

RUNNING HEAD: Internet Memes as Visual Political Rhetoric

Pepper Spray Cop and the American Dream: Using Synecdoche and Metaphor
to Unlock Internet Memes' Visual Political Rhetoric

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Abstract: Social media are increasingly important in protest movements for communication and organization. As such, scholars should consider these ephemeral messages as a tool for understanding such movements' rhetoric. This paper draws on Kjeldsen's method for the critique of visual political rhetoric, and adds consideration of intertextuality, synecdoche and metaphor to demonstrate a method for the rhetorical analysis and critique of internet memes as visual, political rhetoric. The Pepper Spray Cop meme arising from Occupy Wall Street is presented as a case study example. The paper considers the centrality of the intertextual nature of memes as a unique form of visual rhetoric in activist contexts and contributes to the literature on user-generated and activist rhetoric.

Keywords: visual rhetoric, internet memes, rhetorical analysis, activism, Occupy Wall Street

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The Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement was relatively short-lived in terms of time spent in physical protest, but it was born out of years of economic turbulence, and its rhetoric about economy and class rippled throughout public discourse in the United States. According to the movement's website, occupytogether.org, OWS was first and foremost a response to economic recession and high unemployment rates in the United States. However, it was also a form of class protest against perceived economic disparities made more apparent by economic recession. Finally, OWS was a reflection of tensions between political ideologies regarding economic structure and underlying notions of human liberties in the United States.

Throughout the fall of 2011, loosely connected but localized protests spread beyond New York and across the country to protest corrupt relationships between corporations and American politics (Occupy Together, 2013). Simultaneously, OWS gained attention and followers via social media in a sort of virtual-world movement that mirrored and supported the real-world movement. Through a combination of occupations in parks and extensive use of social media, OWS eventually succeeded in becoming part of the national story on the state of the economy (DeLuca, Lawson & Sun, 2012, p. 484). One such use of social media within the movement and its online supporters was the spread of activist internet memes, a particular form of digital media-based rhetoric that gained mainstream media attention for OWS. While the term *internet meme* can and has been appended to multiple genres, or forms, of online texts (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Shifman, 2014), from videos to hashtag conversations, the term is perhaps most commonly

associated with still images that are appropriated from popular culture and news media, and remixed by individuals to include additional textual or visual commentary (Milner, 2013).

This essay presents Kjeldsen's (2000) method for rhetorical analysis of visual political rhetoric as a framework for analysis of specific rhetorical functions and argumentative claims of such activist, image-based internet memes. To account for memes' particular rhetorical characteristics, this essay also suggests consideration of the rhetoric of intertextuality (D'Angelo, 2009) and the trope of synecdoche to aid illuminating these memes' arguments. After describing considerations for rhetorical analysis of such digital, visual political rhetoric, an analysis of a key OWS meme is presented as a case study for this method. In so doing, this essay expands the tools available to scholars who seek to understand the influence of user-generated, visual rhetoric and suggests the consideration of such media for understanding the purpose, demands, and influence of grassroots social movements like OWS.

Rhetorical Speech: Defining Internet Memes

Appropriated from Richard Dawkins' coined word to describe a unit of cultural transmission passed on by imitation (Blackmore, 1999), the term *meme* is now popularly applied to a variety of "'catchy' and widely propagated ideas or phenomena" on the internet (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 201). Internet memes (hereafter referred to as memes) are best understood as groups of digital items or texts created and shared separately by many individuals but in awareness of one another, and having common characteristics of "content, form, and/or stance" (Shifman, 2014, p. 41). Much of memes' appeal is their intertextual nature, by which they take images from dominant media structures, juxtaposing and remixing them to create new layers of meaning. Many memes are humorous, but a growing body of literature indicates that memes also

fulfill deeper gratifications than simple laughs (Miltner, 2011), having implications for identity building, public discourse and commentary through collaborative action.

Memos may take a variety of forms; the basic still-image meme forms are the image macro and the reaction Photoshop (Shifman, 2014). An image macro consists of text script superimposed over an image. In this genre, the particular background image tends to remain fairly constant within the meme; it is the text script that users continually modify. This text script is most often written using an all-capitals block font known as Impact, now closely associated with memes (Brideau & Berret, 2014). In contrast, the reaction Photoshop meme genre rarely relies on text to make its point. It is characterized by the use of Photoshop to place a common character, often removed from a larger image, in increasingly incongruous settings (Shifman, 2014). Here, the image background is constantly changing; the juxtaposition of the character and the new setting create the central meaning of the individual iterations. Figure 1 presents a side-by-side comparison of these two forms.

[Figure 1 here]

Though the particular aesthetics of each meme form may differ, a commonality is that as memes are passed around the internet, participants contribute their own take on the underlying theme by altering some aspects of the meme, while maintaining others, to create a new iteration. Memos are “interdiscursive, intertwining multiple texts and commentaries into complex collages” (Milner, 2013, p. 2367). It is this same collaborative nature that elevates memes to the level of participatory discourse (Milner, 2012). Because memes by definition are created through the creative engagement and collaboration of many individuals, particular meme iterations only truly exist in relation to the whole (Shifman, 2014).

Defining memes as rhetoric

Based on the preceding, memes can be viewed as a participatory practice that produces texts, which may in turn be analyzed as rhetoric. To adapt Blakesley's (2004) formula for a definition of film rhetoric, memes present a rhetorical situation in which interactions among an anonymous creator, the meme and meme iteration, and the viewer combine to create "the total act of making meaning" (p. 116). Put differently, these elements roughly correspond to those of the basic communication model. However, in addition to these elements of sender, message, and receiver, memes' rhetoric also encompasses the context of events to which the meme responds and source texts from which the meme appropriates and remixes. These associations lend memes their rhetorical power; for the rhetorical critic, a meme is an assemblage of these elements.

Rhetorical Method: Analysis of Visual Political Rhetoric

The question of whether visual texts can be considered rhetoric has been argued by a number of scholars; the discussion is often centered on whether these texts can serve as arguments (e.g. Blair, 2004). Memes' particular content, form, and stance are important factors for identifying a particular meme (Shifman, 2014), but understanding a given meme's visual rhetoric is reliant on additional considerations related to memes' associations among sender, message, context, and receiver. Image-based memes have their closest traditional media analogue in the editorial cartoon, the persuasive or argumentative nature of which has been examined and supported (Abraham, 2009). Such visual arguments have particular rhetorical power through engaging the viewer in the completion of visual enthymemes (Blair, 2004). Aristotle's enthymeme lays out key points of an argument while leaving the conclusion of the argument unstated. As viewers must complete the argument themselves, the enthymeme gains

persuasive power by creating “a self-convincing audience” (Kjeldsen, 2000, p. 321).

Additionally Edwards (2004) has argued that iconic images, such as the flag being raised over Iwo Jima, become a type of metaphor and can be recontextualized for symbolic association. These remixing practices of visual arguments are also central to the rhetorical or persuasive communication characteristics of memes. It is the juxtaposition of text and image, or of multiple different images, and the associations among them that forms the meme’s argument. As D’Angelo (2009) explained, intertextuality uses practices of adaptation, retro or recycling, appropriation, parody, pastiche and simulation, all practices that are key to the ethos of memes (Milner, 2012; Shifman, 2014). Therefore, intertextuality and visual enthymeme are key elements of memes’ rhetorical power, and should be considered in rhetorical analyses of memes.

Similarly, iconic images in visual rhetoric can act as synecdoche by using the concrete as an avenue to the abstract or ephemeral. Merriam-Webster defines synecdoche as a figure of speech by which a part is used to refer to the whole, or the whole for a part. Because the viewer is drawn in to the interpretation, or completion, of the synecdoche, this essay argues visual synecdoche works in accordance with the persuasive power of the enthymeme. The use of synecdoche is perhaps best illuminated in rhetorical criticism through the use of an organizing metaphor; this combination can create a powerful tool for uncovering visual argument in rhetorical analysis. In their work on the Argentine Mothers protest, Foss and Domenici (2001) used the metaphor of haunting as a framework to inform their critique of the use of visual symbols, such as diapers as headscarves, in the Argentine Mothers protest. They argued that, through synecdoche, the diaper both embodies the relationship between the Mothers and their children, that is, maternal care, and serves as the foundation for the haunting metaphor by

recalling white, flowing ghostly garments. The authors do not claim that the Mothers consciously intended to invoke such a metaphor, but rather that by exploring the connotations of the visual elements of such rhetoric, the critic can identify metaphor for use as an illuminating framework for the function of synecdoche. Consequently, the critic can explore deeper layers of meaning to make stronger arguments regarding the rhetoric.

While intertextuality and metaphor are a start to assessing memes' rhetoric, Kjeldsen (2000) argues that too often analysis of visual rhetoric relies on structuralist, rather than rhetorical, approaches. Rather than simply identify the tropes that are present in the artifact, Kjeldsen proposes that the critic also consider the larger context in which the speech was created and to seek out the persuasive cues within the visual rhetoric in order to re-construct the artifact's argumentative claims and better understand its persuasive nature. Following Kjeldsen's example, by situating the memes in context and analyzing their arguments as well as their tropes, the critic may be able to make meaningful conclusions about visual rhetoric within social movements.

Rhetorical Context: Occupy Wall Street—And Beyond

OWS was situated in a particular period of economic unrest. According to the National Bureau of Economic Research, the United States entered an 18-month recession in December 2007. That recession lasted through June 2009 and was the longest the U.S. economy had endured since the World War II era (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2010). Between January 2010 and October 2011, monthly U.S. unemployment rates as measured by Gallup averaged 9.5 percent, with a high of 10.9 percent in January 2010 (Jacobe, 2011). The recession's ripple effects continued to be felt into the following years. The impact in the form of missed opportunities for young people in their 20s and 30s become more evident in the fall of

2011, when the release of 2010 census data demonstrated high levels of unemployment among that age group (Lee, 2011).

These impacts were at the center of localized OWS movements in California, where the cost of higher education was heavily affected by the economic downturn. Those who gathered at the University of California at Davis to protest tuition hikes tied their actions to the larger Occupy movement. At the time of these protests, the UC Davis campus was facing a funding shortfall of \$130 million (Golden, 2011). Protestors also called for changes to the California State University system's regulations around university police. When the UC Davis chancellor requested the dispersal of the protestors, campus police used pepper spray on protestors who were sitting on the ground. Video and a still image of the pepper spraying became "the defining imagery of the Occupy movement, rivaling in symbolic power, if not in actual violence, images from the Kent State shootings more than 40 years ago" (Kennicott, 2011, para. 2). These images also led to a great deal of attention on social media for OWS, and were central to the Pepper Spray Cop meme of interest to this essay.

In addition to these economic and political factors, OWS was very much a product of the revolution in social media. The first appearance of the phrase "occupy Wall Street" was on the micro-blogging website Twitter, in a July 4, 2011, tweet from Canadian-based activist group AdBusters (Fleming, 2012). In mid-July, AdBusters issued another invitation in a series of advertisements linked to Twitter: "What is our one demand? #occupywallstreet September 17th. Bring tent" (Rapoza, 2011). With a call to action and a specific date, the message to occupy Wall Street gained enough attention so that on September 17, 2011, people began to set up camp in New York City's privately-owned Zuccotti Park, near Wall Street.

It took eight days for OWS to begin receiving attention in mainstream media reports, and this early coverage tended to frame the movement in negative terms (DeLuca, Lawson & Sun, 2012). However, online it was another story as members of the movement leveraged social media as a tool to request specific actions from supporters. OWS, along with other protest movements of 2011 such as the Arab Spring, demonstrated how advances in communication technologies shape social protest through the normative aspects of co-creative participation in these media, which create “new expectations of what it means to be a citizen and a person and a democracy” (DeLuca, Lawson & Sun, 2012). These expectations hold implications for scholars of social movement rhetoric as it becomes necessary to consider how rhetoric is produced and functions within these new spaces. Protest movements increasingly appear to be driven not by organizations, but through the “digitally coordinated actions of millions of ordinary people” (Shifman, 2014, p. 128). As a movement, OWS framed itself as a collective of people with no established leaders. To assess the rhetoric of OWS, then, the critic must consider those discourses and artifacts produced by ordinary participants of the movement. Because OWS is largely a product of 21st-century technology, it is appropriate for the critic to consider the persuasive effects of discourse that took place on social media.

While it would be difficult to examine all digital media-based discourse that arose out of OWS due to the ephemeral nature of the medium, it is possible to select certain powerful examples to examine for their persuasive functions. Memes are especially suited for consideration as rhetoric within contemporary social movements because memes perform a connective action for “citizens to participate in public, collective actions, while maintaining their sense of individuality” (Shifman, 2014, p. 129). Although memes are not a singular opportunity

for such participation, memes' central ethos of collective individuality mirrors that of the OWS movement itself. Along with the affinity between the movement and OWS memes' collaborative individuality, memes' digital foundations make them a good choice to critique rhetoric surrounding OWS as portrayed through visual digital media.

Milner (2013) provided an excellent overview of a variety of OWS memes and argued for their function as pop polyvocality in public discourse. Others have focused on various rhetorical strategies of OWS, such as Jones' (2014) analysis of the movement's use of compensatory divisions to establish distinctions between protestors and the state, and Penney and Dadas' (2014) examination of Twitter use as digital rhetoric within the movement. However, it is thought that the literature on OWS does not yet contain rhetorical critique of internet memes. Additionally, few published studies have specifically conducted rhetorical analyses for the purpose of critiquing memes as visual political or activist rhetoric. By presenting a method for doing so, this paper contributes to the literatures on internet memes and visual political rhetoric.

Case Study Application: Pepper Spray Cop

To further explore the connection between visual argument, synecdoche and metaphor in OWS memes, it is helpful to present a case study that illustrates the method. One OWS meme that made heavy use of intertextuality was Casually Pepper Spray Everything Cop (hereafter referred to as Pepper Spray Cop). It originated from a photojournalistic-style image captured by Louise Macabitas that depicted police Lieutenant John Pike using pepper spray on a group of protestors at UC Davis on Nov. 18, 2011. Pike's nonchalant demeanor gave the impression that spraying a toxic chemical on the human protestors was no more concerning for him than spraying a garden for weeds (Kennicott, 2011). Macabitas' photo was posted to social media site

Reddit the next day (Know Your Meme, n.d.) and the first remixed appropriations began appearing shortly after.

The resultant memes cut Pike's figure out of the original photo and Photoshopped him and his pepper spray into historical scenes. One of the very earliest iterations placed the Pike figure in the Trumbull painting *Declaration of Independence* (Know Your Meme, n.d.). Pepper Spray Cop most closely fits within the reaction Photoshop genre of memes, with the same central character, Pike, wreaking havoc throughout great moments in history. The meme made use of a variety of iconic images from history, including art history and pop culture, to question the role of authority in society. This rhetoric reflected larger questions of the broader OWS movement, including fundamental notions of human liberty. Throughout, intertextual rhetorical practices of appropriation, parody and pastiche are evident.

In a multimodal critical discourse analysis, Milner (2013) loosely grouped the individual Pepper Spray Cop memes into three basic subcategories, with a focus on the dominant reaction Photoshop form. First are those centered on scenes picturing innocents and moments of goodwill (e.g. a hapless George Bailey from *It's a Wonderful Life* and a defiant Snoopy get pepper sprayed in the face). Second are memes focused on iconic displays of public protest; here, the Pike figure disrupts the 1963 self-immolation of Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức in Vietnam and Rosa Parks' ride on a newly integrated public bus in 1950s Alabama. The final category is that of memes that make use of scenes from patriotic American iconography, for example historic paintings depicting events around the American Revolution or the iconic images of the Iwo Jima flag raising.

These broad categories illustrate the scope of the meme's remixing of images from

history and pop culture, though the boundaries between categories can be slippery. Additionally, many memes inserted Pike's figure into classic works of art, many of which appear disconnected from one another. These classics included Picasso's otherworldly anti-war painting *Guernica*; Wyeth's *Christina's World*, which depicts a paraplegic woman courageously dragging herself across a field; and Seurat's pointillist painting of a peaceful *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. While some rhetorical insight may be gained through categorizing memes according to original image type, because these memes largely belong to the reaction Photoshop genre, greater analytical insight can be had by instead considering what is the same across many exemplars of the meme, rather than focusing on what is different. In this case, that is the incongruous image of a police officer using pepper spray. The presence of this figure categorizes particular exemplars as belonging to the meme, based on content and form (Shifman, 2014).

Analytical framework: Dueling American Dream myths

In critiquing the visual rhetoric of Pepper Spray Cop, it is useful to have such a framework through which to examine the presented visual arguments. Within the United States, there is a particular cultural notion regarding the meaning and definition of civil and human liberties, rooted within key documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. These notions regarding personal freedoms are just one element of what has come to be known as the American Dream, a cultural myth (Fisher, 1973) deemed "the most sacred secular narrative in American society" (Rowland & Jones, 2011, p. 127). Fisher describes myths as public dreams that function to "provide meaning, identity, a comprehensive mental image of the world, and to support the social order" (1973, p. 161). Myths serve as a sort of cultural talisman people can use to measure and justify actions and expectations, both for themselves and

others.

It is generally thought that the American Dream myth has its roots in the Declaration of Independence, with its phrase “life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness” (Kamp, 2009). The American Dream is a narrative of “success, prosperity, and hope for a better life for oneself, one’s children, and one’s future generations” (Moore & Ragsdale, 1997, p. 1). However, rather than a cohesive narrative, the American Dream myth contains inherent tensions. Fisher (1973) explains, “the American Dream is two dreams, or more accurately, it is two myths, myths we all share in some degree or other, and which, when taken together, characterize America as a culture” (p. 160). The two versions of the American Dream encapsulate many political differences within the United States and serve a useful framework for understanding the visual rhetoric of Pepper Spray Cop and OWS.

On one hand, the American Dream is a materialistic myth grounded in the Puritan work ethic that promises rewards for hard work (Fisher, 1973). On the other, the American Dream is a moralistic myth, harkening to the words of the Declaration of Independence; in this version, material gain is secondary to “true regard for the dignity and worth of each and every individual” (Fisher, 1973, p. 161). These two dueling myths embodied within the American Dream highlight a central clash in ideology useful for interpreting rhetoric around certain social movements in the United States. Namely, the myths differ regarding whether the fundamental nature of human liberty is the freedom *to do* what one wishes (the materialistic myth), or whether it is the freedom *to be* who or what one wishes, as in the moralistic myth (Fisher, 1973).

The American Dream represents a host of social and cultural hopes, values and norms that vary by individual interpretation. The American Dream’s internal conflict makes it a

particularly useful framework for examining the rhetoric coming out of OWS, as the movement was rooted in that conflict between the materialistic and moralistic myths of the American Dream. Following the example set forth by Foss and Domenici (2001), this essay uses the American Dream myth as a framework to examine the various elements of Pepper Spray Cop as visual rhetoric. This approach is also supported by Kjeldsen's (2000) argument that critics of visual political rhetoric consider the larger context to draw conclusions about arguments made by such rhetoric. By using the dueling myths of the American Dream as a framework, the critic can consider the meme in relation to these cultural perspectives in addition to more immediate events related to the nation's economy.

Looking at the Pepper Spray Cop memes through this metaphorical lens brings into focus the fact that these varied memes are really nuances on just one broad theme. The Pike figure is cut out from the original photo and juxtaposed with another image that depicts something of—in many cases—intangible value: A sense of innocence, the indomitable or vulnerable human spirit, sacred moments, or American patriotism. Through varying means, these memes draw on the dueling myths of the American Dream to achieve a rhetorical purpose. Memes appropriating overtly patriotic images depicting the nation's founding are perhaps the most explicit in doing so. For example, as mentioned previously, one of the first known exemplars of this meme depicted Pike's image within the *Declaration of Independence* painting (as seen in Figure 1). The Pike figure also turned up in Archibald Willard's *The Spirit of '76*. There, Pike's figure appears from the bottom right of the painting to pepper spray a wounded soldier, as the fifer and drummers continue to play. These overtly patriotic images from the American Revolutionary War (Judkis, 2011) can certainly conjure up notions of freedom because of the overt references to American

political liberty and classic documents such as the Declaration of Independence in which the American Dream myth is rooted.

However, less clearly patriotic images employed in the meme can also be seen to reference these dueling myths. Within the competing myths of the American Dream is a negotiation about the essential essence of freedom: Freedom from tyranny, freedom from want, freedom from fear, the freedom *to do* as one pleases or the freedom *to be* who one pleases. An iteration of the meme using a scene from the movie *It's a Wonderful Life* references that film's depiction of the struggle between the two myths of the American Dream. Tycoon Henry Potter's American Dream could be said to be in line with the materialistic myth, facing off against the hero George Bailey, who comes to represent the moralistic myth of the American Dream when he realizes that happiness is found in living a good life helping family and friends.

Even meme exemplars not strictly drawn from U.S. history or pop culture can be considered to reference these competing notions of freedom. Within the context of OWS, a meme using the photograph of the self-immolation of Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức could be said to subliminally reference an essential nature of human liberty that is at the foundation of the American Dream. The monk's actions were taken in protest of religious persecution; the taking of one's own life in such a protest can alternately be viewed as wresting a certain freedom from the jaws of oppression. In this meme, the Pike figure appears to add pepper spray to the flames surrounding the monk, diminishing the autonomy of the monk's actions. Through its intertextual nature, this meme also replaces the monk with the UC Davis protestors in the viewer's mind.

Rhetorical techniques

With a general scope of this meme established, the critic can turn to a closer examination

of the specific rhetorical techniques at work in it. The intertextual nature of these meme exemplars relies on appropriation and pastiche to juxtapose incongruous images, e.g. Pike's figure and some scene from pop culture or history. Stroupe (2004) notes this juxtaposition creates an "irritating" dialogism, which calls the viewer's attention to the interpretive dilemma in which the artifact's argument lies. Visually, Pepper Spray Cop contains a number of such interpretive dilemmas. For example, in the *Declaration of Independence* and *Spirit of '76* versions of the meme, Pike's image is scaled to fit within the painting, but still maintains a larger than life appearance as compared to the other figures in the images. His clothes clearly are wrong for the era and his actions incorrect for the scene; this dissonance causes the brain to pause and re-consider the image. In the former iteration of the meme, the police officer's pepper spray mist is aimed directly at the Declaration itself, while in the latter the spray is focused on a wounded American soldier writhing in agony on the ground. These juxtapositions convey to the viewer a sense of disrespect. Pike is violating these sacred, patriotic moments. Many of the memes convey this sense of violation or disrespect through incongruous juxtapositions. Other memes convey a milder version of this sentiment, setting up the Pike figure as a killjoy or brutal enforcer who metaphorically kicks a heroic individual down when they're struggling to overcome hardship or a challenge. An example of this might be the *Christina's World* meme, in which, rather than aid the woman, the Pike figure pepper sprays her instead.

Pike's figure is synecdoche for institutionalized power/authority, or perhaps more specifically, the abuse of that power. Though the actions of this specific individual certainly garnered a lot of attention, his figure stands in for these larger, institutionalized structures of which he is only a small part. The use of synecdoche through irritating juxtapositions is where

the true rhetorical power of these memes can be seen, creating an enthymematic argument that draws the viewer into its completion by creating a need to interpret the meme. When interpreted within the context of OWS and the framework of the American Dream myth, the use of intertextuality and synecdoche is effective in creating enthymematic arguments that serve as rhetoric around OWS and, more broadly, the basic nature of human freedom. While the intertextual practice of pastiche as displayed in Pepper Spray Cop is sometimes dismissed as a shallow practice, when combined with synecdoche it can make a powerful statement.

In fact, the meme's spread contributed to a flood of backlash against the university police response to the incident at UC Davis (Associated Press, 2011). For example, ACLU attorney Michael Risher called the event one of "the worst examples of police violence against student demonstrators that we've seen in a generation" (in Kane & Berton, 2012). By comparing the protestors with sympathetic characters from history (e.g. Rosa Parks or the Founding Fathers) the Pepper Spray Cop memes highlighted the callous manner in which the protestors were treated and did more to garner sympathy for the movement than otherwise might have happened.

Argumentative claims

While the previous discussion has outlined rhetorical strategies used in these memes, in order to critique the meme as social movement rhetoric, further analysis of the argumentation presented by these political visual rhetoric artifacts, as proposed by Kjeldsen (2000), can be useful here. According to Kjeldsen (2000), first the scholar must identify the persuasive cues presented by the visual artifact(s). As noted, the common persuasive cues defining these reaction Photoshop memes are the intertextual, incongruous juxtaposition of Pike's figure and another image, one that is iconic on some level. Pike's figure functions as synecdoche for

institutionalized power; the juxtaposition of his image with another can represent the relationship between “the people” and power. The choice of background or base image for the meme—the scene into which Pike is inserted—also functions as a persuasive cue by conveying certain feelings, emotions or associations. A final persuasive cue common to these memes is the target of the stream of pepper spray. The pepper spray in these memes is not always directed at an individual—sometimes the target is some other, non-human, item in the image—but it always has a specific focus. The line of the pepper spray literally draws the eye to a specific place within the scene. This intentionality can indicate the presence within the meme of some particular argument, whether it is about Pike, OWS, or human liberties, and perhaps convey a sense of direction of the argument.

To further illustrate, let us again turn to the *Declaration of Independence* iteration of the Pepper Spray Cop meme. The Pike image is digitally pasted into a famous painting, itself an artist’s representation of the events surrounding the presentation of the Declaration of Independence by its framers to the Continental Congress (Hazleton, 1907). This iconic image can hold several layers of meaning, and thus perform the metaphoric function of the iconic image in visual rhetoric in multiple ways. For one thing, Trumbull’s painting hangs in the United States’ Capitol building, the seat of the legislative branch of government. Additionally, the writing and signing of Declaration of Independence was a key turning point in American history, and could be considered a sacred moment within the nation’s story. The Declaration contains the famous words about “life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” which are at the essence of the American Dream myth. Its use as an iconic image within the meme evokes both the American system of government and the notions of human freedom that are at the center of the American

Dream myth. The Pike figure is centrally placed within the image, between the Congressional delegates and the drafters of the Declaration, and the figure is slightly larger than life in comparison to those of the Founding Fathers. The stream of pepper spray is not directed at any of the Founding Fathers, but rather at the Declaration itself on the desk where it is being presented to the Congress. This choice suggests an attack on the very essence of the American Dream and human liberty.

Next, the essay will extrapolate specific argumentative claims in the *Declaration of Independence* iteration of the meme. Specific claims about OWS and the protestors as suggested by the meme are now presented along with the corresponding data and warrant. Here, the data consists of specific visual elements from the meme that can serve to link the claim and warrant. The claims will be presented in terms of three separate areas of inquiry regarding what these memes can tell us about the digital visual political rhetoric of the OWS social movement.

First area of inquiry: OWS' claims about the relationship of people and power

Claim: Those with power in modern society abuse that power.

Data: *In the meme, the Pike figure serves as synecdoche for all police, which in turn indicates modern institutionalized authority. The figure is casually destroying a key foundation of the American notions of individual liberty.*

Warrant: If a low-level government official believes he can treat other human beings with so little regard, it means that other, larger systems of authority are corrupt. Abuse of power diminishes individual liberties.

This claim is in one sense the easiest to extrapolate from the meme, knowing its immediate context. Pepper Spray Cop was a direct reaction to a perceived use of excessive force on the part

of a member of the UC Davis campus police. The meme existed primarily to protest this use of force. However, in considering the details of the iconic image used for the juxtaposition and using the dueling myths embodied in the American Dream as an interpretive framework, a more nuanced argument regarding the relationship of power and individual, human liberties can be found within the meme. This example of Pepper Spray Cop also contains additional arguments that extend beyond this particular incident and to the larger OWS movement.

Second area of inquiry: OWS' claims about economic and social disparities in the U.S.

Claim: The modern focus on material gain for the few at the expense of the many as embodying the materialistic myth of the American Dream is destructive.

Data: *The Declaration of Independence is the foundation of the American Dream myth, with its words about the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Pike's image, functioning as synecdoche for modern, institutionalized power, has invaded a "sacred" meeting of the Founding Fathers and destroyed the Declaration of Independence.*

Warrant: If powerful institutions of modern society have destroyed the American Dream, it means that society is headed down the wrong path, and should return to the moralist myth interpretation of the American Dream myth, which emphasizes gain for all, not the few.

Third area of inquiry: The OWS protestors' views of themselves

Claim: The protestors are altruistic visionaries for the U.S., much like the nation's Founding Fathers were.

Data: *Pike's figure serves as synecdoche for all power. In this meme, the Founding*

Fathers represent the OWS protestors, as they are peaceably assembled to accomplish a radical vision for the (future) United States.

Warrant: If the positive intentions and vision of the Founding Fathers' radical acts are not questioned, but rather celebrated, so should the OWS protestors' actions be celebrated. The incongruity of Pike's interruption of the Founding Fathers' business highlights the incongruity of doings to the protestors.

These last two areas of inquiry may be of particular interest to scholars interested in the rhetoric of OWS as social movement rhetoric. A criticism of the movement levied by critics in the mainstream media was that OWS lacked a cohesive statement of demands or principles (DeLuca, Lawson and Sun 496). While the Pepper Spray Cop meme (and others, such as the 99% meme) are not the same as a clearly articulated mission statement as some may have been hoping for, they can provide some insight into the hopes of the protestors and movement supporters.

The preceding analysis demonstrates that very specific arguments related to the economic state of the country and human rights can be identified within these memes. That these nuanced arguments exist within just the one meme lends support for the notion that the larger corpus may be a very powerful vehicle for rhetoric, indeed. By nature, memes continually reference and expand upon one another within the corpus and larger events (e.g. Shifman, 2014). Milner (2013). argued that each individual iteration of OWS memes served to extend public commentary about the abuse of power. The preceding analysis supports this, but also demonstrates that these memes potentially conveyed arguments that go even deeper by addressing cultural norms, values and expectations.

By nature, memes are the product of co-creation among many individuals, speaking to

many varied elements and drawing from a myriad sources. This ethos is key to memes' success, triggering a rather unique cycle regarding the impact of such practices on social movements. The meme-creating and –sharing practices of OWS supporters became part of the larger media mainstream media story on OWS (Milner, 2013). The practices also reinforced that social media have transformed the context for activism, creating more potential spaces for activism than ever before (DeLuca, Lawson & Sun, 2012). The cycle of influence from online meme-making practices to mainstream media coverage and back extends the circle of influence of such practices. The visual arguments contained within particularly successful examples of Pepper Spray Cop, such as the *Declaration of Independence* iteration discussed above, had the potential to reach beyond sub-cultural spaces of the internet where such practices originated to consumers of mainstream media.

Internet Memes for the Critique of Activist Rhetoric

Kjeldsen argued that visual political rhetoric can be best analyzed by considering the persuasive cues present in the artifact in light of the political situation. The case study example of the Pepper Spray Cop meme presented here functioned as a digital visual rhetoric artifact by presenting specific arguments related to the state of affairs in the United States. While each iteration of the Pepper Spray Cop meme may contain claims specific to that individual example, the majority of these memes are based on certain common elements, such as the intertextual juxtaposition of the Pike figure and some other iconic image, and the stream of pepper spray as attention focuser. When one considers OWS in context, the picture is painted against a backdrop of economic upheaval. The movement slogan “We are the 99%” was an expression of frustration with perceived social inequalities within the United States; some have argued “the 99%

Movement” is a more accurate label for OWS (DeLaCruz, 2012). In many ways, OWS was a conflict over the essential meaning of human liberty: Is the meaning of freedom *to do* or *to be*? Based on this context, the “public dream” of the American Dream with its competing materialistic and moralistic myths serves a useful framework on which to hang rhetorical analysis of the memes. If we see OWS as essentially a clash between the two competing myths that are part and parcel of the American Dream, a deeper level of interpretation of these memes is unlocked.

By nature, memes provide a relatively consistent framework for messages as participants must work within an established premise in order to be part of the larger meme (Shifman, 2014). In this case, the minimum requirement for a meme to be recognized as part of the Pepper Spray Cop meme was some manipulation of the photograph of Pike pepper spraying protestors. This basic similarity often extended to creating clever juxtapositions of the Pike figure within another iconic image of some sort. The relative consistency within memes gives the critic a firmer foundation from which to draw conclusions about this relatively ephemeral type of visual political rhetoric.

The Pepper Spray Cop meme series effectively used intertextuality and synecdoche to make arguments regarding the essences of human liberty. While it is probable that not all who consumed these memes saw past the humor to the underlying, deeper arguments that does not change the fact that such arguments were central to the meme. The novelty of the meme helped it spread to other outlets and be seen by many people who might not otherwise participate in creating or consuming memes. As such, it was an effective vehicle for activist rhetoric. It is more difficult to draw direct conclusions about the effect of the meme on lasting societal change

within the United States. The movement in general succeeded in becoming part of the mainstream media story on the state of the economy in late 2011 and into 2012. It may have even influenced the 2012 State of the Union address when Obama “demanded ‘no bailouts, no handouts, no copouts’” (Garofoli, 2012). This basic notion of fairness is central to the competing dual myths of the American Dream, and was an element in the Pepper Spray Cop meme.

This paper demonstrates how memes can function as visual political rhetoric within contemporary social movements. As social media and other new communication tools become central to social movements, it will become important for scholars to consider these types of artifacts as rhetoric. This paper demonstrated how Kjeldsen’s method for the analysis of visual political rhetoric might be applied to memes to draw some conclusions about the rhetorical arguments presented by these messages. The particular characteristics of memes make D’Angelo’s rhetoric of intertextuality, synecdoche and iconic images useful tools to use in the critique of memes as social movement rhetoric. Though memes have often been dismissed as simple humor, this paper demonstrates they can instead be neatly packaged visual arguments. Future criticism of activist rhetoric ought to consider these non-traditional rhetorical artifacts for their impact to conversations about the movement.

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