Meme Culture

and Its Discontents

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Mit den sogenannten "Memes" nimmt das Symposium ein Internet-Phänomen in den Blick, das für das Verstehen der Prozesse, die die gegenwärtige digitale Medienkultur kennzeichnen, als besonders aufschlussreich gelten kann: Indem hier vorgefundene digitale Artefakte angeeignet, kommentiert, manipuliert, weiterbearbeitet und -verbreitet werden (mit kostenlos bereitstehenden Tools und über Social Media-Plattformen), operiert die Meme Culture an der Schnittstelle von Utopien der User-Ermächtigung und Medienindustrie. Gleichzeitig ist die "digitale Folklore" (Lialina/Espenschied) Schauplatz nicht nur populärer Humorproduktion, sondern auch eines politischen Populismus, angesichts dessen die produktive Aneignung vorgefundener Inhalte/*contents* durchaus ein Unbehagen/*discontent* provoziert (um auf die englische Übersetzung von Freuds *Unbehagen in der Kultur* als *Civilization and Its Discontents* anzuspielen). Das Symposium fragt nach den Möglichkeiten einer kritischen Analyse dieser Praktiken und nach dem Potential medienwissenschaftlicher, künstlerischer und aktivistischer Interventionen in das Feld der Meme Culture.

Die Veranstaltung findet in englischer Sprache statt.

This symposium is dedicated to "memes", an internet phenomenon which illuminates some of the processes that characterize contemporary digital culture at large: based on the appropriation, manipulation, annotation and propagation of found digital artifacts (using tools provided for free via social media platforms), Meme Culture operates at the intersection of user empowerment and media industries. At the same time, "digital folklore" (Lialina/Espenschied) is not only a site of popular production of humor, but also of political populism, in the face of which the creative appropriation of preexisting content also provokes some discontent (to allude to the English translation of Freud's **Unbehagen in der Kultur** as "Civilization and Its Discontents"). The symposium discusses the possibilities of a critical analysis of these practices and the potential for media studies, art and activism to intervene into the field of Meme Culture.

Thursday, January 16, 2020

2 pm	Welcome & Introduction
2.15 pm	Timothee Ingen-Housz — "Ceci n' est pas un pied piper."
3.15 pm	Coffee Break
3.45 pm	Florian Schlittgen — Doing Memes – Towards a Media Aesthetics of Digital Indeterminacy
4.45 pm	Andy King in conversation with Kathrin Peters — Choosing Fantasy: Taking the 2D Pill

Friday, January 17, 2020

9.30 am	Fabian Schäfer — Memes & Connective Cynicism
10.30 am	Simone Pfeifer & Larissa-Diana Fuhrmann — Re-enacting Violence: Memetic Appropriations of IS Execution Videos
11.30 am	Coffee Break
12 pm	Olia Lialina — Are Memes Digital Folklore?
1 pm	Lunch Break
2.30 pm	Lauren M. Jackson — Bad Feeling Online
3.30 pm	Coffee Break
4 pm	Clusterduck Collective — Meme Invasions: From Troll Wars to Influencer Dramas
5 pm	Geert Lovink — Rituals of Playful Imagery: Strategies of Meme Production
6 pm	Drinks & Finger Food

Timothee Ingen-Housz: "Ceci n' est pas un pied piper."

This short 'lecture-platformance' takes a closer look at Richard Dawkins, who coined the term *meme*, and his attempt to explain the way his trouble child got "hijacked by the internet". It maps out some of the underlying contradictions to explore what the idea of "meme" may still have to tell us about sharing ideas, evolution, and the nature/culture divide in a post-trolling approach to platform design.

Timothee Ingen-Housz, cartoonist, designer and gonzotheorist, teaches media dramaturgy at the University of the Arts Berlin. Amongst various attempts to go viral, he designed a "non-linear pictorial language" in the early nineties, taking meme-design seriously enough to self-experiment with the notion of "language as a virus".

Florian Schlittgen: Doing Memes – Towards a Media Aesthetics of Digital Indeterminacy

Due to their viral nature, memes are not only reproduced, but subject to a continuous process of transformation. In light of this aesthetic morphogenesis, the internet appears not merely as a virtual stage, but as an actor. From this perspective, memes are more than content – they are aesthetic expressions of technical and human co-performances which relate to, and are constructive for, each other.

Florian Schlittgen is a researcher at the Department of Media and Cultural Studies at Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf. His research focuses on digital image cultures, media ecologies and the potentials of digital and material trash.

Lauren M. Jackson: Bad Feeling Online

Going online is awful. What was once discovery and splendor is now exhaustion and paranoia, so suffuse that "going online," is an antique—one is never not online. This talk is about the bad feeling of the hellsites we nonetheless cannot get enough of, the gendered, racial, sexual, environmental, and national components of this feeling and what it reveals about the contemporary.

Lauren Michele Jackson teaches in the Department of English at Northwestern University. Her research focuses on black affect and aesthetics. She is the author of White Negroes, recently published by Beacon Press, and is currently working on a manuscript on vertigo in black literature and art of the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Fabian Schäfer: Memes & Connective Cynicism

This presentation will discuss the concept of "connective cynicism" in relation to the role of memes in the phatic communication prevalent on social media. In the second part, it will provide examples from meme culture in Japan and show the applicability of this concept to memes related to Japanese politics.

Fabian Schäfer holds the chair in Japanese Studies at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg. His research interests include the digital transformation of the public sphere, computational social sciences, media history, and modern Japanese (media) philosophy. He published on political bots in Japanese elections and hate speech against female politicians in Japan.

Olia Lialina: Are Memes Digital Folklore?

"This question usually comes up after my talks on web vernacular, because obviously there are parallels between, let's say, the way early GIFs were and todays MACROS are distributed and go viral. Still I would argue that memes are rather modern pop culture, strong and dominant, and therefore obscure the means of expression that we could see as the Digital Folklore of the 2020s." Olia Lialina

Olia Lialiana is a net artist, web vernacular researcher, GIF model, and Professor for New Media at Merz Akademie, Stuttgart. With Dragan Espenschied, she is the co-editor of the book Digital Folklore (2009, sold out – digitalfolklore.org).

Simone Pfeifer & Larissa-Diana Fuhrmann: Re-enacting Violence: Memetic Appropriations of IS Execution Videos

This presentation deals with memetic re-enactments of IS decapitation videos and reveals the similarities between strategies from groups as different as Muslim artists, activists and the right-wing 'Identitarian Movement' in Austria. It brings together mimetic theory with meme culture and argues that these similar strategies are memetic forms of cultural resistance that are used to defy the iconic and operative status of IS's imagery, e.g. through humour.

Simone Pfeifer is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Anthropology and African Studies and the research project "Jihadism on the Internet" at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. In her research she focuses on social and visual media practices, kinship, migration, mobility and transnationality and Islam on social media.

Larissa-Diana Fuhrmann is a PhD candidate in Anthropology and part of the research project "Jihadism on the Internet" at the Department of Anthropology and African Studies, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz.

Andy King in conversation with Kathrin Peters: Choosing Fantasy: Taking the 2D Pill

From online dating profiles to fictional characters and dating sim games – images are becoming a proxy for human relationships. Can the need for physical intimacy be bypassed using technology without long-term consequences, especially within a society plagued by inequality? Forever Alone Together: tulpamancy, incels and volcels in an age of radicalised loneliness.

Andy King is a media artist and researcher whose satirical and political works focus on internet subcultures, loneliness and human relationships in the digital age. She explores the blurring of borders between truth and fiction, copy and original, private and public spaces.

Kathrin Peters is professor of Visual Culture Studies at the University of Arts Berlin and co-director of the Research Training School "Knowledge in the Arts". Her main teaching and research topics are gender and media, history of design and theory of photography.

Clusterduck Collective: Meme Invasions: From Troll Wars to Influencer Dramas

Is trolling by nature reactionary, or can it be considered a neutral weapon – and therefore potentially progressive? And who is using this weapon today, and how? Clusterduck will investigate the history of the so called "troll wars", interpreting them as a media strategy linked to the mechanisms of the attention economy. They will also explore the concept of memes as performative or "magical" objects, pointing out the crucial role of context for their interpretation.

Clusterduck is an interdisciplinary collective working at the crossroads of research, design and transmedia, focusing on the processes and actors behind the creation of Internet-related content. Among their latest projects is the online exhibition #MEMEPROPAGANDA, hosted by Greencube Gallery, which was presented in many cities around Europe.

## Geert Lovink: Rituals of Playful Imagery - Strategies of Meme Production

Analysing meme culture is one thing, but how about its future? Can internet cultures be designed and steered or can we only discuss their consequences? What's to be done, now that politics is defined by micro-slogans, micro-images and micro-targetting? What happens when the traditional guardians of public opinion are no longer in charge and the PR that makes a real difference has shifted to invisible levels and counter-cultural sites? Is it enough to argue for a new culture of 'progressive irony'? And how can European media theory catch up and become an avant-garde again?

Geert Lovink is a Dutch media theorist, internet critic and author of Networks Without a Cause (2012), Social Media Abyss (2016), Organisation after Social Media (with Ned Rossiter, 2018) and Sad by Design (2019). In 2004 he founded the Institute of Network Cultures at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (www.networkcultures.org).

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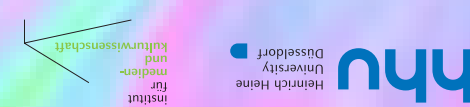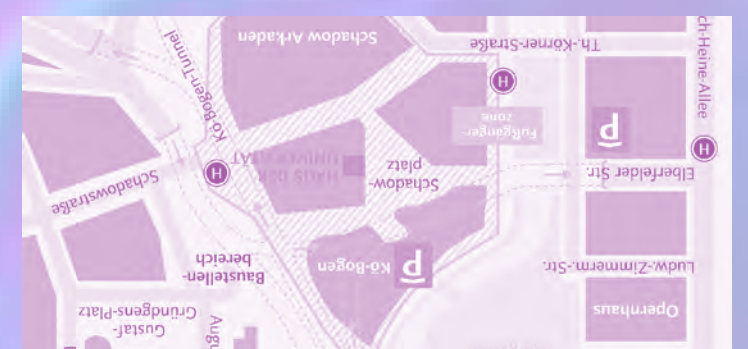
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