ABSTRACT

Memetic Frameworks in the 2016 Presidential Election

Roman Kezios, M.A.

Mentor: Leslie A. Hahner, Ph.D.

Memes rose to mainstream prominence as tools for political influence during the 2016 presidential election. This thesis will analyze the most prominent memes deployed during that time to evaluate their effectiveness. Using an approach that draws upon the works of Jean Baudrillard, this piece will construct a framework for demarcating particular forms and tactics in memetic engagement that have the highest propensity for circulation. Coupled with research regarding compatibility of political ideology with a memetic deployment, this thesis will describe why certain memes gained more traction than others. In doing so this thesis will point to avenues for future development of political memetic strategies and their saliency with disparate ideological groups that may wish to deploy them.

Memetic Frameworks in the 2016 Presidential Election

by

Roman Kezios, B.A.

A Thesis

Approved by the Department of Communication

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David Schlueter, Ph.D., Chairperson

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Baylor University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Arts

Approved by the Thesis Committee

_____

Leslie A. Hahner, Ph.D., Chairperson

_____

Matthew Gerber, Ph.D.

_____

Kara Poe Alexander, Ph.D.

Accepted by the Graduate School

May 2020

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J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Memes have become a new rubric for social media discourse, defining one of the

primary modes of communication among increasingly larger swathes of people. What

was once only found in concentration within niche enclaves of the internet have now

become commonplace throughout digital public discourse.[1] The production of a new

rhetorical form to this scale should come as no surprise, within the past nine years,

Twitter and Facebook, home to many memes, have collectively ballooned by

approximately 2.5 billion users.[2] These new platforms shifted the terrain of social

discourse in a way that necessitated new forms of rhetorical address. Memes have

evolved to fill digital space—these images have seen varying degrees of evolution and

stability over time, while simultaneously being taken up and deployed among different

groups for different ends. The prominence of memes can be largely attributed to their

capacity to be deployed in a multiplicity of contexts, coupled with the inherent iterability

of memes, which allow participants to craft uniquely applicable messages from a

generalized format. My thesis theorizes a framework to describe the socio-political

implications of memes as rhetorical devices, and in doing so, describe the nature of their

flexibility and morphology within the context of rhetoric, tracing the mechanisms of

memetic iterability on the basis of form rather than content. Though primarily interested

in the rhetorical mechanisms of memes, this analysis is applied by considering how such

banal discourse was capable of upending previously steadfast norms of political efficacy once it seeped into the 2016 Trump campaign.

The spread of mimetic discourse reached its most recent apex in the 2016 presidential election.[3] Memes were politically mechanized precisely because of their association with banal digital discourse toward the ends of winning an election to control the highest office in the United States.[4] The elevation of memes to the plane of political efficacy canonizes memes as worthy of rhetorical study, as memes complicate normative understandings of persuasion within the context of political address.[5] Memes as political discourse blurs the social demarcations between the masses and those with their hands on the levers of power, while simultaneously destabilizing the forms of rhetorical efficacy that tend to be tied to such positions of power.[6] What is odd, however, is how the deployment of memes by such actors can work to coalesce political support not despite of but because of these traits, effectively energizing a political base on the basis of the novelty of engaging in memetic discourse rather than on a coherent ideological framework.

My thesis develops a framework for describing the form of memes through reading the theories of Jean Baudrillard and Gilles Deleuze. Memes function as a unique network of signifiers through which their meaning is generated formally, while eliciting a drive in users to produce more memes. Baudrillard describes this sort of drive as being generated from the satisfaction of engaging in discourses that are premised upon successful enactments of rhetorical forms. Such satisfaction/drive is accessible only to those who fully grasp the "rules" that define particular memes—"the secret is seductive: the secret which circulates as the rule of the game, as an initiatory form, as a symbolic

pact, which no code can resolve, no clue to interpret."[7] It is in this way that memes can sustain circulation without adhering to a rational message, instead subsisting on the rationality of its form. It is this function of reproducibility based on the locus of the mimetic form, rather than content, which requires an inclusion of Deleuzian analysis to describe the refracting ways repetition/difference operationalize mimetic circulation.

Scope

The recency of the wealth of scholarly engagement in memes requires research to have a limited scope. The demarcation for what can be called a meme is hazy at best. Scholars such as Limor Shifman and Ryan Milner have provided interpretations of memes as a certain type of artifact, while Wiggins and Bowers argue that inherent to the participatory function of the meme is its status as a "developing genre."[8] My research enters into this conversation to analyze how memes operate as rhetorical artifacts that require a fluidity of genre, inherent to the medium. That fluidity may ultimately enable memes to transform the political landscape of the United States. I propose several guiding questions to situate my research—questions regarding political efficacy, questions regarding the nature of memetic fluidity, and questions regarding the networked societies in which memetic circulation occurs.

The first set of questions directly relates to the deployment of memes in service of winning the 2016 United States Presidential election. Such memetic propaganda presents a certain urgency for rhetorical analysis. The tactics used by the campaigns in the 2016 U.S. presidential election are indicative of a shifting terrain of political rhetoric that necessitates new conceptual frameworks to properly interrogate.[9] It has been said that the election was won through 'meme magic,' but what that may indicate and the extent of its

factuality is still in question.[10] The most prominent deployment was the use of 'Pepe the Frog' by the Trump campaign.[11] Other memes from varying political orientations also circulated at the time, gesturing towards a need for analysis that explains the varying levels of rhetorical and political effectiveness within different forms of mimetic deployment. Though there have been many books and articles analyzing Pepe the Frog, my research seeks to incorporate such findings into a broader understanding of the base functionality of the medium.

Grappling with memetic fluidity requires a narrowing of what constitutes a meme for the purposes of research. My thesis analyzes memes that include images in their production, as they invite broader amounts of user participation in their iterative engagement.[12] This would exclude, for example, screenshots of Twitter posts that often become circulated and labeled in tandem with more normative memes. Limiting research to memes that involve images allows for the application of theories of visual rhetoric to articulate a unique phenomenon in digital communication. Such an approach enables a historical tracing of the form of a meme through some of the earliest instances of identification of memes as such—examples such as Philosoraptor or Joseph Ducreux illustrate a set of widely applicable standards (a single image with the subject centered, accompanied by text in Impact font in the top, bottom, or both parts of the image) that no longer restrict mimetic production to such degrees. But such an approach also allows memes to be distinguished from 'viral' online messages, including but not limited to, online videos that see abrupt and explosive engagement. Describing the total history of memes is outside the scope of this thesis, so I restrict the timeframe of analyzed memes

to those that occurred or those that directly implicate memes produced in the months leading up to the 2016 election.

The final set of questions attempts to spotlight the ways memetic circulation is made possible, both within and among particular digital platforms. Platform analysis is necessary to describe memes as they compose the geographic plane on which such discourse is grounded.[13] To analyze the degree of circulation purely through rhetorical analysis may gloss over how particular digital platforms sort what appears on their user's feeds, and may undertheorize the mechanizes that generate mimetic circulation in the first place.[14] The question of who a particular meme appeals to cannot be separated from an analysis of the digital platforms they arise from because the location of mimetic production is in part indicative of which bodies are reached by the meme.[15] This also acts as a filter on *how* they appeal to those bodies and the audiences those bodies compose.[16] Algorithms act as a lens for social groups that exist on particular platforms, acting to filter which memes such social groups can be made aware of to evaluate.[17] This means that circulation can only be described by articulating both the socio-cultural implications of a meme *in conjunction* with how the algorithmic functions of the platform mediate those cultures in the first place. This also opens up space to discuss more completely the nature of cross-pollination of memes both between social groups and across distinct digital platforms.

Literature Review

In their analysis of memes produced by the alt-right, Woods and Hahner describe the function and form of memes as "rhetorical images that influence insiders on message

forums but, more importantly, are tactically used to convince mainstream audiences to find affinity with far-right claims."[18] My work will build on this through an "engage[ment] with the tactical elements of meme creation and distribution,"[19] to cohesively theorize memes in a way that can account for alt-right memes in tandem with leftist or seemingly a-political memes through their shared dependence on the structural form of the artifact. My initial research indicates that this could be accomplished by magnifying the current literature's focus on Deleuzian theory and bringing that into dialogue with some of the structural claims defended by Jean Baudrillard.

Scholars who have investigated memes tend to focus on the construct of the assemblage when applying the work of Deleuze. An assemblage describes multiplicities which collectively structure semiotic flows in ways that challenge the possibility of analyzing particular phenomena in discrete units.[20] This is a particularly useful analytical framework for describing the coalescence of digital social groups. Woods and Hahner argue that "the Alt-right is more aptly understood as an assemblage"[21] because the group "only exists in terms of the rhetorical articulations of its public statements"[22] through the deployment of DeLanda's application of assemblage theory to social organizations. Deleuze illustrates this point through the metaphor of a rhizome—a type of subterranean plant in which roots grow outwards horizontally, at times reconnecting to form an ever-growing web. In contrast to a tree, which grows distinct biological components upward while roots extend downward, the rhizome more accurately describes social production as a process of an expanding network in which parts are mediated by the whole and vice versa in a recursive fashion rather than a linear progression of development.[23] The possibilities available for new cultural invention, i.e. the space available for at the edge of

the rhizome growing roots reach for, are referred to as "lines of flight."[24] Johnson argues that memes do not rely on a rational subject but instead propagate outside the confines of logical commitment[25] and as such represent cultural "lines of flight" in that they play with chance and ambiguity in ways that create new vectors for meaning production.[26]

While my analysis concurs and builds on this literature, I propose the need to expand this line of inquiry by applying analysis formulated in *Difference & Repetition.*[27] Here, Deleuze theorizes that the two titled functions are inherently intertwined, in that repetition can only be identified by difference (otherwise the mere fact that something was repeated would not be observable, the thing would instead appear to persist),[28] while difference requires repetition (insofar as commonalities must be identified to create a relationship at all before identifying what is different).[29] I hypothesize a strong textual application of these concepts creates the possibility for research to describe the central rubric for a mimetic assemblage based on the techniques observable in the deployment of memes as rhetorical artifacts. While assemblage theory describes the ways a flexible rhetorical artifact can circulate among seemingly disparate social groups, analyzing what features of particular memes can be flexibly 'different' versus the qualities that allow different images to be recognized as forms of the same meme (repetition) produces the textual link with the current literature to allow the rhetorical mapping of the function of memes as particular rhetorical artifacts. Pepe the Frog is emblematic of this function, as its existence as a meme preceded by many years its current incarnation as an alt-right symbol. It was through its iterability, both as an image and in the disparate contexts in which it can be deployed, that allowed Pepe's simultaneous cooption and recuperation into a more static ideological artifact. This feature is not unique to Pepe the Frog, as I

argue the success of any particular meme is premised on the degree of iterability that the particular meme format may perform.

Memes have been dissected as forms of visual rhetoric through the application of Situationist notions of spectacle. Phillips writes that memes are a form of *détournement*—a notion developed by Guy Debord describing a process of reconfiguring or redeployment of images to challenge dominant ideals.[30] The Situationists theorized that engaging in practices of *détournement* disrupts the smooth functioning of the spectacle supported by hegemonic power, creating fissures within totalizing ideology,[31] through the deployment of images that produce juxtapositions while evading "rational reply" by refusing to engage on the level of "simple reversal."[32] Woods and Hahner as well take up the framework of *détournement* arguing for a broader understanding of memes functioning "not as a leftist or rightist political strategy, but by seizing imagery that seems countercultural"[33] describing why such a strategy could be effective in the service of white nationalists. What remains consistent between the two analyses of memes is the focus on the process of the spectacularization of the image as a process that "inverts the real …[which] is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle while simultaneously absorbing the spectacular order."[34] The effects of this process within memetic discourse can be most explicitly recognized in overtly political memes, such as those that scripted the Trump campaign as a fantastical event in which an election was won through "meme magic."[35] A strictly Situationist interpretation of spectacle, however, would presume such an event would conclude with a refocus on the real, whereas today we see the real increasingly diffused in an era defined by fake news.

Baudrillard's theories should be considered additive to Debord, as the Baudrillard once described himself as "Situationist at thirty…viral and metaleptic at sixty."[36] Baudrillard posits a more fundamental tension within the communicative schema that problematizes the notion of the real. For Debord, spectacularized images invert the real, whereas Baudrillard's theories imply that the procession of inversion remains itself within the confines of representation through the use of the notion of compounding simulation. The significance of what Debord identifies as 'inversion,' is for Baudrillard a simulation of the real. Successful forms of spectacle rhetorically impact the viewer by necessarily altering the perception of the real and as such, can only move conceptions of the real increasingly toward the realm of spectacle. This corrupts the possibility of a Debordian 'inversion' that would presume the capacity of the viewer to distinguish the nature of spectacle as such. The viewer can never locate the real. Baudrillard's key example distinguishes between a 'fake' of reality and a simulation—whereas a patient who is faking an illness is defined as one who only has the appearance of symptoms, a simulation would constitute a patient who could will themselves to exhibit certain symptoms of illness, thus jeopardizing the entire process of diagnosis.[37] This argument becomes a foundational claim for the effect of memes on political efficacy, destabilizing the locus of a campaign's symbolic power away from normative signifiers of political efficacy through satirical diffusion.

An injection of Baudrillard into the current literature is necessary to describe how an instance of *détournement* functions in the accelerated digital age. Baudrillard's analysis is particularly salient at describing this in the context of a globalized market where social media executives are among the most financially successful. It is my

position that this research adds depth to the literature particularly regarding the nature of circulation as it relates to digital *détournement.* Wiggins and Bowers highlight the iterability of memes as a necessary component of their status as forms of *détournement.*[38] Baudrillard argues that when a system reliant on spectacle is accelerated, the images begin to lose the necessary referent to the real to produce changes in consciousness, devolving into banal consumption of satirical entertainment. The masses "accept and redirect everything en bloc into the spectacular, without requiring any meaning, ultimately without resistance, but making everything slide into an indeterminate sphere which is not even that of non-sense, but that of overall manipulation/fascination."[39] This framing is particularly salient at describing memes as a unique and particular form of *détournement* at the aesthetic and ideological level. The argument echoes Milner's theorization of polyvocality within memes, accounting for the spectacular nature of memes while refusing to neglect the function of arbitrariness within the structure of a meme. The idealized concept of perverse engagement here is defined as the "mockery" that is the "craving for the *social* as an item of *individual* consumption, submitted to an ever-escalating supply and demand."[40] This additive allows for an articulation of memetic discourse as a structuring framework—distinguishing Trumpian politics from past campaign messages that remain circumscribed strictly within the telos of the campaigns for which they were produced.

The structural framework for memes also describes the broader cultural impact of the mass circulation of a rhetorical artifact that is paradoxically sustained by its ability to be endlessly deconstructed in service of iterability. The destruction of the real through spectacularization creates a meta-framework for the process of power as a function of

mimetic articulation. Once simulation ceases to fit within a relational hierarchy to the

real, society becomes plunged in a vertigo of simulation, as the only frame of reference

becomes other simulations. This process produces a reality in which signifiers of value

are circulated among shifting and co-constitutive levels of simulation, short-circuiting a

connection with the real. Value itself becomes the signified in a state that Baudrillard

calls hyper-reality.[41]

The nature of hyper-reality eliminates the real as a frame of reference and thus

orients itself towards the exhaustion of its own capacity for meaning.[42] This argument

preserves a Debordian articulation of memes as images that function according to the

rubrics of *détournement,* while challenging the revolutionary potential of such acts. The

spectacle itself, however, is abandoned as an organizing principle as it maintains that

authentic subjecthood exists and is merely posed with the challenge of overcoming the

obstacles of the real.[43] Taken to its extension, hyper-reality fully encapsulates the entirety

of capitalist production, rather than merely prioritizing its representational aspects,

creating a closed circuit in which spectacular resistance becomes an oxymoron, playing

into the hegemonic discourse of the status quo. The corporatization of memes seen in

public relations Twitter accounts is evidence that the comedic banality of memes can no

longer be resistant to capitalism, justifying analysis that further develops the Situationist

argument for a context in which image-based resistance has been hijacked by capitalist

structures.

Baudrillard's concept of seduction is given less treatment within the literature

comparatively with some of his more well-known arguments. He describes the

communicative process of seduction as "that which seduces production – just as absences

is not that of which is opposed to presence, but that which seduces presence."[44] As one might infer from the above quotation the usage of the term in the definition was not a mistake – "seduction is what seduces, and that's that."[45] This argument demonstrates what Pawlett maintains is the primary motivation behind Baudrillard's theorizing—to produce analysis of indescribable communicative objects without attempting to render them intelligible (thus destroying the artifact's status indescribable and eliminating the value of analysis).[46] Pawlett contends that this unique approach is necessary to produce accurate epistemology on the subject, rather than to reduce its value to what can be made legible.[47] The framework is particularly well suited to analyze memes as rhetorical artifacts that resist rational intelligibility, such as the recent popularization of "deep-fried memes" that propagate based on the user's ability to corrupt the image file to be less readable. Baudrillard writes that "distinctive signs, full signs, never seduce us. Seduction only comes through empty, illegible, insoluble, arbitrary, fortuitous signs which glide by lightly, modifying the index of the refraction of space."[48] One could be forgiven for thinking this was written with full knowledge of internet culture instead of in 1987, and merits an analytical return to Baudrillard's seduction, using a worthy text to more fully develop a "seductive theory of language."[49] The seductive power of memes, then, becomes a framework to identify the possible degrees of circulation by evaluating the context of memetic propagation of the form of the medium over ideological content.

The form seduction takes necessarily depends on the embodiment of the meme producer. Milner argues that despite personal distancing from particularly transgressive memes, that the individual is nonetheless inculcated within dominant structures of power, particularly whiteness.[50] Historically, participants in meme production tend to be white

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and privileged, while the disavowal of responsibility for the content of memes produces a narrative whose connection to the whiteness of the creators becomes problematically obscured. Shifman more fully develops how the process of bodily entanglement is produced in mimetic engagement.[51] Shifman's later work with Nissenbaum shows that the subject of memes tends to be the image of the bodily ideal in any given culture,[52] reflecting the kinds of audiences memes are likely to sway.

Which bodies are reached and how is a dynamic necessarily structured by the digital platforms that capture specific communities. Circulation of memes cannot be fully articulated without accounting for the platforms upon which circulation takes place. Terranova's work isolates key nuances of a focus on information amplification that necessitate attending to platforms as the mechanisms that drive that amplification. Terranova argues that modern strategies of mass communication rely on clearing a channel of noise by flooding it with a particular piece of information[53] (information here being distinguished as both a "physical operation on metastable material processes that it captures as probabilistic and dynamic states" and a "signifying articulation that inserts such description into the networks of signification that make it meaningful").[54] Srnicek writes that the introduction of digital platforms have shifted the nature of both production and labor within capitalism. While social media defines channels for mimetic propagation, Srnicek points toward the tendency to monopolize channels of all information to expand the reach of platforms to all aspects of social life.[55] Monopolization comes coupled with the ability for the heads of social media platforms to regulate how information is sorted and circulated through the deployment of algorithms. Given their positioning within capitalism, these companies have particular ideological

investments that affect how algorithms are designed, complicating the signifying articulation of the information. These restrictions shape the particular kinds of content that thrive in different platforms through mimetic discourse.

Memes corrupt stable truth by imposing absurdity onto social discourse at a large scale. The hyper-real consequences of political cyber mimesis implicate the role of truth within modern political regimes. The strategy of diffused irrationality well defines the position the Trump administration has taken against the media, often lampooning what is cited as 'fake news' by challenging the possibility of unbiased factuality in news reporting. This can be understood as a part of the same communicative strategy of the Pepe the Frog meme, as the administration seems more focused on destabilizing any and all grounding of truth in favor of their own construct.[56] While Baudrillard's theory points to this occurrence happening, an inclusion of the conceptual tool of memes allows the mapping of strategies that mechanize the disappearance

Finally, situating memes within Michael Calvin McGee's conception of the ideograph is useful in describing how memes can be ideologically stabilized, creating a loose coherence with room for slippage that manifests in the iterability of memes. Ideographs are defined as "one-term sums of an orientation," that do not permit "question[ing] [of] the fundamental logic."[57] These concepts are formed through collective fragments that work in tandem to define the negative space of an assumed value (McGee points to examples such as "the rule of law"[58] to illustrate both the irreducibility and breadth of ideographic signification). Dominant ideographs likely define the ideological channels that remain open as lines of flight for particular memes to evolve. The assemblages involved in cross-platform integration and the people that

participate in integration work together within an ideographic framework. The fluidity of the assemblage complicates the process of evaluating the proper scope of agency within the digital matrix.

Ronald W. Greene's framework for rhetorical labor is useful to resolve some tensions between the world of the symbolic and the materiality of lives. Greene defends "a materialist-communicative approach to rhetorical agency, a theory of rhetoric that imagines it as a life-affirming labor."[59] This positions the collectivity of individual authors of a particular meme as the locus of rhetorical agency in communication. Rather than seek the agent that has the best claim of controlling the ideograph, the collectivity wields agency. Avoiding models that begin from an assumed singular ownership resolve theoretical ambiguities inherent in the fluid process of collective meme engagement. Such problems may arise when attempting to predict linear trajectories of strategic meme deployment. By instead articulating collective engagements as autonomous structures, this thesis offers a stronger understanding of memetic culture. These theoretical frameworks justify the grounding of my argument solidly within the rhetorical discipline. Yet, my claims also describe how transgressive content, embodiment, and personal participation interweave with each other to produce a social framework that allows for meme production.

Method

My thesis analyzes the rhetorical form of memes by articulating their qualities through the lens of Deleuze and Baudrillard's theories. The crafting of this framework describes how memes operate at three distinct interconnected levels—the rhizomatic networks through which memes circulate and cross-pollinate, the content levels through

which individuals become attached to propagating certain memes, and social impacts

such discourse brings with it. Theoretically defining these planes of memetic existence

allows for memes to be understood as unique rhetorical artifacts. Doing so avoids

premising their capacity on particular enclaves engaged in meme production, while

creating space for analyzing the modalities of those enclaves within a broader rhetorical

structure.

On the level of circulation, a Deleuzian analysis of difference/repetition will be

applied to memetic texts to define the degrees of memetic circulation by isolating

relevant components of iterability. The tension in difference/repetition incorporates

assemblage theory insofar as it provides limiters for defining particular assemblages on

the basis of what forms of iterability become salient in selected social locales. Platform

analysis necessarily inflects this research as it provides the algorithmic grounding to

articulate why certain forms of iterability are better suited for propagation, while also

analyzing available lines of flight for memetic cross-pollination between different sites.

To describe the components of particular memes as creating a drive for social

engagement, I apply Bataillian concepts of transgression to define the affective

resonances that make certain memetic content more enticing to spread. Such an approach

incorporates Baudrillard's theory of seduction, which is heavily premised on Bataillian

transgression. The incorporation of Bataille will broaden the scope of the "logic of lulz"[60]

from largely a discussion of trolls to argue for a more deeply ingrained human desire to

engage in discourses that profane the social order through its participatory

deconstruction. The seductive power of certain memetic content can then be applied to

levels of embodiment that structure the direction of those energies for individual social enclaves.

The social impact of memetic discourse is analyzed through an application of Baudrillard's theories of hyper-reality. Using Baudrillard charts out and justifies the historical moment in which memetic propagation can rise to the level of effecting national politics within the United States. The value of truth and facticity within an era of fake news can then be described as a fomentation of new values brought forth from mimetic discourse that seeks to play with the real. The analysis will produce predictive power for the future vectors of memetic evolution and political ideology within that context.

While these three levels are distinct, my thesis argues for understanding them together as creating a complete articulation of memes as rhetorical artifacts. A reorientation of values as per Baudrillard requires a particular kind of driven engagement defined through Bataille. The possibility of memetic discourse having such wide impacts on societal values requires an articulation of the assemblages that allow for the acceleration of that discourse to the macro-political level. In doing so my thesis brings together these theories into conversation with current scholarly research on memetic texts to describe a vector of social evolution that becomes evident in the rhetorical form of memes.

Chapter Structure

My thesis is divided into five chapters. The first analysis chapter of my thesis focuses on platform studies. This chapter will begin with an application of Terranova's work on information systems to the definitional arguments regarding memes presented in

the previous chapter. The chapter will proceed with an analysis of modes of data circulation within several social media platforms, along with an analysis of relative cultural differences in user bases between the platforms. I more heavily inflecting Terranova's work with Deleuze to describe the nature of social cross pollination of memes across different platforms.

I analyze three social media platforms in this section—Facebook, 4chan, and Reddit. In doing so, my attempt is to capture a broad cross-section of total online meme circulation. Three of the largest social media platforms were chosen to allow for strong comparative analysis as market competition forces the largest competitors to distinguish themselves in the form of data management and social catering. Facebook, having the largest user base of any social media platform, is analyzed to provide the most widely applicable platform model that is engaged with by the masses. 4chan is historically the progenitor of vast majorities of popular memes[61] and an analysis of the platform defines the morphological evolution of memes in both form and content. An analysis of 4chan is particularly useful as well in providing depth for analysis that will occur in the proceeding chapter. Lastly, Reddit is analyzed as an intermediary between the two previous platforms, displaying the effect of gradations in certain platform structures that influence mass appeal as well as complicate the nature of anonymity in the production of memes.

The second chapter of my thesis deconstructs the deployment of "Pepe the Frog" within the 2016 election. Pepe the Frog is a meme that has persisted since 2008,[62] slowly evolving in usage on 4chan before being associated with the Trump campaign. The format was to depict reactions to certain content, usually accompanied with the text "feels

good/bad man" depending on the used expression.[63] Its role as expressing the emotions of the poster allowed for an affective slippage in memetic deployments. Slippage is created due the location within forums that have pre-established symbolic notions of universally accessible subjecthood through anonymity. This function positions Pepe the Frog as a visual personification an otherwise anonymous 4chan user. Pepe became fused with Trumpian politics when its ethic, defined as political chaos, became the momentary driving force of meme production on 4chan's /pol/. Through repetitive juxtapositions of Pepe reacting positively to spectacularly disruptive actions on the part of the candidate, the meme took on new meaning as the idealized form of an anti-establishment 4chan user, acquiring frames of white nationalism through its situated evolution.[64] On October 13th 2015, Trump retweeted an image of Pepe the Frog iterated upon to include Trump's hairstyle and suit positioned in front of an American Flag, behind a podium emblazoned with the presidential seal.[65] Trump's political persona was now linked to the participatory networked collectivity of the meme. His embodied intervention amplified the resonance of Pepe the Frog among his supporters.[66] Circulation accelerated when pro-Trump memes began to trend on Reddit during February of 2016,[67] when the first Republican primaries began to occur—4chan self-reports approximately twenty-seven million unique visitors per month,[68] while Reddit boasted 1.6 billion unique visitors in July of 2018.[69] In analyzing this moment, the chapter will incorporate the seemingly unique techniques of alt-right meme production into a broader structure that describes memes as rhetorical artifacts. Such artifacts can be rhetorically theorized via Bataillain transgression, a mode of analysis that better explains the function of white nationalist imagery.

Pepe the Frog is a ripe text for analysis as it is the most prominent deployment of memes for political ends. The usage of a meme in a presidential campaign implicates the broader cultural and ideological impacts of the rhetorical circulation of memes and justifies the production of new and complex frameworks to analyze its effectiveness. Pepe the Frog is also one of the most culturally relevant examples of a political meme.[70] Using it as a primary text for analysis allows for the deepest engagement with the current literature. My thesis adds to that literature through the incorporation of Baudrillard so as to describe the dimensions in which this strategy may be effective and generative of new planes of political discourse.

My third chapter will focus on memes associated with politics on the left. This is intended to draw comparisons and make visible distinctions between deployments of political memes under different orienting ideologies. Such comparison is necessary to evaluate the propensity for memes to serve as an effective rhetorical deployment for political ends, versus as a tool particularly suited to advance the goals of a single political orientation.

There is a notable lack of literature regarding the production of leftist memes, especially in comparison with pieces written dissecting mimetic deployment on the far-right. Though some scholars do attend to leftist memes, those meme analyses are often in passing. This is partially due to the lack of an individual text on par with the social impact produced by the deployment of Pepe the Frog. My thesis fills that gap through analyzing a set of memes deployed by Democrats in the 2016 election, followed by an analysis of recent leftist meme production on Facebook. In this way, my thesis articulates

the seductive capacity of meme production and circulation outside of the confines of radical right-wing motivations.

I analyze memes associated with Hillary Clinton and Bernie during the 2016 election to substantiate arguments regarding the campaign effectiveness of memes for the Democratic party. In response to media push of the Trump's label "Crooked Hillary," Clinton's Twitter account posted "Delete your account."[71] It was one of the few successful and most prominent moments of memetic engagement by the Clinton campaign, being liked 707,000 times.[72] This will be discussed in tandem with "Texts from Hillary"—a popular meme format from 2012 that included Clinton sitting down gazing at her phone, with users inserting text illustrating similar snide and curt responses as "delete your account."[73] While this meme was most prominently circulated the previous election cycle, it provides context for the Clinton campaign's media strategy regarding memes. Bernie Sanders garnered notably more traction in the realm of memes. Media outlets reported on the spread of "Bernie Sander's Dank Meme Stash."[74] His positionality serves as a salient point of analysis not only due to the memes produced but the social perception that the candidate's image was a more active contributor to meme production than his primary opponent. "Birdie Sanders" proves one of the best case studies in the invention of a Democratic political meme.[75] After a bird landed on Sanders' podium during a campaign rally, images of birds sporting Sanders' hairstyle tagged with the phrase Birdie Sanders began to be propagated on social media, furthering his built persona. More directly tying Sanders to being situated as a denizen of the memescape were "Bernie or Hillary" memes. These were parodies of election posters that users would caption with questions regarding pop culture.[76] Users would then write their own

responses underneath to the effect of articulating Clinton as particularly out of touch, while Sanders' responses mirrored the opinion of the in-group of the particular pop culture niche. Memes coming from both the left and right then operate on the basis of user engagement and iterability of the genre, opening space for analysis of the commonalities between these processes that serve to define memes writ large.

The concluding chapter of my thesis evaluates and resolve theoretical inconsistencies in the developed rhetorical framework for memes considering evidence found in the analysis chapters. In doing so, I am able to generate predictive claims regarding the potential future evolution of memes as an aesthetic object. In describing the political valences of the deployment of memes, my thesis concludes on the most effective mode of political deployment of memes regarding content, strategic flexibility, and choice of platform. Finally, I assess the relevance and/or challenges memes present to scholarship on presidential rhetoric, a necessary consideration given the most prominent deployment of a political meme was followed by a successful campaign for the presidency.

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CHAPTER TWO

Memetic Platforms

The circulation of internet memes cannot be fully grasped without an understanding of the digital platforms that they travel. Platforms shape the limitations of content that can successfully be circulated via sorting algorithms. Differing goals and philosophies of information relevancy differentiate which content is chosen to be shown to a wider audiences and results in distinguishing the populations that traffic certain platforms. In this chapter, I will address three of the most prominent platforms that widely circulate memes to describe the forms of memes most capable of circulating on each platform, The conclusions of this type of research describe how platforms shape the kinds of memes produced. Rhetorical form is scripted by the restraints of the contexts available for deployment, making an analysis of digital platforms a requirement for fully describing digital rhetoric such as memes.

Platforms are "digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact."[1] Websites are all platforms, as at a base level they create content hosted on the internet that can be visited by internet users. The degree to which the platform moniker describes the totality of a website differs depending on their design. Social media websites that function primarily to allow for mass engagement among users serve as a broader platform than information websites such as those maintained by news agencies. However, in recent years the platform model has become increasingly applied to digital infrastructures writ large, with most websites implementing ways to increase user engagement, such as the

addition of a "comments section" for users to type their own input within any digital space.

The largest platforms today are financially motivated, and as such the business model used by platform creators dictates what content is presented to its users. While Facebook and Twitter are emblematic examples of social media platforms, the former caters to facilitating communication among existing social circles of the user. Twitter attempts to create a digital public sphere to facilitate public communication. This distinction shapes what content is more readily spreadable, along with the discourse writ large that occurs on the platform. The demands of capitalism further shape how platforms choose to algorithmically sort their data. Google, a platform designed to present relevant information in response to user searches, makes its money by selling search term data to advertisers to allow for more precisely targeted advertisements.[2] The relationship between the data created from user engagement and the financial success of the platform are intimately intertwined. Under this financial model, websites are incentivized to motivate users to share data most valuable on the market. This presents a recursive effect on algorithm development—as websites are more incentivized to produce data producing engagement rather than to simply garner views.

The creation and popularization of memes directly mirrors the rise of digital platforms as some of the largest spaces for mass communication. The relationship between platforms and memes is inseparable in describing the evolution of memetic form, as their existence is directly shaped by the circuits of communication provided by platforms. This chapter will analyze the platforms of 4chan, Reddit, and Facebook to describe the saliency of political memes on each platform and argue for the relevancy of

particular memetic strategies specific to each platform. The following analysis reads

more technical information regarding advertising metrics and algorithmic philosophies to

ground latter arguments in this thesis regarding the propensity for certain memes to thrive

in particular digital communities related to which platforms those communities are

situated upon.

Social Theory of Platforms

To understand the impact platforms have on communication, information must

first be distinguished from data. Platforms are structures of data management. Tiziana

Terranova describes the distinction insofar as "information is not simply representation

but a technique of data compression that makes it easier for us to relate to the

overwhelming complexity and indeterminacy of material processes."[3] Terranova's model

understands that implicit within information is "an uncertainty in our knowledge of a

state, process, or event"[4] Nick Srnicek describes the lacuna of uncertainty as data being

"information that something happened" whereas knowledge is composed of "information

about why something happened."[5] Taken in conjunction, both point towards data being a

material resource that can be extracted outside the logical confines of a process of

understanding.[6] Data, then, is the building block that allows for knowledge and

information to be communicated. Information, or knowledge, is how data is

conceptualized and applied to create meaning.

Platforms are facilitators or data management, and knowledge and information

come in the moment of user engagement dictating the form of engagement. How data is

disseminated relies on algorithms—sets of "procedures for transforming input data into a

desired output, based on specified calculations."[7] Algorithms are created and maintained

to automate processes in which new data must be sorted. A non-cybernetic example of algorithms is applicable to solving a Rubik's Cube. A certain number of patterns can be memorized to correspond with particular movements used to reach a completed puzzle, patterns that rely on only a handful of color positions to be recognized to be performed. In this way, the solver of the Rubik's Cube only needs to understand a set of movement patterns depending on the stage of solvency, with each pattern of movements resulting in a limited number of configurations that can be solved with other memorized patterns. In doing so, all forty-three quintillion possible starting configurations of the cube can be solved with approximately six patterns of movement, divided into three steps in which the puzzle solver must pick one of two in each step.

Platform algorithms automate the process in which data is displayed for the user. In this sense, materially obfuscated processes have come to limit pathways available for content, and in doing so, create the possible vectors for rhetorical development. Unlike a Rubik's Cube there is no correct "solution" to the perfect mode of social discourse. Algorithmic choices for social platforms are made on subjective experience regarding user enjoyment and willingness to participate. They are also based on capital accumulation. In the example above regarding Google, the search engine attempts to present the most relevant results to a search query, however, what is and is not "relevant" is decided by the software engineers at Google, and may not align with the opinions of relevancy of the user. Simultaneously, it is an algorithmic choice to present first those websites that payed the search engine to prioritize their websites when certain terms used in a search query.

Algorithms are not stable entities. While early search algorithms functioned by

recording the frequency in which a search term appears within a potential result, they

now

> incorporate contextual information about the sites and their hosts, consider how
> often the site is linked to by others and in what way, and enlist natural language
> processing techniques to better 'understand' both the query and the resources the
> algorithm might return in response.[8]

This means algorithms are not merely the imposition of one subjective metric, but rather

a host of networked decisions that intertwine to produce the final result.

Platforms can be understood as data transmission spaces, of which the shape of

their space is determined by algorithmic imposition. Algorithms describe the cartography

of digital space, mapping the potential for discourse that occurs within it.[9] The

importance of such mapping is magnified once digital platforms became everyday spaces

of communication accessible to the masses. Once smart phones became commonplace

among the public, platforms came to engulf vast amounts of daily communication,

becoming accessible at any time or place with the ability to be stored in one's pocket.

The spatial metaphor functions to describe how algorithms can create and

maintain publics. Gillespie uses the term "calculated publics" to describe how the every

increasing complexity of algorithms can result in vastly different results from the same

input coming from separate users.[10] This becomes especially prominent in the contexts of

users searching for news—algorithms informed by data collected from the user will

output different results as relevant tailored to the user, fueling the fake news crisis in

which each individual can proclaim their opinion as researched fact. The nature of

individualized research is presented as objective, obfuscating to the user the biases

inherent in algorithmic search result generation. In this sense, hyper specific algorithms

are a key component in the creation of internet echo chambers, as the more that users

engage with the platform, the more likely they will be presented with data packaged in

ways that confirm their preexisting opinion. Tarleton Gillespie offers the example of how

Amazon determines what to list under the section of products purchased by "customers

like you" to show how the effect of algorithms goes further than to simply create echo

chambers, but to organize publics themselves.[11] The result, then, is not only to structure

what data is understood as truth by the user, but to link individual users together forming

publics that then produce their own data, recursively emphasizing the social boundaries

of the imposed public in question. Because of this function, the question of platform

function and organization cannot be sequestered to existing entirely online, but work to

organize real populaces that then impact offline discourse, such as politics.

Benjamin Bratton describes the heterogenous relationship between offline and

online discourse brought upon by algorithmic organizing as a stack, a

> vast software/hardware formation, a proto-megastructure built on crisscrossed
> oceans, layered concrete and fiber optics, urban metal and fleshy fingers abstract
> identities and fortified skins of oversubscribed national sovereignty.[12]

As almost all macro-societal structures are linked to the internet, platforms have become

the foundation for all life, a massive web of data circulation that impacts the world at

both material and immaterial levels. Bratton argues that the history of stack models are

"necessarily a history of multiple competing communication standards."[13] The prevalence

of memetic discourse across virtually all digital social platforms then should be seen as

significant. It means that memes are not merely a novel rhetorical invention for the

internet, but rather a standardization of rhetoric tailored to reproduce on the basis of the

form of the stack that has come to incapsulate social discourse.

The platform model shifts techniques used to broadcast information. YouTube, a website used as a business platform by users through monetizing the videos posted, drastically changed the form of user-produced content when they radically altered their sorting algorithm. When YouTube changed their algorithm to account for time the user spent watching a particular channel, content creators began making longer videos to ensure maximum value from individual views.[14] This shift is notable in that it was not brought on by consumer demand or preference, but rather an attempt to conform to the algorithmic limitations set upon them by the software engineers working for YouTube. Terranova argues that information transfer operates on the basis of clearing a channel of noise, operating on the basis of amplification of certain messages.[15] Manipulation of platform algorithms, then, is vital to the possibilities of amplification, as they serve as the channels for data transfer.

Jenkins describes the existence of memes within platforms as modes, or "manners that orient the interfacing between viewer and image, that provide implicit instructions in how to view."[16] The modal conceptualization of memes show how they function to replicate content across numerous channels, as the implicit instructions that organically develop in digital spaces are ones that are in service of taking advantage of the algorithmic technologies that structure all digital platforms. Modal analysis highlights the function of iteration within memes as requisite for their spreadability as the stasis point of what makes a meme identifiable is not restricted to content that may be prioritized differently depending on platform. Instead, what is static is the constructed form of the meme, allowing any message to be packaged within it and spread across the most salient platform for that message.

Using a Deleuzian model to understand the form of memes describes how they take advantage of algorithmic amplification. In *Difference and Repetition,* Deleuze argues that the two concepts are inextricably related. For something to be repeated, differences must be recognized to articulate that the repetition is in fact a second object, rather than a singular object. Difference, likewise, can only be identified through repetition of forms, i.e., some commonalities must be used as a metric to determine points of differences. Distinguishing two different works of fiction is a process that can only happen after recognizing the repetition of the form of a book, a chair and a rock can only be distinguished after recognizing the repetition of form as objects.

Memes take the form of iterable images, repetition of the same form with differences that arise in nuances to the joke. Image-macro based memes will often be reproduced by users using the same image each time, with different texts attached to articulate different jokes. The rules for creating differences are not static, such as editing the image itself, however recognizability of the meme format is necessary for the iteration to have meaning. Reaction memes, or those that depict an image of a subject making a facial expression, are prime examples of this function. The text indicating the context for the reaction is changed depending on the usage. However, the image may also be edited to describe a different reaction than the original, or add specificity to the meme by superimposing a different face onto the meme (political candidates are examples that could be used when used to react to political events). Despite this, each reaction meme spreads on their distinct familiarity, such as surprised pickachu, insofar as iterations are made on top of a base meme format in a process that motivates user engagement.

Memes by nature, then, maximize their own amplification through algorithmic processes. The capacity for a singular meme to be redeployed in differing contexts allows it to be sorted into discrete calculated publics. Like the scattering of seeds in a field, being able to exist within multiple modes of sorting maximizes the possibility that one public or another will take it up, spreading it virally to other members of that public. Overlapping of publics facilitated by users engaging in multiple platforms ensures popular niche memes have the potential to escape echo chambers, cross pollinating to other publics who may take up the meme to redeploy for their own contexts. During this process, larger swathes of the public more regularly engage in the meme, raising its relevancy score and maximizing its potential to reach previously unreachable audiences.

LOLcats are a key example to describe the crosspollination of memes from niche communities to the more general public. Originating on 4chan in 2005,[17] the memes depicted images of cats with text overlaid to describe the cat's inner thoughts. While acceleration of its usage on 4chan resulted in particular speech patterns that became associated with LOLcats, the fully formed meme depicting cats in silly situations was appealing enough to broader sections of the public that the meme broke free of 4chan. LOLcats proceeded to become one of the most popular early memes on the internet from this process.

To articulate how algorithms and data extraction methods coalesce to create the contexts for meme production, 4chan, Facebook, and Reddit will be analyzed to deconstruct the saliency of different meme types among the platforms. The conclusions will ground the following chapters to describe the potentials and limitations of rhetorical forms of memes within the contexts that they are deployed.

The Technics of 4chan, Facebook, and Reddit

4chan, Facebook, and Reddit serve as some of the most prominent examples of platforms adept at circulating memes. The following section will describe the algorithmic techniques used by each, along with the particular demands made on users regarding data production to participate in each platform. The types of memes that circulalate on each platform will then be described in relation to those contexts to argue for the best strategies of memetic amplification in regard to the platforms. In other words, this section identifies the rhetorical affordances of memes within each platform. This section pursues the modalities of rhetoric available to memes on these platforms and the possibilities for cross-pollination that may remain.

4chan

4chan comprises the simplest platform algorithm philosophy among the three analyzed here. The website is composed of several image boards, each containing fourteen contiguous pages of user generated posts. The order of posts is based on recency. When a user makes a new post, it is placed as the first post on the board, while simultaneously the last post is deleted. There is no official 4chan archive, so posts are made under the assumption of ephemerality.[18] The second metric used is additional user engagement. Each time an older post receives a comment, it is "bumped" to the top of the page. Therefore, the life span of a post on 4chan is entirely determined by the amount of conversation generated.

4chan demands very little user data. Users do not create accounts, but rather have the choice to sign their posts with a name. This function is rarely used, as users of 4chan embrace the usage of the Anonymous tag given to unsigned posts.[19] Users are not

technically anonymous, as the administrators of 4chan have access to the IP address of each user.[20] This is one of the only metrics for content enforcement, as IP addresses can be supplied to law enforcement, or be banned from access to the website. Content moderation, however, is only used in the most extreme cases. In particular, the /b/ board conceptualizes itself as a bastion of free speech. That sentiment is expressed as "pornography, racial slurs, and a distinctive brand of humor derived from defilement."[21] Coleman identifies 4chan as the birth place of the modern form of internet trolling, one that is distinct from the hacker culture the 1990's due to the function of anonymity existing at the level of the platform. Whereas 1990's hacker culture functioned as individual actions by self-identified hackers operating under anonymity to avert capture, 4chan created a collectivity unified under the concept of anonymity to engage in acts of trolling.[22] It was here that some of the earliest prominent examples of memes were generated.

The social discourse on /b/ can be explained through these two functions of platform – anonymity and an algorithm based exclusively on user engagement. Anonymously shielded from direct criticism regarding their post, users are incentivized to post the most shocking images and texts they can to elicit reactive engagement from other users. When read through Gillespie's calculated publics, 4chan may be only loosely calculated, but describes the acceleration of shocking and taboo content in the way it contributes to the development of its user base as a distinct public sphere.

While Anonymous is only the default user name attached to posts, it was the prolonged state of user engagement within the platform that evolved the moniker to be a unique signifier of the collective 4chan user population. The figure of anonymous came

to have many faces represented in images posted to the board, such as an individual in a green morph suit wearing a suit and tie,[23] and later a Guy Fawkes mask.[24] Due to the subversive content prioritized by 4chan's algorithm, the figure of Anonymous was not an empty signifier, instead attached to it were the tastes and sensibilities of one who enjoyed existing in a space full of gore and racism. The existence of this clear signifier of Anonymous meant that new users became more quickly integrated into the social discourse, having a clear referent to identify with as the engage more with the platform.

The popularization of memes as a form is largely due to the algorithm rather than the nature of user data. While not inherently grotesque, memes serve to boost user engagement thus sustaining the life of a post in three major ways. First, the repetition of the meme creates familiarity with other users, decreasing the likelihood that users skim over the post when scrolling through the image board. The potential for iteration serves two functions that contribute to the success of memes on 4chan. Iteration allow for users to comment on posts containing memes with their own nuances on the meme made by the original poster. Likewise, once a meme format has been sufficiently popularized, users become motivated to make new posts using the format. In this way, new memes on 4chan tend to take the image boards by storm. Niche memes hit a tipping point when several users over time take notice of its existence on the board, in which the groupthink of the public takes over, creating large quantities of posts using the same meme.

4chan's platform structure makes it particular difficult for an individual to be responsible for the creation of a meme, relying on the collective to affirm its value as a precondition for its mass circulation. This is why long-term users of 4chan are so readily inculcated into an otherwise taboo space, as users are trained via collective affirmation to

contort their discourse in increasingly subversive ways. However, outside organizations

would likely have an easier time circulating a targeted meme through collective action. If

hundreds of individuals began posting a new meme format simultaneously, they would be

taking advantage of the Anonymous moniker to create the illusion of the collective

affirmation of the user base. An example of this would be the antagonism between

Anonymous and Scientology.[25] While it is most probably that only a fraction of the users

on 4chan participated in antagonistic acts such as hacking of Scientology websites, the

moniker of Anonymous fused the antagonism with the identity of users of the site as a

whole.

Outside the context of influence by an outside organization, 4chan's algorithmic

simplicity makes its platform one of the most organic spaces for meme production.

Memes rise and fall purely on their merits of generating user engagement in the simplest

forms. Despite its embrace of more radical interpretations of free speech, 4chan

simultaneously creates the most cohesive calculated public compared to the other

platforms discussed here with an identifiable site-wide culture.

Reddit

Reddit's platform is constructed in ways similar to 4chan—allowing a degree of

anonymity while sorting posts on the basis of user votes. Account creation is required to

post, and requires a static user-name while archiving posts made by each of its users.

Like 4chan's image boards, Reddit has what are called subreddits (forums) dedicated to

discussion of particular topics, such as /r/NBA. However, rather than 4chan's anything-

goes style /b/ board, Reddit instead has the "front page," the default presentation when

visiting the site that indexes the top posts across all subreddits. What qualifies as a top post is presented by the votes attached—users have the ability to "up-vote" posts they affirm, or "down-vote" posts they dislike. The option to either up/down vote a post creates a distinction between the content that reaches the front page of Reddit with the content that persists on 4chan's /b/. Shocking or otherwise offensive posts on Reddit often have hundreds of comments made by other users attached to them. On 4chan, this would ensure the posts retains a spot at the front of the image-board. The existence of down votes, however, means that these posts are unlikely to make the front page of Reddit.

The effect that down votes have on front page content provides a salient example of the effect of a calculated public. Theoretically, if the population of 4chan was displaced onto Reddit, offensive posts would likely still get to the front page as users would affirm the expression of their taboo culture. However, the effect of algorithms on organizing publics ensures extreme taboo discourse is unlikely to circulate that widely. In this respect, 4chan's public has created an inherent gatekeeping function for new members, as the only recourse for objection is to simply leave the site, as any engagement contributes to the amplification of the messages on the site. On Reddit, however, dissent can be expressed in ways that negatively impact the circulation of the post, thus decreasing the possibility of it reaching wider audiences.

Reddit's variation on anonymity also creates unique contexts from 4chan. While username's shield individuals from direct personal responsibility for their posts, they also demarcate users as individuals. The enthusiasm for anonymity is still culturally embraced by Reddit users, as shown by the popular sentiment expressed in the meme below.

However, it is common practice for users to investigate the post history of other content producers, calling out contradicting opinions, or past comments deemed unacceptable to dismiss what the user had currently posted. Anonymity on Reddit, then, is only a half measure compared to 4chan, as a persona for each user is created as a precondition to participate on the platform. Users are not afforded the degree of separation allowed on 4chan to post taboo content and then immediately disown it. While the username allows users to avoid direct responsibility to their personal character, it still creates a stable entity for other users of the platform to identity and form relationships with, requiring a certain level of commitment to the discourses of the communities the user wishes to participate in.

This is not to say that subversive content does not exist on Reddit. Subreddits are self- moderated by the participating communities. Moderators are made such when they choose to create a new subreddit and other users are made moderators at the discretion of other subreddit moderators. As such, what content is allowed to circulate on a particular subreddit depends on what the moderators choose to allow. This does not however mean that anything is allowed on Reddit. Egregious cases of subreddit obscenity attract the attention of the administrators of the website, who enforce content restrictions on offending subreddits. One of the most prominent examples of this enforcement occurred in 2012, when the user /u/Violentacrez was banned along with the subreddits that he founded and moderated.[26] The most well known of his subreddits was /r/jailbait, a subreddit dedicated to the circulation of nude images of women who looked younger, or were younger, than the legal age of consent. The relationship between administrators and moderators creates a dynamic in which the success of a meme becomes curtailed at the

moment it reaches high enough degrees of circulation for the wider user base to notice it. At the same time, the relationship creates digital niches in which subversive and offensive discourse can persist so long as the subreddit maintains a level of engagement that can avoid administrator notice.

Fig. 1 – Reddit User Names[27]

These technics make Reddit one of the largest circulators of memes in the present day. The capacity for the form of a meme to thrive in algorithms that prioritize user engagement ensures that memes remain one of the primary ways to engage with Reddit as a platform. The layering function between the front page and the subreddits that feed into it create a form of cross pollination of memes between subreddits, creating a heterogenous zone susceptible to accelerated iteration and redeployment of memes. New memes are generated by particular subreddits to serve the purposes of their discussion.

The most popular of these memes may reach the front page, garnering the audience of others not subscribed to the particular subreddit of origin. Those users then can repost their own iteration of the meme within subreddits they frequent, adapting the meme format for different contexts. Therefore, to reach a particular audience, it should be simple to craft memes that articulate messages relevant to a specific community or interest. Reaching the front page, thus accessing the whole of the Reddit audience, would require production of a meme that cross culturally appealing, thus ruling out the kinds of extremely taboo content found on 4chan.

While Reddit shows the consequences of distinct forms of anonymity of meme when compared to 4chan, it does so in a way that allows one to grasp memetic flow through subcultures in the form of subreddits accessible by static username monikers. This provides insights to how the rhetorical forms of particular subcultures influence memetic content. However, it does not allow for analysis that accounts for what content individuals are willing to publicly identify with on the level of their everyday personas.

Facebook

Facebook departs drastically from the platforms described above. There is almost no room for anonymity. Users create accounts linked with their actual name, requiring outside confirmation of identity. Along with their name, their posts are accompanied by their profile picture, which usually is a photo of the user, however, this is not a requirement set by Facebook. Along with this, Facebook implements a "friends" system that is not seen on the other two platforms. To share content with others, Facebook users must be "friends" with other users they wish to share content with or have other users

search specifically for public content. Friendships on Facebook records links between accounts, with each profile having the option to view other accounts the user is friends with. Users are then not only directly responsible for what they post, but also post to an audience primarily of other individuals from their day-to-day social circles.

Facebook's algorithm works as the inverse of Reddit. While Reddit sorts posts on the basis of what users have already affirmed, Facebook prioritizes posts that are likely to generate positive reactions from users.[28] This scripting of what would or wouldn't elicit a positive reaction dictates the availability of content to be widely circulated from the beginning. The mechanism is only possible because of the nature of user data presented. Facebook has the capacity to tailor what posts are disseminated to which users through access to individual users' race, age, political beliefs, along with those metrics applied to the social circles the individual resides in. In an effort to push back on the digital echo chambers this creates, Facebook recently increased the priority of posts made by one's friends than those from publishers.[29] Regarding posts from publishers, Facebook prioritizes posts that have features that conform to it's predictions for what generate "meaningful interactions," defined as comments, replies, likes, and shares rather than view time or story type.[30] This creates a tension between the platform design of Facebook and the ethics of 4chan. Metrics for meaningful engagement align almost entirely with the function of 4chan's algorithm relying on active engagement in the post, however active engagement on Facebook is inherently tied to the personal identity of the individual user.

That tension contributes to Facebook's propensity to propagate memes outside the confines of digitally based communities despite the limitations the platform enforces vis-

à-vis the other platforms analyzed in this chapter. The degree of self-identity infused in Facebook participation creates a "simulation of human culture"[31] in which the circulation of memes as the rhetoric of platforms becomes synonymous with social discourse writ large, in that users willingly attach their personal identity to the form of memetic communication in ways that are apparent to their friends and family. Unlike the meme enclaves of Reddit and 4chan, posting memes on Facebook intertwines memetic discourse with ones public persona. It is then that memes supersede their position as niche rhetoric for digital enclaves and become popular vernacular not restricted to those that define themselves as digital denizens.

The organization of the Facebook newsfeed explains how memes function as more disparate objects than they would on other platforms. While a Reddit user is directed toward participation in communities of strangers that share interests, Facebook orients users toward others they have relationships within daily life. This creates a less cohesive audience for particular memes, as a Reddit user can clearly construct a basketball meme to circulate on /r/NBA, the same meme posted on Facebook is created for an audience of friends and family, of whom only some may be interested in basketball. Likewise, there is no similar function in Facebook as the front page of Reddit, as the best basketball memes will break free of /r/NBA to the wider Reddit user base, those Facebook users who are uninterested in basketball are algorithmically less likely to see the post at all. Calculated publics are less likely to form, as the friends attached to an account are determined prior to the usage of Facebook, rather existing relationships are transposed onto the platform.

Pages dedicated to the production of memes exist on Facebook as a simulation of subreddit meme production, however the platform limits their circulatory propensity. As described above, the initial uptake of a meme is predicated on the affirmation of collective community sentiments. This means the more homogenous one's social circle is, the more likely they are to find memes on Facebook. This condition is not seen on the other platforms. On Reddit, users are directed to self-integrate into homogenous groups. 4chan works to homogenize all users into the same public. Meme pages, as pages that do not exist as profiles to be friends with, are treated as publishers and thus compete for priority with posts made by wide reaching media companies. Because of this, meme pages often need to be actively sought out by the user, or otherwise be introduced via shares from friends. User data forms the direction meme pages take in content production by dictating hyper-specific content, as sharing it under the moniker of personal identity mandates that each share is a statement of one's personality and interests. Therefore, the most circulatable memes become the most niche, as they are most likely to generate user involvement as a means of expressing one's unique tastes.

Despite these factors, Facebook is ripe for the circulation of political memes. The necessity of comedy or obscenity is capable of being subverted by the expression of personal opinion in a way not afforded to the users of 4chan or Reddit. Shares and likes become political statements emphatically expressed to friends and family. These memes can be simple images of politicians with accurate quotes attached due to this form of organization. Whereas on Reddit such memes would remain confined to subreddits dedicated to the support of the politician, while they would suffocate on 4chan due to their perceived banality. The success of Trump's memetic engagement analyzed in

chapter three express one of the first political memes that take advantage of the subversive and absurd tendencies of 4chan. At the same time, these memes remained expressly political, allowing their circulation on all platforms.

Conclusion

Memes rarely remain exclusively on a single platform. Individuals engage with multiple platforms and carry over the forms of their social discourse in doing so. The success of a meme, then, is not restricted by the confines of particular platforms, however the choice of platform origin for new memes is of paramount importance to the meme's degree of circulation. Memes that elicit engagement due to their obscenity are unlikely to be taken up by the user base of Facebook, while memes that lack obscenity are unlikely to propagate on 4chan. The persistence of the form of memes on all platforms however ensures that once a meme is widely taken up on one platform, it can spread to another.

This research can help trace the potential trajectories of memes from platform to platform. Innocuously comedic memes are likely to gain traction on Reddit, and more easily crosses over to the publics residing on Facebook. Obscene memes from 4chan can be taken up by subreddits but are unlikely to circulate more widely on the Reddit platform. Obscene memes can also cross pollinate from 4chan to Facebook, so long as the meme acquires a certain level of political relevancy that the Facebook user can be proud of embracing its content publicly, such as some of the memes produced by the Trump campaign in 2016. While Facebook serves as a poor platform for the origination of new memes, its importance in popularizing memes outside of their original niche audiences cannot be understated.

While all platforms create calculated publics, the methods for doing so have differing impacts on capacity for memetic circulation. From the perspective of memetic production, the public produced by Facebook may seem as the least calculated, arising from preexisting relationships. This ignores the fact that publisher content is disseminated on the metrics Facebook uses to evaluate the tastes of your personal social circle, thus insidiously shaping the opinions of yourself, friends, and family. Despite this, the nature of Facebook's algorithm deprioritizes the circulation of memes compared to the other two platforms discussed, thus it's calculated public has less of a grip on the orientation of memes on Facebook. Meanwhile, the simplest sorting algorithm described in 4chan produces the most cohesive form of a calculative public among the three platforms. This gestures towards the idea that memes compose the bottom up response from the user base to the technics of calculated publics. They arise as organic rhetorical forms when algorithmic limitations are imposed on a community. This is not to be confused with resistance to those algorithms, at least not at an inherent level. In fact, engagement in memes serves to reinforce calculated publics, filling in the gaps in community cohesion when normal technics such as names, faces, and identity are effaced.

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CHAPTER THREE

Pepe the Frog

The 2016 U.S. Presidential Election saw the use of political memes on an unprecedented scale. This historical moment presents a certain urgency for rhetorical analysis. The tactics used by campaigns in the 2016 US presidential election are indicative of a shifting terrain of political rhetoric that necessitates new conceptual frameworks to properly account. It has been said that the election was won through "meme magic,"[1] but what that may mean and the extent of its factuality is still in question. My research traces the history of memes as an iterative genre, calling attention to consistencies throughout the medium that implicate the nature of its meaning and propensity for circulation. In building on the works of Guy Debord through Jean Baudrillard, the meme is framed as an object of spectacle that attains unique properties when posited in an accelerated rhetorical field such as the internet. My analysis specifically deconstructs the case of Pepe the Frog in the 2016 election to argue for a shift in understanding modern political rhetoric.

Jean Baudrillard's theories are particularly salient at interrogating the rhetorical work of memes. Memes are volatile rhetorical artifacts. Situating them within the context of hyper-reality defines the cause of that volatility in regards to circulation and resonance of a meme. Baudrillard argues that the inversion of meaning is accomplished through the prioritization of simulation over the real. That priority becomes a foundational claim that explains the nature of propagation and political effectiveness of specific memes. Memes as a medium are distinguished by an inherent irony in their propagation. Baudrillard's

epistemological framing enunciates the missing link between an ethos of political apathy behind the creation of memes and virility, while also constructing a larger frame that encapsulates the medium as an unstable and evolving object.

The strategy deployed in the 2016 campaign can be better understood as a collective process in which white nationalists were merely the progenitors, rather than the orchestrators. Understanding memes as a genre inherently predicated on mass iterative engagement poses a problematic for political strategists. The nature of the format ensures that no individual can have top-down control over meme-production, and as such the execution of a cohesive "meme-strategy" is virtually impossible. Rather this paper seeks to address the risks and possibilities to engage politically via memes, and the implications such strategies have on defining the nature of political efficacy. Destabilizing the text is necessary to account for the process of fractured articulation within memes, and as such the traditional speaker/audience divide deployed in political rhetoric must be abandoned when determining rubrics for rhetorical effectiveness and success.

I argue for framing memes as objects of spectacle that attain unique properties when posited in an accelerated rhetorical field such as the internet. The paper will then fit the usage of political memes particularly in the case of Pepe the Frog in the 2016 election to argue for a shift in understanding modern political rhetoric. Lastly, an argument for the future trajectory of memes will be delineated as an outgrowth of meme engagement in 2016.

The Meme Defined

This chapter uses the term meme to refer exclusively to communicative artifacts that are propagated through repetition on the internet. The term was coined by Richard Dawkins to create a term to label new cultural phenomena that "conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation."[2] It is a phonetic abbreviation of the Greek term 'mimeme' (the imitated thing) that is intended to evoke the word 'memory.' Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist, posits that memes are the communicative vehicle through which social evolution occurs, much like the role of genes within his own field. Shifman distinguishes the Internet Meme by emphasizing the longevity of the meme (as opposed to Dawkins who is attempting to describe short term phenomena, or fads), while conforming to an arbitrary internal logic, rather than the medium itself being destabilized.[3] Wiggins and Bowers provide a framework for dissecting the lifespan of a meme that explicitly highlights the iterative capacity of the meme as an inherent function of the medium that I take up to distinguish memes from other forms of circulatable content.

Debord theorizes that capitalist society has exceeded its material manifestation and now primarily operates through the circulation of images, labelling such a societal moment spectacle.[4] Understanding the meme as spectacle articulates the cultural weight of that evolutionary process. The Situationists were particularly critical of spectacularization, as it was understood as a process that "inverts the real …[which] is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle while simultaneously absorbing the spectacular order."[5] Through a framework of spectacle, memes can be understood as a form of *détournement*, i.e. a process of reconfiguring or redeployment of images to

challenge dominant ideals.[6] Wiggins and Bowers note memes make use of juxtaposition

to produce new meaning from old texts,[7] defining memes as *détournement* through form

rather than intent.

Debord and Wolman define four premises along which *détournement* operates.[8]

To briefly exclude the second premise, the set dictates the floor requirements that

delineate whether a message becomes a meme. The first premise is that the more

conceptually distant the juxtaposition, the more acute the effect. The second is that

distortions produced must be as simplified as possible to elicit new forms of recollections

of a text. Thirdly, rationality within instances of *détournement* are inversely related to its

effect. Finally, the most effective form of *détournement* is simple reversal. [9]Memes as

outlined by Phillips[10] often showcase absurdity in their representational redeployments,

echoing the strategy outlined by Debord and Wolman, that includes a focus on sharply

contrasting juxtapositions that evade "rational reply" by refusing to engage on the level

of "simple reversal."[11] To return now to the second premise, the format of the medium

becomes sharply defined, existing as a "simplified" message usually in the form of

sentence variations on top of an established visual template, garnering its comedic capital

from the 'conscious or semiconscious recollection of the original contexts of the

elements."[12] Some form of recognition of the original material is necessary to produce

resonances necessary in meme propagation, however the nature of absurdist bricolage

disarticulates those images to produce contingent meanings, images the Situationists see

as potentially revolutionary. They theorize that engaging in practices of *détournement*

disrupts the smooth functioning of the spectacle supported by hegemonic power, creating

fissures within totalizing ideology.[13]

As discussed early, Baudrillard's theory expands on the Situationists to describe a world where forms of *detournement* has come to supplant understandings of the real, no longer inverting ideas but replacing them all together as new regimes of truth. The destruction of the real creates a meta-framework for the process of power as a function of mimetic articulation, as can be seen by the radically different discourse found in the 2016 election. Once simulation ceases to fit within a relational hierarchy to the real, society becomes plunged in a vertigo of simulation, as the only frame of reference becomes other simulation. This produces a reality in which signifiers of value are circulated among shifting and co-constitutive levels of simulation, short-circuiting a connection with the real, i.e. value itself as the signified in a state that Baudrillard calls hyper-reality.[14] The nature of hyper-reality eliminates the real as a frame of reference, hyper-reality thus orients itself towards the exhaustion of its own capacity for meaning.[15] The exhaustion premise preserves a Debordian articulation of memes as images that function according to the rubrics of detournement, while challenging the revolutionary potential of such acts. The spectacle itself however is abandoned as an organizing principle as it maintains that authentic subject-hood exists and is merely posed with the challenge of overcoming the obstacles of the real.[16] Taken to its extension hyper-reality fully encapsulates the entirety of capitalist production, rather than merely prioritizing its representational aspects, creating a closed circuit in which spectacular resistance becomes an oxymoron, playing into the hegemonic discourse of the status quo.

While Baudrillard can help to explain the seductive power of memes to both illicit their reproduction,[17] and inculcate individuals into particular social enclaves, the force of the argument relies on warrants developed by proto-psychoanalytic theorist Georges

Bataille. Bataille theorizes the incompleteness of an individual subject, which spurs a drive to produce completeness through experiences with Others.[18] Bataille highlights the importance of the consumption of the taboo and abject as seductively pleasurable experiences that elicit fissures within an individual's notion of self. Such notions explains the desirability of engagement in a form of *détournement* that has become explicitly banal. While difficult to deny the status of memes as spectacle, they pose a problematic for Situationist theory, as they exist as infinitely replicable for the masses, composing digital social discourse rather than existing as individual nodes of rupture.

Deployment of memes in the 2016 election, in opposition to established political norms of campaign efficacy, can thus be described as a process of profaning the realness of the election, a sort of mass satire that destabilizes political efficacy from below. This argument proves sharp contrast to political campaigns oriented top down from the candidate that attempt to harness grassroots energies under a coherent ideology established by the campaign figurehead, instead reversing the starting point for the generation of political energy. Bataille directly connects these functions to moments of laughter as subjective immanence.[19] Bataille's analysis provides an explanation for the scripting of memes as 'just jokes' even when deployed in overtly political contexts.

Inspired by Baudrillard and Bataille, my method would allow for the construction of a broader framework of memes through the lens of Nagle's[1] analysis in *Kill All Normies*.[20] Nagle analyzes digital culture in the years that preceded the creation of the alt-right, focusing on moments of political upheavals, such as Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring. She argues that the cultural uptake on the political right is in part motivated

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[1] While some claims in *Kill all Normies* are plagiarized, I will be avoiding those sections in favor of building on her original analysis regarding the connection between transgressive discourse and meme production.

by notions of transgression seen in de Sade and Nietzsche, both of which are primary theorists built upon in Bataille's work. An integration with Bataille's analysis creates explanatory power for this transgressive uptake, acting as a dual process creating subjective distancing[21] through rendering the coherence of the subject, or what Coleman would refer to as Lulz.[22] In this way I account for the Lulz as a specific form of transgressive drive that deeply motivates users to engage in meme production towards transgressive ends.

Milner writes that the interactivity of the format makes meme production a form of "networked collectivism" that thrives without the need for social centralization.[23] He argues, along with Van Zoonen, that memes are a form of fully realized political populism.[24] The lens of populism is consistent with a Baudrillardian lens that refuses to position banal social expressions as having less political efficacy than historically normative political engagement. Politics is defined by its mass resonance rather than its content, which implies the meme is the primary site for political expressions by the masses. As such memes do not rely on a rational subject, but instead propagate outside the confines of logical commitment.[25] Memes restructure subjects to "alter their environments so that their chances for replication are enhanced."[26] In this way, memes complicate notions of agency, supplanting political expression while simultaneously suturing subjects to a representational framework with its own inertia that subordinates clarity of meaning within transmission to maximizing any and all modes of transmission.[27]

In light of this conundrum, Johnson's solution to locating the active propagators of memes within a cyclical schema is to understand the energies of the masses as oriented

under a Deleuzian rubric of desire. Memes as genre become the conceptual basis for tracing lines of flight while preserving the rhetorical terrain of internet memes as one that allows fluidity and destratified hybridity. They represent "lines of flight" in that they play with chance and ambiguity in ways that create new vectors for meaning production.[28] The progression of the meme is a self-replicating cycle such that in the moment a user actively iterates on a meme, their engagement is prefigured into a larger social order predicated on the assumed internal logic of the meme itself. It is impossible to predetermine the evolutionary pathways of particular memes, as their ambiguous absurdity ensure that the mass audience approaches each meme from a plurality of interpretive frames,[29] while simultaneously accentuating the potential for lines of flight by opening that interpretive ambiguity to a plurality of voices through iterative engagement.[30] Spectacularization then plays out within the medium of the meme as a self-cannibalizing image, by which its capacity to propagate is directly related to its vacuousness, as it is this property that creates the creative space for iteration.

Wiggins and Bowers define this interaction between agent and structure as a constitutive duality.[31] Internet memes serve as a microcosm for broader hyper-reality in that "digital culture recursively produces memes which 'mutually reproduce the social world' precisely because the rules and resources available for remix, iteration, and rapid diffusion are unique to the new media landscape."[32] Memes operate entirely within a closed system of their own logic (or more accurately their own non-logic). This allows them to conclude that most current literature on internet memes limit their understanding of particular memes as static objects with virility that varies over time. Theoretical

interventions such as this one rectify that frame of analysis to account for memes as "a developing genre of communication enacted by participatory digital culture."[33]

Here the life phases of memes defined by Wiggins and Bowers can be used to construct the limits of memes as a tool for political organizing. Three phases are outlined, and while certain media creations may reside statically within one phase, what can be called a meme necessarily moves through each iteration before becoming fully realized. The base material that has the potential to become a meme is labeled as 'spreadable media' is defined as images that can be transmitted, but are not iterated upon.[34] Examples included anything that can be linked to on online, yet do not elicit creative user engagement, such as trailers or family photos. Spreadable media begins to acquire characteristics of *détournement* at the moment it becomes what is labeled an "emergent meme."[35] The image is fused with a characteristic that forces new articulated meaning to be produced as a result of the juxtaposition. Traditional performances of *détournement*, culture jamming, rage comics all constitute emergent memes in that they hijack visual rhetoric to create niche understandings of meaning or culture. The third and final phase, labelled simply as 'meme', is marked by the point of rapid diffusion, and iterative engagement on the format of the meme begins.[36] This stage of meme would include memes that gain their humor purely through self-referentiality, such as 'deep fried memes' in which other meme formats are visually distorted beyond recognition for humorous appeal.[37] While all stages are spectacle, it is the charted movement from emergent to full meme that displays the effect that the meme becomes hyper-real, sheading the qualities of *détournement* as the particular meme slides towards self

referentiality. This telos situates the tactics of the 2016 Trump campaign within the broader communicative trajectory structured by the usage of memes.

Trump the Deplorable

The 2016 American presidential election stood out in the history of electoral politics for a number of reasons. Donald Trump was elected president running on a platform that antagonized the party he was running with, while actively disrupting political norms of speech and decorum. This was done with the help of the evangelical vote after a publicized scandal involving an alleged extra-marital affair with a pornstar. It is not a coincidence then that this was the first national U.S. election in which internet memes were mechanized towards drumming up campaign energy, as they create the constitutive moments of subject formation by which political demarcations can be redrawn.

The Trump campaign seemed predestined to take hold a strategy of mimetic production. His campaign announcement in 2016 visually mirrors a scene illustrated in the Simpsons episode "Bart to the Future" produced 15 years prior.[38] Originally a fringe candidate seen as trying to replicate previous political publicity stunts, Trump quickly gained a following among white ethno-nationalists after proposing policies such as a proposed border wall separating the United States from Mexico as early as the summer of 2015.[39]

These events converged with the far-right tendencies incubating in Reddit and 4chan, particularly 4chan's /pol/ board. 4chan is a notable progenitor of much of the internet's meme culture, largely but not exclusively from the /b/ board.[40] 4chan is particularly conducive to the production of alt-right memes due to the structure of the

website described in chapter two. Individuals post anonymously, allowing focus exclusively on the text severed from the author. Posts are brought to the top of the page when refreshed each time a new comment is left on the thread. The 4chan community had been recently embroiled in what came to be called GamerGate.[41] What began as a discussion of patriarchy inherent in video game design became conceptualized on the site as an organized plot to shift the video game industry to include more liberal notions of inclusion and diversity.[42] 'Social Justice Warriors' became caricatured as an outgroup to the 4chan 'gamer', solidifying the collective notion of the figure of anonymous as politically oriented towards the goals of white masculine identities, and actively antagonistic to more active individuals situated within the left. The presence of Donald Trump as a candidate basing his platform on shocking and normatively offensive discourse, one that refuses a rational response within the logic of a presidential election smoothed his transition into the rhetoric of memes.

The moment at which Trump's soundbites cross the threshold from spreadable media to emergent meme takes place during the political mobilization of the Pepe the Frog meme. Pepe the Frog is a meme that has persisted since 2008,[43] and had spent several years as a fully realized meme under Wiggins and Bowers' framework before being associated with the Trump campaign. The format was to depict reactions to certain content, usually accompanied with the text "feels good/bad man" depending on the intended expression.[44] The meme should be thought of as fully realized because a) statement communicated formulates the meme as a discrete artifact from the original illustration meant for a comic book, and b) warranted iteration on the statement itself so long as the image of Pepe persists, being used to communicate a gamut of reactions. Its

role as expressing the emotions of the poster coupled with its location within forums that have pre-established symbolic notions of universally accessible subjecthood through anonymity, allowed for an affective slippage that positions Pepe the Frog as a lesser form of the various images of Anonymous as a depicter of the universal 4chan user in a particular mood. The performance of using the Pepe meme successfully was itself part of the larger discourse of successful meme performance that qualifies an individual as part of the in group.[45] Pepe became fused with Trumpian politics when its ethic defined as political chaos became the particular momentary driving force of meme production on /pol/. Through repetitive juxtapositions of Pepe reacting positively to spectacularly disruptive actions on the part of the candidate the meme took on new meaning as the idealized form of an anti-establishment 4chan user, subliminally acquiring frames of white nationalism through its situated evolution.

On October 13th 2015, Trump retweeted an image of Pepe the Frog iterated upon to include Trump's hairstyle and suit positioned in front of an American Flag, behind a podium emblazoned with the presidential seal.[46] The moment was the point at which Pepe the Frog ceases to exist as merely a symbolic artifact and is elevated as a tool of hyper-reality by utilizing the specific technics afforded by the medium of memes. Trump's political persona is now depicted to his audience as engaging in the participatory networked collectivity of the meme. His embodied intervention makes the meme simultaneously resonate as both more and less real. More real in the sense that the circulation of the meme is no longer confined to the subculture of internet denizens, and now includes the very 'real' candidate that is being memed. Less real in the sense that the political process which was once foiled as the 'real' alternative to the banal discourses of

online humor, has now been invaded by the meme contagion, and has thus been accelerated to a degree of silliness believed impossible within successful political discourse. The 'real simulation' of politics via memes has become more favorable than the 'fake reality' of normative political discourse, which becomes characterized as an inauthentic enterprise of manufacturing public perception. As per Baudrillard, the slippage between political norms and their connection to the real becomes demonized in the face of a purely hyper-real object that affords no slippages with the real by avoiding it entirely.

Trump memes exploded onto Reddit during February of 2016,[47] when the first Republican primaries began to occur. It is important to note the distinction between the platforms being discussed to articulate the scale of increased engagement. 4chan self-reports approximately twenty-seven million unique visitors per month.[48] In contrast, Reddit boasted 1.6 billion unique visitors in July of 2018. The increased discourse occurring within the subreddit /r/the_donald mirrored the pro-Trump mimetic production occurring on /pol/, but was now reaching a much more vast audience. As Trump memes slowly attracted media attention, the banal absurdism injected into political discourse subsumed the whole of the enterprise, rather than just Trump supporters. When Hillary Clinton responded to Pepe the Frog by accurately defining it as a symbol for white nationalism, her campaign sealed the pact of hyper-real blackmail. The banality of the discourse simulates the real in that it confuses the possibility of determining 'real' politics. Clinton's response falls flat in this framework as defending the 'real' in the face of absurdity only calcifies Clinton as 'out of touch' with the everyday. The détourned meme is resonated at such intensity to demand a political response, yet to return to

Debord, it actively refuses rational response. Clinton's election strategy of foiling herself against Trump's irrationality only ceded ground on the level on the symbolic, isolating Trump as the only candidate capable of engaging in participatory collectivity of mimetic simulation.

Ramifications of Mimetic Shifts in Political Rhetoric

This analysis argues for the reproduction of mimetic strategies used during the 2016 election. Rather, it attempts to map the effects and limits of such strategies. While the capacity for disarticulation within the medium of the internet meme has been clearly defined, the value and direction of that disarticulation is much more poorly defined. The participatory collectivity inherently decentralizes authority for mimetic propagation, and in doing so makes the internet meme an unreliable tool for organized campaigns. Johnson's interpretation of collectivity functioning as a process of the meme organizing its audience to create environments for its reproduction infers that campaigns can only take advantage of favorable communicative flows, shepherding their directions while unable to dictate them.

The reason this strategy was effective towards white nationalist is due to a confluence of existing social structures coupled with the psychological distancing mechanism inherent in the logic of lulz. The ontological effects of the mimetic schema are undergirded by the functioning of ideological structures. Milner notes that "participatory media collectives have, historically, been white and privileged."[49] As an extension whiteness structures many of the subversive assumptions of the meme. The users white subject-hood is presumed when engaging in race, as the self-defined markers for these communities of racial tolerance is the inability to detect blackness.[50] While

Milner articulates the capacity for racial memes to both sustain and deconstruct racial stereotypes, this function always presumes the black body exists as the Other, normalizing whiteness as a position of domination. Content analysis of internet support this claim, globally internet memes share similar traits that cast a mirror to the idealized subject of power.[51] Over 85% of memes globally depicted a male subject with little variance.[52] All memes surveyed featured white individuals with the exception of Chinese produced memes, which overwhelmingly featured Chinese individuals. Nissenbaum and Shifman argue women also reside as a marker for the Other in memes, as depictions tend to be limited to their romantic desirability or to express emotional oversensitivity.[53]

The logic of lulz is an additional meta-layer of ambiguity that complicates the ontological potentiality of the meme. Phillips defines lulz as amusement at other's distress.[54] This serves a double function in the virility of overtly racist internet memes that would otherwise be eschewed from normative discourse. The stance of the author is called into question, as their degree of investment in irony is opaque. When accused of racist opinions, the author can deride the critique for not getting the joke; that the post was made just for the lulz.[55] The inherent obfuscation of identity allows the individual to absolve themselves of social responsibility for racist discourse – a function made especially easy given 4chan users' anonymity. The polyvocality of the collective, however, ensures that even in the most charitable interpretations, enclaves of bigotry have the opportunity to thrive.[56] It also reflexively hijacks ground for opposition, as the exhibited racisms connection to the real is disavowed, and thus negates the means for argumentative rebuttal on the level of content. Poe's Law, the axiom that satire or sarcasm is indeterminable online without explicit intent, maximizes the infectious

properties of the meme.[57] As memes propagate outside the rubrics of logic within their own self-referentiality, satire is often mislabeled. The repetition of God Emperor Trump on Reddit often caused confusion among the user-base as to whether /r/the_donald was aligned with or against its namesake.[58] User confusion over the meaning of their own engagement makes evaluating the effectiveness of the strategy on the metric of quantity of shares misleading, as the nature of engagement obscures analysis of the persuasive effect.

A culture of lulz forms when social enclaves come to be defined by users' willingness to engage in transgressive behavior. Nagle notes how 4chan users simultaneously embrace admission of suicidal tendencies while simultaneously embracing a culture that prompts suggestion of suicide toward others cohesively precisely because both actions are socially taboo.[59] She links this to Georges Bataille's conceptualization of transgression as an ecstatic rebellion against instrumentalism most historically directed against Protestant rationality.[60] Such rationality coalesces to form the sinister underside of the Situationist's optimist politics that instead magnifies deep seated nihilism rather than attempting to positively effect the political order. The 4chan's user's anonymity then becomes doubly relevant to the forums ability to continually generate alt-right memes, as Bataille writes that "what is intimate, in the strong sense, is what has the passion of an absence of individuality."[61] Anonymity shields the users of blame redirecting it to the forum itself, while sustaining a culture that allows the individual to feel as if they have given up their own social location in favor of become one with the 4chan hive-mind. Bataille equates this type of social organizing to a festival, in which "different arts contribute to making the festival the place and time of a spectacular letting

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loose. But consciousness, awake in anguish, is disposed, in a reversal commanded by an inability to go along with the letting loose."[62] It is no surprise then, that lulz mirrors Bataille's articulation of the festival in that the ultimate affective expression of the festival for Bataille is laughter, in that it is an reactive response to the unconceivable. [63]4chan then is the digital Bataillain festival, and it was Trump's willingness to embrace those politics that harnessed the festive energies towards political ends.

The impact produced by the event of the election on political rhetoric is not merely subversive or structural. The reverberations of the policy are felt among the political order writ large, just as the Clinton campaign was forced to reply to a cartoon frog seriously. Political discussion over the efficacy of banning entire ethnicities from entry to the United States, unilateral withdrawal from international organizations, and reversing our ally commitments have now become common as banal political advocacy, leading to an increased polarization within political discourse and regression of culturally established values.

Injecting Baudrillard with the logic of lulz acutely defines the workings of memes within the Trump campaign, as the setting of entertainment dictates the function of engagement by the masses, and thus engagement can only be "done so out of perversity, out of complete irresponsibility."[64] Baudrillard likens this new political matrix as akin to the mass consumption of TV game shows.[65] The original function of politics is superseded as entertainment, a high stakes sports game with complete fanfare. Horse race journalism is performed the same regardless if the piece is located under sports or politics. The perverse nature of the content of Alt-Right memes only heightens enjoyment on the part of the author. The process is one that "accept[s] and redirect[s] everything en

bloc into the spectacular, without requiring any meaning, ultimately without resistance, but making everything slide into an indeterminate sphere which is not even that of non-sense, but that of overall manipulation/fascination."[66] Baudrillard echoes Milner's theorization of polyvocality, accounting for the spectacular nature of memes while refusing to neglect the function of arbitrariness within the structure of a meme. The idealized concept of perverse engagement here is defined as the "mockery" that is the "craving for the *social* as an item of *individual* consumption, submitted to an ever-escalating supply and demand."[67] The meme is the individual unit that epitomizes and drives this very form of consumption by harnessing the participatory nature of internet memes.

Seriously contending with Baudrillard's claim uncovers the mimetic reverberations felt among leftist internet denizens. The effects of the political meme are constitutive of a rhetorical plane of communication, it forces other ideologies that seek to engage content packaged in a meme onto that terrain. It ruptures the traditional plane of rhetoric insofar as the demand is made on the level of technics. The rhetorical form of the meme due to its accessibility necessitates that any response can no longer ground its authority in its use of traditional persuasion but instead precisely by its ability to create paradoxes within its notions of efficacy. The 2016 election brought about an uptick in leftist memes spawning from places like /r/latestagecapitalism that mechanize the borrowed notions of Marxist revolutionary consciousness as mimetic instances on the internet. The dichotomous party relations of the past are superimposed onto a political sphere predicated on cat pictures, sweeping the legs out from under the complex and

totalizing ideological structures to be replaced by an iterative and collective form of rhizomatic agency.

While Trump memes certainly have not died out, they seem to have slowed after algorithm changes were made to limit visibility of /r/the_donald.[68] The success of this project is indicative of the unstable construction of the campaign meme that results from imbuing it with enough residual meaning to mobilize political action. To return to Wiggins and Bower's, Pepe was a fully realized meme before and after it became fused with the Trump campaign, as the engagement by the campaign as a peer in the iterative process was necessary to its success. However, in gutting the meme for political efficiency, Pepe becomes staticized, and reverts to a state in between the emergent and full meme. After the political iteration of Pepe the Frog, the meme becomes notably limited in necessitating support for a particular set of policies, action, and discourse approved by the Trump administration. The final stage, or the remixes of the remixed format[69], is cut short and rerouted as directed *détournement*, implying that the continued use of the meme under static contexts reverted Pepe the Frog's status to an emergent meme,[70] i.e. Pepe has all the hallmarks of a generative meme, but the iterative process has stymied. Understanding the propensity of memes as relying on endless iteration accounts for the success of the Reddit quarantine, because the internet environment conducive to the production of memes themselves, cross-pollination in other communities would be an assumed byproduct. It should not be implied that Alt-Right memes have ceased to exist, but their ability to hold the attention of the public at large is now limited by the inherent political partisanship that would not restrict banal meme circulation. Circulation of Alt-Right 'memes' only among the Alt-Right justifies a

downgrading of the particular memes in question as they have lost their capacity for mass persuasion, becoming more akin to normative interpretations of subcultural artifacts, rather than a unique communicative technic.

Conclusion

The ceding of the political to the memescape brings with it a paradigm shift in political rhetoric. Effective strategy is no longer predicated on the ability to communicate cohesive ideology, but rather to produce fractured logics that can survive within the slippages of the networked collective. The Trump campaign, then, is an example of an attempt to maximize memes as a symbiotic process, but is not emblematic of total co-option. The marker for effective deployment of political mimetic strategy is determined by its ability to sustain support. The possibility for such a faithful execution is in great tension, as the faster and more widely a meme is propagated, the faster iterative exhaustion will occur requiring a shift to new memes. The promise of discourse traversing into the real, of 'meme magic' electing an actual president, collapses when all that is revealed is shifting simulation. Productive utilization of the participatory collective ensures that the 'magic' can only persist until the night of the election, at which point the product of 'magic' reverts to business as usual. While the entrenchment of memes within the political in form is here to stay, it is unlikely that any one actor can maintain a prolonged cohesive memetic strategy. The Trump campaign strategy then is only partially effective, shown by sustained low approval ratings[71] coupled with decreased meme engagement.

The hyper-real consequences of political cyber mimesis implicate the role of truth within modern political regimes, manifesting in the destabilization of truth within the

media as 'fake news.' This is made possible through Bataillian rebellion, in which suffering is responded to by being reduced to a subversive game, one which antagonizes the possibility of knowledge itself.[72] This should be understood as a part of the same communicative strategy of Pepe the Frog, as the administration seems more focused on destabilizing any grounds in favor of their own construct.[73] While Baudrillard's theory points to this occurrence happening, an inclusion of the conceptual tool of memes allows the mapping of strategies that mechanize the disappearance of truth.

Whether mimetic intervention will leave historical footprints on the presidency are yet to be seen. Jeffrey Tulis theorizes the presidency as primarily a rhetorical role, in that the social centering of the particular elected office lends itself to mobilize public support as a means of organizing disparate branches of government under the goals of the president.[74] The methods that define the rhetorical presidency have shifted and evolved over time, most recently according to Tulis in Woodrow Wilsons shift to being a leader in principled debate at the increased risk of demagoguery. While it is obvious that Trump's use of internet memes is a drastic departure from the goals of Wilson, it is as of now unclear whether future electoral campaigns will actively embrace similar strategies. More acutely felt is the notion of what it means for a president to be involved in the participatory collective. The rhetorical presidency is predicated on the assumption that the President as an actor generates their power through their ability construct a particular audience. The collectivity of the meme eschews that very agency, and thrusts the role of the rhetorical presidency into polyvocal tension.

Memes as genre trace the rhetorical footprint of societies move into hyper-real politics. The traces of Baudrillard's predicted exhaustion of meaning can be identified

when mapping memes through this method. As such, while memes as political tactic work against cohering a leftist opposition to Trump, the gambit initiated by the Trump campaign necessitates the opposition anteing up. Failing to do so would cede banality to Trumpian politics, as the allure of the 'realness' of politics has already been hijacked as a political platform. This strategy would entail the production of memes with less focus on rigorous content rather than on the presumed audience and/or subjects presented in the meme. While the prevalence of Trump related memes has decreased on the front page of Reddit, they continue to circulate within enclaves like /pol/ and /r/the_donald, and will continue to be animated by the enjoyment users attain through proliferating subversive content.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Liberal and Left Memes in 2016

Leftist digital activism can be traced back to the late 1990's with movements such as the Zapatistas to "organize direct actions, share information and resources, and coordinate activities."[1] The internet offered opportunities for outreach to potential activists and offered connections for disparate radicals. At the time, due to its decentralization, these connections were largely unregulated. The mechanism allowed for grass roots organizations to coalesce organically in ways that were previously impossible. New strategies of resistance developed in tandem with new modes of outreach such as hacktivism[2] and updated modes of culture jamming.[3] What is puzzling today is why memes, which fits so well into the tradition of leftist digital politics, been coopted successfully by the alt-right by the time of the 2016 election.

Leftists weren't always at a disadvantage in the realm of meme production. Memes were theorized to be alternate forms of democracy, an idealized version of the Habermasian public sphere.[4] The anonymity of meme producers was framed as a vanguard for the destruction of oppressive identity structures while the plane of digital discourse was hailed as "a disruptive space of nonsensical humor, and an accessible public sphere."[5] It was, however, the downplaying of internet memes as merely accessible nonsense that allowed for the alt-right to seize the strategy for their own, leaving little ground for liberals or the left to defend themselves on this new rhetorical plane.[6] I argue that the disavowal of nonsense as a useful tactic by liberals makes up for the largest discrepancy in the effectiveness between liberal and right memes. Meanwhile,

more effective memes that overlap with liberal strategies can be identified further to the margins of the left.

The liberal response to Trump memes was far less cohesive compared to their conservative counterparts. No case study as emblematic as Pepe the Frog exists on the left. Instead, political memeing was most prevalent within the Democratic primary election between Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton and took the form of disparate memes in support of each candidate. Especially absent is the prominent usage of memes by the candidates themselves as a cultural bulwark for their platform. Absence of contemporary examples introduces complications in comparatively analyzing left and right memes. However, this chapter will argue that this is due to the nature and style of leftist meme engagement rather than a lack of foresight on the part of the candidates. While explicit engagement in meme production certainly would work toward evening the playing field between Trump and the eventual nominee Hillary Clinton, the unwillingness for Democratic candidates to engage in explicitly subversive politics constrains the type of memes that can be generated in their favor. Such constraints minimize the circulation of leftist memes by avoiding the transgressive affects that fueled Pepe the Frog.

This chapter will discuss the effectiveness of memes produced in favor of Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton during the Democratic primary to articulate the effectiveness of different modes of leftist meme production. I analyze these artifacts in dialogue with other modes of leftist memes and digital activism to situate the current prevailing mode of leftist meme production outside the confines of the 2016 Democratic primary. Finally, this chapter will analyze the effectiveness and merits of other forms of leftist meme production. Such analysis will generate those rubrics used in political meme production.

In doing so, the chapter will highlight the technics responsible for the discrepancy in effectiveness between liberal and conservative meme production during the 2016 election. This method allows for left memes to be contrasted against the case of Pepe the Frog to highlight both the distinctions in strategy but also the potential limits of such strategies when coupled with particular ideologies.

Democratic Primary Memes

The 2016 Democratic primary was largely framed as a generational conflict between the newly eligible young voters in support of Bernie Sanders, and the established Democratic electorate in favor of Hillary Clinton. These generational distinctions contributed toward a lopsided quantity of memes for each candidate given the lack of meme production on the candidates themselves: Younger people who have spent more of their lives in a world with memes more comfortably showed their support for their preferred candidate through memes than older voters more likely to vote for Hillary Clinton. As such, while there was no singular meme that came to represent Bernie Sanders to the degree Pepe the Frog represented Trump, the prevalence of meme support for Sanders far outweighed those for Clinton. Ultimately, however, the lack of candidate engagement prevented Bernie Sanders memes from forcing a response in the way that Pepe the Frog did in the general election, and instead acted more as a conduit for those already engaged in social enclaves that produced memes to discuss politics among themselves.

There are several distinctions between the left's use of memes and the alt-right that help explain why liberal meme production in 2016 did not reach the same levels of circulation as Pepe the Frog. The first, as discussed above, is the lack of engagement

on the part of the candidate. This however only explains the inability for particular

campaigns to harness community meme production for specific ends. Bernie Sanders

memes still existed during the 2016 election, and as such the lack of meme production

from Sanders does not explain why memes such as Bernie or Hillary did not leave the

same cultural mark as alt-right memes.

Media outlets reported on the spread of "Bernie Sander's Dank Meme Stash,"[7]

which came to represent the memetic products coming from Sanders supporters, however

it is telling that the collective "dank meme stash" achieved more notoriety than any

particular Sanders meme. Most proximate in contributing to Sanders's being situated as a

denizen of the memesphere came from "Bernie or Hillary" memes. These were parodies

of election posters that users would caption with questions regarding pop culture.[8] Users

would then write their own responses underneath to the effect of labeling Clinton as

especially out of touch, while Sanders' responses mirrored the opinion of the "in crowd"

within such meme enclaves. While these memes lacked the participation of Sanders

himself, the rhetorical form of this meme allowed its continued survival throughout the

primaries due to the vast potential for user iteration. The open-ended nature of the meme

allowed wide cleavages of the electorate to participate by inserting their own connections

to pop culture, while simultaneously humanizing Sanders to those disparate audiences.

The scripting of Sander's opinion on the part of the meme producer works as a lesser

analog for Sander's participation – while Sanders is not directly situated as part of the

meme community, his participation is simulated and as such sustains meme circulation as
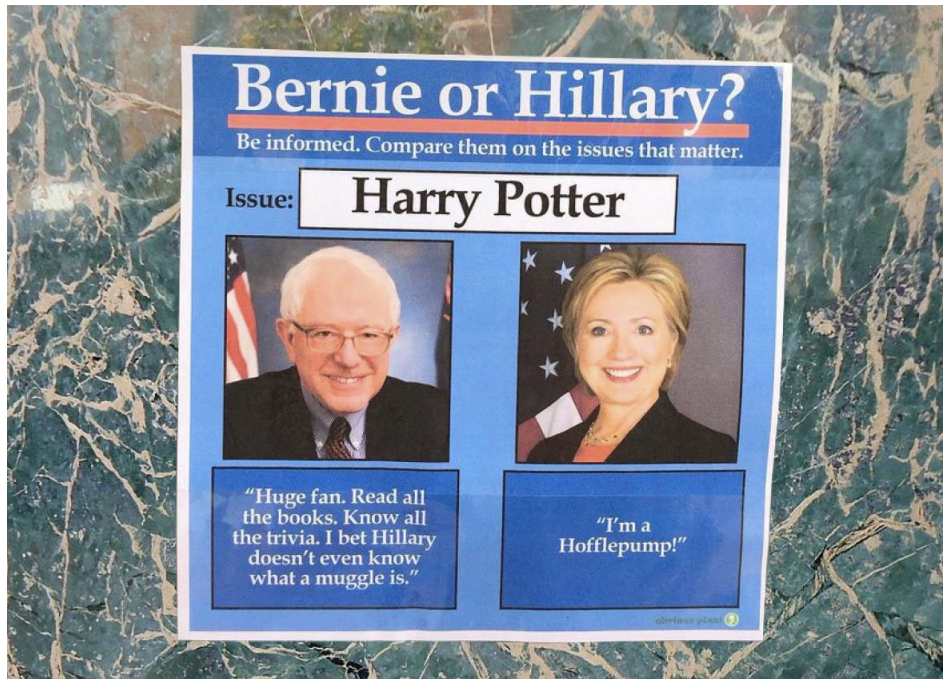
a component of his support base.

Fig. 2 Bernie or Hillary[9]

Bernie or Hillary memes satisfy the requirement of iterability, while falling short of becoming a full meme under Wiggins and Bowers' framework due to its inability to be remixed for purposes outside the original intent of use to describe the primary election. Pure self referentiality of the meme cannot be achieved as the confines of its potential iterability is directly related to specific candidates within a specific moment, rather than the meme format itself, as the format would be unrecognizable if say the pictures of the candidates were interchanged, eliminating references to either Sanders or Clinton. The comedic effect of the meme is premised on an understanding of difference between the two candidates as specific subjects.

The second prominent Sanders meme was "Birdie Sanders," which proves as one of the best examples of unique meme production from a Democratic campaign.[10] After a bird landed on Sanders' podium during a campaign rally, images of birds sporting

Sanders' hairstyle tagged with the phrase "Birdie Sanders" began to be propagated on social media. The heavy circulation of this meme shows a campaign seizing the moment to jump-start an iterable image. It retains the elements of absurdity, in that the visual image of the bird was deployed disconnected from ideological politicking. The meme allows a form of political branding[11] that relies only on the positive affect of the image itself, further magnifying its propensity for virility by disconnecting the image from ideological rationality. While Bernie or Hillary memes attempted to situate Sanders within pop culture, and Birdie Sanders gestured toward an affect of optimism, neither became the unifying mechanism in the same vein as Pepe the Frog. Neither drummed up votes for the primary. Where Pepe the frog turned Trump into a mystic within meme communities due to accelerating the absurdity of his candidacy, Sanders memes where immediately recognizable as attempts by meme producers to support Sanders. In this way, Sanders memes became signifiers that the youth supported Sanders, rather than inculcate the Sanders campaign as one that was propelled by memes. Meme producers became cordoned off as a wing of Sander's support base rather than being framed as a more central component of Sanders' momentum.

Given the explicit participation from both the more radical wing of the Democratic party and the Republican opposition, it is surprising the Clinton campaign did not engage more heavily in meme production in 2016. "Texts from Hillary" was a popular meme format occurring in 2012 that included Clinton sitting down gazing at her phone, with users inserting text illustrating snide and curt responses. Using Clinton as the subject of the meme forces users to identify with her when modifying the meme, positioning users against Clinton's political opponents. These memes were before their

time, however, as the prioritization of political respectability bars "texts from Hillary" from being a central point of the campaign's public relations approach as they run counter to depictions of Clinton as a classical stateswoman being used by her campaign. This explains why despite these memes still existing at the time of the 2016 primary, their use did not see a substantial revival. The Clinton campaign seemed to make a conscious choice not to redeploy effective memes such as "texts from Hillary" to contrast the campaign from Trump, but the damage had been done. By moving away from such strategies, the Democratic party ensured those on the left who communicated in mimetic networks had no alternative for political engagement outside of Pepe the Frog once the general election began. As such, the Trump campaign benefitted from their head-first embrace of memes by forcing Clinton onto his terrain.

The lack of circulation of pro-Clinton memes can be attributed to her campaign image being framed as more serious than the supposed memelords that made up Trump's base. Support for Clinton in this context was necessarily antithetical to production of memes in her favor. In response to media push of the label "Crooked Hillary," Clinton's Twitter account posted "Delete your account."[12] It was one of the few successful moments of mimetic engagement by the Clinton campaign, being liked 707,000 times.[13] Like Pepe the Frog, what propelled the meme to virility was the presumption that Hillary Clinton herself responded to an opposing meme. The enactment of banal digital discourse coupled with snide aggressiveness had the post function as a meme despite not conforming to a particular format of image macros. The failure to produce a memetic form ripe for iterable engagement ensured the virility of "delete your account" was severely limited. The statement had no obvious potential for iteration, while

simultaneously lacking possibilities for redeployment within different contexts. Without a mechanism for community iteration, the statement's rhetorical form was a half measure that signaled Clinton's presence in mimetic networks without fully contributing to the reproduction of those networks—a vital component of a meme's generativity.

Distinctions in Memetic Production between Political Camps

While the capacity for disarticulation within the medium of the internet meme through its capacity for mass iterable engagement has been clearly defined, the value and direction of that disarticulation is much more poorly defined. The lens of rhetorical criticism is necessary to define how memes as visual rhetoric influence the nature of political communication. Rhetorical influence occurs as much through form as it does content. That influence happens in novel ways that disrupt even the possibility of drawing lines between form and content. Memes are made in participatory groups. Such groups decentralize authority for mimetic propagation, and in doing so, make the internet meme an unreliable tool for organizing political messages. Johnson's interpretation of collective memetic creation suggests that campaigns can only take advantage of favorable communicative flows, shepherding memetic directions, yet unable to dictate them.

Memetic strategies also reflexively hijack ground for opposition, as the expressed opinion within a meme is disavowed as comedic jest, and thus negates the means for argumentative rebuttal on the level of content. Milner argues that Poe's Law, the axiom that satire or sarcasm is indeterminable online without explicit intent, maximizes the infectious properties of the meme.[14] As memes propagate outside the rubrics of logic within their own self-referentiality, satire is often mislabeled. Such mislabeling particularly aids in the propagation of radical leftist memes, normalizing ideologies that

would otherwise reflect negatively on an American political campaign. Woods and Hahner note the propensity for mimetic circulation from radical left groups such as Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall Street.[15] The combination of the distancing function of the banality of memes coupled with Poe's law allows for the positive circulation of Marxism among the American youth.[16] Circulation of radical philosophy can be disavowed as users acting "edgy", creating motivations for those both for or against the philosophy to reproduce it in memetic content. As chapter two shows, this effectually creates publics that are inculcated into the thought driving meme production within the community.

A prominent distinction from alt-right memes is the lack of transgressive messages within liberal memes. Unlike Pepe the Frog, which was enthusiastically embraced as a hate symbol by users of /pol/, liberal memes where comparatively tepid. Texts from Hillary conveyed snide annoyance at political opponents, while Birdie Sanders is the polar opposite of the affects circulated by the alt-right in its optimism. There comparatively less lulz or trolling in liberal memes, and due to that absence the possibility of a unique coalescence toward political ends is not established—or to be put in Bataillain terms, liberal meme production takes place outside the festival. In this sense, the lack of cohesiveness between liberal memes is due to this fact, especially when compared with the cohesiveness in which the alt-right incorporated several memes under its banner. Liberal memes are produced in multiplicities of different enclaves, and while those memes cross-pollinate they lack the ability to unify socialities into a common entity to the degree that alt-right memes create a mythos for their own community. This is a foundational component without which the memes produced begin to lack the degree of authenticity felt when consumed by users. Whereas Trump's use of Pepe the Frog

situated Trump *within* an autonomous meme community, liberal memes seem to be caught between being produced by users *about* the candidate. As argued in chapter 3, a pivotal moment for the Trump campaign's memetic strategy was the moment Trump's twitter posted himself as Pepe the Frog. Liberal memes maintain a separation in which the candidate does not engage, rather memetic engagement is reserved for the masses who support the candidate as a distinct public. The banality of politics is not corrupted by absurd spectacle, instead meme-production is contained as banal internet discourse that occurs as a byproduct of politics, the political discourse of the masses. Liberal memetic strategy stands in stark contrast to Pepe the Frog, in which that discourse overcoded the campaign itself rather than being merely an inconsequential byproduct. Given that the Clinton campaign felt out of touch compared to Trump's memetic prowess, the gap between the real politics of the campaign and the hyper-real political memes was excerbated.

The lack of shock value may not only hurt circulation among liberal supporters. When Pepe the Frog was posted by Donald Trump, it became widely publicized by the Southern Poverty Law center as a symbol for white nationalism.[17] It was through this ,along with Clinton's highlighting of the meme that brought its existence to the attention of many democrats unassociated with the cultural language of places like 4chan. All press is good press, as the opposition towards Pepe the Frog became a fuel that accelerated alt-right meme culture, culminating in examples such as the "Basket of Deplorables"[18] meme. When Clinton accused Trump supporters as racists that make up a "basket of deplorables,"[19] the moniker was lovingly accepted as a self-identifier among far right individuals and mainstream conservatives.[20] This is a textbook example of

feeding the trolls, in which the goal of lulz to provoke opponents is successfully achieved. Without containing shock value, liberal memes lack the capacity to incite circulation by the right, instead remaining quarantined within liberal communities.

Fig. 3 Basket of Deplorables[21]

It is possible that traditional American liberalism is incompatible with mimetic strategy as a campaign force. Wilson argues that leftist politics positions itself against mimetic simulation insofar as the left works against a clear communication of authenticity.[22] For Wilson, authenticity is a core value that animates liberal ideals.[23] Evidence of this notion can be seen in the context of memes produced on either side of the 2016 election. Sanders and Clinton memes take the form of direct reference to the candidate while attempting to simulate culturally relevant nuances, compared to Trump memes that ranged from depicting Trump as the god-emperor of the fictional Warhammer 40,000 franchise[24] to simply equating him to a cartoon frog. The degree of hyper-real simulation that occurred within the Trump campaign surpasses that of the left insofar as it disregards the limitations placed by normative political procedure in

eschewing any sort of authentic political communication in favor of pure rhetorical play. Pepe the Frog is an absurd symbol of 4chan denizens, absurdity that is accelerated when it appears closely associated with a presidential candidate. Liberal memes instead work to create the image of their candidates as identifiable and unique subjects packaged in memetic form. The key distinction between the strategies liberates Trump memes from exclusively digital users to the political mainstream. The process functions as the use of hyper-real imagery and ideas explicitly challenges notions of successful campaigning. The Trump campaign can then surpass the world of the traditional electorate and simultaneously the campaign's memes move beyond remaining an inside joke among supporters who frequent meme platforms.

Seriously contending with Baudrillard's claim uncovers the mimetic reverberations felt among leftist internet denizens. The effects of the political meme are constitutive of a rhetorical plane of communication. The strategy forces other ideologies that seek to engage content packaged in a meme onto that terrain. It ruptures the traditional plane of rhetoric insofar as the demand is made on the level of technics, a challenge to the underlying code of political discourse rather than its content.[25] The rhetorical form of the meme due to its accessibility necessitates that any response can no longer ground its authority in its use of traditional persuasion but instead precisely by its ability to create paradoxes within its notions of efficacy. The 2016 election brought about an uptick in leftist memes spawning from places like /r/latestagecapitalism that mechanize Marxist revolutionary consciousness as mimetic instances on the internet. The dichotomous party relations of the past between Republicans and Democrats are superimposed onto a political sphere predicated on cat pictures, sweeping the legs out

from under the complex and totalizing ideological structures that historically structured campaign orientation. Instead those structures came to be replaced by an iterative and collective form of agency that wrests control away from the campaign itself.

It is due to the aversion of some of the less universally affirmable components of memetic strategy that memes saw such a decreased circulation among the left versus among the alt-right. All of the major forms of leftist memes within the 2016 election neglected the extreme absurdism of Pepe the Frog. Marxist memes can still be identified as Marxist. Birdie Sanders could never escape its symbolic circumscription as a form of campaign brandings. These gestured at the form of memes while becoming disconnected from the energy generating mechanism that a formerly a-political cartoon would have when thrust into a network of iteration. The mere identification of political motivation within the format ensures leftist memes retain a sense of inauthenticity that is entirely avoided by alt-right memes.

Conclusion

The existence of the memes within the 2016 election decries an unstable rhetorical landscape that questions even the reproducibility of the Trump campaigns tactics. The proximity of the memes to truth is perpetually being renegotiated along indeterminate lines of flight—oscillating between subversion of social discourses while also coming to describe one of the most meaningful discursive events in US politics. The success of Pepe the Frog juxtaposed against liberal memes gestures towards the necessity for successful leftist memes to circulate their political ideologies through opacity mechanized through absurdity. One example of this trajectory is /r/aboringdystopia. This subreddit generates memes with anti-capitalist bents, however their format is based on

circulating a particular affect felt by anti-capitalist. As such, they are more likely to circulate anti-capitalist ideology as their propensity to create connective communities on the basis of social disillusionment is more easily spread as banal rather than jokes explicitly valorizing Marxism. The survival of liberal campaign strategy then relies on mimetic communication should the right continue its investment in memetic deployments.. Failing to do so would cede banality to Trumpian politics, as the allure of the 'realness' of politics has already been hijacked as a political platform. This problematic implies the effective reversal of strategies for political mobilization from one of cogently disseminating a message to embracing the fractal slippages within form. Politicians capable of magnifying an affect of disinvested banality should garner political traction through diffusing ground for opposition rather than shoring up ideological ground among an identified base. This would imply critics of the Clinton campaign are wrong in isolating the lack of a focused message as the cause of the campaign failure.[26] Instead, the campaign was missing the next step, the capacity to intensify that position through banal mimetic forms as a point of coalescence for voters. The strategy would entail the production of memes with less focus on rigorous content rather than on the presumed audience and/or subjects presented in the meme. The future for American politics then will rely on intentionally ambiguous branding that lends itself to performative and iterative engagement by the masses to sustain appeal.

One such mechanism that could be employed by the left to take hold of Bataillain mimetic elements would by apocalyptic memes. Konior argues that apocalypticism reflects a subversive obsession with death and destruction that motivates both alt-right memes (framed as an immigration crisis that has already occurred) and liberal memes

(/r/latestagecapitalism being an obsession with the decay of western capitalism).[27] This strategy explicitly circulated as an antagonistic response to the killing of Qasem Soleimani in 2020. Meme producers made humorous image macros referencing the threat of being drafted for an impending World War III said to arise from a U.S./Iran conflagration.[28] In doing so, the potential apocalyptic consequences of the killing of Soleimani were brought into the present. It follows that such strategies are ripe for application to the oncoming ecological crises that virtually all Democratic candidates offer solutions to as part of their platform.

Liberal politics of authenticity may be salvageable through acceleration of socially radical monikers. In 2014, the idea of "fully automated luxury communism" began circulating on youtube.[29] Aaron Bastani, the original uploader of the video, argued that impending labor automation brought forth by capitalist creates the opportunity for a communist society insofar as labor relations could materially be eliminated. The radical label of communism in post-Cold War America coupled with utopian simulation of the future made this idea ripe for mimetic circulation. The technofuturist elements of fully automated luxury communism became coupled with leftist world building in mimetic form with the production of "fully automated luxury gay space communism," in which the abolition of gender norms became added to the utopian vision.[30] Fully automated luxury gay space communism's incorporation of gender orientation aids in it's ability to produce and normalize otherwise deviant identity through mimetic participation much in the same way Pepe the Frog created unique conservative communities when fused with political orientation.

Leftist theory could become more spreadable with the aid of memetic circulation as well. Memes can be found on Facebook that prompt discussion on Afro-Pessimism.[31] Authors such as Nick Land who tend to circulate exclusively within academia reach wider discussion through their memefication.[32] The transformation from arcane academic texts to comedic absurdity prompts engagement in users by inverting the context of their engagement from academic work into social play, thus motivating deeper personal connection to the source material either in support or opposition. Milner notes that political meme production prompts polyvocal engagement regardless of support for the content, which could be seen in both the digital organization and proceeding opposition to Occupy Wallstreet in 2009.[33] This feature of memetic engagement can strategically deployed to both raise awareness and shift focus of the political mainstream toward issues that would otherwise be overlooked.

Using memes as a mechanism to establish such left counterpublics could also function through specific deployment of trolling. Milner highlights that while memetic trolling is effective for those on the radical right, successful counter-trolling is also effective.[34] The subreddit /r/ShitRedditSays rose to prominence primarily by circulating screenshots of racist and sexist reddit comments to jeer at those who would support such sentiments.[35] This counterpublic retains a degree of message obfuscation by occupying a negative space in the content produced – i.e. rather than affirm particular stances tactics such as those by /r/ShitRedditSays are capable of unifying individuals on the basis of shared opposition toward oppressive discourse. Trolling in this form allows the formation of the counterpublic to cast a wider net than if it attempted to communicate a clear affirmative stance in which individuals would have the opportunity to disagree with.

Much like Pepe the Frog obfuscates the degree to which the individual must identify with explicit Trumpian policies to be included, counter-trolling in this fashion allows coalescence on the basis of being against explicit racism rather than on the basis of identifying as a particular kind of leftist. The effectiveness of the strategy is magnified when understanding meme production as a collective network, in which the quantity of memes produced serve to subtly weave a tapestry connecting disparate sentiments into an identifiable ideological set deserving opposition. This counter-trolling also preserves an antagonistic discourse seen in most alt-right memes that seduce participation by heightening the impulse to engage in the presented discourse.

       Leftists attempting to engage in memetic strategies risk dangers brought forth with ironic subversion. While irony aids in the reproduction of a memetic artifact, it can also serve to blur the intended message, potentially aiding political opponents. Successful Black Man[36] is a poignant example of this conundrum. The meme depicts an image of a black man, accompanied by text that begins with lines that evoke racial stereotypes, only to conclude with a message that ultimately inverts the racial stereotype. While it can be argued that the meme works to subvert the depicted racial stereotype, it requires a prerequisite understanding of the racial stereotype, in which its existence is reaffirmed through its continued circulation.[37] Such degrees of irony may also subvert the development of leftist counterpublics. The subreddit /r/GamersRiseUp shows this failure. The subreddit, dedicated to the production of memes that depict video game enthusiasts stating absurdly racist or otherwise offensive statements to satirize the worst tendencies in online video game culture, became banned by Reddit administrators for spreading

toxicity.[38] These instances highlight both the potential risks of irony as leftist strategy along with describing why irony can be easily coopted by the alt-right.

Leftist meme strategy is still in a nascent stage, despite the left's early adoption of digital tactics of organizing. This is especially true compared to memes produced by the radical right. This chapter shows potential avenues for development, however the direction to be taken by the mainstream left remains ambiguous. While there are negative risks to each path, the left must choose how to shore up the discourse of its digital constituency. Without doing so the left will continue to cede digital mediums to increasingly radical wings of conservative coalitions that increasingly innovate on modes of digital communication.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Memes are iterable rhetorical artifacts organically produced through collective user engagement for the purpose of circulation among the digital platforms that have come to encompass social discourse. The prominence of their use illustrates a shift in societal dispositions regarding the value of truth, political efficacy, and the nature of public engagement. With the widespread introduction of memes into the political arena in 2016, the vectors of memetic circulation will come to define the future of political engagement in a world where the social has become automated by digital algorithms that prioritize memes as the emblematic form of mass public communication on the internet.

Memes require a subversive component to persist. Even the most innocuous memes challenge an idea or subvert the expectations of the viewer. The most widely accessible form of subversion is accessed through comedy, while more abrasive forms explicitly take the form of trolling. This renders irony, political resistance, and nihilistic wills for chaos tools for the propagation of memetic messages. The wide range of uses applicable to the use of memes allows for disparate audiences to make use of them for their own purposes, establishing memetic engagement as the pervasive rhetorical form of the internet age.

The inherent capacity for iteration in memes is the engine that facilitates their saliency for digital transmission within platform algorithms. Iteration motivates users to actively engage in content, thus boosting relevancy scores among virtually all platforms. The process of iteration unites multiple opinions from individuals under a recognizable

image, thus acting as an amplification of many public sentiments in networked channels. In doing so, they facilitate the recursive maintenance of communities when users are directed toward the production of different repetitions of memes accepted by their communities.

Saliency of certain memes cannot be directly mapped according to certain populations. As chapter two has shown, the degree of anonymity afforded by a platform changes the boundaries of acceptable memetic content. Simultaneously, memetic participation creates a form of groupthink in which the degree of individual user engagement in particular spaces shapes memetic tastes. The existence of such groupthink proves that platforms have consumed social discourse in ways that have broad impacts on material lives. Social relationships are now reorganized in ways that spring forth from a device they always keep in their pocket. The consequences of which can be seen in the impact on politics brought about by new rhetorical forms such as memes.

Memes at a base level are empty signifiers. They are points of data that acquire meaning through the context of their redeployment. They are rhetorical artifacts defined primarily by a form that premised on iteration. The form means that memes are not tools that are inherently susceptible to deployments for a particular ideology. Rather, it is a matter of whether actors of those ideologies are willing to engage in a tactic that explodes interpretation of their message. To submit a meme onto a platform is to open up one's message to infinite iteration by the masses. Whether those interventions are seen as acceptable to one's political goals determines the likelihood of a political actor engaging in memetic circulation.

Being the first widescale deployment of memes to win a national election, 2016 gestures toward the potential avenues for future political deployments of memes. While the Trump campaign was willing to embrace the comedic absurdity in memes without regard for the ethicality of groups it would attract, the democratic campaigns took smaller steps toward embracing memetic discourse. Using memes so was a drastic risk for the Trump campaign under the prevailing logic of campaign strategy that focuses on the clear communication of a specific message. The resulting payoff was in their favor, as the Trump campaign successfully aligned itself with cutting edge rhetorical discourse in ways that cast their opponents as woefully out of touch, helping to overcome challenges as the level of policy.

The degree of willingness to engage in the more radical aspects of memes dictates the most salient platform of origin. Deployment of memes such as those used by the democrats in 2016 are most salient on platforms that lack extreme anonymity such as Facebook. Choosing to depict direct images of the candidate while eschewing obscene or particularly subversive content attached to the meme motivates uptake on the basis of expressing one's political individuality, thus requiring self-identification. Democratic memes propagate purely on the basis of form without attempting to mechanize the cultural currents flowing from enclaves known for producing memes such as 4chan. Pepe the Frog's origin on 4chan meant the Trump campaign's redeployment hijacked the preexisting calculated community residing on the platform. The content of the meme itself was absurd in that it originally communicated nothing other than Trump was a cartoon frog, while the method of its redeployment became the political analogue of trolling in "triggering the libs." Memes from both parties thrived on Reddit due to the

vertical relationship between the front page and subreddits, although the excessive embrace of the absurd elements of memes used by the Trump campaign ensured the priority of Trump memes during 2016. Poe's law, described in chapter three as the assumption that differing opinions are made in jest, is accelerated through mechanizing absurdity, thus leading to the further amplification of Pepe memes on Reddit by users who saw a Trump candidacy as comedic insofar as it existed at all. Meanwhile, Poe's law worked to inculcate users into aligning with Trump, wanting to see how far the joke could extend to reality.

Memes then herald the wider acceptance of a hyper-real world. The explicit attempt to overcode the real of politics with the joke of God-Emperor Trump is emblematic of the shift. This was inevitable, due to the nature of the internet becoming a space for social discourse to engage in the stacked layers of hard/software that now extend to all reaches of the globe. While Baudrillard argued that forms of irony were becoming more identifiable than the real that they subverted, the real slowly disappeared into heaps of layered, extrapolated data.[1] Memes are the organic development of a language for such a world that could only exist once those layers came to define the channels of communication through automated algorithms. If digital spaces were previously thought of as less real than material spaces for public discourse, the influence of memes on the 2016 election signals the consumption of the real by the hyper-real. As Facebook is a simulation of a social order, the simulation has come to overcode the real of the social.

It is here that the contributions of Deleuze and Baudrillard can be coupled at the level of memes. Memes as differential but repetitive rhetorical artifacts prove their

seductive capacity as rhetorical artifacts to elicit users to play with the rules of their form. Through influencing non-digital discourse, that play with form now has consequences on social planes such as politics that composed the real as distinct from the silliness that occurred as internet discourse. Mass engagement in play with the social bounds of the real then is made possible precisely through the mechanization of the redeployment of difference. In the process the real is exploded into infinite hyper-real interpretations. In doing so, memes eliminate the position of the real as one that is defensible,[2] as in the 2016 election the strategy has been shown to cast democrats as incapable of identifying with public sentiments structured by comedic irony.

Memes also illustrate a blurring of the lines of individuality and collectivity. Memes are used as individual social capital when linked to either one's name or choice of user name. This occurs simultaneously with a process of collective identification, as no one user can lay claim to a rhetorical artifact defined by collective engagement in its iteration. Self-identification has been shown to not be necessary to memetic circulation, as 4chan has been shown to generate memes explicitly through the anonymity of its users. In this form, memetic engagement is not used so much as social capital, but to inculcate oneself into a collective by effacing their own identity. In doing so, memes serve as a self-regulator on the part of the users to maintain the public orders bound by platform algorithms.

While the prominence of memes serves to highlight the existence and modes of operation of these digitally calculated communities, they are not the products of the process. Parallels can be seen in the concept of fake-news. Algorithms present user research as fact, while obfuscating that the results of their research are based on metrics

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tailored to their preexisting opinion. The process displays how the construction of calculated publics tends to be obscured from their participants. Memes serve to insidiously reinforce this process, as they circulate not at the level of individuals, but of social niches that collectively affirm the available contexts of the meme's redeployment. Tongue-in-cheek reinterpretations of the real aid in the construction of an echo chamber where opinions are affectively reinforced as fact among one's peers through the continual re-deployment of memes. When read along with Baudrillard, memes illustrate the capacity for users to believe that they have the ability to pick and choose which forms of news to believe. As the true nature of the real is increasingly perceived as up to interpretation to absurd by the masses, it becomes up to each individual to decide for themselves what is real versus fake news, decisions that cannot happen outside the influence of the publics that individuals inhabit.

The trending of memes towards extreme self referentiality further supports this theorization while pointing to the future evolution of memes. Three notable memes in this regard are Deep Fried Memes, Surreal Memes, and Coaxed into A Snafu. Deep Fried memes describe those in which comedic effect is derived simply from the corruption of the image file, producing grainy, high contrast images that are difficult to read.[3] Surreal Memes became an umbrella term for memes that used a set of characters that were absurd to the point of incomprehensibility.[4] Coaxed into A Snafu describe poorly drawn versions of other memes that reduce memes to their base format as a form of comedic irony.[5] Common among these forms of memes is the reliance exclusively on memetic fluency to produce their comedy. As memes become increasingly acceptable as a form of discourse, these types of memes will likely continue intensifying in reaction. This is the process of

hyper-simulation, in which increasing levels of play in the form of memes becomes necessitated at the moment which a standardized discursive code begins to arise in the use of memes. The creation of a static code would be an attempt to incorporate memes as tools for communication of the real, ironically rendering them subject for subversion by other memes.

Fig. 4 – A Surrealist Meme about Surrealist Memes[6]

Memes then are necessarily unstable rhetorical artifacts, both in the fact that they work against their own ability for clear communication, while also existing as forms of collective enactment. It can then be said that memes are not only rhizomatic in regard to the networks on which they circulate, but in their very form. The content of a meme is porous, allowing differentiation at any level of the meme so long as components of the meme are left well enough in tact to be recognized as one meme versus another. The process happens without centralized standards for which components are necessary to be included. They have very specific meanings when deployed, but absent deployment they

are empty signifiers, blank canvases for the user to project their own interpretations. That makes memes the premier rhetorical tool for negotiating discourse in a hyper-real world.

My thesis argues that political memes are effective at persuading publics when actors account for platform functions and calculated publics that surround particular meme types. The absurdity of memes positions them counter to images historically embraced by political campaigns, yet it is that disparity that may allow campaigns to access otherwise apolitical individuals. Using a meme strategy does not guarantee success, as chapter four shows that both platform of origin, and willingness to obfuscate clear messaging in service of increasing potential for user iteration.

The political consequences of memes also prove that memetic form is a key mode of investigation in its own right. Memetic frameworks allow the tracing of messages across cultural niches on the internet both vertically and horizontally. Focusing on the vectors of iteration on a particular meme can show both how memes spread to different communities, but also their propensity for reaching communities through trickling up to larger audiences such as entering the front page of Reddit. By this same function memetic form as a mode of investigation shows which memes are likely to have staying power in particular communities through platforms such as Facebook that sustain memes through more insular, identifiable community engagement.

Future research on memes could focus on larger societal impacts brought about in parallel or in consequences to memetic deployments. Fake news, which has been mentioned several times throughout this thesis, could analyzed more closely in relation to memes in the context of the creation of particular communities that have become insular. Approaches that seek to delve deeper into the Baudrillardian connections may analyze the

propensity for memes to make individuals more or less indifferent to the concept of true

news, instead being more accepting of unstable fact as a stand in for truth. The

framework also serves as a litmus test for future political memetic strategies, capable of

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