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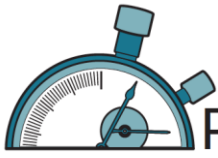
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Picking Up the Fragments of the 2012 Election: Memes, Topoi, and Political Rhetoric

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On October 16, 2012, I sat on a futon, one eye and one ear following the *New York Times'* live stream of the second presidential debate between Democratic president Barack Obama and Republican challenger Mitt Romney. I was busy at the time with coursework, class-planning, and a half-dozen other academic and personal commitments, so my attention was spread thinly. But I felt the need to watch. The oratorically gifted Obama, as the media told it, had unexpectedly bombed the first debate after enjoying a comfortable lead in the polls, and the heretofore gauche and unlikable Romney, now nipping at the incumbent's heels, had his chance to accelerate into the lead with weeks remaining before Election Day. I watched cynically and half-interestedly, bound by some sense of civic duty, tallying up red herrings and ad hominem barbs from both speakers, but hoping nonetheless that my candidate, Obama, would at least hold his own this time.

As it happened, Obama won that debate (and, shortly thereafter, the election), but not through any strategy I'd anticipated. Instead, it went like this: Roughly a third of the way through the debate, Romney said something that snared not just my attention, but apparently the whole nation's. In a tone reeking of *gee-I-tell-ya* artifice, he recalled a personal anecdote in response to an audience question about pay equity for

women: "And—and so we—we took a concerted effort to go out and find women who had backgrounds that could be qualified to become members of our cabinet. I went to a number of women's groups and said, can you help us find folks? And I brought us whole binders full of—of women" ("Transcript").

Binders full of women—he stuttered as he said it, as if he couldn't believe his own lips. The phrase hit a cultural nerve. Within minutes, my Facebook and Twitter feeds erupted with "binders full of women" jokes. What began is simple commentary—"Did Romney really just say 'binders full of women'?!"—evolved quickly into a scathing series of Internet memes: in one captioned image, *Lord of the Rings'* Boromir admonished Romney that "One does not simply fill binders with women"; in another, a deadly-serious *Dirty Dancing*-era Patrick Swayze added, "No one puts baby in a binder" (see "Binders"). "Binders full of women" sprung to life online, effectively ushering the rest of the 98-minute debate into the margins of our cultural memory. And together with a few other bite-sized flubs (among them "47 percent" and "Big Bird"), "binders" did excruciating damage to Romney's presidential bid. He lost. He lost for many reasons, but "binders" was sure one of them.
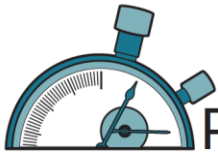
Memetics and Rhetoric

The phenomenon that was "binders full of women" demands scholarly attention. More generally, the fact that a series of Internet memes significantly influenced the discourse around the 2012 presidential election suggests rather plainly that rhetoricians should take memetics (the study of memes) seriously.[1] On this front, Stephanie Vie has examined the relation of memetics to classical *imitatio* and writing pedagogy ("Cokelore"), plus internet "slacktivism" ("In Defense"), while others have probed the role of memes in digital literacy (Knobel and Lankshear; Lewis). The intersection of memetics and rhetorical theory, however, remains largely untapped terrain. I argue here that rhetorical criticism benefits from accounting for memes, and that rhetoricians—by exploring the relationship between memes and rhetorical *topoi*—can pose fruitful interventions in the field of memetics. Online practices of discursive replication and circulation especially compel such cross-disciplinary inquiry.

The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins coined the term *meme* in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* in order to push the theory of Darwinian evolution beyond "the narrow context of the gene" (191) and into human culture. Dawkins defines the meme as "a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*" that functions analogically but not literally like a self-replicating gene; examples he provides are "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches" (192, emphasis in original). Others, most notably Susan Blackmore and Daniel Dennett, have taken up memetics in considerably more detail, Blackmore ambitiously proposing that human culture writ large self-manifests through sets of

memes.[2] Memetics has proven to be a fraught topic—not empirically scientific enough for many scientists, and too scientific (or scientistic) for many humanists—but the term "meme" has gained a popular, non-academic life on the web, where sites like Know Your Meme document the spread of those online bits of discourse that propagate across venues like Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr.[3] Many of these Internet memes—like Grumpy Cat, the Harlem Shake, LOLcats, or Christopher Walken demanding more cowbell—are innocuously funny; the will to laugh motivates their propagation and evolution from one context to the next. Some, like "binders full of women," are also funny, but possess immediate rhetorical potency (Shifman 122-27).

If memes like "binders" fall squarely under the purview of rhetoric, we might begin to reconcile rhetoric and memetics by considering how some memes function as rhetorical *topoi*. Scholars of rhetoric, thanks in part to disagreement among ancient rhetoricians, disagree over the exact definition of *topoi*, though the term typically denotes the "locations" or "places" where rhetors can go to invent arguments. Generally, *topoi* are regarded as either heuristic patterns one can follow to generate arguments in the right circumstances—à la Aristotle's twenty-eight "common" topics (definition, division, compare-and-contrast, and so on) listed in Book 2 of the *Rhetoric* (2.23 1397a-1400b)—or stock "commonplaces" the rhetor commits to memory, seen most notably in early Roman rhetorical handbooks (*Rhetoric ad Herennium* 2.9; Cicero, *De inventione* 2.48-51). Both definitions present limitations. As Michael C. Leff notes, the former, while allowing theoretical coherence, tends to distract from the "material circumstances that surround issues of public debate" in favor of "logical formalism," while the

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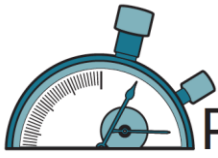
latter tends to sacrifice generative potential for rote memory (42). Recent work on *topoi*, though—by those like Carolyn R. Miller, John Muckelbauer, and Ralph Cintron—seems to posit a middle ground whereby *topoi* can both derive from specific cultural-discursive circumstances and take on a generative role in rhetorical invention. For Miller, a *topos* is best understood not as a warrant or formal premise in an *enthymeme*, but "a point in semantic space that is particularly rich in connectivity to other significant or highly connected points" (142). Such a definition situates *topoi* not logically (a là the tradition of dialectical topics seen in Aristotle's *Topica*) but ideologically: an effective special *topos* will be one that triggers the appropriate set of conceptual and emotional associations for a given audience within a given cultural context. Ideologies, by this theory, function as the linked sets of beliefs, values, assumptions, and cultural knowledge within which a *topos* can meaningfully mobilize rhetoric.[4] Verbal *topoi* like "liberty," "justice," and "equality," for instance, are meaningful to Americans on the left and right alike, though these words mean different things to different Americans because they connect to very different points on overlapping but incongruent ideological matrices.[5]

It remains, however, somewhat counterintuitive to consider Internet memes as *topoi*. The former are fleeting bits of discourse that quickly lose steam once abstracted from their immediate cultural contexts. The latter, at least traditionally, compose sets of patterns (Aristotelian common topics) or stock assumptions (Ciceronian commonplaces) that endure through time, providing generations of rhetors with forms and materials for rhetorical invention. Rather than accepting that memes like "binders" don't fit the bill, however, I want to propose the inverse: that

Internet memes should compel us to challenge the traditional fixity of *topoi*—that we should resist the traditional urge to conceptualize *topos*, text, and context in a secure, static matrix. As Miller reminds us, "The utility and generativity of a *topos* as a source of patterns and relationships depends upon the richness and connectedness of the knowledge available for recombination" (142). As I describe below, memes like "binders" tap into the rich connectivity of cultural association for a short time; "binders" was not just a static block of "content," but an associative node linking to cultural knowledge about capitalism, gender inequity, and Governor Romney's *ethos*. The topical utility of such memes then sharply wanes, but not before making a difference.

Put another way, memes compel us to reexamine the moving parts of the rhetorical situation. Juxtaposing *topoi* and memes reminds us that no *topos* ever "always was": *topoi* are born and evolve; they adapt to new cultural-ideological contexts; and as they evolve, they help reshape those same contexts. Rhetoric occurs within a shifting, evolving set of topic "places" that move within a shifting, evolving set of ideological parameters.[6] Individual *topoi* can evolve formally, as when the Christian *ichthys* ("Jesus fish") sprouts legs and bears the tag "Darwin" to satirize intelligent design, or when Obama's monosyllabic slogan "Hope" gives way to his detractors' "Nope." Or they can evolve in terms of connotation, as when the word "freedom" comes to occupy invisible scare quotes, signaling, for a certain audience, the threat of brutish individual liberty at the expense of the common good.[7]
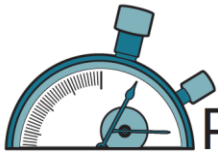
Where Memetic *Topoi* Come From

Topoi often function as memes that evolve to suit rhetorical circumstances. Some, like "God bless America" or appeals to "American ingenuity" have long shelf-lives and built-in adaptive flexibility; others, like "binders full of women" burn brightly (and, for the Romney campaign, painfully) for a short time. But where do such *topoi* come from? Frank J. D'Angelo has argued that even the "common" analytic *topoi* originated not as "pure" logic, but were "abstracted from . . . narrative context[s] or from cosmological arguments in Greek thought" (59). By that token, I would suggest that more specific *topoi* also emerge organically from the contexts of their topical deployment, often by splintering or fragmenting off larger texts.

By "organically," I mean that rarely do individual rhetors deliberately invent mimetically successful *topoi*—though the popularization of memes as a concept has prompted politicians to attempt just this. Obama, for instance, coined "Romnesia" during a stump speech in Fairfax, Virginia, three days after Romney's "binders" gaffe, and then loosed the #romnesia hashtag on Twitter. But the maneuver went largely unnoticed. It was the "accidental" *topoi* like "binders" and "47 percent" that crippled Romney's campaign, just as Obama's "You didn't build that" had marred the president's own efforts that preceding summer (see "2012").

Rather, in the Internet age, a memetically successful *topos* emerges as such through a sort of corporate agency: typically, multiple individuals recognize one nugget-sized chunk of a larger text as significant; this "nugget" becomes a meme once numerous people replicate it outside its immediate original context; it becomes an especially successful

meme once this replication induces a snowball effect of further replication. Most textual units ripe for memetic replication resemble what Roland Barthes, in *S/Z*, calls "lexias," the "brief, contiguous fragments" that serve as "units of reading" within larger texts (13). Barthes elaborates, "The lexia will include sometimes a few words, sometimes several sentences; it will be a matter of convenience: it will suffice that the lexia will be the best possible space in which we can observe meanings; its dimension, empirically determined, estimated, will depend of the *density of connotations*, variable according to the moments of the text" (13; emphasis added). "Binders full of women" clearly stood out to listeners as a "convenient" self-contained lexia within the second 2012 debate, in part, perhaps, for its catchy metrical structure of three consecutive trochees (*bind*-ers *full* of *wo*-men), but mostly for its ability to link to a wealth of connotative meanings through one simple, replicable phrase. The phrase made unfortunate (for Romney) sense to many American voters. It linked, first, to a trend of misogyny that social and news media outlets identified among Republican statesmen in 2012, including incidents like Todd Akin's memorable commentary on "legitimate rape" (another *topos*) and the decision of House Republicans in Michigan, Romney's home state, to censure their Democratic colleague Barb Byrum for uttering the word "vagina" on the floor. "Binders" also played into Romney's unwanted *ethos* of the aloof, out-of-touch plutocrat—the sort of insensitive capitalist who would organize human beings via office filing equipment. In Barthes's terms, "binders" gained traction because of its connotative density; it became a "place" one could go to economically summon these connotations and rebuke Romney for his familiar flaws.

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S/Z, of course, antedates the Internet, as does the practice of abstracting lexia from their surrounding texts and forming them into memes and *topoi*. In politics, one can point to Franklin D. Roosevelt's "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," or Kennedy's "Ask not what you can do for your country, but what your country can do for you." Both political quotations make use of catchy rhetorical devices (*polyptoton* and *chiasmus*, respectively), and seem, therefore, equipped for memetic replication. Obama has succeeded on this front, too, deliberately offering up "change we can believe in" and "yes we can" in his 2008 stump speeches.

Yet I claim above that individual rhetors face an uphill battle in deliberately coining memes. Let me requalify that claim: Individual rhetors will struggle especially to deliberately coin successful *Internet memes*. As in "binders," the most successful Internet memes typically work against the intentions of the meme's original "author" because the culture of memetics online favors the humorous, ironic, parodic, and pop-culturally literate over the deliberately, purposefully polemical (Shifman 78-81). Why is this? Perhaps because humor itself comprises a set of commonplaces among casual Internet users, who are disproportionately young and privy to a number of "in-jokes" specific to online discourse.[8] Indeed, "Internet meme" is not just a popular phrase for describing web humor, but a genre notable for (1) reliance of irreverent, parodic humor, (2) unequaled potential for rapid circulation and replication across social media (seen, for instance, in the explosion "binders" across my Facebook feed on debate night), and (3) multimodal composition for digital consumption. I have discussed the humorous and circulative dimensions of Internet memes

already; the multimodal requires more elaboration.

Gunther Kress defines a mode as a social "resource for meaning making," examples of which include images, writing, music, gesture, soundtrack, and so on (54). The phrase "binders full of women" has been monomodally repeated (on the radio, for instance), but Internet riffing on "binders" usually implies pairing that textual phrase with an image or set of images, creating a more overtly multimodal composite—but for which each mode triggers its own set of connotations. The *Lord of the Rings*-themed meme, for instance, of Sean Bean's Boromir stating, "One does not simply fill binders with women" (Fig. 1; see "Binders"), actually forgoes repeating the phrase "binders full of women," assuming audiences will understand the reference.
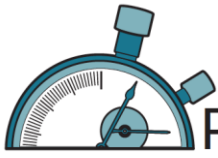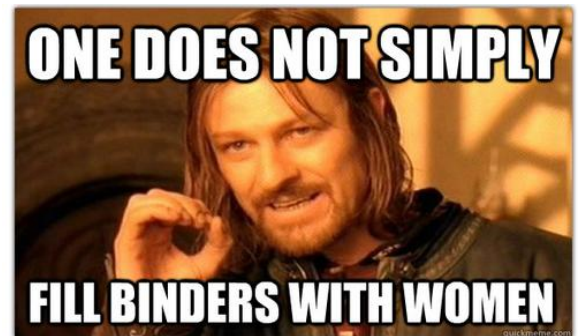

Fig. 1: "Binders" meme example.

It invokes a second lexia, a specific moment in *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, in which Boromir states, "One does not simply walk into Mordor," creating a second in-reference for the benefit of a certain audience with a certain pop-cultural knowledge base.[9] This particular riff on "binders," in appealing to cultural knowledge of a particular audience, satirizes the Romney campaign by likening the storage of women in

binders (and the sexism that connotes) to the absurdity of waltzing unimpeded to the gate of Tolkien's Mount Doom. The "binders" meme has taken countless other forms, too, each one distancing itself from the immediate social context and modal construction of the second debate in 2012. As Kress notes, "modal preferences" vary among societies and cultures; writing has enjoyed dominance in recent Western cultures, while oratory prevailed in classical Greece and Rome (57). Today, one modal composition Internet cultures tend to privilege is the coupling of image and text. For this reason, in large part, I suspect few Americans will recall the particulars of the second 2012 debate one or two years later, but many of us will still remember our favorite online iterations of the "binders" meme. In this sense, the topical place "binders" occupies is also a *synecdoche* for the second presidential debate as a whole.
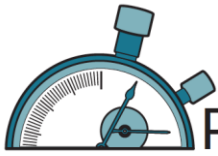
A Cautionary Tale

It is easy to praise Athens among Athenians; it is easy to praise Internet memes among Obama supporters. Internet meme culture undoubtedly benefited the incumbent candidate: Obama "won" the second debate with a competent, mostly unmemorable performance, one that, most importantly, steered clear of Romney's memetic self-crucifixion. As an Obama supporter, I could hardly complain, but as a rhetorician, I wonder about the ramifications of meme culture to our disciplinary assumptions about rhetoric and political deliberation.

Michael Calvin McGee argues, in a 1990 essay, that "it is time to stop whining about the so-called 'post-modern' condition and to develop realistic strategies to cope with it as a fact of human life" (278). For McGee, postmodernity is

characterized by the inability, in heterogeneous cultures, to compose an airtight text that addresses the necessary context of its argument, as, for example, an Athenian orator might have comprehensively addressed Athenian *doxa* in his discourse. Writing before the full brunt of the Internet, McGee posits postmodern texts as "fragments" of their contexts, rending the formal barrier that demarcates text and context. Logically, if we follow McGee—and the postmillennial Internet supports his thesis better than any discursive resources available in 1990—*topoi* like "binders" are fragments of fragments. When such a fragment, in turn, widely circulates, it creates a context of repetition: the "binders" *topos* emerged from the context of the second 2012 debate, but reiterations of that meme grew to contextualize further reiterations, perhaps to the point where the sheer profusion of "binders" memes pulled more rhetorical weight than the debate itself.

I don't mean to bemoan our digital-postmodern condition, but I will suggest that the more a fragment like "binders" replicates and evolves, the further it carries popular memory away from its textual origin. When that origin is a major political event, there are repercussions; when voters assess an election based on which candidate has won the "meme war," some ability to rationally deliberate based on two candidates' many arguments goes by the wayside. When one *topos* consumes a rhetorical situation, the "available means of persuasion" localize in that *topos*.

This, again, is something to accept and deal with, not a cause for despair. Our methods of rhetorical analysis should adapt to account for the paradigm of online memetics, but I would caution against aligning our methods of academic argument with that paradigm even as

we examine it. That is, I am still unwilling to cede the value in reflective, premise-by-premise, theorized argument that can only be achieved by devoting a single text to a single subject over a considerable length. Such argument can offer in *depth* what memes can offer in repetitive *breadth*. Amid our current push to create more digital scholarship, then, we should be cautious in adopting the cultural modalities of the Internet. Memes inevitably propel culture as *topoi* propel argument. I'm not saying we should (or even can) avoid either in our scholarship, but we should recognize, as Blackmore warns, that we are, in a sense, the sum of our memes. We shouldn't get too comfortable with that identity.

Endnotes

1. See Neuman's coverage for *NPR* following the last of the three debates: "Even if you didn't watch any of the three presidential debates," he writes, "chances are you're familiar with Big Bird, binders and bayonets." See, also, Parker on "binders" specifically.

2. Blackmore's *The Meme Machine* may represent the fullest attempt to systematize memes into a comprehensive theory, but Dennett's *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* is equally notable, largely for its conception of memes as "the smallest elements that replicate themselves with reliability and fecundity" — a definition that translates especially well to studies of rhetoric and discourse (344).

3. Shifman's *Memes in Digital Culture* provides an excellent (and readable) academic introduction to Internet memes.

4. I have in mind here Crowley's notion of ideology as "any system within which beliefs, symbols, and images are articulated in such a way that they assemble a more or less coherent depiction of reality and/or establish a hierarchy of values" (65). This definition bears a clear similarity to what memeticists have called *memeplexes*— "groups of memes that are replicated together" (Blackmore 19)—but the psychological emphasis of memetics is often ill-equipped to deal with matters like social power structures or Crowley's "hierarch[ies] of values."

5. Weaver speaks to the memetic quality of "god terms" like "liberty," "justice," or—his go-to example—"progress": "[I]f one has to select the one term which in our day carries the greatest blessing . . . one will not go far wrong in naming 'progress.' . . . If one can 'make it stick,' ['progress'] will validate almost anything" (212). More recent theories
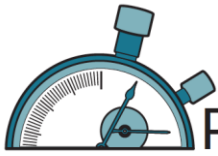
of rhetoric and ideology bear out similar insights about rhetorically potent fragments of discourse; see Crowley on 'ideologic' and commonplaces (70-79) and Cintron on *topoi* as "storehouses of social energy" (100-02). See Arthos for an interesting commentary on neurobiology and what he calls "the instability of the topic places." He contends that "rhetorical *topoi* in their more suggestive and unresolved potential were anticipating [the] richer understanding of the coordination of pattern recognition, adaptation, and assimilation" granted by neurobiological theory (283).

6. Any evolution of topical form seems to imply a parallel evolution in connotation, though the inverse is not necessarily true. In this sense, the most fundamental form of topical evolution seems to be connotative, concerning chiefly not what a topos looks like, but the set of ideological links it is equipped to make.

7. Aristotle may be on to something in his claim that the young, more than the elderly, are "fond of fun and, as a result, witty; for wit is cultured insolence" (*Rhetoric* 2.12 1389b15).

8. This particular meme could also be said to imply a third mode, since audiences familiar with the film will hear Sean Bean's voice in their heads, and thus recall his exasperated vocal tone.

9. This particular meme could also be said to imply a third mode, since audiences familiar with the film will hear Sean Bean's voice in their heads, and thus recall his exasperated vocal tone.

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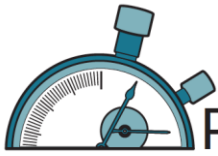
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