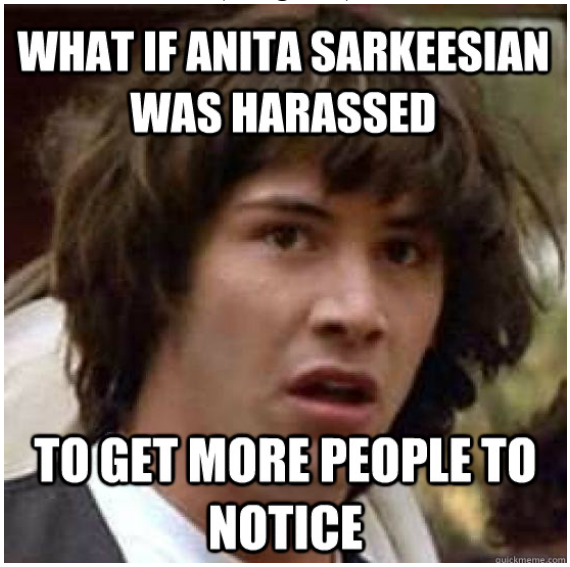
Anti-Clinton memes circulating during the 2016 election. Original creators unknown.

(Image 10)



Screencap of the online game Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian circulated during Gamergate. Original creator unknown.

(Image 10)



Meme suggesting Sarkeesian perpetrated her own harassment campaign during Gamergate in order to garner attention. Original creator unknown.

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