To a Person With a Smartphone Everything Looks Like a Meme

Every time a new technology makes its way into the world, a mutation process is set in motion. Some of the changes it brings about are immediately visible, while others happen on a deeper level, manifesting themselves only years – even decades – later. And sometimes we get to observe them only through the distorting lens of side effects. In the case of digital computers, while their incredible capacity to calculate and manage data has been evident from the start, we had to wait until the 1980's – when the first digital cameras reached the market and personal computers became more accessible – to get the first glimpse of the incredible cultural tsunami that would invade

Words by Valentina Tanni

the world of images and, as a consequence, our perception of the world. Sure, a few visionaries had gifted us with some spoilers a few decades back – Paul Valéry's essay from 1928 *La conquête de l'ubiquité* (Valéry, 1960) describes a future where visual and auditory content would be delivered effortlessly in every home like water and gas – but for many years the revolutionary potential of digital images had been overlooked.

The killer combination between easy manipulation (thanks to simple and cheap editing software) and instant dissemination (made possible by the spread of internet connections) generated a whole new visual ecosystem, inhabited by living organisms, *quasi-objects* that evolve and mutate incessantly. In this context, nothing is fixed once and for all, and no image possesses a stable configuration. Digital files, whatever their content might be, are fundamentally *unstable*, constantly exposed to the possibility of being downloaded, modified and re-uploaded. During their perpetual journey on the internet, they can change location, disappear, but most importantly they can be manipulated in infinite ways. Sometimes the modifications are barely perceptible, other times they are so radical that they end up transfiguring the initial object, generating whole new content.

Yet another instability factor for the digital image resides in the metadata that accompanies it: each file can be enriched with additional code that carries information on its origin, its author, its technical specifications, and sometimes also its content. Metadata, which is mostly generated by cameras but can also be added later, represents a fundamental tool for finding one's way in the ocean of images in digital format within a network. Even a small change in their structure determines a redefinition of the context to which an image refers, as well as the future of its circulation and its degree of visibility.

As Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis explain in an essay entitled *Notes on the Margins of Metadata; concerning the undecidability of the digital image:*

"as photography becomes an encoded, networked object, the emphasis shifts from considering it in visual terms towards the semantic processes valorized within computational culture. This in turn establishes photography as a kind of unstable surface that produces meanings not through indexicality or representation but through the aggregation and topologies of data." (Rubinstein, Sluis, 2103) The manipulation of metadata, as one can imagine, poses a threat to authorship as well. The signature embedded in the file, which is sometimes advertised as a valuable tool for copyright protection, can be easily changed or removed, resulting in the eradication of any trace of the original author. And this happens on a daily basis, despite efforts made by software companies and photography organizations to enforce regulations and good practices.

The instability of digital images is particularly visible in internet memes, a genre of content that seems to be the perfect embodiment of this unstoppable mutation process. In the context of memetics, every image is a *potential template*, and every piece of content is eligible for re-use, no matter the source, style or medium. Borrowing the words written by Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman in *Mode d'emploi du détournement*, the mere act of meme-making implies "indifference toward a meaningless and forgotten original" (Debord, Wolman, 1956). Indifference is a keyword here: the reused material, whether it is a work of art considered sacred or a screenshot from a reality show, is treated with the same approach. No reverential attitude, no particular respect for the original (which sometimes

is unknown): every piece of our visual repository is a potential piece of the puzzle. Nothing is untouchable, everything is transformable, *the ways of Mash-up are infinite*.

Theorized in the Sixties, this anarchic attitude towards the use of images is now typical of a generation that attaches less and less importance to authorship and intellectual property, a generation accustomed to the frenetic consumption of content, addicted to the practice of file sharing and grown up in the context of a hypertrophic visual ecosystem.

What is particularly interesting, if we address the genre of digital photography, is the fact that in a similar cultural milieu, when a photograph enters the public sphere – and it is therefore seen and used by millions of people – it immediately ceases to exist as a single entity. *It morphs into a vast network of variations, an ever-expanding galaxy of possible versions of itself, a swarm of covers and remixes that ends up becoming the true nature of the image itself.* Its cultural significance, its aesthetics and all its possible interpretations are inextricably tied up to the entire cluster, destroying the possibility of a unique vision forever. This applies to every image that reaches a certain peak of popularity, regardless

of the date, provenance and cultural status. It happens to the *Mona Lisa* and the picture of Bernie Sanders in mittens; to the *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* and Baby Yoda.

But it can also happen to everyday pictures when they accidentally become worldwide icons. It is the case – just to make one of the many possible examples – of the meme template known as *Disaster Girl*. The original image, shot by Dave Roth in January 2005 in Mebane, North Carolina, shows a little girl – his daughter Zoe – smiling devilishly in front of a burning house. The image was first uploaded on the internet in January 2007, but it began to gain attention only at the end of the year when Roth submitted the image to JPG Magazine for a competition. Over the years, the *Disaster Girl* photo sparked thousands of derivative versions, lighting up the imagination of an incredible number of people all around the world. Zoe's face has become a piece of language, a sign that is (almost) universally recognizable and is used to communicate concepts, tell jokes, express emotions and disseminate political statements. The original photograph has been retouched, disassembled, juxtaposed with text and other images, reproduced in paintings, drawings and videos. After 16 years from the moment in which the camera button was pressed, *this image is not a photograph anymore*, it is a vast and tentacular cultural phenomenon. The singular image has mutated into *a visual galaxy* that keeps expanding and producing new meanings.

The existence of this kind of dispersed and collaborative digital photography immediately raises another question: what happens to the concept of authorship? Or, to be more exact, what happens to what Michel Foucault called the *author function* (Foucault, 1969)? In the case of the *Disaster Girl* image, even if we know the name of the person that took the initial picture, this information isn't relevant in any way. It does not add value to the image – culturally nor economically – and it doesn't help us understand the possible meanings expressed by it. As Geoffrey Batchen reminds us, "photography's authorship has always been a matter of controversy, given that a selling point of the new medium was that it apparently

dispensed altogether with the need for an artist's intervening hand" (Batchen, 2012). But in the case of internet memes the issue is not even on the table anymore: the author simply doesn't function as one. Information about authorship re-enters the scene only when these cultural artifacts are sold on the market, to determine whose bank account will collect the money at the end of the sale.

This has become very clear when *Disaster Girl* – together with other notable memes like *Bad Luck Brian*, *Success Kid*, *Nyan Cat* – was sold as an NFT at the beginning of 2021 for a consistent sum of money ($500,000, according to the press). But as Silvia Dal Dosso explains in an essay about the rise of Crypto Art, when it comes to memes, the question of authorship is very complex because they can never be considered single units of content: "like participatory performance works, or some forms of new media art", she writes, "memes exist in a given period for a given historical reason, sometimes political, often subcultural, as their major significance is happening on ephemeral media such as chats, threads and comments in private groups. For this reason a meme should not be considered an autonomous unit of information that propagates on the net following a 'spatial' and 'viral' diffusion model, and consequently it should not be sold as such" (Dal Dosso, 2021).

In a recent article, published in the popular newsletter The Convivial Society, L. M. Sacasas explains the big cultural shift that we're currently witnessing in very clear terms: "the image-making tools have been democratized. The image itself has been demystified. Every image we encounter now invites us to manipulate it to whatever end strikes our fancy [...] it's probably too simplistic to put it this way, but perhaps we might say that the age of the image has yielded to the age of the meme" (Sacasas, 2021). Building on the work of famous media scholars like Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman, Sacasas points out the fact that every technology shapes the way we see the world and the way we use language in profound ways. So, what does living in the age of memes imply? In which way does memetic logic influence our minds, our visual habits and our cultural

system? We're still not able to answer these questions in a clear and convincing way, as we are deeply immersed inside the unstoppable cycle of manipulation and remixes like fish in water. But something is already clear to see: images have become malleable materials, and they tend to evolve in space and time like live entities. We know we have the power to change them, and we do it incessantly: in our minds first, and then on our screens, collectively reshaping our visual heritage with each click.

Going back to Neil Postman – whose writings are still incredibly relevant several decades after their first publication – a famous statement he made in 1998 immediately comes to mind. That year, during a conference in Denver, Colorado, the American theorist listed five fundamental features of technological change. The third one was about the fact that every technology makes people use their minds and bodies in different ways, influencing the way they codify the world: "perhaps you are familiar with the old adage that says: to a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail", he said to the audience, "we may extend that truism: to a person with a pencil, everything looks like a sentence. To a person with a TV camera, everything looks like an image. To a person with a computer, everything looks like data"(Postman, 1998). Maybe today, to a person with a smartphone, everything looks like a meme.

REFERENCES

Batchen, Geoffrey. *Photography and Authorship*. Fotomuseum Winterthur, 2012.

Dal Dosso, Silvia. *Cats, Frogs and Cryptoartists: What if Auteur .jpgs Become a Luxury Good*. Institute for Network Cultures, 2021.

Debord, Guy-Ernest and Wolman Gil J. *Mode d'emploi du détournement*. Les lèvres nues n. 8, 1956.

Foucault, Michel. *Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?* Société Française de Philosophie, Bulletin 63, 1969.

Postman, Neil. *Five Things We Need to Know About Technological Change*. Talk delivered in Denver Colorado, March 28, 1998.

Rubinstein, Daniel and Sluis, Katrina. *Notes on the Margins of Metadata; concerning the undecidability of the digital image*. Photographies, Volume: 6 issue 1, Routledge, 2013, pp. 151-158.

L. M. Sacasas. *Nice Image You've Got There. Shame If It Got Meme*d. The Convivial Society: Vol. 2, No. 15, 2021.

Valéry, Paul. La conquête de l'ubiquité, 1928. *Oeuvres, tome II, Pièces sur l'art*, Nrf, Gallimard, Bibl. de la Pléiade, 1960, pp. 1283-1287.