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### CS115 Reading Task:

- 1) read this chapter
- 2) try to find one relatively recent meme for as many genres you can (at least 3, spread out through the list, so that we get to see memes from different genres)
- 3) put the URLs in a Google doc, so that in class you can easily show them to your peers in small groups
- 4) we'll try to decide together what makes for the best memes

If you are interested in memes as cultural artifacts, you can read the whole book from which this chapter is extracted, which is available online in our library.



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## MEME GENRES

In theory, all Internet users are free spirits, individuals who take their unique path to the hall of digital fame. In practice, they tend to follow the same beaten tracks of meme creation. These paths can be thought of as *meme genres*. Defined as “socially recognized types of communicative action,”<sup>1</sup> genres share not only structures and stylistic features, but also themes, topics, and intended audiences. The study of genres encompasses both top-down cultural artifacts such as drama, film, and television, and bottom-up mundane types of rhetorical actions such as “best man” speeches and application letters. Recently, Internet meme genres have been added to the long list of genres that we encounter on a daily basis.

Internet meme genres are based on what Jean Burgess describes as “vernacular creativity”:<sup>2</sup> everyday innovative and artistic practices that can be carried out by simple production means. Although vernacular creativity predates

digital culture, Burgess suggests that new media have reshaped it by turning hidden and mundane practices (such as singing in front of the mirror) into highly visible public culture. As public discourse, meme genres play an important role in the construction of group identity and social boundaries. Ryan Milner shows that while technically meme creation is becoming increasingly easy—specialized websites offer templates that even a six-year-old can operate—creating and understanding memes requires sophisticated “meme literacy.”<sup>3</sup> In what follows, I assert that different meme genres involve different levels of literacy: some can be understood (and created) by almost anyone, whereas others require detailed knowledge about a digital meme subculture.

My selected list of nine meme genres is far from comprehensive, yet it surveys some of the central formats that have emerged in the past decade. It is written mainly as an introduction for those who are less immersed into digital culture. In other words: if you are a regular on 4chan, Tumblr, or Reddit, you may want to skip ahead to the next chapter.

## **Reaction Photoshops**

Editing software in general and Adobe Photoshop in particular have been an inseparable part of Internet humor

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since the early 2000s.<sup>4</sup> The genre that I'm calling "reaction Photoshops" is composed of the images created in response to *memetic photos*, defined in chapter 6 as photographs that provoke extensive creative reactions. One of the earliest examples of a reaction Photoshop was the "Tourist Guy" meme. Shortly after 9/11, a photograph of a young man with sunglasses and a backpack standing on the World Trade Center observation deck, with a plane heading toward him, was widely circulated over the Internet. It soon became apparent that the photo was a hoax: a young Hungarian named Peter Guzli had edited a photo of himself—taken in 1997—and sent it to a couple of friends as a private joke. Once the hoax was exposed, the Internet was flooded by reaction Photoshops, showing the "tourist guy" in various settings and historical periods, spanning the sinking of the *Titanic*, the film *The Matrix*, and a Ku Klux Klan rally. Since reaction Photoshops are so prevalent, I discuss them at length in various parts of this book—particularly in chapters 6 and 8.

## Photo Fads

The photo fad genre (as described by "Know Your Meme") includes staged photos of people who imitate specific positions or actions in various settings, usually with the purpose of posting the picture on the Web. Specific photo

fad memes include, for instance, the ones described above as planking (lying face down with arms to the side in unusual settings) and “Heads in Freezers” (which is just what it sounds like), as well as “Put Shoe on Head” (ditto) and “owling” (sitting in a perched position and looking into the distance to imitate an owl). I provided a brief analysis of this genre in chapter 3. In many ways, it resembles the next genre on which I will elaborate.

### **Flash Mob**

The flash mob is a phenomenon in which a group of strangers gather in a public space, suddenly and simultaneously perform a particular act, and after that just leave the scene, quick as a flash. The public act can assume many forms: frivolous dancing and freezing in place, zombie walks, and sudden disrobing. The gathering is coordinated through the Internet and mobile phones, and then photographed and uploaded to YouTube.

Flash mobs emerged as an Internet phenomenon in 2003, when over one hundred people flooded the home furnishings department of Macy’s in Manhattan. They told the sales assistants they were members of a commune living in a warehouse in Williamsburg and were looking to buy a “love rug” for the price of \$10,000 “to play on.” Bill Wasik, then a senior editor of *Harper’s Magazine*, was

credited with organizing this prank and consequently with the invention of the flash mob genre, which quickly spread outside New York City and the United States.

Virág Molnár traces the roots of the genre to twentieth-century avant-garde movements, such as the Dadaists, who wanted to shock the conformist “bourgeois” middle classes by using surprise and guerilla tactics.<sup>5</sup> For instance, the US-based Yippies (members of the Youth International Party), an amalgam of apolitical hippies and radical New Left activists, engaged in politically oriented pranks. In one of them, a group of Yippies took a tour of the New York Stock Exchange and started throwing dollar bills onto the trading floor. Trade was stopped as elegantly dressed brokers stumbled over each other to get to the money.

According to Molnár’s typology, contemporary flash mobs include several subtypes. While some of these are apolitical, others have an embedded anticonsumerist element: they want to “reclaim” public space that has been overtaken by commercial use and interests in order to generate consumption-free enjoyment. Yet, somewhat ironically, from an early stage the genre was capitalized on for marketing purposes. For instance, the cellular company T-Mobile coordinated a flash mob dance of three hundred people at a London train station, resulting in an extremely popular YouTube advertisement. This commercial use has been criticized as subverting the basic principles of the genre: democracy, anticommercialism, and spontaneity.

## Lipsynch

Lipsynch (or lipdub) videos are clips in which an individual or group is seen matching their lip movements to a popular song. Before the 1970s, lipsynch was used widely as a technical—yet concealed—procedure in popular music performance and cinema: the audience was not supposed to see any disconnection between voice and body. Even now, exposure of lipsynching elicits mockery and accusations of lack of authenticity. The origins of lipdub as a performative genre, in which the split between voice and body is manifest and played upon, can be traced to Dennis Potter's TV series *Pennies from Heaven* (1978). The series featured a 1930s salesman who avoided the agonies of his life by escaping, through lipsynch, to the magical world of music. In Potter's later productions—*The Singing Detective*, *Lipstick on Your Collar*, and *Karaoke*—lipsynching was further developed as a technique through which the ideas and emotions of the characters were exposed.<sup>6</sup>

The Internet, and especially the introduction of personal webcams and, later on, simple editing software, has enabled the quick popularization of the genre. Indeed, lipsynching has become extremely prevalent across the globe. It currently embeds two main subgenres: bedroom lipdubs and collective lipdubs. As I outline below, the first subgenre is linked to private households and the second to public activities and organizations.



Bedroom lipsynchs feature a small number of participants, usually in front of their webcams. One of the first notable examples of this genre was the “Numa Numa” dance, performed by Gari Brolsma in 2004. Brolsma, a nineteen-year-old student from New Jersey, just wanted to entertain his friends with a personal version of the Romanian hit “Dragostea Din Tei.” But apparently the video amused other people as well: within a short period, it had been viewed by millions, evoking numerous memetic responses, in the form of both flattering homage and derogatory mockery. Another notable example is the “Back-Dorm Boys,” two Chinese art students from Guangdong Province who, in 2005, uploaded a lipsynched version of the Backstreet Boys hit “I Want It That Way.” Their overwhelming popularity resulted in a subsequent series of videos and vast mainstream media attention. Such success stories encouraged many others, resulting in numerous bedroom lipsynchs covering almost every imaginable pop hit. The memetic appeal of this genre can be explained in light of the principles discussed in chapter 3. Bedroom lipdubs are very easy to produce, and they relate strongly to today’s era of networked individualism. They highlight the presence and talents of a specific individual, and also signal that this person is part of a larger digital pop culture.

In contrast to the individualistic aura of bedroom lipsynchs, public sphere lipsynchs are multiparticipant

collective productions. They are often created as an organizational effort, featured in spaces such as university campuses, offices, or army bases, and filmed in one continuous camera shot. This subgenre has also been labeled lipdub, a term coined in 2006 by Jakob Lodwick, the founder of Vimeo (a video-sharing venture that allows only user-generated material). Lodwick explains: “It’s kind of the bridge between amateur video and actual music videos.”<sup>7</sup> Collective lipdubs are often used for public relations. They signify to the world that a certain university or firm is “cool,” vigorous, and frivolous—the kind of place you would like to be.

Both types of lipdub embody a blend of fame and anonymity that characterize participatory culture. Lipdubs are based on the reappropriation of mass-mediated hits, originally performed by professional singers, by small, local communities of amateurs. While this may be seen as a positive, democratizing turn, a more critical reading claims that lipdub also draws a line between amateur and professional art: most lipsynchers remain anonymous, and even if they do become famous, they are labeled as class B YouTube stars who are never equivalent to “real” film or television stars. Moreover, as Graham Turner suggests, success in digital media is still measured through one’s ability to be incorporated into traditional mass media.<sup>8</sup> Thus, genres such as lipsynch do not create a real alternative to the conventional media industries.

## Misheard Lyrics

Phonetic translation or misheard-lyrics videos are based on amusing mistranslations of spoken sounds to written words. These are done by transcribing what the words sound like (that is, their phonetics), regardless of their true meaning. Phonetic translations were molded into a distinct meme genre following a popular 2001 animation that Neil Cicierega created to the Japanese song “Hyakugojyuuichi.” At a certain point, subtitles such as “Give my sweater back or I will play the guitar” popped on the screen, reflecting what the Japanese words would sound like to an average English speaker. In subsequent years, many similar clips (tagged as “animutations”) emerged on the Internet.<sup>9</sup>

At a later stage, another phonetic translation subgenre emerged based on an even simpler user-generated manipulation: the insertion of subtitles into an existing video clip, usually one that originated in South or East Asia. This subversion is sometimes called “buffalax,” referring to the nickname of the YouTuber who in 2007 posted the staple video of this subgenre, “Benny Lava.” His phonetic translation of the song “Kalluri Vaanil” by Tamil artists Prabhu Deva and Jaya Sheel opens with the unforgettable line: “My loony bun is fine, Benny Lava!,” followed by such gems as “Have you been high today? I see the nuns are gay.” The genre quickly globalized, with numerous linguistic dyads

emerging, including, for example, Malayalam subtitles to a Russian folksong. English language songs, heard (but not always understood) the world over, have also become popular targets. For instance the Beatles' "I Want to Hold Your Hand" is phonetically translated into Japanese as "Stupid public urination," and "I've Got the Power" becomes in German "Agathe Bauer."<sup>10</sup>

### Recut Trailers

A recut trailer is a user-generated "fake" movie trailer based on the re-editing or remixing of film footage. In many cases, it displaces the original film's genre with an utterly different one, creating "new" movies such as *Brokeback to the Future* (an amalgam between *Brokeback Mountain* and *Back to the Future*) and *Scary Mary Poppins*. The genre was popularized in 2005, with the launch of the trailer for *The Shining*, which presented the famous horror film as a delightful family comedy featuring a story of father-son bonding.

Kathleen Williams unpacks some of the paradoxes underpinning recut trailers. While their very existence clearly indicates that people are familiar with (and even enjoy) movie trailers, these clips are also saturated with criticism of the trailers' blunt marketing strategies. Specifically, recut trailers mock the formula-based and mechanistic ways

in which marketers try to press audience's emotional buttons. For instance, a recut trailer that presents the horror film *Jaws* as a romantic comedy uses the narration, "In a world that does not understand ... in a place where there is no hope at all ... love comes to the surface." The incongruity between these motivational words and what we know about the film parodies the original trailers' overly optimistic scripts of overcoming adversaries. Moreover, recut trailers reflect the ambivalent nature of audiences' relationship with pop culture in the Web 2.0 era.<sup>11</sup> While professional trailers are released and consumed according to industry-dictated timing, recut trailers reflect the new power claimed by Internet users who play with cinema without actually needing "to go to cinema at all."<sup>12</sup> Yet although these parodied trailers seemingly promote nothing, they actually do promote something: the image of their creators as talented, creative, and digitally literate people.

## LOLCats

LOLCats are pictures of cats accompanied by systematically misspelled captions, which typically refer to the situation shown in the photo. The genre's name is a composite of the Internet acronym "LOL" (laughing out loud) and the word "cat." It was the first prominent manifestation of "image

macros”: a more general form of pictures with overlaid text. The spike in this genre’s popularity is associated with the image-posting board I Can Has Cheezburger? (<http://icanhas.cheezburger.com>), launched in 2007. Motivated by the urge to understand “Why in the name of Ceiling Cat are LOLCats so popular,” Kate Miltner investigated the appeal of the genre by interviewing LOLCat lovers.<sup>13</sup> She found that the LOLCat audience actually comprises three separate groups: CheezFrenz (who like LOLCats because they love cats), MemeGeeks (who love LOLCats because they acknowledge the genre’s place in the grand history of Internet memes), and casual users (all the rest, mostly composed of the “bored at work” population).

Miltner found that beyond these differences, LOLCats are used to construct and maintain social boundaries. Creating—and enjoying—LOLCats requires familiarity with the genre and the special language underpinning it, “LOLspeak.” This is a complex, nonstandard, childlike (or catlike) English Internet dialect, which is celebrated by its users as “teh furst language born of teh intertubes.” Enjoying the genre involves the sweet scent of an inside joke, understood by those who are immersed in the digital cultural landscape. In addition, in many cases LOLCats are created or shared for the purpose of interpersonal communication: they serve as indirect ways to convey a wide array of feelings and states of mind. Thus, although LOLCats are often dismissed as emblems of a silly and whimsical

culture, Miltner shows that they actually fulfill diverse and complex social roles.

## Stock Character Macros

The stock character macros meme genre originated from one meme, labeled “Advice Dog.” The initial meme, featuring a photo of a puppy’s face positioned on a multicolored rainbow background, was launched on a 2006 discussion board on which a boy asked for romantic advice about kissing a girl. The photo of the dog advising “Just do it” spurred a stream of derivatives on 4chan, featuring the dog offering further pieces of bad advice. This then prompted a profusion of related “advice animal” memes, such as “Socially Awkward Penguin,” the aggressive “Courage Wolf,” and “Bachelor Frog.”<sup>14</sup>

While the genre is commonly labeled “advice animals,” it does not always include advice, and, over time, many human protagonists have been added to the initial animal-based arsenal. Yet memes belonging to this family do share two features: they use image macros, and they build on a set of stock characters that represent stereotypical behaviors. A very partial list of macro characters includes “Scumbag Steve” (who always acts in unethical, irresponsible, and asocial ways) and his antithesis, “Good Guy Greg” (who always tries to help, even if it brings him

harm); “Naive College Freshman” (who is overenthusiastic about his new status as a student and clueless about the norms of social behavior in college); “Annoying Facebook Girl” (who is overenthusiastic and overanxious about Facebook and its significance to her social life); “Female College Liberal” (also known as “Bad Argument Hippie,” who is both naive and a hypocrite); “Success Kid” (a baby with a self-satisfied grin, accompanied by a caption describing a situation that works better than expected); and “Successful Black Man” (a black man who comically subverts racist assumptions about him by acting like a middle class bourgeois). This array of stock character macros provides a glimpse into the drama of morality of the First World of the twenty-first century: it is a conceptual map of types that represent exaggerated forms of behavior. As detailed below, these extreme forms tend to focus on success and failure in the social life of a particular group.

## Rage Comics

Rage comics are amateur-looking comics featuring “rage faces”—a set of expressive characters, each associated with a typical behavior. The genre embarked on 4chan in 2008 with a stream of four-panel comics dedicated to the tales of a character named the Rage Guy, who was often caught in situations that led him to scream in anger



**GETS YOUR HELP TO MOVE  
HIS FURNITURE TO NEW FLAT**



**DOESN'T INVITE YOU TO  
HOUSEWARMING PARTY**

**WENT GROCERY  
SHOPPING**



**GOT A CART WITH FOUR  
FUNCTIONAL WHEELS**

**START TELLING JOKE**



**FORGET PUNCHLINE**

(FFFFFFUUUUUU). Following the success of this initial rage face, a series of neighboring characters shortly emerged, among them Forever Alone (a sad, lonely chap with no friends); Me Gusta (“I like” in Spanish, a character who expresses enjoyment); Troll Face (who enjoys annoying and harming people); and Poker Face (who tries to conceal his embarrassment in awkward situations). Since then, rage comics have migrated from 4chan into other communities, expanding the range of faces in the repertoire. The means for creating rage comics were also popularized, with the introduction of “Rage Makers” websites, on which users can create rage comics easily by reappropriating ready-made characters. Yet, as Ryan Milner observes, digital literacy is not enough in order to participate in the rage discourse. It also requires subcultural literacy: knowledge of the codes and norms developed in this meme-based subculture. Thus, one needs to have a considerable amount of knowledge about a large number of characters and the socially appropriate ways to use them in order to create an ostensibly simple four-panel comic.

Although rage comics and image macros differ in format, they deal with similar themes. According to Ryan Milner’s illuminating analysis, these meme genres tend to focus on a small core of subjects associated with winners

**Figure 10** Stock character macros: “Scumbag Steve,” “Success Kid,” and “Socially Awkward Penguin.” Source: <http://www.quickmeme.com/>.



Figure 11 Rage comics. Source: <http://fuckyeahchallengeacceptedguy.tumblr.com/>.

and losers in social life. He tags them as “Fail,” “What the fuck,” and “Win” memes. “Fail” marks moments of social incompetence, embarrassment, and misfortune and is incarnated in specific characters (such as “Forever Alone” and “Socially Awkward Penguin”), as well as in the narrative structure of many rage comics that end with a moment of personal failure. In numerous cases, failure has to do with geeky or awkward young men’s lack of romantic success, often associated with Net subcultures. Posters often accompany these memes with commentary such as “This happened to me today,” thus using the memes as a “way to share geeky failure in a collective way.”<sup>15</sup> “What the fuck” (or WTF) memes relate to those instances in which failure is not associated with the self, but with others, leaving the protagonist with the eternal question, WTF? The “others” in such memes are framed as the out-group. They lack intelligence, discernment, and literacy—particularly digital literacy. Finally, “Win” memes deal with successful social interactions and small daily victories that help the protagonist avoid “a Forever Alone fate.”<sup>16</sup>

In this chapter, I have presented nine major Internet meme genres, as a first step in mapping a complex universe of user-generated content. As evident from this survey, some of these genres have already been studied in depth, while others have attracted less scholarly attention. Yet to obtain a fuller understanding of the memesphere, an integrative and comparative analysis of these genres is

required. An initial observation stemming from this survey is that meme genres can be divided into three groups: (1) Genres that are based on the *documentation of “real-life” moments* (photo fads, flash mobs). These genres are always anchored in a concrete and nondigital space. (2) Genres that are based on *explicit manipulation* of visual or audiovisual mass-mediated content (reaction Photoshops, lipdubs, misheard lyrics, recut trailers). These genres—which may be grouped as “remix” memes—often reappropriate news and popular culture items. Such transformative works reveal multifaceted attitudes of enchantment and criticism toward contemporary pop-culture. (3) Genres that evolved around *a new universe of digital and meme-oriented content* (LOLCats, rage comics, and stock character macros). These genres, emerging mainly after 2007, embody the development of a complex grid of signs that only those “in the know” can decipher. Thus, in order to produce and understand LOLCats, users need to master LOLspeak; to create a rage comic, the user requires familiarity with a broad range of new symbols. These genres are thus strongly associated with what Ryan Milner describes as the meme subculture, which flourishes on specific sites such as 4chan, Tumblr, and Reddit. Yet since all nine genres that I have surveyed in this chapter are still alive and kicking, users who are not part of this subculture still have a wide spectrum of options for creating and consuming Internet memes.