SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE
JUST FINISHED READING SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE.

WHAT MORE COULD I SAY THAN THIS?

O, CHRISTMAS TREE

I love Christmas trees and the holiday spirit they bring, but walking around the city the past few days and
seeing the aftermath made me sad.

DEWDROPS AS STARS

Innumerable as the stars of night,
Or stars of morning, dewdrops which the sun
Impearls on every leaf and every flower.
– John Milton

TRUST AND “THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI”
There are many striking features in Robert Wiene’s film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, a 1920 German silent horror film, but the one that stands out is the theme of trust. Who can be trusted? Is anyone or anything what it seems? In a horror movie, of course, trust is a shaky thing, but Wiene’s production values are so outlandish and distorted, that they elevate the sense of uncertainty and imbalance far beyond the plot. This is in keeping with Gerald Mast’s explanation in *A Short History of the Movies*: “The Expressionist filmmaker had to design and construct an artificial landscape that was graphic in inspiration and boldly disturbing, on and beneath the surface” (170). The sets, music, techniques, even the overacting and over-long shots all work to create an artificial landscape that is loaded with ambiguity. The audience can’t trust its own judgment because everything is so skewed.

The film’s opening is less expressionistic than the rest of the film, yet it makes a strong impression and sets up the question of who is in charge. Together with trust, control can be either reassuring or unsettling. By the looks of things, *Caligari* is going for unsettling. The iris effect opens onto the first scene that is hard to decipher. Two men sit motionless with what appears to be white string hanging around them, Francis’ head lolls to one side, and only the “string” moves slightly. They look like marionettes, but they come to life when the man in the background starts talking. It quickly becomes clear that these are not puppets, they are men sitting in a desolate garden, and the strings are actually dead branches. The setting could have been established without putting the branches in front of the men, but placing them there and making them white, not only makes them visible, it makes a statement. It’s a quick statement, but the visual impact lingers and raises the question that remains beyond the final scene: If they are puppets, who controls the string?

The iris effect continues throughout the film. At just the right moments it opens and closes the collective eye of the audience and gives a sense of the classic hypnotist’s refrain, “You are getting verrrry sleepy.” The shadows and strangeness of the setting reinforce the sense of being under a spell.

When the story of the town clerk’s murder comes out, the intertitle tells us it is “the first of a series of mysterious crimes.” At this point, Cesare has been mentioned at the fair, but he has not been on screen yet. Because of Caligari’s earlier interaction with the clerk, the audience is led to think that he is the killer, but as the story progresses, we are redirected.

The killer could be Cesare or Caligari. As I watched, I realized there could be a third suspect. The love triangle between Francis, Alan, and Jane suggests that Francis had a motive for killing Alan. The bright lighting on Alan’s face, compared to the darkness around Francis when they are together, further pushes this idea. By the end of the film, we still don’t know who committed the murders. It’s true that Cesare is seen entering Jane’s room to kill her, but he can’t go through with it and only kidnaps her instead. This situation leaves open the possibility that Cesare didn’t kill Alan or the town clerk.

Near the end of the film, we learn that the mad man is not Caligari, but Francis. In a scene that mirrors Dr.
Caligari’s earlier capture, Francis is wrestled into a straightjacket and led into the room where Caligari was held in the earlier scene. The difference is that when Francis is dragged in, the chaotic paintings that were clear when Caligari was there, have been scribbled over and blurred. This example of Expressionist technique is a strong representation of change and confusion. Again, the audience doesn’t know whom to trust. While Francis lies agitated and rocking, Dr. Caligari is now the sane-looking Dr. Sonnow, the director of the asylum. Dr. Sonnow doesn’t wear the round eyeglasses that gave Dr. Caligari such a crazed look. His hair stripes are gone and so are the matching gloves. After Dr. Sonnow tries unsuccessfully to calm Francis, he signals the orderlies to sit Francis up. This recollects the scenes where Caligari sat Cesare up, like a puppet. Dr. Sonnow turns toward the camera, reaches into his pocket, and puts on the round glasses. He turns back to Francis whose eyes instantly widen and he goes still. As Caligari/Sonnow looks into Francis’ eyes, Francis stops moving, his breathing calms, and the orderlies lie him back down. We don’t know if he is hypnotized by Dr. Caligari/Sonnow, but it appears that he is. Caligari turns to the camera again and pointedly removes his glasses. The intertitle says, “At last I understand his mania. He thinks I am that mystic Caligari—! And now I also know how to cure him.” The final scene has Caligari putting his glasses back into his jacket pocket. The iris slowly closes in on his face and holds for a long shot. His appearance is more Sonnow, than Caligari. The glasses, the clownish hair stripes, and the gloves are gone once more. The maniacal expression is changed, but it’s not gone. Although he looks like Sonnow, shades of Caligari remain, and that is chilling.

We’re left to wonder: Who is in charge? Who is the mad man? Can those in control be trusted. Interestingly, the behind the scene story of the addition of the framing narrative against the wishes of the writers, reinforces those concerns. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* doesn’t answer these questions, but by virtue of plot and production values, it asks them again and again.

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**Works cited**


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**LAUNDRY DANCE**

*Posted on March 7, 2016*

*Posted in Poetry, Writing*

*Leave a comment*
On laundry day, like Narcissus, I’m lured by the reflection. The washer’s drum my River Styx, our clothes draw my affection. Hot water fills the old machine as soap suds burst and bubble, Obscuring all the grimy grit from daily toils and trouble.

I sniff your dark blue shirt once more, before I dunk it in. A deep inhale, a smile, a sigh. It’s eau de you, My Sin. The agitator rumbas to its Afro-Cuban beat, While bunching up our undies in a mangled, tangled heap.

Your pant leg circles my red skirt. My bra shimmies your sock, Like the rhythmic spinning cycles of a syncopated clock. And sometimes these entanglements tear a tenuous thread, Our delicate connection frays to raggedy instead.

Then everything goes silent just before the rinse arrives, To sanitize the slurry of our busy, messy lives. We fold together neatly, and we put our clothes away, Closely snuggled in the closet to be worn another day.

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THE TINY REVOLUTION

Posted on March 6, 2016
Posted in Essays, Writing
Tagged Internet Memes, Rhetorical Studies
Leave a comment

THE RHETORICAL POWER OF INTERNET MEMES

Have you seen the overweight cat with the blank stare asking, “I can has cheezburger?”

Has Willy Wonka patronizingly asked you a question?

Did you see the determined toddler enthusiastically fist-pumping his latest success?

If so, you are familiar with the world of Internet memes, those photos, images, hashtags, or videos that spread virus-like, via the Internet. They sometimes take the form of a pithy caption on a photo designed to
make you laugh or roll your eyes. In a growing number of cases, memes compel socially positive action, but they are often dismissed as low culture, vulgar, and a waste of time.

Memes can be all of those things, but whether or not they are valuable is moot because they have become vital components in the distribution of cultural information. They are part of our lives and their growing presence and rhetorical effectiveness has the power to influence our world. Already, memes reach as far as the blogs of prepubescent teens to corporate board rooms to philanthropic efforts like the $100 million fundraiser for ALS Research.

Memes are a relatively new cultural phenomenon. They have been around since before LOLCat made its first appearance by an anonymous poster on 4chan.com in 2006 (Miltner 10). The term itself is older, and was first coined by Richard Dawkins in his book The Selfish Gene. “We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation” (192). Dawkins turned the Greek “mimeme” into meme (rhymes with cream), and the meme was born ... or at least it was named. Since then memes have become a popular and powerful mode of communication in today’s world, and their intent is as varied as the individual memes themselves. What is indisputable is that the proliferation of memes came about with the advent of social media. These bits of information are passed from one person to another in what is quite clearly a worldwide web and a social network. By examining the distribution of power, shaping of knowledge, and building of community, this paper presents a rhetorical analysis of the social functions of memes as discussed in The History and Theory of Rhetoric by James A. Herrick.

In Rhetoric, Herrick says, “Issues of power and its distribution have always been central to rhetorical theory” (17). The Ancient Greek Sophists knew and the oligarchy feared that those with rhetorical know-how could use that expertise to gain power. As Michel Foucault argues in “The Discourse on Language,” knowledge is power. Considering the ease of creation and replication, the rhetorical effectiveness of memes is illustrated through their tremendous impact on the distribution of power. Easy access to the Internet creates an egalitarian platform that allows anyone with a computer, tablet, or smart phone to participate. OF THE PEOPLE

Occupy Wall Street, the grassroots protest movement that was born and built on the Internet, illustrates the power of memes to galvanize from the bottom up. In Memes in Digital Culture, author Limor Shifman explains: “Protests such as ... Occupy Wall Street are not backed by a strong existing organization—they are energized by the digitally coordinated actions of millions of ordinary people. Memes play an important role in these coordinated actions” (Shifman 128). A key element is “ordinary people.” It is not government, religious institutions, or big business. In fact it is not any power-wielding institution. It is ordinary people using the tools they have to take power into their own hands to effect change.

Los Indignados, the social movement protesting austerity measures in Spain that predates the Occupy movement, had similar success. “One of the most remarkable aspects of this sustained protest organization was its success at keeping political parties, unions, and other powerful political organizations out: indeed, they were targeted as part of the political problem” (Bennett and Segerberg 741). The success of Occupy Wall Street and Los Indignados is disputed because of its broad message and vague goals. What cannot be disputed, though, is the effectiveness of memes to spread the word.

The ability of memes to distribute power grows when they infiltrate mainstream media. Because memes are such a new cultural phenomenon, news sources often take notice, and the message behind the meme spreads further still. This was demonstrated with Los Indignados. “The indignados (sic) achieved impressive levels of communication with outside publics ... when anonymous Twitter streams and YouTube videos were taken up as mainstream press sources” (Bennett and Segerberg 741-2). Here we see memes not only working to distribute power through Los Indignados, but the memes themselves are given credibility through the media’s use of them.

That mainstream media now scavenges social networks like Twitter and YouTube for news sources is further evidence of the rhetorical power of memes. It also illustrates the viral nature of memes. As Dawkins says, “[Memes] propagate themselves ... by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation” (192). This imitation is inherent to memes with the duplicated efforts and copied formats spreading from one person to the next until it becomes noticeable enough to be reported
While most memes do not have the *gravitas* as those used for the Occupy or *Indignados* movements, even frivolous memes factor into the distribution of power. LOLCat, Condescending Wonka, and Success Kid function through shared humor, and as George Orwell said, “Every joke is a tiny revolution.” As memes are shared and replicated, their impact increases until eventually the real power behind memes takes hold and the once private joke becomes public knowledge.

This transition from private to public, highlights the rhetorical ability of memes to shape knowledge:

“Although [memes] spread on a micro basis, their impact is on the macro level: memes shape the mindsets, forms of behavior, and actions of social groups. This attribute is highly compatible to the way culture is formed in the Web 2.0 era, which is marked by platforms for creating and exchanging user-generated content” (18).
— Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*

As users share memes with friends and family, their values and beliefs are distributed right along with the laughs.

Repetition is a characteristic of memes that helps them achieve the level of influence Shifman describes. It is a frequent and effective rhetorical device that is a trademark of successful memes. Sharing can reinforce knowledge, but the repeated and viral nature of memes can shape it. LOLCats, one of the most popular and enduring meme genres, offer an example. The memes feature a cat picture superimposed with a misspelled and grammatically tortured caption. The explosive popularity of the meme spawned Cheezburger Networks, which received $30 million in venture funding in 2011, two best-selling books, a Bible translation, a play, an art show, and a massive worldwide following (Miltner 9). The quirky captions now known as lolspeak are an essential element of the meme. “[Lolspeak] has been taken up with great gusto by the LOLCat community and operates as the *lingua franca* of the I Can Has Cheezburger comment boards” (Miltner 30). In order to produce a successful LOLCat meme, a user must have knowledge of proper lolspeak usage. “LOLCats are operating as a genre, and the appropriate execution of that genre is central to their enjoyment” (Miltner 7). These memes are lighthearted entertainment, and learning lolspeak does not have much value outside the Cheezburger comment boards. Yet the number of people who know and use the dialect is indicative of the power of memes to shape knowledge.

The knowledge created and dispersed by the “We Are The 99 Percent” meme carries more weight than LOLCats, but it similarly illustrates the power of memes to share knowledge. We are the 99 Percent was created in support of Occupy Wall Street. It provides an example of the rhetorical use of kairos, using an opportune moment or situation to convey a message appropriate to that moment” (Herrick 47). The meme based at wearethe99percent.tumblr.com, is a series of user-generated photos and handwritten notes describing personal financial difficulties resulting from the severe economic inequity in the United States. Together with Occupy Wall Street, the 99% meme furthered the message and created new knowledge and greater awareness. The repetitive format of the photographs reinforces that knowledge.
The “Successful Black Man” meme is an excellent illustration of the ability of memes to shape knowledge. The style is similar to LOLcat and features a photo of a well-dressed black man with a superimposed caption. The top caption relates a racial stereotype that the bottom caption quickly contradicts. “On the one hand, its name, “Successful Black Guy,” hints at the racial presumption that the modifier “successful” needs to be inserted before the “black man” category in order to differentiate between this guy and the “regular” black man. The meme thus reinforces stereotypes by presenting the exception that proves the rule. Yet at the same time, this meme is poignant with a strong anti-stereotyping message” (Shifman 162). The message calls attention to potential racist assumptions in a joking, familiar way. It is a joke, but the joke is on the racist reader.

The formulaic style of memes enhances their effectiveness, and their repetitive nature develops familiarity and easier acceptance. But the benefits of a consistent look go beyond the messages memes send. It also plays a part in building community. In “The Discourse on Language,” Foucault says, “In every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures…” (Foucault 216). At first glance this idea seems to go against the underground world of meme creation. While there are no gatekeepers for the production and distribution of memes, they do follow a specific format and rules of engagement. “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” (Shifman 99). Memes by their nature are imitative, but the individuals Shifman refers to may not be as solitary as they seem.

It may be paradoxical to think of meme creators and fans as members of a community, but the popularity of creating and sharing memes contradicts that idea. This can be tied to Kenneth Burke’s theory of identification and the drive for communion. “Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division...If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity” (1326). The community that meme sharing builds, both within message board cultures and between friends and family who share favorite memes cannot be denied. As Shifman explains it, “In an era marked by ‘network individualism,’ people use memes to simultaneously express both their uniqueness and their connectivity” (30). The connectivity is the thing, and in sharing, communities are created and thrive, both online and in real life.

One of humanity’s most pleasurable ways of connecting is through humor. As seen in the Occupy Wall Street and similar movements, one purpose of memes is to compel action, but their original intent, which is still very much alive, was to make us laugh. “Ultimately, LOLcats are funny pictures of cats; however, the ways in which they traffic in fundamental human needs like belonging and emotional expression are no laughing matter” (Miltner 7). The need for belonging is answered in memes’ power to build community, an essential social function of rhetoric. It is through the laughter that memes provoke that we can more easily connect.

Memes distribute power by creating a more egalitarian platform to generate and disseminate information. They also allow for easier access to information that might otherwise be censored or destroyed. Their effectiveness in shaping knowledge is assisted through repetition, which reinforces the message, and kairos, which uses the opportune moment to build onto other messages, such as the “We are 99%” meme did with Occupy Wall Street. Finally, memes work in a number of ways to build online and real communities. These functions combine in memes to create a new avenue of rhetoric that is effective, powerful, popular, and funny.
FULL ENOUGH

Essay completed in response to an assignment for ENG 472 Rhetorical Studies, Arizona State University, Dr. Katherine Heenan, Spring 2015. Grade: A.
The moon isn’t full until tomorrow
but I couldn’t wait that long

THE SORROW AND THE JOY, BUT MOSTLY THE JOY

Posted on May 7, 2014
Posted in Creative Nonfiction, Writing
8 Comments

My Mama died a year ago today. It simultaneously feels like forever ago, and just yesterday. At the memorial service we held in her hometown, I had the privilege of giving her eulogy. Afterward I promised some family and friends that I’d put my notes together and email them a copy of what I’d said.

I had every intention of following through, but when I sat down to do it, I couldn’t. It felt too fresh, and I felt too sad. My notes didn’t make sense, and as is often the case when I speak publicly, I had no memory of what I’d actually said, how I strung my thoughts together, or even if I just stood in front of a church-load of people and spouted gibberish.
But a year has passed and even though it still feels too fresh and I sometimes feel too sad, I can hear my mother’s voice in my head. JUST DO IT ALREADY! So, I’m doing it already. As promised, here is my Mama’s Eulogy, by me.

Thank you for being here to honor Anita ... my mother. And thank you also for the love and support so many of you have shared with my family these past weeks and throughout the past year during her illness. Your care and your kindness made the unbearable bearable for her and for us, and we thank you. Continue reading →

SHOOTING STARS AND THE PROMISE OF HOPE

Posted on December 12, 2012
Posted in Authors, Books, The Silent Writers Collective, The Writer's Devotional, Writing
Tagged 2012, Geminid Meteor Shower, Running, Writing
2 Comments

I saw a shooting star when I was out running this dark, early morning. That’s exciting for many reasons, but primarily because 1) I was out running this dark, early morning, and 2) I saw a shooting star!

That bright solitary shooter lifted my mood in the way shooting stars do, and it helped me finish a tough run with unexpected oomph. It also reminded me that the Geminid Meteor Shower is this week, Thursday and Friday. I’ll be out there watching, bundled up against the cold, mug of hot chocolate in hand, perhaps something harder. I’ll take the quiet time as a chance to look at the past year.

2012. It’s been a dilly and it’s not over yet. There’s the Geminid this week, the end of the world on the 21st (as if!), Christmas on the 25th, and a New Year’s Eve 5K run on the 31st. It’s a busy few days wrapping up a busy year.

In Madame Bovary, Gustav Flaubert wrote of Emma:

She did not believe that things could remain the same in different places, and since the portion of her life that lay behind her had been bad, no doubt that which remained to be lived would be better.

If you know much about Emma Bovary, you know things didn’t turn out to be better for her. But I’m going to ignore her end for now and think about her hope instead, especially as the new year approaches. For me, 2012 was manic. Heart-pumping highs, heart-breaking lows. As 2013 gets ready to chime in, remnants of the highs and lows linger. It’s going to be a year of decisions and changes. I’m not a fan of decisions and changes. I like static; it’s easier. But new years hold the promise of new hope, new oomph, new excitement. Even after welcoming in 50 of them, I still feel that way.

So, with a wit more wisdom and a smidge less naivete than Madame Bovary, I’m keeping the promise of hope and looking forward to 2013 with the thought that no doubt that which remains to be lived will be better. Not that it’s been all bad. It certainly hasn’t. I’ve enjoyed far more than my share of heart-pumping highs and I’m going to do my part to make sure that continues. I’m going to keep running, I’m going to keep writing, and I’m going to keep looking for shooting stars.

PS: Happy birthday, Gustav Flaubert
Last week I decided to participate in WordPress’ Weekly Photo Challenge. This week, WordPress neglected to post a theme. As we eager bloggers stood around grumbling about having to wait, one enterprising blogger (cobbies69) suggested we use “Waiting” as this week’s theme.

I selected this photo, shot at MacAlpine’s Soda Fountain in Phoenix because the wait from the moment the waitress set this hot fudge brownie sundae down in front of me, to shooting the photo, to finally digging in, seemed interminable. Well worth it though!

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A Thousand Words is a photo prompt posted on Sundays. Maybe the image will inspire you to write a short story, a poem, or a blog post. Maybe it will send you straight to the frozen food aisle at Safeway. Whatever your response, I hope the picture inspires you to some sort of creative zen.

If you write something based on the image, feel free to share a link in the comments section. Also feel free to use the photo on your blog, just be sure to give proper credit, which I will always include in the post or the caption.

Be inspired with motivational quotes, and famous quotes on traveling the world. Posted By Dave And Deb • 51 Comments » • Inspiration. Travel quotes can be powerful. Through quotes, we have been inspired to take chances, we've been inspired to travel, to take action, and to strive to live a better life. Feel free to pin, save, tweet, and post on your own social media. Let's spread the word of love, travel, and adventure. We need it now more than ever! » Literature is the one place in any society where, within the secrecy of our own heads, we can hear voices talking about everything in every possible way. SALMAN RUSHDIE, speech, Feb. 6, 1990. This is what I try to tell my students: this is one great thing that literature can do -- it can make us identify with situations and people far away. If it does that, it's a miracle. CHINUA ACHEBE, The Atlantic Online, Aug. Posted on November 22, 2011 by Hawthorn Mineart Posted in Books, Writing — 4 Comments 4. Word count for famous novels, in ascending order by number of words. Based on this list compiled by Nicole Humphrey Cook. (Thanks Nicole, and sorry for stealing; I wanted to see the list in order.) For average word counts based on genre, see this handy reference. Also, here’s another list I may swipe and add in here. Harry Potter Books Philosopher’s Stone – 77,325 Chamber of Secrets – 84,799 Prisoner of Azkaban – 106,821 Goblet of Fire – 190,858 Order of the Phoenix – 257,154 Half Blood Prince – 169,441 De...  NaNoWriMo Prep: Word Count

Comfort | The Lady Nerds™ says: October 22, 2015 at 10:59 pm.