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# The Politics of Anti-Discourse: Cypypasta, the Alt-Right, and the Rhetoric of Form<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This essay examines the reactionary turn in digital culture through the cypypasta, a meaningless block of text shared on message boards and recognizable only to the already-initiated. Although rarely studied, the cypypasta is an archetype of contemporary digital culture. As a form, it refuses representational content and coordinates affect, holding a position against the stream of digital content. I argue that digital form—rather than representational content—carries potent ideological and affective charge. Building on an analysis of the cypypastas on 4chan’s infamous /pol/ board, I suggest scholars resuscitate the rhetorical canon of *dispositio*, or arrangement, for the computational age.

Although it was once commonplace to suggest that digital media promoted democratization, recent events have generated increased momentum for scholars and critics who have long sought to trouble that assumption: from the Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro’s use of WhatsApp as a propaganda tool, to the murky role of Cambridge Analytica and Facebook data in the Brexit campaign, to the Trump-supporting alt-right on Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan, there has been something of a reactionary turn in digitally mediated cultures. It is now increasingly commonplace to suggest that digital media promotes radical right-wing politics.<sup>2</sup> These democratizing and radicalizing commonplaces are misleading not only because they are contradictory, but because they are the outcome of an analytical bias toward the study of digital “content” that tends to ignore the material practices of digital culture. Despite recent advances in a range of nonhuman, nonrepresentational, and new materialist approaches to media, digital “content” is still often treated as a text to be mined for its representations. In this essay, I argue for an approach that subordinates representational content to digital form. I suggest that it is digital form—rather than representational content—that tends to carry the more potent ideological and affective charge. I offer the cypypasta—a meaningless block of text routinely shared on message boards and recognizable only to the already-initiated—as an archetype of digital culture. As a form, the cypypasta coagulates affect and refuses representational meaning. As I will describe below, the cypypasta is a paradoxical form: an archetype of a digital culture that is often defined by the circulation of content, the cypypasta nevertheless refuses its own content. It coagulates digital affects but holds a position against digital flows.

The cypypasta is a reactionary form. As Corey Robin argues, reactionary ideology is not simply a longing for tradition. Instead, reactionary politics tends to adopt the form and appearance of radical politics: both declare war on the present, but reactionary politics absorbs radical tactics to launch a counter-revolution pushing against, not with, the tide of democratic equality.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, the cypypasta may appear, in the Rancièrian sense, as a moment of “the political,” a disruptive “excess of words” that issues a challenge to the reigning neoliberal order of discourse. But this challenge does not take the form Rancièrè describes as “literariness,” a proliferation of words unleashing the creative excesses of language that overflows and potentially overwhelms the ruling order.<sup>4</sup> The cypypasta attempts to halt the flow of words, foreclosing on the possibility of a new order that might resist the present. By adopting the appearance of an “excess of words” precisely to foreclose the possibility of any re-invention or reconfiguration of the sayable and the audible, the cypypasta functions as a reactionary form.

I present the case for reckoning with the ostensibly reactionary shift in digital culture by resuscitating the classical rhetorical canon of *dispositio*, or arrangement, for the computational age. *Dispositio* is not concerned with representational meaning; instead, it captures how formal arrangements intervene in technological ecologies, affective milieus, and even ideologies. Moving from the cypypasta as archetype to Gilbert Simondon’s ontogenetic media theory and Ian Bogost’s “procedural rhetoric,” I argue that *dispositio* dominates in the production of digital communication—that is, that the formal arrangement of a discourse takes precedence over its representational content. The dominance of digital *dispositio* requires a model of critique that attends to digital form over content.

Foregrounding the classical rhetorical canon of arrangement reveals how digital forms coagulate out of Aristotle's "available means of persuasion," which range from internet in-jokes to interface logics, keyboard functions to computer programming. Digital arrangement is agnostic to questions of representational meaning. But these arrangements carry ideological force. As the techno-optimist and techno-pessimist traditions intuit, the digital is always ideological, but ideology lies not in representational content but in the ways digital forms shape capacities for action and coordinate affects. In digital culture, ideologies take the shape of formal coagulations rather than the shape of belief, which makes them affective, performative, and highly situated in digital practice. Although nonrepresentational approaches have been developed to combat an overemphasis on ideology as representation, such approaches can also revive ideology not as "bad" representation or "false" consciousness but as a material capacity for action situated in technological arrangements. As a form that jettisons representation, the cypypasta shows both how forms intervene into their milieus and how those milieus coordinate affective and ideological capacities. As I argue, the ideology of ironic anti-discourse that predominates in reactionary digital politics emerges from the arrangement of forms rather than from the spread of representational content.

I begin with an analysis of the cypypasta, a bizarre, overlooked, and yet foundational digital form that traces its genealogy to the early history of Graphical User Interfaces (GUIs) and the cut, copy, and paste functions. I then show how the cypypasta relates to the rhetorical canon of *dispositio*, or arrangement, suggesting that arrangements offer resources for individuation. Recovering the role of material (as opposed to representational or epistemological) practices often overlooked in ideology critique, I next suggest that *dispositio* captures a notion of ideology as a distributed set of forms that emerge from material practices. I close with a case study of "President Trump General" posts on 4chan's infamous /pol/ or "Politically Incorrect" politics board, showing how these posts act as cypypastas, sustaining nonrepresentational ideological formations. As I suggest in the conclusion, the apparent "elective affinity" between digital and reactionary cultures is largely the result of a shared privileging of formal arrangement over representational meaning.<sup>5</sup> Although critique tends to begin by locating objects in historical and discursive context, the history of digital objects often runs along a divergent path from their affective charge, and the arrangements they modulate tend to be agnostic to discursive context. Digital ideology critique, then, requires attention to form over content and arrangement over representation.

### The Cypypasta

The central antagonists of the reactionary turn in digital culture are adherents and co-travelers of the so-called alt-right, an infamous yet incoherent collection of digitally active white nationalists, Nazis, libertarian monarchists, race realists, Men's Rights activists, incels, and trolls. Although some associated with the alt-right, including the self-proclaimed leader Richard Spencer, have something approaching a coherent political agenda, alt-right culture is dominated by performative anti-discourse (or trolling) that ironizes earnest belief (the "redpilling" metaphor is about replacing belief with reality). The difficulty with this ironic style—which is characteristic not only of the alt-right but of much of internet discourse—is not that the content of the discourse expresses the opposite of its apparent meaning, but instead that the discourse has no representational meaning at all. Indeed, this lack of representational content can be an intentional trap for outside analysts. As Jodi Dean has argued, digital culture relies heavily on repetition, which exerts an "affective impact" that has "effects independent of the meaning of what is repeated."<sup>6</sup> Dean highlights Lacan's distinction between the content and the contribution, or the representational content and the fact of it being sent; the latter carries an oft-unnoticed affective charge. Alt-right adherents repeatedly posted images of themselves making the "ok" hand gesture so that liberal critics would label it a white nationalist symbol and tie themselves in knots by explaining how a common gesture represents white nationalism. The "ok" hand gesture is not a white nationalist symbol—it has no content—but it is a contribution, and as such it coordinates white nationalist affect.

The humble cypypasta offers an archetypical example of this kind of repetitive, performative anti-discourse that discharges affect through contribution rather than content. The cypypasta illustrates how the content of internet discourse tends to be subordinate to its form, and its form both emerges from and revises digital *dispositio*, or the position of the discourse in the digital ecology. A cypypasta, as its name suggests, is a passage of copied-and-pasted text that is routinely posted in internet message board communities. The cypypasta is a digital curio with few analogues. Chain letters and spam are also forms designed to distribute the same block of text, but cypypastas do not include urgent appeals to re-share the message, as the chain letter does, nor are they distributed broadly in bulk, as is spam. Indeed, cypypastas contain no message, and they tend to circulate only to those who are already familiar if not with the text itself, then with the affect it discharges. There are other ostensibly meaningless blocks of texts, or at least texts that almost no one reads, such as legal boilerplate and "terms of service" on websites, platforms, and apps. Like

the cypypasta, these forms are rarely read, but they do have enforceable meaning—Facebook does collect user data for targeted advertising; the arbitration clause does prevent disputes from proceeding to court. Lorem Ipsum filler text is another close cousin to the cypypasta, and, as I will discuss below, shares similar roots in the early history of personal computing. But Lorem Ipsum is a placeholder for content to come; the cypypasta is a form that refuses its content, or indeed the insertion of any content in the future. Cypypastas circulate as message board users often post them in response to a post or comment that broaches a well-worn topic in a given community. Cypypastas also act as a kind of troll-bait for users less familiar with the community. The subreddit *r/AteThePasta* archives examples of users who mistakenly attempt to read, understand, and respond to cypypastas, thereby unwittingly revealing their status as “newbies.” Cypypastas rely on a particular kind of *kairos*, or timeliness, an ability to recognize when a familiar theme arises on a message board community and to respond accordingly—in this case, the ability to spot an opportune moment to trick a newbie. Part of the reason the trick often works is that cypypastas tend to parody the tone and style of message board culture. The cypypasta is a digital curio, then, but it also offers an archetype of the formal procedures of much of message board culture (posting, commenting, replying) and of message board affect (contribution over content).

Three examples of cypypastas will help illustrate how the form functions. First, one about the musician Flying Lotus which originated on 4chan, but versions of which appear in different communities with different celebrities. It reads as follows:

I saw Flying Lotus at a grocery store in Los Angeles yesterday. I told him how cool it was to meet him in person, but I didn't want to be a douche and bother him and ask him for photos or anything. He said, “Oh, like you're doing now?” I was taken aback, and all I could say was “Huh?” but he kept cutting me off and going “huh? huh? huh?” and closing his hand shut in front of my face. I walked away and continued with my shopping, and I heard him chuckle as I walked off. When I came to pay for my stuff up front I saw him trying to walk out the doors with like fifteen Milky Ways in his hands without paying. The girl at the counter was very nice about it and professional, and was like “Sir, you need to pay for those first.” At first he kept pretending to be tired and not hear her, but eventually turned back around and brought them to the counter. When she took one of the bars and started scanning it multiple times, he stopped her and told her to scan them each individually “to prevent any electrical infetterence,” and then turned around and winked at me. I don't even think that's a word. After she scanned each bar and put them in a bag and started to say the price, he kept interrupting her by yawning really loudly.<sup>7</sup>

Narrative posts on 4chan often end with unexpected or bizarre twists. This post parodies that tendency, becoming less and less believable line by line. The nonsense is the point: users who read all the way through and engage the narrative reveal themselves as overly credulous newbies unfamiliar with the ironizing style of 4chan boards. This ironic self-referentiality is a dominant trend of message board culture. This trend suggests, contrary to longstanding and persistent assumptions about the internet as a “space of flows,” the internet is also full of obscure pools and swirling eddies that resist the flow.<sup>8</sup> What happens within these swirls is often inscrutable to outsiders precisely because it carries no representational meaning and is difficult to understand without familiarity with the formal procedures (voting, bumping, linking, replying) and affective styles of a given community. Indeed, so many internet users have “eaten” the Flying Lotus cypypasta that Flying Lotus himself tweeted in 2019, “Sorry but I never liked milky ways. Smh.”<sup>9</sup> Far from coursing through a “space of flows,” the cypypasta is bound by the formal demands of the post and buried in a highly contextual ironic affect. Those who “eat” the cypypasta mistake it for yet another bit of circulating content that can be commented on, liked, shared, and recirculated. Where digital culture tends to demand “spreadability,” the cypypasta is sticky.<sup>10</sup> The cypypasta is an artefact of the “proliferation, distribution, acceleration, and intensification” of media technologies and media content that Dean argues is characteristic of communicative capitalism, but it also reacts against the imperative to circulate.<sup>11</sup> The nonsense Flying Lotus narrative does not resonate outside the self-referential irony of chan culture.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, the cypypasta assumes the form of digital culture to undermine the logics of circulation that drive it. The cypypasta thus follows the formal contours of reactionary politics as Robin describes them: reactionaries reject culture as it exists, but they do so by adopting the tactics of the rejected culture. Reactionary politics thus assumes the formal appearance of the present but only in order to stop or reverse the present trajectory. In this sense, the cypypasta is formally reactionary and conservative: it appears as yet another bit of circulating digital culture, but instead of circulating freely, it sticks against the spread.

Where the Flying Lotus cypypasta parodies message board style, the Navy Seal cypypasta parodies the dominant affect of message board culture. It skewers the self-aggrandizing keyboard warrior who launches invective at fellow message board users. An excerpt of the cypypasta reads as follows:

What the fuck did you just fucking say about me, you little bitch? I'll have you know I graduated top of my class in the Navy Seals, and I've been involved in numerous secret raids on Al-Quaeda, and I have over 300 confirmed kills. I am trained in gorilla warfare and I'm the top sniper in the entire US armed forces...You think you can get away with saying that shit to me over the internet ? Think again, fucker.<sup>13</sup>

The cypypasta in full continues for another 174 words. The length is part of the joke: the more the user reads, the more time the user wastes searching for meaning in a meaningless text. Although there is always some element of reading required to recognize cypypastas, experienced message board users quickly stop reading the Navy Seal cypypasta upon recognition, not only because they will likely have seen it before, but because it performs in parodic form the affective style of the keyboard warrior so familiar in message board culture. There is a tendency to assume parody is potentially liberatory, or at least to view it as a formal ally of critique. Bonnie Honig aligns parody with Rancière's "literariness," arguing that citing and mimicking the tropes of the dominant order deflates them and opens a space for the excesses of language to flourish.<sup>14</sup> Yet the cypypasta shows that parody can also be a dead end. In parodying message board style, this cypypasta also parodies the very idea of representational meaning, eliding any "excess" one might associate with the political in a Rancièrian sense. This emphasis on performative anti-discourse perhaps provides one explanation for the impossibility of winning an argument on a message board or on social media. As Dean has shown, the intensity of circulation that characterizes communicative capitalism has led to a decline in symbolic efficiency—a loss of shared meaning amidst the flurry of circulating content—leaving us with "communication without communicability."<sup>15</sup> Where arguments involve deliberative reasoning, message boards coordinate affect. As Dean argues, digital forms of communication "produce and circulate affect as a binding technique."<sup>16</sup> The content is secondary; the fact and affect of posting are primary. As archetypes of digital culture, the cypypasta reveals how this emphasis on contribution over content tends to consolidate reactionary position-taking. It is not only that the cypypasta fails to engage in deliberative reasoning—which, after all, might be a radical gesture, or a mode of resistance—it is that the cypypasta forecloses the possibility of a new regime of meaning, preserving the position of the old.

A third example can help illustrate how cypypastas emerge not only from affective styles but from formal procedures. There is an entire subgenre of cypypasta composed of art created with the characters from the American Standard Code for Information Interchange (ASCII) encoding system. Consider the cypypasta in figure 1, where the ASCII characters are arranged to sketch the shape of Garfield, with Garfield's belly framing the words "Free Bobby Shmurda." Bobby Shmurda is a young Brooklyn rapper who had an unexpected viral hit in 2014. He was arrested in the same year in controversial circumstances, and the phrase "Free Bobby Shmurda" became a slogan associated with #BlackLivesMatter and other anti-racist campaigns. There is a temptation here to read for meaning in this reference to #BlackLivesMatter, to query how this cypypasta engages with the meaning of the movement. But the cypypasta taps into #BlackLivesMatter merely as an available internet reference that can be rearranged into another form. As ASCII art, this post also highlights the way cypypastas rely on formal procedures and digital interfaces. As a character encoding system, ASCII was developed so that it could be displayed on most computer systems. ASCII art is plaintext, which makes it amenable to the cypypasta form. ASCII art is stored easily on sites like Pastebin, which were first formed to archive programming scripts but can house any plaintext. ASCII art functions effectively on message boards where HTML or XML formatting is impossible or impractical. Producing ASCII art requires well-practiced technique, but posting it requires only copying and pasting. The "Free Bobby Shmurda" Garfield thus emerges from a confluence of computational forms and practices, one of which is copying. If placing the phrase "Free Bobby Shmurda" on Garfield's belly seems like odd symbolism, then, that is precisely the point of this cypypasta: it is a species of "shitposting," a term for posts that are purposefully (and therefore ironically) low effort, pointless, and meaningless. I will return to the ideological dimension of shitposting below, but for now it is enough to emphasize that to offer a close reading of the representational meaning of a cypypasta is to misunderstand how its function follows its form. Shitposts parody the very idea that digital "content" is worth paying any attention to.

### The Digital Copy

The cypypasta is an archetype of digital culture. Indeed, the copy in cypypasta gestures toward computation itself. As Lev Manovich suggests, contemporary computation offers the "perfect materialization" of postmodern compulsion to copy.<sup>17</sup> Computer programming relies on the sharing (and therefore the copying) of software development libraries, packages, and entire programs. Programmers routinely share scripts by making them available for copying and pasting. Pastebin and other sites like it emerged to solve a formal problem in Internet Relay Chat (IRC) discussions where posting long programming scripts would interrupt the flow of the chat. Pastebin stores plaintext in a simple textbox

interface with numbered lines. Each stored passage of text has a unique hyperlink, making it easy to share in chats. Anything that can be stored in plaintext can be stored on Pastebin—programming scripts, password dumps, databases of compromised Facebook accounts, and cospypastas. Crucially, Pastebin relies for its existence on the copy-and-paste function, without which a site devoted to plaintext storage would be largely useless. In this sense, the cospypasta emerges from a genealogy of overlapping and intersecting digital forms, including IRCs, message boards, programming scripts, Pastebin (where a search for “cospypasta” returns 1,470 results), and the copy-and-paste function.

Indeed, the copy-and-paste function, which makes it possible to post lengthy blocks of text quickly and repeatedly, is a foundational development in the GUIs that make contemporary commercial computing possible. As early as 1968, the Defense Advanced Research Project Agency-funded oN-Line System (NLS) software included many of the tools and functions that would make computation accessible to non-programmers, including the mouse, hypertext, windows, collaborative real-time editing, word processing, and more. However, NLS had one key drawback: it was modal, meaning it relied on distinct settings for each operation.<sup>18</sup> For example, to delete text, it was necessary to first activate the delete mode in the command line and then direct NLS to the specific text to be deleted. Anyone who has accidentally left on CapsLock (a modal setting) and sent a seemingly screaming message to a friend or colleague will be aware of how cumbersome modal programs can be. The computer programmer Larry Tesler is widely credited with developing the largely modeless GUIs that would eventually become standard in the operating systems of personal computers and software programs such as the Microsoft Office suite. Like most word processors, Microsoft Word relies heavily on a key feature Lasler and his colleague Timothy Mott introduced to the Gypsy document preparation system they developed at Xerox PARC in the 1970s: the cut-and-paste and copy-and-paste functions.<sup>19</sup> To cut or copy and paste was once publishing industry jargon referring to a series of physical actions involving physical objects—metal scissors and messy paste. Now the scissors and paste have been replaced with CTRL + X and CTRL + V.

The cut-and-paste and copy-and-paste functions are examples of what Ian Bogost calls “unit operations,” a term that refers to “the gesture of conceiving a particular process as an encapsulated concept.”<sup>20</sup> Cut- and copy-and-paste are inscribed as concepts in GUIs; one no longer needs scissors or paste, just a right click or a basic knowledge of keyboard shortcuts. Without modeless GUIs and the copy, cut, and paste functions, the cospypasta would be impossible. It is easy to forget that, before personal computing and desktop publishing programs, there was no way to render text without producing a “final” unmodifiable copy.<sup>21</sup> The Lorem Ipsum placeholder text, which comes from a jumbled fragment of Cicero, is now standard for previewing fonts, but it had little use before personal computing.<sup>22</sup> In the 1960s, Letraset, which made rub-down transferable type popular among graphic designers, used Lorem Ipsum to showcase its font offerings. When Aldus (now Adobe) PageMaker was introduced on the Apple Macintosh on 1985, it borrowed Letraset’s practice and used Lorem Ipsum to preview fonts, which led to it becoming a familiar standard.<sup>23</sup> However, Lorem Ipsum is unlikely to trick anyone (except perhaps Latin scholars) into reading it because it is a placeholder for content to come. The cospypasta takes the formal appearance of content precisely to refuse content. Still, Lorem Ipsum is kin to cospypasta in that it is a meaningless text that has its roots in the history of personal computing and the role of copying as a digital function. Indeed, Jussi Parikka writes that the copy function “presents itself as the key mode”—or form—“of becoming-object of digital culture.”<sup>24</sup> In digital culture, to share is to copy. A digital form that moves through and relies on other digital forms, including Pastebin, a website developed to store long programming scripts; the unofficial cospypasta database for the video streaming platform Twitch; the software developer site GitHub, which houses approximately 69,000 programming scripts related to cospypastas, including one that automatically scrapes cospypastas from message board sites; and the programming support site StackOverflow, where at least one developer is scripting a bot that will allow users to extract cospypastas and automatically post them—a bizarre case of a machine impersonating a human impersonating a machine.

### Copy as Coagulate

The cospypasta is one unexpected result of the interfacing of human and machine. As cospypastas, the Flying Lotus, Navy Seal, and “Free Bobby Shmurda” Garfield are conrescences of computation, user interfaces, programming, and message board affect. Yet the cospypasta poses a number of conceptual problems for the study of representational discourse in digital culture. It is possible to modify the cospypasta—Flying Lotus, for example, can be replaced with another celebrity—but the cospypasta is not an artefact of “remix culture.” The point of the cospypasta is prior recognition, not rewriting or modifying. Cospypastas can circulate, but not very far. The Navy Seal cospypasta does not travel well beyond anonymous message boards. “Spreadable” forms of media rely on fluidity; cospypastas tend to coagulate, revealing the limits of “spreadable media.” If “content is king,” as Bill Gates famously declared in 1996, what are we to make of a form that refuses its own contents? The cospypasta is a block of text that lodges itself in a

context, that resists remixing, and, finally, that belies representational meaning, that indeed is not to be read but instead recognized, and that is misread only if it is read. The copy-paste gestures toward a different form of digital culture, one where coagulations of formal arrangements take precedent over the circulation of content, where anti-discourse undermines representational meaning.

Given the inadequacy of rhetorical invention and symbolic representation to describing digital culture, recent approaches to media studies have suggested going beyond the surface of the screen. Software studies foregrounds algorithms, logical functions, programming languages, and application programming interfaces (APIs), showing how software is more than a content-delivery mechanism, more than a space for reading, seeing, clicking, typing, and scrolling.<sup>25</sup> Friedrich Kittler goes further, rejecting software and delving into the material substrates of computational hardware.<sup>26</sup> These approaches are necessary, but they do not attend to the rhetorical effects of digital culture. Symbolic efficiency declines as the sheer volume of content on feeds, streams, and message boards increases. And while Latour may be right that critique has run out of steam, we have not run out of objects worthy of critique.<sup>27</sup> Understanding contemporary digital culture requires attending to content without contents, to content as a function of form, and to these forms of content as an affective potential. The rhetorical tradition has resources for viewing language in precisely this way—as an arrangement of tropes, of recombinatory forms that carry an affective charge. Routing the rhetorical tradition through contemporary nonrepresentational approaches to media theory offers a model for understanding digital culture as a rhetoric of arrangement. Rhetoric has always been a machine, a repeatable set of procedures, for producing public performances adapted to highly specific contexts. As a machine, rhetoric has always subordinated meaning to form and content to performance and procedural technique. The rhetorical tradition thus provides overlooked resources for the study of digital culture.

#### Digital Dispositio

Of the five rhetorical canons—*invention*, *arrangement*, *style*, *memory*, and *delivery*—*invention*, or the generation of new content, has tended to occupy a privileged position. Indeed, Cicero titled the treatise in which he sets out the canons *De Inventione*. Quintilian modified Cicero's emphasis, suggesting that invention would be “nothing” without arrangement.<sup>28</sup> In the narrow sense, arrangement is confined to ordering the parts of a discourse (*exordium*, *narratio*, *partitio*, *confirmatio*, *refutatio*, *peroratio*). This limited notion of form as internal to the speech is shared in literary criticism, where the New Critics analyzed form through close reading. Literary critic Caroline Levine argues that form structures both text and context. She defines form as “an arrangement of elements” and proposes form as mode of analyzing Rancière's notion of the “distribution of the sensible” that delimits the scope of politics.<sup>29</sup> In his essay on Foucault's notion of *dispositif* (or apparatus), Agamben notes that the French term has its roots in the Latin *dispositio*, but he defines the *dispositif*—and with it, arrangement—principally as a mode of management.<sup>30</sup> In rhetoric, though, arrangement is precisely the unmanageable. Moving beyond the narrow definition of *dispositio* as the parts of speech, Quintilian offers a broader definition of arrangement as the “distribution of things,” including identities and affects, technique and technologies. This abundance makes it impossible to “lay down general rules which would suit all subjects.”<sup>31</sup> The practice of ordering paradoxically resists rules of order.

Arrangement, then, involves not only the ordering of a speech but contingent interventions into the social milieu. Unlike invention, arrangement is agnostic to content; it involves the manipulation of forms. In their call for an “evil media” studies that would examine how digital objects acquire a kind of materiality that is “refractory to meaning,” Fuller and Goffey recognize the Sophists of Ancient Greece as model evil media practitioners.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the Sophists were masters of arrangement, which is precisely how they earned Plato's ire—instead of pursuing truth, they played with form, exploiting the affective potential of language. Hence Plato's famous criticism of sophistic rhetoric as “mere cookery,” a set of replicable procedures for arranging language to achieve a desired effect without recourse to logic, meaning, or truth. Ian Bogost argues that digital media involve “procedural rhetoric,” which he defines as the practice of using the methods, techniques, and logics of computational systems persuasively.<sup>33</sup> This is a rhetoric that foregrounds machinic persuasion, attending to processes inscribed in machines as “a configurative system, an arrangement” of digital objects.<sup>34</sup> These objects range in Bogost's account from the syntax of programming languages to the “procedural tropes” of user interfaces, including windows, keyboard shortcuts, scrolling, and more. For Bogost the “procedural tropes” of computation persuade users to interact with digital objects in particular ways. Computation provides resources for individuation. Like the Sophists, these procedural resources bypass the representational demands for truth and falsity, meaning and nonsense, signifier and signified.

Instead of tracking the spread of content, procedural rhetoric directs us to the processes and logics of computation. Procedural rhetoric opens a door to Simondon's theory of ontogenesis, which emphasizes "coming to be" over "being." If Bogost directs us to the level of computation as manipulated through interface logics and procedural tropes, Simondon gives us a language for describing how these forms sustain milieus that provide resources for transduction and individuation. Transduction "names the process that occurs as an entity individuates or precipitates in a field of relations and potentials."<sup>35</sup> Individuation, in turn, is the process by which an entity (a person, an object, a technology) develops "in its specificity out of a domain of unresolved tensions and potentials."<sup>36</sup> Put simply, transduction is a process of transfer or conversion; individuation is the process by which individual entities take shape or "coagulate."<sup>37</sup> Objects individuate as they form relations with other objects and with their milieus. The milieu and the individuated entity combine to activate a "a sort of energized topological configuration"—a *dispositio*—composed of "remarkable points."<sup>38</sup> These remarkable points transduce; they convert energy into new topological configurations. The active milieu is a scene of constant rearrangement.

As Parikka has argued, drawing on Simondon, media are not merely systems for transmitting content but "contractions of the forces of the world into specific resonating milieus."<sup>39</sup> The form of this contraction is constantly changing as the various forms transduce with one another and give rise to novel individuations, such that our experience of the technological is always our experience of adapting and responding to the technological.

### Forming against the Spread

In Simondon's account, media are not merely systems for transmitting and receiving signs and representations but resources for "expanded involvement" with active milieus.<sup>40</sup> Yet the dominant model for examining digital content remains the "spreadable media" thesis, which suggests that digital forms—memes, videos, tweets, and posts—share a tendency toward virality owing to the removal of barriers to publishing, the increased speed of digital communication, and the expanded reach of digital communications networks.<sup>41</sup> Effective digital communication, according to this thesis, involves remixing elements from across contexts and, crucially, spreading these remixed elements across new contexts. For example, in his important study of memes, Ryan Milner adopts the "spreadable media" thesis, arguing that the "collective spread" of memes through remixing, reappropriation, and sharing across contexts helps to constitute a more "vibrant meme pool."<sup>42</sup> The "spreadable media" thesis thus tends to treat circulation as spreadability, and to equate spreadability with democratizing participation.

Although memes ostensibly offer a clinching case for the power of spreadable media, they pose as many problems to the conflation of "participatory media" with "spreadable media." Although some memes certainly do spread, they also offer a striking example of sequestration over spreading. As Yuval Katz and Limor Shifman have recently argued, memes are often entirely meaningless outside of very narrow discursive communities.<sup>43</sup> In this sense, memes serve primarily to signal familiarity with subcultures. Message board communities often lament the spreading of "their" memes to more mainstream communities composed of "normies," an internet slang word that originated on 4chan to describe mainstream internet users who failed to understand the layers of irony inherent to 4chan subcultures. It is not uncommon on 4chan to encounter criticisms of the YouTube channel "Behind the Meme," which explains the origin and history of internet memes (there are four separate petitions to ban "Behind the Meme" on Change.org). According to its critics, the explanations on "Behind the Meme" undermine memes precisely by expanding their audience. In this sense, spreadability also dissipates vibrancy. Spreadability is not the only telos of digital culture. Digital forms also coagulate in formal arrangements that stick against the spread. The copy-pasta is a stagnant pool in a space of flows. It is a repetitive contribution rather than remixable content. As Dean argues, the intensity of digital culture—the addictiveness of its little pleasures—accrues from the repetition of the contribution, not the newness of the content.<sup>44</sup> Formal repetition has an affective impact. Affect circulates, but it also coagulates and gets stuck.

### Copy-pasta Configurations

A focus on spreadability tends to ignore the "topological configuration" of "remarkable points" out of which digital forms coagulate. To ignore these configurations and coagulations is also to miss the affective and ideological charge of digital repetitions. Consider the "Free Bobby Shmurda" Garfield copy-pasta. As I described above, "Free Bobby Shmurda" became a slogan associated with #BlackLivesMatter and other anti-racist campaigns. On one level, then, the spreadability of Shmurda's hit song and the shareability of reports of the apparent injustice of his subsequent arrest explains how "Free Bobby Shmurda" became a slogan. But how did this slogan arrive on Garfield's belly? Here to follow the spread of the slogan's representational content is to follow a hermeneutical dead end. Garfield's

sloganeering belly does not critique racial capitalism or mass incarceration; if anything, the slogan's appearance in an ASCII rendering of a famously banal cartoon cat deracinates and therefore ironizes political critique. This cypypasta suggests that any digital content—even urgent critiques of racist policing—can be captured in a form that evacuates the meaning of that content. To place the slogan on Garfield's belly is to gesture toward rhetorical invention as (re)arrangement. Rather than making a critique, it gestures toward the futility of critique. This gesture is reactionary in the sense Robin describes: it questions the very ground upon which one might launch a radical critique of the present.<sup>45</sup> Unlike Rancière's "literariness," the cypypasta is not an "excess of words" that opens new realms of meaning outside the existing distribution of the sensible. The cypypasta adopts the form of communicative capitalism in order to elide circulation and foreclose meaning. None of this operates on the level of representational content, however. The ironization and deracination is the effect of a condescence of digital forms. As plaintext, ASCII art is stored easily on archives such as Pastebin and posted easily on message boards where HTML or XML formatting is impossible or impractical. The character encoding system is therefore a "remarkable point" that provides a resource for transduction. The copy-and-paste function offers another "remarkable point." The "Free Bobby Shmurda" Garfield thus emerges from a condescence of digital forms and practices. The "spreadable media" model emphasizes representational content, suggesting that "shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content" allows users to "spread content."<sup>46</sup> However, the "Free Bobby Shmurda" Garfield reframes a viral video and a critical slogan not to "spread" the content of its slogan but to rearrange it in the form of ironic anti-discourse through the cypypasta. This reframing arranges "Free Bobby Shmurda" in a form that both deflates its meaning and prevents future remixing. Like all cypypastas, then, its representational content is largely irrelevant; "Free Bobby Shmurda" Garfield signals location in digital culture and practice, including a familiarity with the style of message board discourse, digital forms (ASCII, copy and paste), and internet references (here internet cat culture, ironic enjoyment of Garfield, Bobby Shmurda's arrest, and racist policing all "mean" the same thing). These digital resources coagulate into the cypypasta, but these acts of arrangement also intervene into the "active milieu" of digital culture. Simondon calls this capacity for an object to both emerge from and intervene into its milieu "recurrent causality."<sup>47</sup> Recurrent causality gestures toward a form of arrangement in which rearranging a form also rearranges the milieu. "Free Bobby Shmurda" offers a non-discursive response to #BlackLivesMatter by rearranging the position of an associated hashtag. Shitposts are representationally meaningless, then, but their rhetorical effect is to modulate the milieu. The ideology of ironic anti-discourse emerges from the arrangement of forms rather than the spread of content. The repetition of digital forms releases an affective charge. These forms coagulate out of the practices of procedural rhetoric.

### Ideology as Formal Practice

The rhetorical canon of *dispositio* captures this notion of ideology as a distributed set of practices recruited by a mediated form of organization. The practices of procedural rhetoric can also be understood ideologically—indeed, rhetoric is always ideological, insofar as persuasion involves adopting or assuming position in relation to the world. Yet this position is not always epistemic: ideology is not always housed in one's head; it can also be routinized and performative. With so much attention paid to hailing, interpellation, and the "always already," it is sometimes overlooked that Althusser defined ideologies as "actions inserted into *practices*."<sup>48</sup> Here Althusser elaborates the example of Pascal's believer, who kneels not because he believes but instead believes because he kneels. As Judith Butler explains, Pascal's believer is "an instance of ritual in which assuming the posture of kneeling gives rise over time to belief."<sup>49</sup> The significance of these ritual practices, as Butler argues, is that "ideas have their existence as what is 'inscribed' in those acts" that comprise habitual, regulated practices.<sup>50</sup> Ideology is not a representation but an inscription, not a set of beliefs but a routine of practices.

Inscription delivers us back to media. As Bogost writes, procedural rhetoric "requires inscription in a medium that actually enacts processes rather than merely" describing or expressing them.<sup>51</sup> These inscriptions are ideological not as the content of a false consciousness or as the "unreal but meaningful" abstractions of Marxist formal analysis but as the becoming-object of formal processes. In his idiosyncratic "mediological" theory, Régis Debray modifies Althusser, removing ideological practices entirely "from the semantic field of the *epistème* to that of *praxis*," arguing that ideology is "*a form of organization*" rather than an individual subjectivity, and thus an "incorporation" or "collective incantation" that coheres through mediation.<sup>52</sup> To translate Althusser's schema to the digital context, then, we could say that ideologies are actions inserted into practices afforded by procedural tropes (scroll up, scroll down, click, right click, vote up, vote down, comment, reply to comment, like, retweet, quote retweet, copy and paste, shift + enter for line break). Ideology coheres out of habitual actions that generate coagulated digital forms, which in turn intervene in the "active milieu." Practices of arrangement, then, shape ideologies both at the level of the form and the milieu.

Recent studies of algorithmic culture have begun to draw out the ideological ramifications of computational arrangements. As Safiya Umoja Noble shows, search engine algorithms rearrange existing societal infrastructures and inequalities, which makes amplifying durable social forms such as racism an almost inevitable outcome of practices such as Search Engine Optimization. As Noble notes, the pornography industry is particularly adept at linking key terms to pornographic content, in part by exploiting “long tail keywords,” or variations on keywords that can be linked to niche (and often highly racialized) fetishes and sexual interests.<sup>53</sup> Although these key words can perpetuate racist representations of Black women and girls, the ideological force of the words themselves is nonrepresentational: they become formal components of a computational infrastructure of connectivity. For human subjects, these practices tend to coalesce into Althusser’s “rituals” at the level of GUIs and Human Input Devices (HIDs), which coordinate procedural tropes for the end user. Procedural tropes afford actions that become ideological practices. These actions might be relatively overt, as when moderators of the *r/The\_Donald* community on Reddit removed the “downvote” button for posts and comments, a modification of Reddit’s procedural tropes that enforced the cheerleading affect of *r/The\_Donald* as a “never-ending rally” for Donald Trump. Procedural tropes can also make more subtle modifications to available actions that ramify throughout the digital milieu. For example, the CTRL + C keyboard shortcut captures the postmodern compulsion to copy; the Pastebin textbox offers an “associated milieu” for the practice of copying and pasting; the message board interface affords opportunities to press CTRL + V after pressing CTRL + C on a cypypasta housed in Pastebin; the cypypasta rearranges available digital forms into a coagulate of ironic affect.<sup>54</sup> As users, we are inducted through such routinized procedures into the ideologies afforded by the machinic milieu.

In the digital milieu, arrangement becomes the canon of ideological practice. Quintilian analogizes arrangement to walking through a house, highlighting that the structure might be set, but the walker’s route is infinitely variable. As the notion of the “active milieu” suggests, not only can the digital house be walked through any number of ways, but the house itself modulates with each step.<sup>55</sup> Every encounter with a “procedural trope”—every click, swipe, and keystroke—modulates the milieu. Digital arrangement is therefore highly deictic. Linguistically, deixis refers to words such as *now* and *then*, words whose meaning is dependent on speaker, perspective, and context. Arrangement thus becomes a dynamic scene of constantly re-coagulating forms. Indeed, platforms, interfaces, and mobile devices increasingly recalibrate their affordances based on a variety of inputs from users, including inputs users might be consciously aware of (clicking, swiping, typing) and less consciously aware of (metadata, search history, cookies, and various forms of device “fingerprinting” including battery status, installed fonts, browser version, and so on). Digital experience is highly dependent both on procedural rhetoric—or on how computational processes position us as users—and on deictic arrangement—or on how we are positioned in and by digital culture.

### The Politics of Form

As Richard Grusin has recently suggested, the way mediation generates “conditions for the individuation of entities within the world” is not opposed to politics but co-constitutive of it.<sup>56</sup> Grusin’s emphasis on individuation directs us toward Simondon’s notion of an “active milieu,” where transduction provides resources for individuations, and individuation generates new coagulations, thereby rearranging the “topological configuration” of “remarkable points” that re-energize transductive potentials. Cypypastas have intersected with more extreme political events. The Navy Seal cypypasta has long been famous (on message boards, anyway) but it became infamous when the gunman in a March 15, 2019 attack on a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand posted his manifesto online prior to the attack. The manifesto captured the affective style of the digital troll, including references to the YouTuber PewDiePie, the video game *Fortnite*, and the full text of the Navy Seal cypypasta. Describing his attack as a move from “shitposting” to “effort posting,” the shooter revealed that ironic anti-discourse can be put to horrifying use. Clearly, trolling is no longer “just” ironic, if indeed it ever was: irony can also be a stylistic mode of stating dearly-held positions. However, this form of irony is nonrepresentational. Here irony emerges from an arrangement of digital forms, including video games, message boards, and user-generated platforms, such as YouTube and Reddit. The references to PewDiePie, the Navy Seal cypypasta, and *Fortnite* are entirely empty in the symbolic and representational sense: they don’t mean anything, they are not codes for anything, they are not symbols to be unpacked; they are, instead, signals of a location in a digital arrangement. The manifesto’s “trolling” is a location signal. Instead of critiquing these references as symbols, we need to understand the topological arrangement of these references.

The question, then, is what sorts of individuations occur in digital spaces? Instead of thinking agentic digital inventions, how can we think the arrangements of active digital milieus? How does a 4chan imageboard energize remarkable points that assume particular forms which, in turn, have particular consequences? One key point is that

there is no singular individual navigating the internet. There is, instead, a meshwork of interfaces “individuating” in Simondon’s sense, which is to say there exist only objects assuming a particular form as their “remarkable points” interact to generate further relations. Modifying Bill Gates, Yuk Hui argues that the digital mantra “Content Is King,” which many digital “content providers” still abide by, has already become an anachronism because “relations have taken over...the primary function of content is to form resources for generating relations.”<sup>57</sup> If content is subordinate to the relations it generates, then the form of those relations becomes the primary question for analysis. From a rhetorical perspective, this requires attending to digital circulation not as an instance of “spreadable media” but as a concrescence of forms that can be gathered under the canon of arrangement. As the cypypasta form shows, digital rhetoric is not only about the liquid spread but about the eddies and dams, not only about virality but about the coagulated forms that signal the stickiness of a message board subculture or the depth of a dank meme pool. Harnessing procedural rhetoric to Simondon’s notion of ontogenetic becoming offers a conceptual framework for the study of digital arrangement. I turn now to /pol/ and r/The\_Donald for a case study in how digital form arranges ideologies.

#### President Trump General: 4chan’s Reactionary Cypypasta

4chan is an anonymous imageboard site modelled on Japanese imageboard sites and originally dedicated to discussions of manga and anime. The site is composed of multiple boards, from the boards on Japanese culture, gaming, and photography to the infamously anarchic /b/ board, and /pol/, which is dominated by trolls practicing a kind of ironic-yet-serious Nazism. All posts are entirely anonymous. Moderation is notoriously lax on 4chan, but it is also impossible to track the extent of moderation, since 4chan displays no record of deleted posts. Most boards have a limit of ten pages; once this limit is reached, old posts are permanently removed. 4chan posts “bump” higher up the list of posts as “anons” (as 4chan users call themselves) reply to the posts, but each post stops being “bumped” after a set time period and is permanently deleted once it descends to the bottom of the board.<sup>58</sup> Due partly to the speed with which 4chan removes posts, there is very little academic study of 4chan.<sup>59</sup>

During Donald Trump’s presidency, the President Trump General posts became a regular feature of the /pol/ board on 4chan. The President Trump General posts almost always appeared at the top of the /pol/ board.<sup>60</sup> Although Sal Hagen describes these as “general” posts that host subforum discussions on variety of topics, including Syria, Fascism, National Socialism, and British politics, these President Trump General posts can also be usefully understood as an iteration on the cypypasta form.<sup>61</sup> As previously discussed, a cypypasta is any passage of text that users copy and paste in message board forums. Cypypastas are often (although not always) lengthy stories that make less sense the longer one reads. Although cypypastas have become a regular feature of message boards, the Trump cypypasta is slightly different: it tells a story through a proliferation of links, each link providing evidence of Trump’s accomplishments. The Trump cypypasta is also more modular than the typical cypypasta: like most cypypastas, its text is almost always the same, however its links (which are housed in Pastebin) continually update. The Trump cypypasta became a ubiquitous feature of /pol/ after Trump’s election. One might expect that the routine appearance of these /ptg/ posts is the work of a bot programmed to perform a rote task. However, bots are banned on 4chan. The ubiquity of the Trump cypypasta is thus the result of routine and dedicated posting by 4chan users energizing the “topological configuration” wherein Pastebin and /pol/ are two of many “remarkable points” transducing with the timely /pol/ poster, resulting in the routine daily appearance of the /ptg/ posts. For example, on Wednesday, June 27, 2018, anonymous 4chan users posted the cypypasta five times between 8:44 and 15:06, usually about every two hours, but sometimes more frequently.

The format is deceptively simple: each post is headed “/ptg/ President Trump General” (Figure 2). The “/ptg/” puns on private tracker generals, invite-only torrent communities that track the sharing and downloading of torrents within the community. The slashes mimic the form in which 4chan identifies boards. The /ptg/ posts stake a formal claim to a status as a board within a board. Although the headings do not change, the links below them are updated as Trump’s “accomplishments” continue. The most noticeable change that distinguishes the various /ptg/ posts is the image. This formal innovation on the cypypasta corresponds to 4chan’s status as an image board, where there are no text-only original posts. The image most frequently depicts Trump, his family, his political allies, or references to contemporary politics. For example, on Wednesday, June 27, 2018, the images depicted a group of young female Hillary Clinton supporters crying after her loss, a story quoting Mike Pence’s comments about illegal immigration, Melania Trump and Queen Rania of Jordan viewed from behind while walking into the White House, and two references to the congressional primaries on June 26, 2018 that mocked the losing candidates Chelsea Manning and Don Blankenship, a Republican Trump had criticized.

The text of the post is a series of links organized by two key headings. The first reads “PRESIDENT DONALD J. TRUMP” and includes links to the White House website, Trump’s personal website, and [www.promiseskept.com](http://www.promiseskept.com), which tracks campaign promises Trump has purportedly kept. The second key heading performs an imagined /pol/ “anon,” reading, in 4chan’s standard green text, “>b-but Trump hasn’t done anything!” Below this heading are links to his daily schedule, previous appearances, as well as Pastebin links to regularly updated lists of Trump’s accomplishments. The first comment is—almost always—“MAGA!”

The /ptg/ cypypasta is performative anti-discourse. The pasting and posting performatively renounces the meaning of the words, which instead become signals of their location in the formal arrangement of the message board. Cypypastas are recognized, not read (this is true even if the users read through the actual text; this is reading as extended self-recognition as message board member—the textual form of enjoying your symptom). The Trump cypypasta thoroughly exploits this power of performative recognition. The hyperlinks are not meant to be followed but to be seen; their proliferation testifies to Trump’s accomplishments. In the cypypasta, content is yet another formal object to be rearranged into novel coagulations. Content is therefore a function of form.

In Simondon’s language, these formal demands and responses to them are resources for transduction. From the process of transduction, new individuations emerge. As described above, Pastebin and other sites like it emerged to solve a formal problem in Internet Relay Chat discussions where posting long programming scripts would interrupt the flow of the chat. Pastebin individuated through an encounter with another individuated machine, the chatroom. For Simondon, such individuated machines entail recurrent causality. The machine, in effect, suggests its own uses, making new connections and relations.<sup>62</sup> Bogost argues that these machinic suggestions compose a rhetorical situation understood as a “structured presentation of specific elements arranged in a certain way.”<sup>63</sup> The procedural rhetoric of a message board emerges from the various procedural tropes available to users: posting, replying, voting, or liking. But procedural rhetorics also span domains and websites. As Bogost argues, “unit operations,” which capture a process, like copying and pasting, as an encapsulated concept, like the copy-and-paste function, “articulate connections between nodes and networks; they build relations.”<sup>64</sup> Pastebin’s plaintext storage is a useful example of a “unit operation” forming in concrescence with other unit operations in the manner Bogost describes. Pastebin resolved a formal demand of internet chatrooms, but it has also spawned a number of other uses involving plaintext files. Hackers frequently use Pastebin to share exploits or to dump compromised account information. Links to more than a thousand hacked webcams recently appeared on Pastebin, for example. But Pastebin also stores the text of cypypastas. Again in Simondon’s language, Pastebin is the associated milieu of the cypypasta, the “charged potentiality” that energizes the process of individuation, giving us the cypypasta. Thus Pastebin offers a relatively simple unit operation—a box for storing plaintext—that can combine in complex ways with other unit operations, such as message board posts and lines of code that update a list of links. The Trump /ptg/ posts are best understood not as content produced by individual subjects but as contingent arrangements of digital forms including Internet Relay Chat, programming scripts, Pastebin, the copy-and-paste function, message boards, and image boards.

Nevertheless, it is clear the /ptg/ cypypasta is deeply referential for 4chan users: the slashes signal 4chan’s board structure, the acronym references torrent communities, and the use of Pastebin itself points to programmer and geek culture. However, the 4chan user—“anon”—does not direct or control these many overlapping formal structures from behind the keyboard. Anon—a name that usefully distances us from the individual subject—is just another individuated machine responding to the formal demands encountered in the transductive process, and in turn issuing further formal demands on the other individuated machines in the same milieu. The repeated posting by “anon”—a singular name for a manifold—of the /ptg/ cypypasta mimics spam and, in a reversal of the Turing Test, impersonates automation. Cypypastas thus reveal how the vaunted agency of the participatory media user can be a form of becoming-machine, and this becoming occurs in and acts on digital arrangements. Like Pascal’s believer, who believes because he kneels—whose ideology follows ritual form—the digital user’s routinized and automated engagement with digital forms is an induction into ideological arrangements. The digital *dispositio*, then, becomes the scene of ideological inscription.

## Conclusion

The specter of a post-truth politics has haunted philosophy since Plato, but digital culture makes Sophists of us all. User-generated content is a misleading phrase; procedurally-generated formal coagulations is a less felicitous but more accurate description of how such digital archetypes as the cypypasta capture affect and coordinate computational form. Plato’s search for permanent form behind the rhetoric has it the wrong way around; the form is the rhetoric. The canon

of arrangement describes how forms coagulate out of Aristotle's "available means of persuasion." As the "spreadable media" thesis intuits, digital culture is indeed a scene of circulation, a space of flows, but this is precisely why coagulated forms succeed: they stick out in the stream. Indeed, alt-right discussion tends to repeat the same arguments over and over and over again, even if—perhaps especially if—these arguments have been widely debunked (the "no-go" areas in London and Paris, the overrunning of Sweden by migrants, child sex rings in pizza parlors, the Cultural Marxist conspiracy allegedly propagated by the Frankfurt School to shorten the American attention span, and so on). These are less arguments than rhetorical tropes, a name for a form with reliable affective resonance. In digital culture, reactionaries have the advantage of damming the flow. In his theorization of conservatism, Robin argues that far from a simple longing for tradition, the reactionary impulse adapts and adopts (and thereby rearranges) the language of the left in order to release an affective charge that animates a "reconfiguration of the old regime."<sup>65</sup> Perhaps this explains the present impasse between democratizing and reactionary accounts of digital media: its forms sustain democratization and the reaction against it.

The far right has long made use of "leaderless resistance" that suits the network form, but extreme right-wing content seems to be bubbling up everywhere, from 8kun and 4chan to Reddit, YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. Symbolic efficiency may be in decline, but the sheer volume of content on feeds, streams, and message boards is on the increase.<sup>66</sup> In arguing for an "elective affinity" between much of right-wing politics and social media, Paolo Gerbaudo suggests that the "focalization and aggregation" mechanisms of social media tend to drive attention to sensationalist content that confirms pre-existing ideological positions.<sup>67</sup> Yet Gerbaudo does not account for the ways in which the formal mechanisms of social media and digital culture are themselves ideological. It is not the meaning of the content but the capacity of formal tropes that coordinates affect and reinforces positions, offering a place in the arrangement for ideologies to cohere. Instead of critiquing content as free-floating representation, attending to the procedural rhetorics of formal arrangement can offer a model of critique adequate to digital culture. A deliberative or agonistic approach is woefully inadequate to countering digitally mediated reactionary ideologies. It is not possible to debunk a reactionary affect or conspiratorial ideology with "better facts." There can be no unveiling or demystifying in this context. Pascal's believer does not kneel because he believes, he believes because he kneels; he is not persuaded by the content of theology, but by the habitual practice of assuming the posture of kneeling. Like Pascal's believer, the arrangements that cohere from the transductive process are ideological—they take one shape and not another, forming the basis for one performance and not another. To engage with "procedural tropes"—liking, sharing, copying and pasting—is to be transduced in an ideological arrangement. Critique must therefore target formal coagulations rather than representational content. The classic rhetorical canon of arrangement must be resuscitated for the digital age.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Ralph Schroeder, *Social Theory after the Internet: Media, Technology, and Globalization* (London: UCL Press, 2018), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump*, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), see in particular 25-26, 29-30, 40.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, translated by Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 37.

<sup>5</sup> Paolo Gerbaudo, "Social media and populism: an elective affinity?" *Media, Culture and Society* 40, no. 5 (2018): 745-753.

<sup>6</sup> Jodi Dean, "Affective Networks," *MediaTropes eJournal* 11, no. 2 (2010): 26.

<sup>7</sup> "Flying Lotus Copy-pasta," *KnowYourMeme*, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/i-saw-flying-lotus-in-a-grocery-store-copy-pasta>, accessed 13 May 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Manuel Castells, "Grassrooting the Space of Flows," *Urban Geography* 20, no. 4 (1999): 294-302.

<sup>9</sup> Flying Lotus, Twitter post, June 2019, 9:11 p.m., <https://twitter.com/flyinglotus/status/1144337488556675072>.

<sup>10</sup> See Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 17.

<sup>12</sup> See Daniël de Zeeuw and Marc Tuters, "Teh Internet Is Serious Business" *Cultural Politics* 16, no. 2 (2020): 214-232.

- <sup>13</sup> “Navy Seal Copypasta,” *KnowYourMeme*, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/navy-seal-copypasta>, accessed 13 May 2020.
- <sup>14</sup> Bonnie Honig, “Antigone’s Two Laws: Greek Tragedy and the Politics of Humanism,” *New Literary History* 41, no. 1 (2010): 20-21.
- <sup>15</sup> Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (New York: Verso, 2012), 127. See also Dean’s account of the decline of symbolic efficiency in Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, 63-67.
- <sup>16</sup> Dean, “Affective Networks,” 21.
- <sup>17</sup> Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 130.
- <sup>18</sup> Al Kossow, “Oral History of Lawrence G. ‘Larry’ Tessler,” *Computer History Museum* (Mountain View, CA): 7.
- <sup>19</sup> Kossow, “Oral History,” 15. See also Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, *Track Changes: A Literary History of Word Processing* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 122-123.
- <sup>20</sup> Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 58.
- <sup>21</sup> See J. Dakota Brown, *Typography, Automation, and the Division of Labour: A Brief History* (Chicago: Other Forms, 2019), 28.
- <sup>22</sup> Alison Flood, “Lorem Ipsum translated: It remains Greek to Me,” *The Guardian* (21 March 2014), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2014/mar/21/lorem-ipsum-translated-latin-placeholder-text>.
- <sup>23</sup> Rosie Cima, “The History of Lorem Ipsum,” *Priceonomics* (13 March, 2015), <https://priceonomics.com/the-history-of-lorem-ipsum/>, accessed 28 January 2021. For more on typography and the Macintosh, see Kirschenbaum, *Track Changes*, 196-197.
- <sup>24</sup> Jussi Parikka, “Copy,” in *Software Studies: A Lexicon*, edited by Matthew Fuller (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 71.
- <sup>25</sup> Matthew Fuller, “Introduction,” in *Software Studies*, 4.
- <sup>26</sup> Friedrich Kittler, *The Truth of the Technological World: Essays on the Genealogy of Presence*, translated by Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 131-132.
- <sup>27</sup> Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern.” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225.
- <sup>28</sup> See *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, edited by Thomas O. Sloane (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001), 43.
- <sup>29</sup> Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 3.
- <sup>30</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, translated by David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 8.
- <sup>31</sup> Quintilian, Book VII, in *Institutio Oratoria*, translated by H.E. Butler (Loeb Classical Library, 1920-22), available at: [https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Quintilian/Institutio\\_Oratoria/home.html](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Quintilian/Institutio_Oratoria/home.html).
- <sup>32</sup> Matthew Fuller and Andrew Goffey, “Toward an Evil Media Studies,” in *Software Studies*, 142.
- <sup>33</sup> Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 3
- <sup>34</sup> Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006) ix.
- <sup>35</sup> Adrian Mackenzie, *Transductions: Bodies and Machines at Speed* (London: Continuum, 2002), 25.
- <sup>36</sup> Mackenzie, *Transductions*, 17.
- <sup>37</sup> Steven Shaviro, “Simondon on Individuation,” *The Pinocchio Theory blog* (2016): <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=471>, accessed 13 May 2020.
- <sup>38</sup> Thomas LaMarre, “Humans and Machines.” *Inflexions* no. 5 (2012): [http://www.inflexions.org/n5\\_lamarrehtml.html](http://www.inflexions.org/n5_lamarrehtml.html).
- <sup>39</sup> Jussi Parikka, *Insect Media: An Archaeology of Animals and Technology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010): xiv.
- <sup>40</sup> Matthew Fuller, *Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 18.
- <sup>41</sup> Jenkins et al, *Spreadable Media*, 162-163.
- <sup>42</sup> Ryan M. Milner, *The World Made Meme* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 37.
- <sup>43</sup> Yuval Katz and Limor Shifman, “Making Sense? The Structure and Meaning of Digital Memetic Nonsense,” *Information, Communication and Society* 20, no. 6 (2017): 834. On the role of obscurity in memes, see Robert Topinka, “‘Back to a Past that was Futuristic’: The Alt-Right and the Uncanny Form of Racism,” *b2o: an online journal*, October 14, 2019, <https://www.boundary2.org/2019/10/robert-topinka-back-to-a-past-that-was-futuristic-the-alt-right-and-the-uncanny-form-of-racism/>.

- <sup>44</sup> Dean, "Affective Networks," 39.
- <sup>45</sup> Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*, 40.
- <sup>46</sup> Jenkins et al, *Spreadable Media*, 2.
- <sup>47</sup> Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, translated by Cecile Malaspina (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 59.
- <sup>48</sup> Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes toward an Investigation," translated by Ben Brewster, available at *Marxists.org*. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm> (1970).
- <sup>49</sup> Judith Butler, "'Conscience Doth Make Subjects of Us All,'" *Yale French Studies* 88 (1995): 9.
- <sup>50</sup> Butler, "'Conscience Doth Make Subjects of US All,'" 23.
- <sup>51</sup> Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 9.
- <sup>52</sup> Régis Debray, *Media Manifestos: On the Technological Transmission of Cultural Forms*, translated by Eric Rauth (London: Verso, 1996) 3-4.
- <sup>53</sup> Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 87.
- <sup>54</sup> On "associated mileus," see Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, 59-67.
- <sup>55</sup> See Collin Gifford Brooke, *Lingua Fracta: Toward a Language of New Media* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2009), 91.
- <sup>56</sup> Richard Grusin, "Donald Trump's Evil Mediation," *Theory and Event* 20, no. 1 (2017): 89.
- <sup>57</sup> Yuk Hui, *On the Existence of Digital Objects* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 141.
- <sup>58</sup> See "Frequently Asked Questions," *4chan*, <https://www.4channel.org/faq>.
- <sup>59</sup> 4chan's ironic style has proven treacherous for scholarly analysis. Gabriella Coleman celebrates the "hacker" culture of 4chan, praising the trickster hijinks of the hacker "weev," who was later revealed to be a neo-Nazi with a swastika tattooed on his chest. See Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous* (London: Verso, 2014). Recent peer-reviewed studies on 4chan include Asaf Nissenbaum and Limor Shifman, "Internet Memes as Contested Cultural Capital: The Case of 4chan's /b/ board," *New Media and Society* 19, no. 4 (2017): 483-501, Sal Hagen "'Who Is /Ourguy/?': Tracing Panoramic Memes to Study the Collectivity of 4chan/Pol/," *New Media & Society*, February 2022, doi: 10.1177/14614448221078274, Marc Tutters and Sal Hagen, "'(((They))) Rule: Memetic Antagonism and Nebulous Othering on 4chan," *New Media & Society* 22, no. 12 (1 December 2020): 2218-37. For an overview of the structure of 4chan, see Sal Hagen, "Rendering Legible the Logic the Ephemerality of 4chan/pol/," *Open Intelligence Lab*, 12 April 2018, <https://oilab.eu/rendering-legible-the-ephemerality-of-4chanpol/>.
- <sup>60</sup> Hagen, "Rendering Legible the Ephemerality of 4chan/pol/."
- <sup>61</sup> Hagen, "Rendering Legible the Ephemerality of 4chan/pol/."
- <sup>62</sup> LaMarre, "Humans and Machines."
- <sup>63</sup> Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 12.
- <sup>64</sup> Bogost, *Unit Operations*, 8.
- <sup>65</sup> Robin, *Reactionary Mind*, 42.
- <sup>66</sup> On leaderless resistance, see Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 108-112 and 120-121.
- <sup>67</sup> Gerbaudo, "Social Media and Populism," 751.

Figures

Figure 1. Free Bobby Shmurda copypasta.

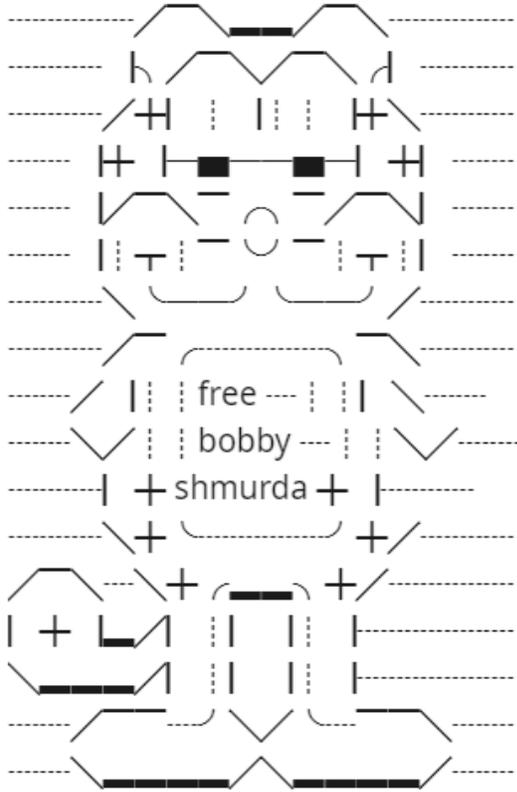


Figure 2. Posted on 4chan's /pol/ board on July 13, 2018.

File: 1531484521633.jpg (1.26 MB, 4500x3000)

/ptg/ PRESIDENT TRUMP GENERAL - LONDON MEETING EDITION Anonymous (ID: qqAF-WJ1T) 07/13/18(Fri)14:00:21 No.178577945 [Reply] ▶



PRESIDENT DONALD J TRUMP  
<https://www.whitehouse.gov>  
<https://www.donaldjtrump.com/>  
<https://www.promiseskept.com/>

>b-but Trump hasnt done anything!  
<https://pastebin.com/JnS5Qy2Q>  
<https://pastebin.com/BcSAGmDf>

PREV APPEARANCES/LINKS <http://pastebin.com/ynXV6CHT>  
DAILY SCHEDULE (WH Press Corps) <https://publicpool.kinja.com/>  
TrumpTV Weekly Updates: <https://pastebin.com/6HbHjqbF>  
NEWTRUMP NIGHTLY NEWS <http://pastebin.com/yArtUKdC>

NEW APPEARANCES  
>Pres Trump meets w/UK PM May 7/13/18  
<https://youtu.be/a-NwmTHejsI>  
>Pres Trump/FLotUS Melania @Welcome Ceremony in Blenheim Palace 7/12/18  
<https://www.c-span.org/video/?448330-1/>  
>Pres Trump/FLotUS Melania depart Winfield House 7/12/18  
<https://www.c-span.org/video/?448329-101/>  
>Pres Trump/FLotUS Melania arrive @Winfield House 7/12/18  
<https://www.c-span.org/video/?448329-101/>