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THE CULTURAL LOGIC OF PHOTO-BASED MEME GENRES

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As bottom-up vernacular creations, internet memes may potentially assume an endless array of forms. In reality, however, memes tend to follow specific formulas, or genres. In this paper, I explore the cultural logic underpinning a particular set of meme genres: those that are based on photographs. The main question that I address focuses on cultural continuity: *how do contemporary meme genres relate to previous photographic genres?* I examine the multifaceted relations between three prominent meme genres (reaction Photoshops, stock character macros, and photo fads) and the genres that I see as their predecessors: iconic photos, stock photography, and vernacular photography. I show how, in each of these cases, meme genres subvert fundamental assumptions and practices associated with well-established photographic types. Based on patterns common to all three dyads, I suggest two novel framings of photo-based meme genres, highlighting their functions as *modes of hypersignification* and as *future-oriented photography*.

The three memetic genres explored in this paper vary greatly in terms of their content, form and stance: (1) Reaction Photoshops are collections of images created in response to *memetic photos* (author, 2013b): a small group of photographs that provoke extensive creative reactions (e.g. *The Situation Room*). (2) Stock character macros are image macros (namely images superimposed with text) that refer to a set of stock characters representing stereotypical behaviors. For example, *Sheltering Suburban Mom* is a conservative hypocrite who preaches one thing and practices another. (3) Photo fads are staged photos of people who imitate specific positions in various settings. *Planking*, for instance, involves lying face down with arms by one's side in unusual settings. While each of these meme genres has many cultural roots, in this paper I focus on what I see as their main "generic ancestors": iconic photos, stock photography, and vernacular photography.

Iconic Photos and Reaction Photoshops

Iconic photos, according to Hariman and Lucaites', are "photographic images produced in print, electronic, or digital media that are widely recognized, are understood to be representations of historically significant events, activate strong emotional response, and are reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics" (2002, p.366). Images such as the Iwo Jima flag raising or the "Tank man" at Tiananmen have served, over

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the years, as powerful anchors in the construction of collective identities. On the face of it, iconic images seem to bear many similarities with memetic photos: both genres are simultaneously widely known and rare; and in both power stems from people's reactions. Yet a second look would reveal that memetic photos depart from iconic images in two fundamental aspects. While iconic images, in their essence, are about capturing primary truths, memetic photos (at least in political contexts) often highlight these "truths" *construction*. They deal with the ways in which politicians stage-manage, manipulate, or even fabricate reality. Another site of difference related to sacredness. Whereas an aura of sacredness hovers around iconic images, memetic photos are associated with the mundane. Even when they describe major events, they tend to veer away from the main happening.

Stock Photographs and Stock Character Macros

As bulk images used by a commercial industry for a wide array of purposes, stock photographs are designed *not* to stand out. Images such as the "slim young executives gathered rapturously around the screen of a laptop computer" or the "smiling parents and children frolicking in the surf of a beach" constitute, according to Paul Frosh (2013, p. 132), a ubiquitous yet often invisible part of our visual environment. "Stock character macros" resemble "stock photos" to a great extent. In both genres, photos are used not as indexes of specific people or historic events, but as visual manifestations of stereotypes. Moreover, both genres represent abstract concepts fundamental to human behavior, such as "successes". But there are also deep differences between them. While stereotypes constitute the bread and butter of this industry, they operate in its deep background, concealed from consumers' eyes. Contrarily, in stock character macros the process of stereotype production often becomes *the* issue (Milner, 2012). A further difference relates to the nature of the concepts underscoring these genres. While the vast majority of concepts featured in stock photos are positive, stock character macros deal with human flaws.

Vernacular Photography and Photo Fads

Vernacular photography, (also labeled also as "amateur photography" and "everyday photography"), focuses on photos taken by ordinary people as part of their daily lives (Burges, 2007). Such photos often represent idealized images of social relationships, showing "happy couples" or "united facilities". This positive mode of representation is often tied to the role vernacular photos play in memory work. Since such photos act as material embodiments of life narratives, people aspire to present favorable self-images in them (Chalfen, 1987).

Photo fads can be understood as a new sub-genre of vernacular photography. Yet while these fads feature ordinary people in their everyday lives, they seem to subvert some of the most fundamental norms underscoring vernacular photography. If the latter is about relationships, photo fads are individual-centered. While amateur photos are used as memory enhancers, photo fads are utterly a-historic: no relevant happening occurred before or after the moment the photo was taken.

Conclusion

So far, I have discussed the three generic dyads – and the cultural logics constituting them – discretely. By way of conclusion, I will explore their *shared* attributes. These overarching principles can be organized into two frames: meme genres as modes of *hypersignification* and as *future-oriented photography*.

Meme genres as hypersignification. A striking difference between photographic and memetic genres relates to their use of signs. The rhetorical power of all three photographic genres has to do with representational truth. Whether the represented entity is a zeitgeist (iconic photos), a concept (stock photography) or social relations (vernacular photography), the direct link between the signifier and the signified is unquestioned. Yet meme genres tend to expose the communicative strategies concealed in more traditional photographic genres. This function echoes what Goldman and Papsan (1996) conceptualize as *hypersignification* in advertising, a phase in which advertisers started to create sophisticated ads that revealed the "backstage" of their own industry, turning the *code itself* into a sign. Similarly, photo-based meme genres tell us something about the mechanisms of signification: they are more about the *process* of meaning making than about meaning itself. As such, they can be read as critical reflections of well-entrenched cultural conventions associated with commemoration, stereotyping, and self-presentation.

Meme genres as future-oriented photography. The notion that photos arrest the flow of time by capturing "dead moments" is fundamental to many theories of photography. In these works photography is conceived as a technology geared towards the past: it is the medium through which histories are narrated. Yet photo based meme genres represent a transition from death to life and from past to present. Memes are all about mutation, or change: the memetic photo is a living object, since, by definition, it never stays still. This feature inherently impacts upon temporality, as photos are increasingly becoming the raw material of future images. Once a memetic photo is shot, numerous offspring are waiting in its imagined womb. The question hovering above this process therefore does not relate to the past but to the future –not "what does this photo represent?", but "what will its next version be?". Instead of looking backwards, we are in a constant state of anticipation for the sequel.

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