

OBSCURED BY THE CLOUD: MEDIA ARCHAEOLOGY, TOPOS STUDY, AND THE INTERNET

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“The Façade of tradition may mask innovation”

Peter Burke, Varieties of Cultural History (1997)

THE PATH TO TOPOS ARCHAEOLOGY – A PERSONAL VIEW

There has been much discussion in recent years about media archaeology, and a growing number of scholars are situating their works under its banner. However, there is no such thing as “media archaeology” as a unified set of tools, methods and protocols. There is no scholarly network either, no journals, conferences or departments. Rather, there are media archaeologists who agree about some principles while diverging on others. Whatever coherence it may have, media archaeology is a discursive field where ideas are presented and (con)tested, and applied to ever-new topics and areas. There is nothing wrong with this as long as the multidirectional nature of the discourse retains its ability to uncover new questions and areas of investigation, while working against new orthodoxies, doctrines and boundaries. As it is, media archaeology is a “happy science,” or perhaps no science at all. Perhaps it is best described as a critical practice that questions assumed certainties and performs excavations at the backlands of media culture, challenging canonized media cultural narratives, pointing out omissions, continuities and discontinuities.

The variant I have been developing during the past twenty years I call “media archaeology as topos study” or simply “topos archaeology.” Its origins go back to my student days, when I was trying to decide whether to follow the path of a cultural historian, literary scholar or visual media art activist. In the end, the outcome was a combination of all these. I learned about Ernst Robert Curtius, the founder of topos research, at a university course on literary theory. The idea of *topoi*, or recurring commonplace elements that “lived on” in literary traditions for hundreds and even thousands of years, stimulated my imagination. It must have happened because I was inspired by both historical and contemporary cultural forms. As a film buff I had already noticed how the cinema was recycling formulas, reinterpreting and revising them to retain the audiences’ attention. Here was something similar. Clichés the spectators already knew (whether they knew it or not) were given ever-new surface manifestations. What seemed novelty and progress was built on processes that were often very old and iterative in nature. Film culture, it began to dawn on me, was a kind of topos engine.

I first encountered the “life of topoi” first-hand as a beginning scholar in the early 1980s, when I got an opportunity to spend a few months in Rome, collecting material for my master’s thesis at the Vatican Library. I thought then I would spend my life as a cultural historian focusing on sixteenth-century French and Italian culture. I was particularly fascinated by the thinking of Michel de Montaigne, whose overarching interests, lack of prejudice, refusal of judgment,

and self-ironic and skeptical stance deeply influenced my outlook on life. I decided to focus my thesis on the journal he kept during his trip to Italy in 1580-81.¹ I was particularly curious about how he found out what he found out. Did he read guidebooks, learn from local inhabitants, rely on received notions (traditions) or draw his own conclusions from what he saw? I became interested in the channels of communication that were operational in a cultural setting that was very different from today’s media culture. Yes, Montaigne did read books, listened to locals, and kept his eyes open. But did he rely on the testimonies of his own senses? The answer was yes and no – a conclusion Montaigne would probably have endorsed.



Fig. 1. Michel de Montaigne, *Journal de Voyage en Italie*, ed. Pierre Michel (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1974). Author’s copy, bought in 1980.

As I read accounts by other sixteenth-century travelers I began noticing regularities between texts that could not have influenced each other. Why was Florence always characterized as *la bella* (beautiful) while Venice was always *la ricca* (rich) and *Padova la dotta* (learned)? These could not possibly be the travelers’ own judgments, although they often emphasized how they had seen this or that thing “with my own eyes.” The solution appeared

on the title page of yet another manuscript, where the traveler had scribbled a list of the epithets of Italian cities: “Milano la grande, Vinegia [Venice] la ricca, Genova la superba, Bologna la grassa, Firenze la bella, Padova la dotta, Ravenna l’antica, Roma la santa.” I understood that whether the travelers had learned the epithets from other travelers, local guides, guidebooks or other sources, they were relying on a topos tradition: using inherited formulas that were called up when needed.² Among other functions, the list served as a mnemonic aid to memorize the names of the principal Italian cities. In that sense it was part of living oral culture.

When a traveler characterized Florence as “beautiful” it had less to do with a first-hand impression than with the ways in which tradition, “the hand of the past,” guides perceptions. The travelers may have used the topoi deliberately, but more often than not they probably resorted to them without being fully aware of them. The topos tradition was much more extensive than the minds of the individuals who lived and worked within its influence. The stereotypical formulas they evoked in their writings connected them to cultural traits that went back to the Middle Ages and guidebooks like the famous *Mirabilia urbis Romae*, used by countless pilgrims across centuries. What made the observation striking for me was the context: the sixteenth century was supposed to be the aftermath of the Renaissance, a period of profound rupture when humans opened their eyes to their surroundings after the long metaphysical sleep of the Middle Ages, as the great liberalist art and cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt taught us in the nineteenth century. Finding out how people’s perceptions were guided by tradition rather than their own judgment demonstrated for me that Burckhardt’s great idea of the Renaissance was really a projection of the values of his own time back into the past.

As it happens, the focus of my interests began to shift, although I never lost my passion for the past – the lost dimension preserved as fragments waiting to be interpreted. Visual culture took center stage as I began to organize media art festivals and art exhibitions. However, it did not take long until I rediscovered the topoi in another context. In a way, the idea of topos itself became a topos for me, as I gave it a new meaning in a field where it had scarcely been applied before. This happened in the context of the virtual reality mania that exploded around 1990. Like many others, I became intrigued by the new synthetic realms or “cyberspaces” one was able to ‘enter’ by means of wearable head-mounted displays and datagloves (even “datasuits” were experimented with). Did they really represent an ontological rupture in our relationship to reality, a before and after experience? I was less convinced about this than the self-made VR prophets like John Perry Barlow who began almost overnight spreading the new technological evangelium. “Immersing” myself in the archive, I discovered earlier phenomena like the panorama and the stereoscope that had already offered immersive experiences in the past. Both had given rise to “manias” in the nineteenth century. So how new was “the new”?

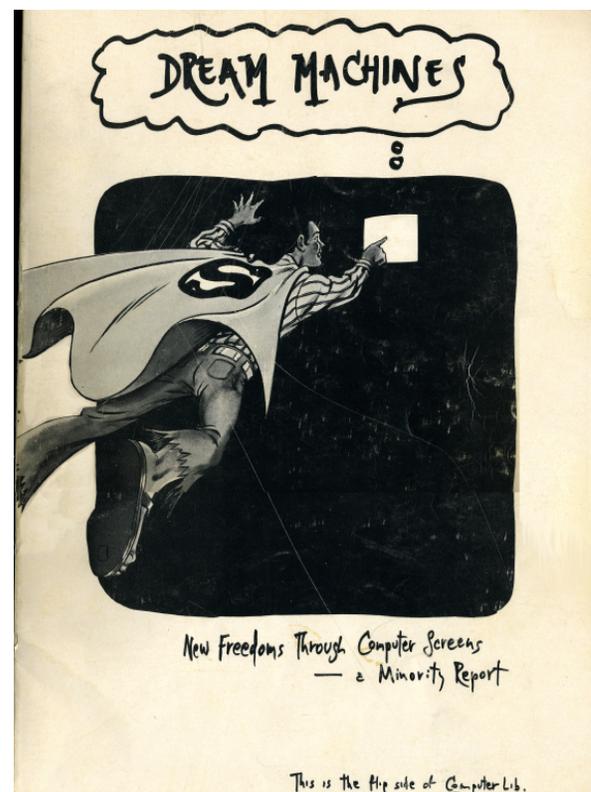


Fig. 2. Cover of Ted Nelson, *Computer Lib / Dream Machines* (Self-published, 1974).

I began to understand that behind all the promises of progress and innovation the media industry was concocting to attract potential customers, it resorted – either deliberately or because it operated within a “giant’s footprint” – to topoi that could be thousands of years old. The most obvious example is the topos of “breaking through the screen” that is routinely evoked whenever a new screen-based device is introduced. Instead of being a divide between incommensurate realms, the screen is presented as a fluid gateway supporting effortless two-way traffic. Human figures either jump from it to the space of the spectator or the spectator dives into its confines, as countless advertisements testify. The same topos has also been used in more critical contexts, from David Cronenberg’s cult film *Moviedrome* to the cover of Ted Nelson’s *Computer Lib / Dream Machines* (1974), a classic book on the future of computing. In the latter, a smiling rag-tag nerd wearing Superman’s cape is flying toward a computer screen, pointing at it with his finger, while a slogan states: “New Freedoms Through Computer Screens.” The emphases may differ, but these cases spring from the same age-old topos where the borderline between reality and its representation melts away, already encountered in ancient China and Greece.

TOPOS AND MEDIA CULTURE

Topoi serve at least three main roles within media culture: as connectors to older and broader cultural traditions, as discursive commentaries on media cultural forms, themes, and fantasies, and as motifs exploited by the culture industry.³ They are

potentially used by anyone from advertisers and industry propagandists to political strategists, artists, writers, journalists, and “normal people.” Topoi can become a part of modern folklore as the case of the “little people” demonstrates.⁴ Lilliputian characters living inside media machines have been evoked in many contexts from photography, gramophone, radio and television to personal computers.⁵ These miniaturized creatures may well have their origins in fairy tales and fantastic stories about the enormous and the minuscule. Some cultural agents even seem to have believed in their existence, although more commonly they have been concocted for other purposes. The “little people” are neither human nor non-human. They function as mediators of the miraculous side of new technology – aspects that are beyond common sense and therefore potentially magical, frightening or uncanny. Wondering at them or laughing at their antics helps soothe the anxieties permeating the technological society.



Fig. 3. “How did they all get in there?” Advertisement for Victor Talking Machine Co., Camden, N.J., USA. C. 1920. Public domain.

Ernst Robert Curtius was mainly interested in literary topoi – such as the “world upside down” or the *theatrum mundi* – that originated in classical antiquity and traveled across the Middle Ages to the modern age, serving as cultural connectors and transmitters. They were kinds of empty vessels that could be filled with new content, over and over again. They therefore became building blocks for cultural traditions. However, it could be added that while many topoi that still keep appearing are very old, others may have been created more recently. It should also be pointed out that topoi are not limited to textual traditions. Visual imagery can also be treated as topoi. There are links with the iconological / iconographic method in art history which can be traced back to the work of Aby Warburg (for whom Curtius dedicated his magnum opus *European Literature and*

the Latin Middle Ages, 1948) in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.⁶ The recent revival of interest in Warburg and particularly in his unfinished *Mnemosyne Atlas project*, an ambitious mapping of visual motifs across centuries and visual forms, has run parallel with the emergence of media archaeology.⁷



Fig. 4. “Imagine the Olympic Games most prominent personality.” Advertisement for Samsung D600E Olympic Winter Games Edition, published in *Scanorama* (Scandinavian Airlines), February 2006, p. 85.

What I call “topos transmissions” can be detected in all forms of media culture as I have tried to demonstrate in earlier studies. Although I have normally applied my approach to media forms of the past, it could be argued that topos archaeology is also suited for making sense of current networked media culture. Because of space limitations, it would be impossible to describe here the many ways in which textual, aural and visual motifs are transmitted across the internet, or to dissect the extremely large and heterogeneous (anti)bodies of online users (including individuals, groups, officials and corporate agents). Especially since the emergence of Web 2.0 and the social media, grasping the “traffic” of data flows without neglecting their individual “bits” has become an urgent task. For scholars (like myself) who have been trained in dealing with cultural traces that are stationary, the rapidity and instability of online communications may seem overwhelming. The challenges are made even more demanding by the political, commercial, cultural and ethnic interests that have questioned what once seemed a realization of Marshall McLuhan’s famous prophesy of the “global village.” The internet as it is today is fractured, partly visible, partly invisible, in constant transformation, and prone to manipulation by countless agents with very different motivations.

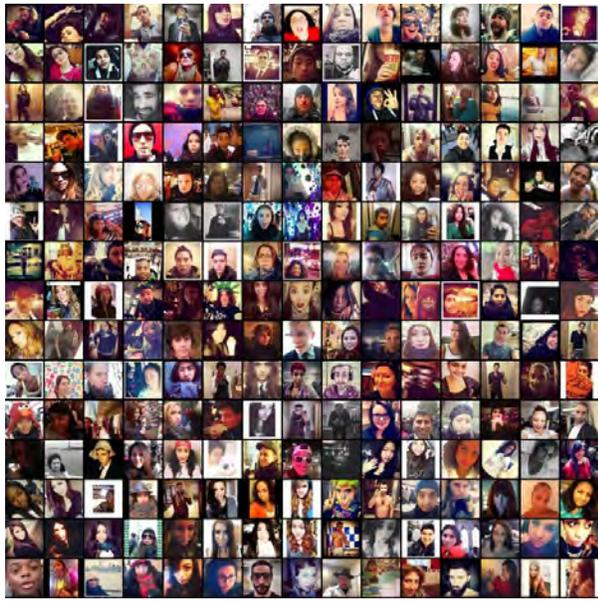


Fig. 5. Selfiecity - posegrid of selfies from New York City. Press image from selfiecity.net.

Lev Manovich, known for his ambitious but ultimately semiotically impossible effort to define the “language of new media,” has turned to the mining and visualization of big data to make sense of the proliferation of imagery at online platforms of Web 2.0.. Recent projects such as *Phototrails* (2013) *Selfiecity* (2014) and the ongoing *Do Happy People Take Happy Images? Measuring Happiness of Cities* (2014-) use combinations of automated data analysis and human labor to detect patterns in digital imagery on sites like Instagram and Twitter.⁹ Taking this task is laudable, but the results have been disappointing, limited to simplistic and formalistic conclusions about the surface manifestations of things. Data visualization easily leads to the aesthetization of research; the graphs and digital “mass ornaments,” abstracted from huge masses of data, become goals in themselves. Arguably there would be more important goals: understanding the “paths” along which visual motifs travel, merge and mutate, and – most crucially – grasping their semantic dimensions. It may be interesting to compare the formal properties of “selfies” taken in different cities around the world, but it is more urgent – and difficult – to find out what deeper meanings the products and practices under scrutiny carry beyond obvious generalities. This work has already been started by a younger generation of communication researchers who are “digital natives”.¹⁰

THE CHALLENGE OF “INTERNET MEMES”

Topos archaeology cannot offer any macro-scale “bird’s eye views” of data traffic. Whatever generalizations it may suggest, result from particularities attained by inductive reasoning. Following motifs as they spread on the network and cross over from one area to the next involves “manual work,” but offers potential for revealing disregarded aspects of online cultural practices. Topos archaeology may help to answer questions such

as: Does the internet truly represent a rupture, or support continuities with cultural forms that preceded its formation? Has it turned into an all-embracing zone that has subsumed “everything there is” into itself? Is it possible to make sense of reality by inhabiting the internet “bubble”? Conclusive answers would require more extensive explorations than are possible here. I will only demonstrate how topos archaeological analyses of internet traffic might be conducted by discussing briefly two interconnected examples. The first has to do with internet memes and the second with the discursive imaginary around “cloud computing.” I hope to show that although media archaeology is often associated with the past, it can also shed light on recent, even contemporary, developments.

“Meme” has become a catchword on the internet, although it originated elsewhere. It was famously coined by the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (1976) as the counterpart to “gene” for the purpose of accounting for “mimetic” cultural evolution as opposed to genetic evolution. Dawkins suggested that “selfish” replication of memes – units of culturally transmitted content situated in the brain – might provide a model for the spreading of human culture. Although the meme was not the main issue in Dawkins’s book, its implications were developed further by scholars like Susan Blackmore, the author of *The Meme Machine* (1999), and those working on the new field of Memetics it inspired.¹¹ There are certain similarities between Dawkins’s meme and Curtius’ topos, because both refer to cultural forms that encapsulate ideas and motifs and are passed on through cultural transmission. However, meme is really a spin-off of evolutionary biology and embedded within debates and controversies about its theories. Topos comes from the studies of culture, art, literature and rhetorics, and is therefore free of the complexities of the gene/meme argument (although it does have its own).¹²

In popular internet usage “meme” has gained a solid standing. However, it has been stripped down of its scientific connotations and context, leaving just a skeletal cliché, a formula that retains the barest features of Dawkins’s theory. The meme has come to signify certain types of semiotic messages that are rapidly and extensively disseminated across the internet. Although the original scientific denotation has been watered down, it is useful to retain “meme” as part of the expression “internet meme.” Limor Shifman has suggested that internet memes differ from Dawkins’s original definition in an important respect: instead of “depicting the meme as a single cultural unit that has propagated as well,” she treats memes as “groups of content units.”¹³ For Shifman this reflects the changed conditions of activities on the internet. In the past “individuals were exposed to one meme version at a given time” whereas in the internet one can easily see “hundreds of versions of any meme imaginable.”¹⁴ This is an interesting observation and also concerns the changed conditions of historical topos traditions or chains on the internet. For topos archaeology there is another fundamental question: are internet memes a new manifestation of historical topoi or something entirely different?¹⁵



Fig. 6. Image macro (not yet image macro meme), based on a photograph from a *Life* photo shoot (1963) with journalist Hugo Gernsback wearing one of his would-be inventions. From www.poptechjam.com/image-macro-and-memes-same-same-but-different/.

Although the phenomenon has been rapidly gaining complexity, and several meme “genres” have been singled out (by Shifman and others), one of the most recognizable internet meme categories is no doubt the “image macro meme.” Its basic characteristics were aptly and self-critically explained by a contributor to the online magazine *Pop | Tech | Jam*, who had posted online a black & white photographic image depicting an older gentleman wearing radio-like “goggles,” with the caption “The rarely seen Google Glass prototype” inserted into the image. The writer explained:¹⁶

“This, my fellow jammers, is an example of an image Macro, but it is not, I learned recently, an Internet Meme. Well, not yet anyway. While my bit of goofy photo fun meets the image Macro criteria (it is a captioned image that consists of a picture and a witty message or a catchphrase), it has yet to sweep through the internet like a relentless plague on humanity like this: [embedded YouTube video of PSY’s Gangnam Style].”¹⁷

Limor Shifman has suggested that internet memes are “groups of digital items” that have three common features: they “share common characteristics of content, form and/or stance, are created with awareness of each other, and are circulated, imitated, and transformed via the internet by multiple users.”¹⁸ It is generally assumed that image macros are created by ordinary internet users by means of Photoshop and related tools, but their task is made even easier by meme generator websites like icanhas.cheezburger.com and memegenerator.net. They offer huge numbers of memes, systems for voting on them, and seed images for creating and uploading new ones. Those that prove

successful (a tiny fraction), spread through the internet, tempting users to create variants. Because popular ones reach large numbers of viewers, they may be assumed to represent “common opinions.” The process is endless, and may lead to long chains, which again branch into unexpected directions. Beside using found images, it is possible to introduce one’s own, but making them catch on is very difficult. Most image macro memes are anonymous and follow coded rules, the most obvious being the use of the Impact font for the captions.¹⁹



Fig. 7. “OH HI i come from internet,” LOLcat meme variant, from www.icanhas.cheezburger.com.

The most famous early image macro meme category is the LOLcat (“laugh out loud cat”), which has, in less than a decade, branched out into countless variants, prompted efforts in “history writing,” and gained the attention of print media from *Time* to *Wired*. There is even a paysite called “Lol Cats Research,” an effort to cash in on its popularity. A typical LOLcat image macro consists of a photograph of cute cat in a funny situation provided with a misspelled caption. The latter corresponds with a speech balloon and is supposed to mimic the cat’s speech (if cats knew English). LOLcat image macros resonate with the huge popularity of cat images and videos on the internet. They sometimes make self-reflective comments – in one variant a cat peeks out from inside a hollowed out tower PC, stating: “OH HI i come from internet.”²⁰ Although the LOLcat phenomenon does seem native to the internet, humorous photographic and graphic images of cats dressed as humans, associated with props of all kinds, and provided with “words from the cat’s mouth,” form a tradition that goes back at least a century and longer, if we take earlier anthropomorphized cat images into account. This has been noted on the internet.²¹ The essential question is: did these earlier topos manifestations inspire the LOLcat? Do they belong to the same lineage, or did LOLcats appear “accidentally,” triggering the awareness of past cat topoi only *after* the phenomenon had gained visibility through mass circulation?



Fig. 8. Cat postcard by Harry Whittier Fries (1879-1953). Rotograph Company, NY, 1905 (No. B838). Public domain.

There is no fits-for-all answer. There are cases, though, where an image macro meme chain connects with a preceding topos tradition. “Pandora’s box” provides a perfect example. As Dora and Erwin Panofsky pointed out, the Greek myth of Pandora created an extensive tradition of variations and commentaries.²² Indeed, it became a topos that underwent significant changes in time and became interpreted according to changing cultural trends. The Panofskys point out that Pandora had originally no “box” at all – it became added to the myth as a misnomer by Erasmus of Rotterdam, who confused the Greek word *pithos* (jar) with *pyxis* (box). Stock character image macro memes inspired by Pandora’s Box connect with the topos, sometimes explicitly, as when a grinning young man (known as “Good Guy Greg”) states: “Found Pandora’s Box / Didn’t Open It,” or when a lolcat in a cardboard box says: “congradulashuns / you just opened pandora’s box.” However, the tradition moves on. When the “Torrenting Turtle” states, “Hears a song on Pandora / Begins epic music download,” the referent has shifted, pointing to the popular internet music streaming service. Instead of continuing far into the past, the chain has been shortened, modified and redirected, albeit not entirely cut.

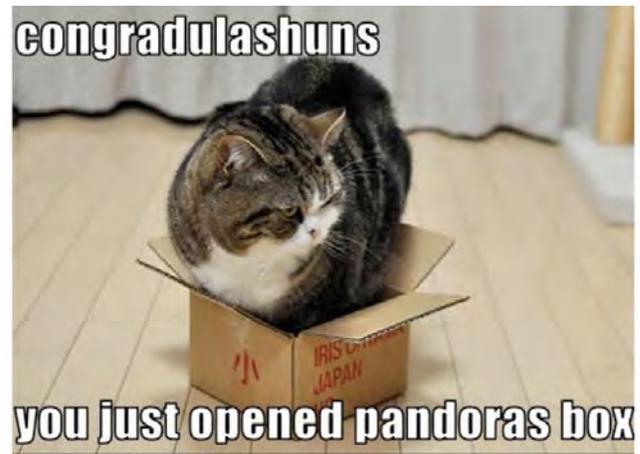


Fig. 9. “congradulashuns you just opened pandora’s box.” LOLcat meme variant that connects with the Pandora’s box topos. From www.ichahaz.cheezburger.com.

It often seems that image macro memes circulate and proliferate within a realm that is essentially secluded from the “world outside,” although it keeps making references to it. As a student of mine said about lolcats, they “live in a world parallel to our own.”²³ The connections to the topos traditions of the past could therefore be assumed to take place occasionally and haphazardly rather than systematically. On the other hand, internet is rapidly subsuming the “archives” of the humankind into itself and making them available through digital tools like Google Books, The Internet Archive and Google Image Search. Where the topos traditions uncovered by Curtius formed chains appearing and disappearing along time-based vectors, when uploaded on the internet they are represented more like associative maps where the connections are spatial rather than temporal (in a way reminiscent of the panels of Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas*). To the extent that the internet inspires users to activate them, that happens by making choices along non-temporal and non-linear paths. The topos traditions on the internet seem to be turning into “topos fields” where moving to any direction is the rule of the game.

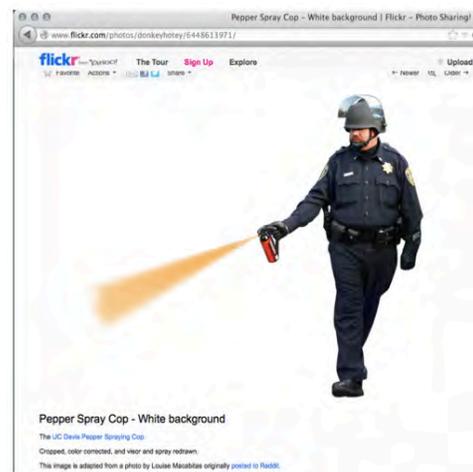


Fig. 10. “Pepper Spraying Cop,” cut out from the original news footage, was pasted on other images by image macro meme creators. From www.flickr.com.



Fig. 11. The "Pepper Spraying Cop" spraying on the Constitution of the United States. Image macro meme spreading on the Internet.

While the internet may have become an "all-embracing" realm for the millions of users who repeatedly visit it via smartphones, tablets and laptops, it is important to keep tracing fractures and fault lines where it coincides and collides with the "real world." A well-known example is the "pepper spraying cop" meme, which was triggered by a widely publicized event during the Occupy Wall Street Movement in 2011.²⁴ The police officer Lt. John Pike used pepper spray at the University of California Davis campus against a group of protesting but peaceful students.²⁵ The meme began proliferating when a cropped cutout figure of the cop (with a white background) was posted on the internet, making it easy to embed it within other images. Very soon the cop began squirting his pepper in a wide variety of settings, many of them with clear historical referents. He sprayed God in the face in Michelangelo's Adam's creation (from the Sistine chapel, a popular seed image for internet memes), the Beatles in the cover of Abbey Road, and even the vampire in *Murnau's* silent film *Nosferatu* (1922). Appropriately, he also made interventions at Guantanamo Bay, and at the signing of the US Constitution.²⁶

Understood as group of related manifestations (following Shifman's suggestion), the pepper spraying cop meme raises questions about its nature and consistency, issues of planning vs. randomness, clear message vs spontaneity, seriousness vs. pranksterism. As the different manifestations of the meme normally remain anonymous (no maker is know) and the motivations largely unexplained, the scholar is left without possibilities of truly penetrating the code or codes supposedly controlling the dissemination and proliferation of the motif. The pepper spraying cop therefore inhabits a split and heterogenous cultural space where the intentions of its creators and its "readers" rarely meet in ways that would assure one of matching intentions. A remarkable amount of polysemy reigns, in this case increased by the lack of captions to "anchor" the meanings.²⁷ While certain manifestation carry a clear political message, others remain more ambiguous, related with equally ambiguous "lives" of associated pop cultural motifs on the internet. Finally, some aspects of the meme become associated with much longer topos traditions.

It is important to avoid over-emphasizing the naive and spontaneous nature of meme creation. Although many of them may have been quickly created as jokes or pranks, internet memes have become a coded form of expression that can be harnessed for many purposes and often require specific knowledge to be properly constructed or interpreted. Examples can be found from China, where memes have been successfully used to bypass the government's relentless efforts to suppress the freedom of expression.²⁸ It has been realized that blocking images, particularly ones with allegorical references and ambiguous connotations, is more difficult for the censors than doing so for words and numbers. Perfectly innocuous images gain radical meanings when interpreted by codes that have already been internalized by internet users. Thus pictures of "grass-mud horses," or cute alpacas, can be turned into subversive messages when combined with the *double entendres* of the Chinese language. In another example, the convey of tanks in the famous iconic photograph from the Tiananmen square protests was replaced by giant yellow rubber ducks. In another version, a cow is seen stopping a convoy of caterpillars, and in yet another, only the surface of the street remains. The erasure of the tanks and the single protester ("Tank Man") who stopped them sends a powerful message.²⁹



Fig. 12. Scarlett Johansson as a street musician. One manifestation of the "Scarlett Falls" image macro meme string spreading on the internet.

Like topoi, internet memes – as any form of user-generated internet content – can be exploited by professional promoters as viral advertising.³⁰ A good example appeared in early October 2013 when tabloid newspapers and internet gossip sites began spreading memes featuring the actress Scarlett Johansson. The source image was a "snapshot" ostensibly snapped by a paparazzo of Johansson accidentally falling on a street while filming in Glasgow. The figure of the falling Johansson soon inspired a huge burst of reactions from meme makers, or so it seemed. Additional elements like a laughing Donald Duck or an arrow sticking out from Johansson's thigh were inserted into the original photograph. In other cases the figure of the film star was cut out and embedded in other scenes. Scarlett was soon seen riding on a dolphin, hanging from the edge of the Grand Canyon, flying on a magic carpet, doing a DJ act, and dancing with the late Michael Jackson, and stealing food from a table. She was turned into a victim of police violence in the streets of Athens,

and of a black gang member's baseball bat, and so on. For those who got tired of the bombardment the most memorable variant may have been the original street view from which Scarlett had been simply made to disappear.

Interestingly, the incident had already taken place a year earlier and publicized then in British Tabloid newspapers with no meme reaction. It wasn't what it was claimed to be. In fact, Scarlett had been performing her own stunt fall for a scene shot with hidden cameras for Jonathan Glazer's film *Under the Skin*. The idea had been to capture the by-passers' spontaneous reactions to Scarlett's "accident," to be used in the film which opted for a candid camera-like look. The "amazing scene" had been shot unannounced "six or seven" times throughout the day to get different reactions from those who happened to be present, as the actress revealed when *Under the Skin* was presented at the Venice Film Festival in September 2013.³¹ The sudden meme explosion that took place soon afterward was hardly more spontaneous than the original incident had been. Although *Wired* still believed it was, when it wrote about "the bizarre story behind The Scarlett Johansson Falling Down Meme" in April 2014 (at the time of the film's theatrical release), it was most likely a deliberate promotional act, which became, inadvertently or deliberately, carried on by independent meme "artists" picking up the thread.³²

Internet memes certainly have characteristics of Curtius' topoi, although – because of their visual component and their frequent emphasis on emotions – they can also be associated with the "passion formulas" traced by Aby Warburg in visual culture across centuries (the notion influenced Curtius' topos). Both form "transforming traditions" of formulas and motifs. The main difference is the rapidity with which meme transmissions occur. Processes that used to take centuries have been as if speeded up. Because of their rapid-fire dissemination, it is not clear if the logic of the periodical appearances and disappearances that typify the "lives" of historical topoi still characterize internet memes. The internet tends to preserve everything put within its confines; search tools make it easy to call up anything within seconds, including otherwise hard to trace topoi of the past. Will once popular internet memes just disappear in its "vaults" or will there be "meme revivals" to come? Will there be perennial "classics" that keep generating variants forever? Internet data is characterized by the duality of presence and flux; everything stays, moves and mutates. It may not be misguided to characterize the internet as a topos transmitter-generator that both subsumes topos traditions into its "archives" and gives rise to new ones in an endless circular motion.

CLOUD COMPUTING AS A TOPOS TRANSMISSION

The other case study, cloud computing, has also inspired numerous image macro memes.³³ It is an interesting example of the discursive processes of signification taking place on the internet. Like meme, cloud computing is a common buzzword.

Its technical referent goes back to the computer time-sharing systems that originated in the 1960s. Later, with the development of the personal computer and the internet, the idea was implemented on a much more massive scale. Instead of having all the programs and data on one's desktop, users would retrieve and share them from remote servers. Steve Jobs presented this idea – without yet having access to the phrase "cloud computing" – in a famous comment on the future of computing in 1997.³⁴ It is uncertain who coined the notion "cloud computing," but it certainly gained currency after Amazon.com launched its "Elastic Compute Cloud" service in 2006.³⁵ Since then cloud computing has boomed, becoming a lucrative business offered both for corporate clients and private users.

One of the most intriguing things about cloud computing is the discrepancy between the fact and its representations. The true public image of the computing cloud would be an unmarked, nondescript warehouse in a remote hard to find location, filled with hundreds of computer servers. The situation recalls aspects of the era of mainframe computers in the 1940s and 1950s, when few people, except mathematicians and programmers, had direct contacts with computers. These were kept behind closed doors at governmental and military facilities. Everyone else's idea of them was indirect – explained in books, commented on by cartoons and television shows, and fantasized in Hollywood movies like the *Desk Set* (1957). The "Giant Brains" became mystified; the computer turned into a hidden object – partly material, partly discursive – for cultural fears and desires. Its "coming out" took place gradually through offices and businesses until it reached private users with the advent of personal computers in the 1970s. Of course, cloud computing cannot be directly compared with this development, because computing devices are now at everyone's fingertips, routinely used to access the "cloud." Still, cloud computing is surrounded by an aura of mystery and awe.

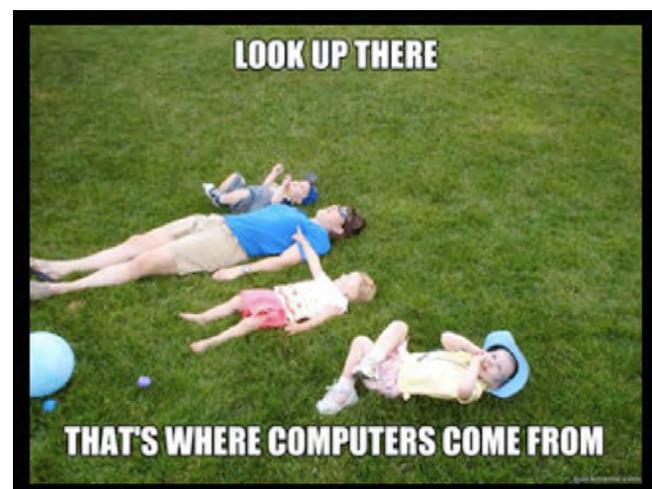


Fig. 13. "Look up there that's where computers come from," an image macro meme spreading on the internet.

It is not difficult to find comments where internet users express their ignorance and bafflement about cloud computing; its meaning and origins are mysteries to many. This is reflected in image macro memes. In one, a man (father?) and three children are lying on their backs on a lawn; one of the children points to the sky and states: “look up there / that’s where computers come from.” In another, the Philosoraptor is reflecting, “if data stays trapped in the cloud too long / will it fall as rain?,” while the “Technologically Impaired Duck” (an “Advice Animal” meme character) wonders, in obvious roleplay aligned with its character: “Backup to the Cloud? / But the sky is clear...” The majority of Americans has been claimed to think that “cloud computing is disrupted by bad weather.”³⁶ Predictably, such comical – posed or real? – ignorance has been picked up by advertisers. In a television commercial for Public Storage we see a middle-aged couple loading their belongings to the carriage of a balloon and releasing it to the sky because they have heard that storing things in the cloud is “the latest thing” and “the future is now.” When the balloon hits electrical wires and the load comes tumbling down, they decide to use a traditional public storage unit.



Fig. 14. “If data stays trapped in the cloud too long will it fall as rain?” Image macro meme featuring the Philosoraptor character. From Diylool.com.

One way of excavating the discursive formations around cloud computing is to begin with etymology. However, this makes the choice even more intriguing, because historical dictionaries emphasize the negative associations of cloud, especially when it is used as a verb. In Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* (1827) “to cloud” refers to “to darken with clouds; to cover with clouds; to obscure,” and worse still: “To make of sullen and gloomy appearance.” A cloud is something that obscures, makes less evident, “sullies” and “defames.” *Pantologia. A New Encyclopedia* (1813) lists, among similar ones, a meaning which sounds a different tone, claiming that cloud is “any thing that spreads wide.” This would be an understandable reference point for cloud computing, but it is rarely if ever explicitly evoked in the discursive formations surrounding it. Along the trail of depressive associations we also find references that associate clouds to

mental aberrations. In a medical case study from 1828, a patient describes, how “a cloud had fallen upon his head, and he believes that this cloud still remains upon it, obscuring his mind, and altering his feelings towards his wife and family, and towards all objects whatever.”³⁷ Perhaps there is a link to the discourse on “psychedelic clouds” – cloud-like environments created in the mind by chemical substances – in the 1960s.

Reflecting such negativity, the blogger Scott Berkun collected a list of reasons why he thinks that “cloud computing is a bad metaphor.”³⁸

- Clouds are fleeting. They don’t last.
- Clouds are vague and open to wide interpretation. No one sees the same thing when they look up at clouds.
“Do you see Darth Vader’s nose?”
“No... oh do you mean the leg of the camel sitting under a tree?”
“What Camel?”
“Nevermind.”
- Clouds often bring rain, lightning and cold wind.
- You can’t see the sky, or the stars, when the clouds are out. (However, *Obscured by Clouds* is a good Pink Floyd album few know about.)
- When someone has ill-formed ideas, we say their thinking is cloudy.
- Clouds, and the weather, are unpredictable.

It could be added that the “mushroom cloud” is probably the darkest metaphor of the modern era, the ultimate emblem of mass destruction and potential self-annihilation of the humankind. Why has the expression cloud computing caught up in the technocultural imagination? One reason may simply be the contrast it creates with the actual state of things. Corporate data centers – the actual “clouds” – are secretive, visually uninviting and undecipherable by common sense. They represent the reverse of open access, so important for the internet ethos. The tightening grip of cloud computing on all data (including the author’s sensitive academic email) has happened simultaneously with series of revelations about massive interceptions of digital data by governments and hackers alike. At the same time accusations have been mounting against companies like Google for hiding revenues from tax officials and engaging in ruthless monopolistic practices behind its “don’t be evil” motto. The commercial and governmental “engines” that run the digital online world have been often associated with negative connotations.

It is wise to avoid concocting conspiracy theories, especially in the complex and multi-nodal realm of the internet, but it is impossible not to notice how perfectly the talk about cloud computing serves corporate interests, covering up unwelcome associations. Clouds are – in spite of the load of negative connotations – light and fluffy, and for many something poetic and even “sculptural.” They have been a rich source for the human imagination, inspiring countless poems, paintings, photographs

and other cultural products.³⁹ The current boom of cloud-inspired contemporary art must in its own way reflect the cloud computing trend, although relatively few works have made explicit links with it so far.⁴⁰ Clouds represent a collective experience available in endless variations for every member of the humankind. They defy gravity and the frustrating limitations imposed on humans by earth-bound life. Clouds are about weightlessness and free flight; the “stuff” of fantasy and daydreams. They also embody a semiotic paradox: although they belong to nature and are therefore independent of human control, clouds are semiotically subsumed into culture as signs. Simply looking at them performs such an operation. Stock images often express this paradox by associating clouds with thought balloons (like in comics); the workings of culture are camouflaged into nature.



Fig. 15. Stock images of businessmen climbing to the cloud, found on the internet by Google image search.

There are more specific explanations where observing topos traditions becomes useful. By exploring image macro memes, stock photography websites, corporate advertisements and brochures, and other visual representations of cloud computing one begins to see the impact of Christian religious iconography.⁴¹ There are humans sitting on clouds, tapping their computers. Others are standing on the ground, holding their laptop computers while gazing to the skies; more often than not, “otherworldly” rays of the sun penetrate from behind the clouds. There are also images where a businessman is using a ladder to climb up to the cloud – a reference to the Biblical topos of Jacob’s Ladder (which has also given its name to a gym training machine and inspired internet memes).⁴² Websites like Shutterstock.com, which sell stock images for commercial uses, are brimming with images linking Christian mythology with businessmen or -women and cloud motifs.

Christian iconography has often depicted gods sitting on clouds looking down into the world of humans, as illusionistic *sotto in su* ceiling paintings in Renaissance and Baroque era churches demonstrate.⁴³ Such scenes were carefully, often according to programmatic ideological efforts, combined with architectural and sculptural elements to offer the visitors an illusion of transcendence. Standing under the dome and looking up, the believer was

immersed into a dizzying imaginary upward movement while being at the same time aware of one’s lot on earth. Correggio’s Assumption of the Virgin (1526-1530) at the Cathedral of Parma and Andrea Pozzo’s Glory of St Ignatius and the Society of Jesus in Sant’Ignazio, Rome (1688) are impressive examples.⁴⁴ The visual imaginary around cloud computing has reconnected itself with this topos, but in ways where the ascension to the clouds is depicted as taking place “right now” rather than as a future possibility, a “rapture” attainable through faith. Lifting computer users from their mundane, stressful and crowded environments to a miraculous and serene realm in the sky promises them values and affordances denied from earth-bound humans. Elevating the cult of magical new technology to where the Christian mythology situates heaven grants the businessman angelic powers denied from the crowd he has left behind on earth.



Fig. 16. Correggio (1489-1534), Assumption of the Virgin (1526-1530), Cathedral of Parma, Italy.

In the New Testament supernatural clouds appear in different roles. God speaks to humans from clouds, but they also serve as transportation devices to carry believers into heaven. Yet another variant appears in Revelation (Ch. XIV. 14-16), where “one [...] like a son of man” is sitting on “a white cloud.” An angel cries out, “Thrust in thy sickle and reap; for the time to reap is come; for the harvest of the earth is ripe.” In response, “he that sat on the cloud, thrust in his sickle upon the earth, and the earth was reaped.” Such allegorical supernatural acts from above have inspired rich traditions of emblemata. The “hand of god” that interferes with the lives of humans sanctifying marriages, placing rulers on thrones and causing fear and destruction is a topos that is also represented on the internet, sometimes with serious, but often with parodistic intent, as in an image macro, where a cloud-shaped hand of God is hovering in the sky, slapping (the viewer, or something unseen on the ground?) with a loud sound: “SMACK!!”

The hand of god topos is part of a wider historical tradition of motifs centered on the hand, its actions and the meanings it conveys (hands were depicted already centuries ago as writing surfaces, in anticipation of today’s tattoo fad).⁴⁵ The touch, whether of the disembodied hand of a metaphysical being or that

of a human agent, has inspired huge amounts of discursive variations. To name just one example, the medieval beliefs and rituals related with the idea of the healing touch of the king were analyzed by the French historian Marc Bloch in a famous book.⁴⁶ When it comes to cloud computing, stock photographs have given rise to a version where a hand, sometimes disembodied, but often belonging to a businessman, touches a tiny cloud. This magically activates a network of connections depicted in various ways: as clouds, icons, graphic depictions of IT devices, etc. Sometimes the cloud is framed by a transparent screen hovering in the air, forming a link with the “through the screen” topos tradition. These images can be seen as intersections of the hand of god topos and visual representations inspired by interactive computing. Interestingly, some stock images draw a link with a hand drawing a diagram on a whiteboard, revealing the low tech corporate boardroom as an additional inspiration.



Fig. 17. Stock images of businessmen sitting on clouds, found on the internet by Google image search.

The traditional hand of god topos identifies the cloud as a site of superhuman power, which certainly resonates with the interests of cloud technology proponents. The iconography of cloud computing suggests that the human protagonists who occupy the cloud want to stay there, leaving the earth behind. The supply of stock images either presents them working on the cloud or striving upward to reach it, whereas one never encounters images depicting the opposite trajectory: the return from the cloud. Bringing the fruits of cloud computing back to earth to help reverse its troubled material culture or to save its endangered ecology does not seem to be on the agenda. In that sense the cloud computing imagery deviates from the hand of god topos, which is about reaching out to the world below. If the businessmen in the clouds are the new gods and the cloud environment the heaven they have already reached, they seem to be all too content with their achievement. Perhaps the human world as it has been experienced for thousands of years does not matter for them anymore. All this projects an image of selfishness and narcissistic self-absorption, where virtualized life has taken the place of social and collective goals as they used to be known. This escapist

situation could be interpreted as a reaction to depressing reality, perhaps felt to be beyond repair.

As far as stock images can be read as representations of mentalities, it is worth paying attention to a feature that distinguishes them from the illusionistic paintings by Renaissance and Baroque era artists. In the latter the scenes are crowded, whereas in the stock imagery the computer users almost always sit alone on their own little clouds (when several characters are depicted, each has one's own cloud). Whatever connections they have with others are invisibly mediated by the device they are holding. The clouds function like private floats gently drifting in a 'sea above.' This transformation highlights the current media-cultural condition, where direct face-to-face and body-to-body contacts have been increasingly replaced by remote ones. It is worth noting that the great majority of available stock images represent young white male professionals. Attractive young white women magically poking floating 'cloud-screens' or enjoying data processing in the clouds appear, but seem to be a minority; other ethnic variants are rare. All this reflects the dominant stereotypes about social, gender and racial hierarchies underlying today's digital culture and disseminated through many different channels. However, the visual repertory of stock images is in flux and new trends and motifs appear rapidly.

CONCLUSION: “OVERCLOUDED”

Whenever a traditional crowd appears, it is depicted as something undesirable and frustrating. A perfect example is “Overclouded,” a television commercial promoting My Cloud, a personal cloud storage system by WD, a Western Digital Company (USA, 2013). We see a distant view of a cloud floating over Manhattan, with something dark lining its top; could it be a rain cloud, we wonder. Close-ups show that it's absolutely packed with people; frustration can be seen on everyone's face as they desperately try to use their devices. A small cloud - like the ones in stock images - floats by. Unusually, we see a beautiful African-American woman sitting on it, exchanging a slightly condescending smile with a male on the overclouded cloud, while comfortably tapping her tablet.⁴⁷ Another commercial presents the ideal situation brought forth by My Cloud. Tiny clouds now float over individual tablet and smartphone users, whether they are alone or with a partner or a child. Everyone has been brought back to earth to their daily surroundings - homes, airports, pleasant looking town squares and scenic elevators. In yet another My Cloud commercial, “Bring the Cloud Home,” we rush wildly through the clouds (where traces of personal photographs can be detected) and finally land in a residential home. The trope reverses the “upward mobility” of stock photography.

The advertising campaign for My Cloud is one of the most elaborate seen so far, perhaps because it promotes a concept that differs from the centralized services marketed by giants like Amazon, Microsoft, Google and Apple. Instead of some nondescript remote location, the cloud 'resides' in a neat little box

in one's own domestic environment. Were this concept to become popular, it might be an incentive for abandoning the cloud metaphor. The box that is prominently displayed in the commercials is in fact a miniaturized version of the massive server boxes hidden inside corporate "clouds." The commercials try to achieve their goal by engaging in a "critique" of mystifying metaphors. Toward the beginning of a longer infomercial (2013), the clouds form a question mark in the sky, while the voiceover claims: "Who wants to keep their precious content in some mysterious location?" No more clouds are seen - My Cloud users at homes and in public spaces are given the center stage. Toward the end the viewer is exhorted to "rise above that other cloud." This business-motivated "critique" is no more "radical" than the meme concocted by the US government's IT-service contractor CSC, showing clouds reflected from the glass facade of its corporate office building, stating: "Cloud computing: the greatest thing... to happen for stock photography."⁴⁸

Although My Cloud may have come to the user instead of 'rapturing' the user into the clouds, the imagery around cloud computing - arguably *The* virtual frontier of current digital culture - remains stereotypical and conservative. As topos archaeology can teach us, this is anything but a coincidence. Conservative representations, including very old religious ones, are coated with layers of "newness" and awe. They may seem out of place in today's secular society, but are used to sell new technology, including things that on the surface level are "from the future" (which can be a topos too).⁴⁹ Images of god-like humans empowered by digital technology are fed even for people who have little or nothing to do with Christian metaphysics. Of course, religious mythologies, and even cultural interpretations of clouds differ drastically around the world. The Japanese speak about "Crowd Computing" instead of "Cloud Computing," presumably because the phonetics of their language does not distinguish between "l" and "r", but perhaps also because the relationship between the collective and the individual is valued very differently in Japan compared with the Western world.⁵⁰

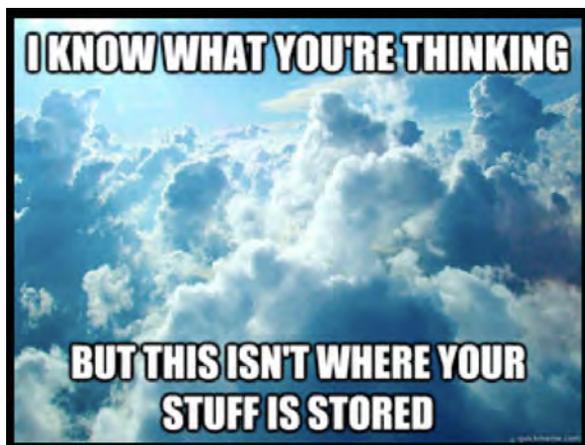


Fig. 18. "I know what you're thinking but this isn't where your stuff is stored. Image macro meme spreading on the internet.

Whether deliberately as a manifestation of Western pretensions to global hegemony in the realm of new technology or because of circumstantial reasons caused by the near-global reach of the internet, the Western cloud computing discourse continues to spread. The crucial questions to ask concern alternatives and ways of resistance. What else can there be beside the endless recycling of topos? Are truly radical representations possible, and what purposes would they serve? When an image macro meme depicting a glossy stock image-like view of clouds claims, "I know what you are thinking / But this isn't where your stuff is stored," it makes a point but may be too straightforward in its approach to reach a goal. It seems that "radical" in these postmodern times necessarily implies circular transformation-transportation of meanings in the form of parody, pastiche and mimicry. Culture jammers and even some creators of image macro memes have offered cunning pranks and comments that resonate with the coded mindsets of social media users who "think different" (to re-appropriate Apple's notoriously ambiguous advertising slogan). Whether such interventions will have time to have an effect before being overshadowed by something else is quite another thing.⁵¹

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ENDNOTES

1. Michel de Montaigne, *Journal de Voyage*, ed. Fausta Garavini (Paris: Gallimard, 1983).
2. My research was very much along the same lines as that of Peter Burke, as I learned nearly twenty years later from "The Discreet Charm of Milan: English Travellers in the Seventeenth Century," first published in his *Varieties of Cultural History* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1997), 94-110. Burke also discovered the epithets of the Italian cities as a topos (102).
3. See my "Dismantling the Fairy Engine. Media Archaeology as Topos Study," in *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, ed. Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 27-47.
4. Ibid.
5. Many stories of people's beliefs in little people inside radios and TV sets can be found at www.iusedtobelieve.com. Last visited May 13, 2015.
6. Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979 [1953]).
7. Aby Warburg, *L'Atlas Mnémosyne*, trans. Sacha Zilberfarb (Paris: L'écarquillé - INHA, 2012).
8. See the list of publications at www.erkkihuhtamo.com.
9. www.manovich.com. These are group efforts. The latter project, winner of a Twitter Data Grant, will purportedly analyze a million Twitter images. It was publicly announced in April 2014.
10. Limor Shifman's *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2013) is a good and inspiring example. The special issue on "memes" of *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (December 2014) also points to a new and fruitful direction.

11. Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
12. See my "Dismantling the Fairy Engine," in *Media Archaeology*.
13. Limor Shifman, "The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres," *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (December 2014), 340-358 (341).
14. Ibid.
15. The discussion about the relationship between "meme" and "topos" would take too long here and has to be postponed to another occasion. Useful ideas, also in relation to Blackmore's book, have been presented by Ben Wetherbee (2013) in "Memes and Topoi," a series of postings at <http://benwetherbee.com>. Last visited May 9, 2015.
16. The appropriated photograph, from a *Life* magazine photo shoot in 1963, depicts the inventor and popular scientific journalist Hugo Gernsback with one of his would-be inventions.
17. Pedro Rafael Rosado, "Image Macro and Memes: Same Same but Different," www.poptechjam.com/image-macro-and-memes-same-same-but-different/. Last visited May 9, 2015.
18. Shifman, "The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres," 341.
19. See Kate Brideau and Charles Berret, "A Brief Introduction to Impact: 'The Meme Font,'" *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (December 2014), 307-313.
20. A huge number of image macros featuring a cat and a computer (often peeking from inside) exists.
21. See the pre-internet "lolcats" and other animal images on [Retronaut.com](http://retronaut.com). Last visited May 9, 2015.
22. Dora and Erwin Panofsky, *Pandora's Box. The Changing Aspects of a Mythical Symbol* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965 [1956]).
23. Erica Cei, a honors student at UCLA. There has been a tongue-in-cheek project of translating the Bible into "lolspeak."
24. Different political uses of memes have been discussed by Shifman in *Memes in Digital Culture*, Ch. 8 (119-150).
25. The event took place on November 18, 2011 and was widely featured in news media and blogs.
26. It is also worth mentioning a fake CNN webpage with a photo where the cop is spraying at the UC Davis students, while an embedded caption explains: "Congress Declares Pepper Spray a Vegetable. Police application beneficial to the health of protestors."
27. Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in: *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Hammersmith, London: Fontana, 1977), 32-51 (39)
28. This paragraph has profited from discussions with graduate studentvHsin-Yu Lin at UCLA, Department of Design | Media Arts. See also An Xiao Mina, "Batman, Pandaman and the Blind Man: A Case Study in Social Change Memes and Internet Censorship in China," *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (December 2014), 359-375.
29. Alexander Abad-Santos, "How Memes Became the Best Weapon Against Chinese Internet Censorship," *The Wire*, June 4, 2013. At www.thewire.com/global/2013/06/how-memes-became-the-best-weapon-against-chinese-internet-censorship/65877/. Last visited May 9, 2015.
30. For background, Karine Nahon & Jeff Hemsley, *Going Viral* (Cambridge, Polity: 2013). The complex relationship between meme and viral is discussed by Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, Ch. 5-6 (55-97).
31. *The Guardian*, September 3, 2013.
32. Angela Watercutter, "The Bizarre Story Behind the Scarlett Johansson Falling Down Meme," *Wired*, on line, published April 3, 2014. At www.wired.com/2014/04/scarlett-johansson-meme/
33. Discussions with Professor Machiko Kusahara, Waseda University, Tokyo, have influenced my ideas about cloud computing.
34. During a Q&A at the World Wide Developer Conference, see [www.youtube.watch?v=2v0OTCI2nLI](http://www.youtube/watch?v=2v0OTCI2nLI). Last visited May 9, 2015.
35. The cyberspace evangelist John Perry Barlow used "DataCloud" in his article "Being in Nothingness," *Mondo 2000*, No. 2 (2000), 34-43 (43) about the "global supply of words, numbers, statistics, projections, analyses, and gossip" that "expands with thermonuclear vigor." For him it was a pejorative term, while virtual reality promised a "shared experience" and perhaps "some navigational [sic] aids through [the DataCloud]."
36. The Citrix survey's results were reported on August 30, 2012 by internet publications like Business Insider and the techspot.com. Many people pretended to know its meaning but did not. A cartoon comments on this issue. A "cloud help desk" representative says to a remote caller: "Relax madam, you're not losing all your data just because it is raining. / That only happens when there's thunderstorms."
37. Alexander Morison, *Cases of Mental Disease with Practical Observations on the Medical Treatment* (London & Edinburgh: Longman & Co. and Maclachlan & Stewart, 1828), Case XXXI, 106.
38. www.scottberkun.com/2010/cloud-computing-is-a-bad-metaphor/ (last visited May 9, 2015).
39. For clouds in painting, see Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of / Cloud /*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 2002).
40. The good example is the interactive installation *Cloud* (2012) by Caitlind r.c. Brown and Wayne Garrett. Usman Hague's public cloud-related installations like *Sky Ear* (2004-) and Burble (2006-) anticipated the cloud computing boom. Cory Arcangel's *Super Mario Clouds* (2004) now feels prophetic, although its inspiration came from elsewhere (game hacking).
41. Many explicitly religious images showing the Christian gods in cloud can be found from the internet, as well as parodies, also image macro memes. Many cartoons link gods and angels living in clouds with cloud computing. An angel says to another: "It's not boring up here - you get to look through everyone's data!"
42. In one image macro meme, the tireless Philosoraptor comments: "If there's a ladder to heaven / is there a chute to hell?" "Ladder to heaven" or "Stairway to heaven" are alternative key concepts used in many memes.
43. Such painting also represented the Counter-Reformation ideology of the Catholic church, particularly eagerly theorized by the Jesuits. The goals of the Society of Jesus were explicitly integrated to the Christian iconography by Andrea Pozzo and others. See Evonne Levy, *Propaganda and the Jesuit Baroque* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 152- 155.
44. Miriam Milman, *Trompe-l'oeil. Painted Architecture* (New York: Skira / Rizzoli, 1986), 51-66.
45. Claire Richter Sherman, *Writing on Hands: Memory and Knowledge in Early Modern Europe* (Seattle: University of Washington Press [distr.], 2001).

46. March Bloch, *The Royal Touch: Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France*, trans. J. E. Anderson (New York: Routledge, 2015 [1924]).
47. The male has darker skin too. Other ethnicities, including an Asian-looking women, can be detected in the crowd.
48. The meme is branded as "CSC Meme" and was distributed online through their "Meme Monday" effort at google+ and elsewhere. "Meme Monday" is no doubt an effort to promote their "CSC Trusted Cloud Solutions.". In another context, an image macro with a picture of "Angry Linus" (Torvalds) stated a very rude comment. The corporation represents for many the ruthless, shady and exploitative side of the IT business sector.
49. Secularity vs. religiosity of contemporary societies remains a big question. Polls indicate that surprising numbers of Americans believe in the mythological narratives collected into the Bible, many of them verbatim.
50. This was pointed out to me by audience members when I gave a lecture about cloud computing at the Waseda University, Tokyo, in December 2014. They told me that clouds are not used in Japanese commercials for cloud computing systems. Also the metaphysical meanings of clouds are different.
51. *The Orion* made a hilarious comment on the cloud computing fad, managing to include many of the common clichés, in the form of a fake Tech Trends report where HP, often considered a "tired" old school technology company, suddenly realizes it has to get into cloud business (although it is clueless). See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ntPxdWAWq8>. Last visited May 16, 2015.