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A New Materialist Approach to Visual Rhetoric in PhotoShopBattles

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A New Materialist Approach to Visual Rhetoric in PhotoShopBattles

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Department of English
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Abstract

The purpose of this project is to examine the visual rhetoric of one online community. Drawing heavily from the work of Laurie Gries (2015), I track the evolution of an image as it circulates through a forum of photo manipulators in the group “PhotoShopBattles.” While Gries’ work traced the evolution of the iconic Obama Hope poster and its iterations in various media, this project restricts its observations to the images posted to one webpage, focusing on one evolutionary chain. By narrowing the focus to one internet forum page that evolved over the course of one week, we can observe linear evolution that occurs quite rapidly. While the study of Obama Hope covered years, the works in this study were constructed in a matter of days. Additionally, the site records the step-by-step progress of the reformed work.

The Obama Hope work offers guidance to the work in this project. Using this method, an image’s evolution is broken down into steps and principles noted in the life of the image or multiple-image. By recreating a slightly modified version of Gries’ method, this work seeks to decode the meanings and outcomes that are created and changed around one set of evolving images. New materialism offers a way to explore the visual rhetorical moves of members of an online community and discuss the outcomes associated with those moves. With a deeper understanding of the environment surrounding image creation and the outcomes derived from an image, we can better understand the way image is used rhetorically online.

Visual Rhetoric and Reddit

Reddit (www.reddit.com) is an online space where people converge in different forum pages based upon common interests. I seek to understand the evolution of a set of manipulated images in one of Reddit's PhotoShopBattles, a contest where X (something) happens. The new materialist approach provides a new way to discern this information by focusing on the outcomes inspired by each new contribution. Tracing the various iterations and effects of these images lends insight into how the visual can not only vary over time but also change meaning in relation to each other based on their collective impact on internet audiences. Visual communication in online spaces coupled with the speed of sharing these messages requires a methodology that takes into account these shifts. New materialism provides an approach for understanding the nuances of modern discourse communities. This project examines how contributors to the subreddit PhotoShopBattles craft visuals that work together and against one another to create and recreate meaning as the images are altered.

History of Visual Rhetoric

Although pictures and images have been produced and studied for hundreds of years, the term visual rhetoric is a much more recent development. A quick search using Google Books Ngram Viewer shows that only in the last half of the 20th century was visual rhetoric a common term (Figure 1).

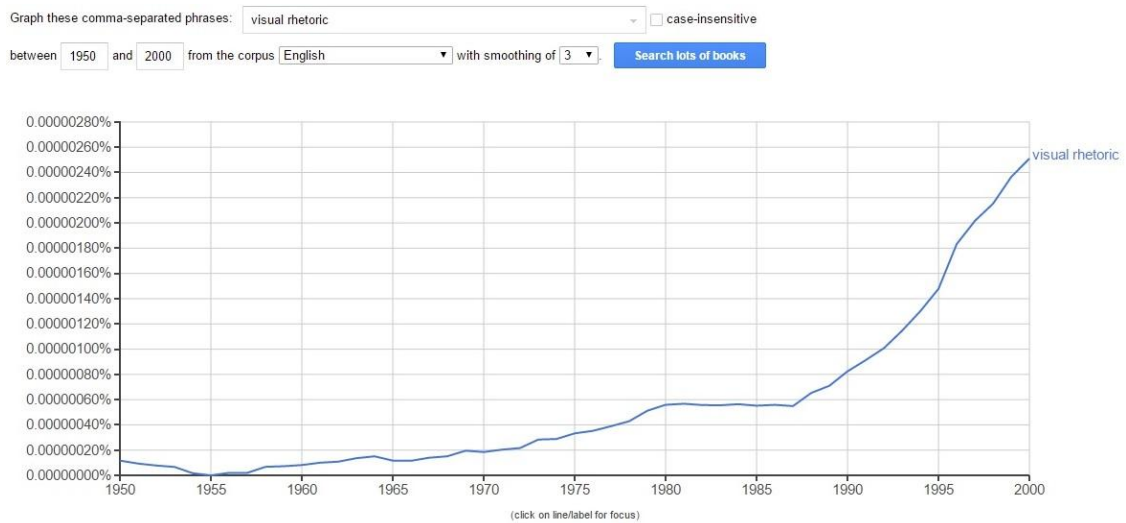


Figure 1: Prevalence of the Term “Visual Rhetoric” 1950 - 2000

In 2004, Sonja Foss suggested that there had been a shift from studying the discourse of material objects and visual images to studying the rhetoric of these items because of their pervasiveness in society today and their impact on the current culture. In 2005, Foss wrote:

Visual rhetoric is the term used to describe the study of visual imagery within the discipline of rhetoric. As a branch of knowledge, rhetoric dates back to classical Greece and is concerned with the study of the use of symbols to communicate; in the most basic sense, *rhetoric* is an ancient term for what now typically is called communication. Visual rhetoric is a very new area of study within the centuries old discipline. Not until 1970 was the first formal call made to include visual images in the study of rhetoric, which until then had been conceived exclusively as verbal discourse. (p. 141)

To make the distinction between visual discourse and visual rhetoric, Foss (2005) wrote that to qualify as visual rhetoric rather than as discourse, the image has to involve three things. The image has to be a symbol that conveys some meaning, it must involve human intervention in the form of image creation, and it has to be presented in some way with an audience in mind.

Foss looks to examples to drive her point home. She considers the image of a stop sign to show an arbitrary image that has taken on symbolic meaning and, through the use of that symbolic meaning, causes a car to stop. To show the human intervention of an image, Foss gave the example of a tree that is not, in and of itself, rhetoric; however, when a human brings that tree into the home to symbolize Christmas, then that tree, through human intervention, becomes a part of visual rhetoric. For her third principle, Foss (2005) wrote that the manipulator of an image is not only manipulating the image for the sole purpose of self-expression but also for the purpose of conveying some message to some audience outside herself. According to Foss, these three things – meaning, human intervention, and audience – must be present to call discussion of an image visual rhetoric rather than visual discourse.

Visual rhetoric, according to Stanley Meltzoff (1970), is the “iconography of the twentieth century” (p. 27). Iconography, he pointed out, is the study of the “representation of ideas by means of images” (Meltzoff, 1970, p. 27). In fact, in his attempt to study the messages that great works of art communicate, Meltzoff referred to iconography as the rhetoric of vision. In his article, “On the Rhetoric of Vision” (1970), he continued to contend that all pictorial images have meanings and that pictures are part of the language system of every culture. Thus, Meltzoff talked about the meaning of paintings, the commissioned painter of the art (human intervention), and the painter’s need to “mold the level of presentation to those whom it will reach” (p. 31). Those whom the painting will reach are the audience – the third aspect that Foss said must be present in rhetoric. Meltzoff, however, worked in the earliest days of the term visual rhetoric. He did not describe the three requirements of rhetorical images that Foss would define decades later. Nevertheless, it is important to note his early work likely inspired a lot of the ensuing scholarship on the topic.

John Louis Lucaites and Robert Hariman (2001), in a study of photojournalism in a democratic culture, said that “visual rhetoric refers to a large body of visual and material practices, from architecture to cartography and from interior design to public memorials” (p. 37). Lucaites and Hariman followed the changes and uses of one iconic photograph from artist Dorothea Lange in 1936. The original photograph was of a migrant pea picker and her children who symbolized, for Lange, “a profound, generalized sense of vulnerability while simultaneously providing a localized means for breaking its spell through state action” (Lucaites and Hariman, 2001, p. 40). Lucaites and Hariman further contended that through the passage of time, “Migrant Mother” became symbolic of the Great Depression and the New Deal policies put in place to rebound from it. The researchers tracked the use of the photograph through 1970 where it was used by a Black Panther artist to represent a racial mother and child; through President Clinton’s 1996 campaign as it was used in a campaigning film to represent an American family in need; and through a 1999 *Time* magazine cover that helped illustrate an enclosed story about troops being sent to Kosovo. This time, a photograph of a woman in a similar pose was slightly altered to include a suckling child. The woman was Albanian and the message (symbol) was about sending ground troops to resolve the Albanians-in-Kosovo conflict with Yugoslavia. Each time this iconic photograph was changed through human intervention, its meaning changed as did its audience. Once again, the Foss triumvirate of visual rhetorical elements had been met.

Researcher Mary Hocks (2003), on the other hand, in a study about how writing teachers can use visual rhetoric in a digital writing environment, began with a Foss-like description of visual rhetoric but added other important elements to the definition. Hocks addresses each of Foss’ three elements; meaning, human intervention, and audience:

Visual rhetoric, or visual strategies used for meaning and persuasion, is hardly new, but its importance has been amplified by the visual and interactive nature of native hypertext and multimedia writing. . . . Scholars who study the effect technologies have on readers and writers in various settings have all influenced our understanding of how multimedia technologies use visual rhetoric. Since the appearance of hypertext and other interactive new media, these digital writing environments make it difficult to separate words from visuals or privilege one over the other. Interactive digital texts can blend words and visuals, talk and text, and authors and audiences in ways that are recognizably postmodern. (p. 629)

Hocks pointed out that in the digital environments people use today, words and visuals are difficult to separate, and, as noted above, there are writers (human intervention), readers (audience), and meaning. Hocks expanded Foss' trilogy of visual rhetoric with three more characteristics that describe how visual rhetoric operates in digital writing environments:

1. *Interactivity*

First, Hocks (2003) wrote that the audience stance is important to this study of visual rhetoric with regards to the ethos that encourages – or discourages – interactivity by the audience (p. 632). While Hocks focused on the audience's reception of the message, *College English* author, Steve Westbrook (2006), worried that in practice, visual rhetoric focuses too often on *reading* rather than creating. In one of Westbrook's examples, Secretary of Homeland Security, Tom Ridge, used an image of duct tape and a verbal reference to the September 11, 2001 acts of terrorism to encourage Americans to buy duct tape to seal off their doors and windows and protect themselves from potential attacks of biological terrorism. Within four days of this visual representation of duct tape

and Ridge's comments about 9/11 and biological terrorism, demand for duct tape had risen by 5,000 percent, according to reports. Westbrook contended that focusing solely on the outcome of a message could miss the interactivity between the sender and the audience.

2. *Transparency*

Hocks (2003) second addition to Foss' schema is audience transparency; that is, the more an image is tied to other conventions familiar to a particular audience, such as other graphics, or pieces of print, or film, or other information on the Web, the more transparent the image will be (p. 632). Westbrook (2006) believed that the responsibility of making such connections falls on the author; he stated, "explaining the significance of preexisting visual artifacts is the primary task of the visual rhetor" (p. 461), and like Hocks, he noted both the visual and the verbal significance of visual rhetoric.

On the other hand, in their article, *Visual Rhetoric in Advertising*, authors Edward McQuarrie and David Mick (1999) focused on the sensitivity of the audience. They wrote that rhetorical figures had two primary effects on consumer response: elaboration and pleasure. They described elaboration as "the amount, complexity, or range of cognitive activity occasioned by a stimulus" (p. 39). Pleasure, on the other hand, "comes from the successful resolution of incongruity, and the amount of incongruity, and hence the degree of resolution possible" (p. 40).

While McQuarrie and Mick use both verbal and visual rhetoric to make their point about advertising, they continue to assert that these two characteristics, audience elaboration and pleasure, are what make an instance of rhetoric successful. In their study of undergraduates at a private university in California, using four visual test ads, these

researchers found “the acute sensitivity of consumers to the visual element in advertising” (p. 51). This study showed that audiences are highly sensitive to the visual elements, as they make connections to familiar conventions.

3. *Hybridity*

Finally, Hocks (2003) believed that hybridity is important. Hybridity, she wrote, is the combination of visual and verbal information and the interplay of these two types of rhetoric (p. 632). McQuarrie and Mick (1999) and Westbrook (2006) all focused on the interplay of visual and verbal rather than a separation of the two. Researcher Linda Scott also examined visuals in ads in relation to the communicative (mainly verbal) conventions of a culture, in her article, “Images in Advertising” (1994). She wrote, “Rhetoric is an interpretive theory that frames a message as an interested party’s attempt to influence an audience” (p. 252). She then continued on to use several examples of visual ads to interpret both the sender’s role in the communication and the receiver’s role as well as their shared cultural knowledge of conventions, vocabularies, and experiences. In fact, each part of the Foss trilogy comes into play in her work, under slightly variable terminology.

Importance of Visual Rhetoric, Image Manipulation, and Digital Editing

Why study visual rhetoric? Both Foss (2004) and Meltzoff (1970) have noted how the visual are rhetorical. Above, Foss (2005) mentioned 1970 (when Meltzoff published “On the Rhetoric of Vision”) as the early days of visual rhetoric as a discipline (p. 141). A few of the researchers that get us from 1970 to 2015 appear on the following timeline that traces the evolution of visual rhetoric as a term used by scholars:

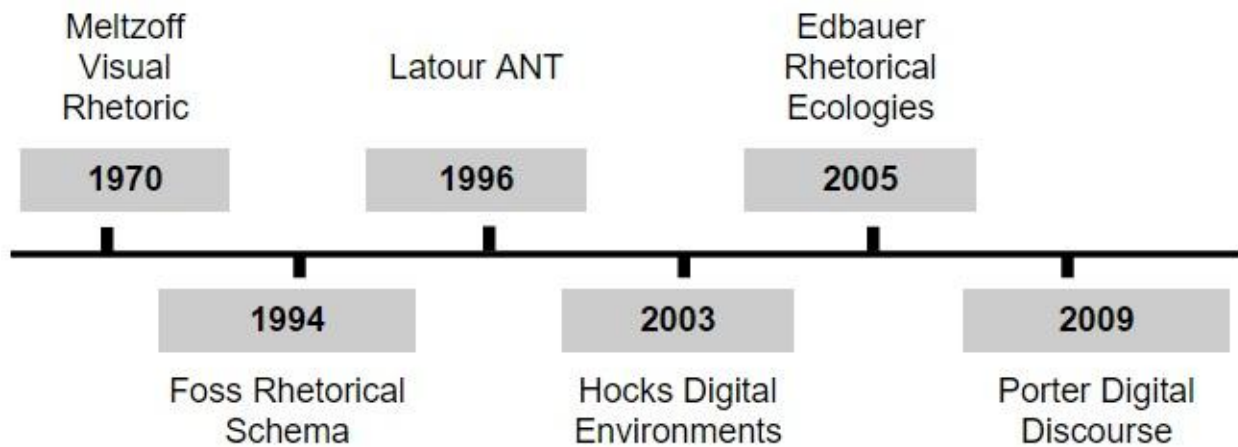


Figure 2: Timeline of Visual Rhetoric Concepts

More than two decades after Meltzoff’s article, Foss (1994) described her rhetorical schemas in visual rhetoric. New materialism relies on Latour’s (1996) Actor Network Theory coupled with Edbauer’s (2005) rhetorical ecologies. Latour’s Actor Network Theory cites the actors sending and receiving messages as influential participants, then additionally claims that the network itself is an “actant” influencing the way those messages are exchanged. Edbauer’s rhetorical ecologies inform us that no one actor in a network can act “alone.” Every action performed in a network is both influenced by and influences other actors in the network. Hocks (2003) and Porter (2009) explore digital environments and digital discourse, respectively. Obama Hope, as it evolved, was heavily reliant on the discourse that evolved in the digital environments of websites, message boards, and social media. Laurie Gries (2015) draws upon all the scholars’ work to inform her application of new materialism to the visual phenomenon that is Obama Hope. Gries used new materialism to follow the outcomes that the use of the Obama Hope image caused. As the image was used by different people for different purposes it evolved over the course of several years. Why such a long evolution? It seems that visual rhetoric is like many

other things: it takes a little while to take shape. Looking at the Google Ngram chart above (Figure 1), the number of mentions of visual rhetoric in published books grew slowly between 1970 and 1987. From that point, the number of mentions rose steadily. Reviewing the reference lists of the sources I gathered in my research, the majority of works cited are post-2000.

As can be gathered from the Ngram graph, there are far more publications in recent years than the last century that address visual rhetoric. This is not simply because scholars are jumping on the bandwagon of a trendy new topic. As a culture we are communicating in visual ways far more regularly. With the inclusion of high quality cameras, filters, apps, and editing software on every smartphone, tablet, and computer, communication has become increasingly visual. Our digital communications (Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, etc.) rely on imagery nearly as much as text. If we are to understand the full range of communication and rhetoric in our world, the visual must be a major focus. Pictures tell stories. They provoke a response, and they often cause us to act. Remembering Foss' (2005) example of the stop sign, we understand that visuals can influence outcomes. Other visuals such as pictorial warning labels (high voltage, Mr. Yuck) aid in the outcome of keeping people safe.

The application of visual rhetorical strategies to a discourse community is significant for several reasons. In these communities, rhetors are more familiar with their audience; they engage with them regularly and know about this audience through the common interests of the community. Through watching previous interactions amongst members, they are also familiar with the appeals that work or don't work with this audience. When the appeals are visual instead of verbal or literary, it becomes even more critical to be knowledgeable about what images are effective, because images are subject to much more interpretation than written texts.

Mark Smith (1997) commented on the importance of understanding the appeal of images and argued, “The preeminence of electronic symbols has added another dimension to classroom discourse, one that reaffirms the classroom’s role as a forum of critical thought and active inquiry” (p. 4). Even amateur images utilize the power of persuasion, he said. We see the appeals of pathos, logos, and ethos at work in emerging artists’ works. Whether consciously or not, these appeals are recognized by non-expert audience members as well. Since we are inundated with images, helping students understand them is part of our jobs as educators. Students who are aware of the manipulative ability of images become more discerning members of society, less susceptible to the negative influence rhetoric can have (think advertising, or political propaganda). Equally important is that these students may become more aware of the positive influence, giving them power and voice to create a better world for themselves and others.

Focusing a scholarly lens on seemingly inane, silly internet photos is analogous to Foss’ purpose when first using rhetoric to understand image: we can learn about persuasion by dissecting the outcomes these images produce. In “A Rhetorical Schema for the Evaluation of Visual Imagery,” Foss (1994) attempted to look at works of art (furniture) in a rhetorical way. The objects were judged not by the intentions of their creators, but by the outcomes the objects produced (i.e. How usable is this chair or bookcase?). While Foss focused on the usability of pieces of furniture, the images on internet communities like Reddit are judged by a different measure of success (upvotes).

Visual Rhetoric in the Digital Age

One of the biggest shifts from film to digital photography was the increased ability to manipulate photos after they have been taken. Daniela Chiorean (2014) noted in “The Digital Image – Medium and Resource in Graphics” that with digital photography, the “image comes to

be used as a resource medium, as a basic element for information that is lost gradually by dilution and is rebuilt as an abstract composition” (p. 10). For Chiorean, the original photo is a small piece of the finished product. Using digital image processing techniques and computer science, modern image creators are building wholly new visuals that only partially resemble the image they once were.

Other researchers have studied the importance of image manipulation and digital editing in adults as well as children. This research shows that manipulating images may prove important to participants in a myriad of ways. In the last decade researchers have shown that image manipulation and digital editing have been linked to: enhanced participant engagement (MacDonald, 2012); more active and collaborative learning (Nie, Rosh, & Wheeler, 2010); and increased participant creativity (Siegle, 2012). Researchers have also shown that visual media is a form of communication (Van House, 2011) and can be used to enhance social consciousness (Serriere, 2010).

MacDonald (2012), in a study of participants’ attitudes toward digital and film photographic media, had participants use digital photography to manipulate images and compared the results to their experiences with regular photography. The digital manipulations, he determined through interviews, engaged the participants more, and since digital photography was more hands on and required greater effort on the part of the participants, he argued that it was “making a positive impact on [participants’] attainment and the exploration of abstract concepts” (p. 192).

For participants in PhotoShopBattles, the acts of manipulating, uploading, and sharing files digitally makes for more meaningful communication. By using the tools of digital editing, they have engaged in a deeper level of communication due to the work involved in engaging in

this type of conversation. This is similar to the findings of Ming Nie, Paula Roush, & Matthew Wheeler (2010) who found participants tasked with manipulating online avatars, not just images, enhanced their active learning. More specifically, they said that this online manipulation, because it was a joint effort of several participants working together, was a “collaborative learning [opportunity] that might not be easy to generate in real life” (p. 268). In the case of editors in PhotoShopBattles, these researchers would argue that their messages are also more meaningful. When a given image is posted, users download that image and go to work manipulating it. They may cut part of the picture out, such as the object at the center of the image, and place them in a new situation, by pasting them into an unfamiliar or ridiculous background. For example, a user might take a cat sitting on a window sill, cut it out, and place it behind the wheel of a racecar. Even experienced users of Photoshop can spend hours crafting their submissions for the subreddit. Surely, they intend to send a meaningful message, which we can trace through the outcomes produced.

Siegle (2012) also found that digital photography could be used to enhance participant creativity. He used different assignments in which he asked participants to create photographs that represented different ambiguous categories, such as ones that represent ‘Near and Far’ or that depict ‘People Without People.’ To represent the last category of People Without People, one participant created a picture of his grandfather who had Alzheimer’s and explained to the class that, although his grandfather was there, he wasn’t there. This was an example, Siegle concluded, of the fact that when participants were asked to manipulate photographs, they also used the photographs as a form of communication. “People take pictures to share their experiences and thoughts with each other,” Siegle wrote (p. 287).

Van House (2011) studied personal photography, digital technologies, and the use of visual media, and found that as photography has shifted from film to digital and as more camera phones and technology have increased the amount of online image sharing, personal online photography has become more public and transitory. Additionally, Van House argued for the importance of the online photographs given the fact that they were “less private and durable and more effective as objects of communication than of memory” (p. 125). Today we take pictures for the purpose of sharing them publically, rather than storing them in albums as a record of events.

Serriere (2010), in research on participants in an early childhood classroom, found that her participants could use digital photographs they had taken as a group in the classroom to discuss and think about social dilemmas that might arise. Each day in the classroom, Serriere took the digital photographs and uploaded them to her computer, creating a slideshow that the participants would view and discuss later that day. Participants were pulled aside two or three at a time to discuss the photos taken that day. Serriere used the photo-talks, as she called them, to “give the participants an opportunity to imagine changing their social reality” and to consider such abstract issues as equality and fairness. Using visuals to learn of and assess the world around them, the participants were able to identify and express these concepts, which are often too complex for children.

Reddit, Subreddits, and PhotoShopBattles

Reddit, the focus of the current project, is an internet based community of users exchanging ideas and information with like-minded individuals. These individuals congregate on pages dedicated to specific interests. These pages are called “subreddits.” This project explores reddit.com’s subreddit community dedicated to visual communication. In Reddit’s

PhotoShopBattles, users attempt to manipulate a given image in the most creative, humorous, or outrageous way possible. Other “redditors” vote each submission up or down (they give a cleverly named “upvote” or “downvote”). This forms a two-way communication: a submitter uploads a modified image; the audience responds by voting. Some users take their involvement a step further and respond by further editing the posted image. Here is an example of one subreddit “conversation:”



Figure 3: Original image of “Bush Battle”



Figure 4: Second Iteration of “Bush Battle”

In Figure 4, the first redditor moved George W. Bush into a wrestling ring, showing him partaking in the action by throwing his body at the other men. The edit between frames two and three takes the action in slightly different direction though.



Figure 5: Third Iteration of “Bush Battle”

The next redditor adds John Cena to the picture in Figure 5, which might be seen as shorthand for two pieces of information. Not only is Cena a championship wrestler, he is also used as a meme (repeated idea within a culture) that users interject into unexpected circumstances, often to throw a conversation off track. The photoshopper who added Cena uses this shorthand to “come out of nowhere” and surprise his fellow redditors, presumably for its humorous effect. A similar rhetorical move happens in the fourth frame.



Figure 6: Fourth Iteration of “Bush Battle”

Danny DeVito's character Frank Reynolds from "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia" enters the fray in Figure 6. Reynolds' wrestling alter-ego, The Trashman, claims to show up in the ring just to "throw trash everywhere" and make a mess of things. His addition in the fourth image is likely a shorthand way of messing with the previous iterations of the original photo – hence, a true response to the edits in the previous image.

These four frames show the evolution of an image – or more precisely, *an* evolution, not *the* evolution, for it is but one of an infinite number of possibilities. Each image shows a step on the path of what Gries (2015) called "their distinct, albeit divergent rhetorical lives" (p. 28). Although these alterations often take an image (and the conversation it is holding) in surprising directions, successful evolutions are supported by the audience. Members show this support by voting for the images they find humorous – images that speak to a shared background, experience, or simply sense of humor. The subreddit community is what linguist John Swales would call a "discourse community," sharing common goals and communication (Borg, 2003).

As a discourse community, the participants in PhotoShopBattles have shared interest and converse with one another in a very particular way. Their vocabulary includes elements of images arranged and rearranged to deliver various meanings. They adjust their use of different images, memes, and internet conventions to invent new messages. While some simply repeat the tropes they've seen before, the most successful, measured by votes, create interesting and unexpected images to respond to others.

In a particular thread (a series of responses to one image), there may be a hundred starting points, or first frames. Of those, perhaps less than ten inspire several more iterations like the above. Every manipulation, however, makes rhetorical moves, what Smith (1997), in his article "Penetrating 'Symbolspeak': Reading the Images of Public Discourse," referred to as a

shorthand method for persuasion. Smith argued that images become shorthand because they can encompass a great deal of information that a reader can receive with just a glance. Popular shorthand images in this subreddit range from political figures, to cartoons, to animals such as narwhals and sloths.

Communities as tightly knit as subreddits often have more than one of these shorthand methods. As with most internet forums, PhotoShopBattles is full of repeated references, abbreviations, jargon, and memes. Particularly interesting in this case, though, are the images that take on meaning beyond themselves, and what they say about the community that uses them. In “Rhetorical Ecologies,” Edbauer (2005) noted the bond between people, stating, “we are never outside the networked interconnection of forces, energies, rhetorics, moods, and experiences” (p. 10). This holds true on Reddit, a site that encourages connection and even calls itself a community. Recurring jokes and references are highly rewarded by the audience. Making connections to other posts and ideas generally increases the likelihood of upvotes.

Humor in PhotoShopBattles often originates from viral images/memes that have previously gained attention on the internet, or more specifically on Reddit. Many redditors lift commonly repeated elements from viral images/memes/news stories that have gone viral (or Reddit-viral). By using these elements (whether a shirtless Putin, “In the Way Guy,” or Donald Trump), what assumptions are the image editors making? These authors rely on the audience’s common knowledge base. While in reality, no two strangers have exactly the same knowledge base, in PhotoShopBattles we do see evidence of largely overlapping experiences among members. The inclusion of a theme or joke that was popular weeks ago generally nets the author a lot of karma (upvotes in the thousands).

These images, memes, and stories become shorthand for the members of the community. Usually a redditor crops a portion of the original viral image and reuses it in the new Photoshop edit. We can call these reused portions elements of the newly created image. By repeatedly including an element, image authors reaffirm the shorthand of the group, making it common. This is not to say the community doesn't value originality, but a cursory assessment of the top voted submissions each week shows a lot of commonality between submissions. Many authors appear to be using a formula: $J(\text{popular in-joke}) + I(\text{current thread's image}) + C(\text{creativity}) = U(\text{lots of upvotes})$. The best submissions often buck this trend, but they are in the minority.

Occasionally, a redditor will comment, asking, "What does this [image] refer to?" These questions are typically met with an explanation that contains a link to the original source, story, meme, etc. These informative responses generally receive a large number of upvotes, a sign that the community members approve of the given response, and that they agree on the meaning of the element in question.

It is worth noting the "niche-ness" of subreddits. Despite early assumptions that the internet would create an enormous melting pot, what followed was far more segmented. Weiss (2001) argued that users value a more personalized experience over one produced for the masses. In the decade since its inception, reddit.com has demonstrated this concept precisely: as site membership increased, so too did the number of subreddits, niche communities with shared interests. What originated as one Reddit page has ballooned into over 800,000 subreddits in just 10 years. Many of these microcommunities have adopted a shared vocabulary, jargon that may appear meaningless to those not familiar with the microcommunity. In medical-related subreddits, for example, the acronym IANAD (I am not a doctor) is a common preface to a

comment that may regard health issues. Similarly, IANAL (I am not a lawyer) is used to disclose one's level of expertise (or lack thereof) before dispensing legal advice.

For the PhotoShopBattles community, the shorthand comes in the way of images. The sample images discussed earlier might appear absurd to those who don't spend countless hours perusing the internet, watching TV, or "redditing." Without some shared experience of the referenced memes/viral images/news stories/pop culture, the humor is lost.

New Materialist Approach to Visual Rhetoric

Gries (2015) used an assessment of art in *Still Life with Rhetoric: A New Materialist Approach for Visual Rhetoric*. She looked for the effect Obama Hope's iterations had on its audiences, whether it encouraged votes, protests, or shifts in climate change policy. Gries' new materialist perspective owes quite a bit to the consequentialist lens Foss put forth over two decades ago – which was, in other words, focusing her analysis of a thing solely on the outcomes the thing provides. Two things Gries added to the conversation are (1) the inclusion of social media as a factor in the way the pieces move and interact with the audience and (2) consideration of secondary works – pieces that are derivatives of the original. While Foss certainly had no way of predicting the former, she may have understood the latter better than she realized. Certainly, in the instance of a chair or bookcase, she was assessing it as a newer version of an existing type of furniture, much like Gries assessed a remixed image (or other work of art).

Much of Gries' interest focused on the way multiple images morphed from one iteration to the next. While that required more than the single iterations Foss studied, assessing them also became easier. The same technologies with which the images were created, shared, and remixed allowed Gries to track changes that happened over time. Foss would likely embrace the methods Gries used to “follow” the multiple linear and divergent paths Obama Hope took.

As Gries (2015) noted in her book, one of the difficulties of tracing multiple images simultaneously is that different images exist both *independently of* and *in relation to* one another. Gries paraphrased Graham Harman (2011) when she wrote, “A thing's external relations are just as important in creating the conditions necessary for manipulating reality” (p. 57). This line resonates with Jenny Edbauer's (2005) observations regarding the interconnected nature of

members of a community. Harman's "relations" are similar to the connections Edbauer saw in her ecologies. Gries' take on Harman's stance seems to align with the two rhetoricians' views. Gries is certain that things in a network exert influence on one another, affecting the meaning of both the existing and the new. Each new Obama Hope image that contributed to the conversation changed the overall effect of Obama Hope as a phenomenon, rather than simply an image.

In Edbauer's world of networked cohabitation, no member of a community acts in a bubble. Exigent circumstances cause members to act in ways that affect others in a community. Gries would argue a similar point when discussing the way Obama's image travelled the globe, influencing many people in different ways. Obama Hope's exigent circumstances *began* as the primary elections but its outcomes were many different realizations achieved through various evolutions of Obama Hope (whether selling products in Africa or criticizing NSA surveillance). Taken in whole, the many versions of Obama Hope combined to create a new meaning of the image entirely. Gries' book, much like this project, depended heavily on viewing the images as a collection of items that inter-relate. In both instances, the meaning/outcome of one image depends directly on the meaning/outcome of another image.

Gries (2015) aimed to cultivate "a new materialist habitus of method for rhetorical study, particularly visual rhetorics" (p. 85). She defined that habitus of method as "a set of dispositions embodied in a shared tradition of inquiry that influences a community of scholars to conduct research in certain ways" (p. 85). Gries sought to break down destructive binaries that value humans over non-human matter. She argued that visual rhetoric "can do its part by disclosing in theory and practice how visual things circulate and acquire power" instead of simply being a one-way message from sender to receiver (p. 85). She named six principles to discuss her style of new materialism. The six principles named here will be discussed further in relation to both

Obama Hope and the PhotoShopBattle images, which will be the focus of this current study.

Using these principles, we gain insight into the world surrounding the creation of the various images. These principles are:

Table 1: Laura Gries' Six Principles of New Materialism

<i>Principle</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Example</i>
1. Principle of Becoming	opening of events to unknown future	Fairey created Obama Hope without knowing how popular and varied it would become.
2. Principle of Transformation	rhetoric unfolds in unpredictable, divergent, and inconsistent ways	Obama Hope was turned into stickers, billboards, protest signs, and many other things.
3. Principle of Consequentiality	meaning of matter is determined by its consequences	Obama Hope, in part, influenced the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections.
4. Principle of Vitality	things have lives of their own	Fairey had no control over how pervasive his image became after he published it.
5. Principle of Agency	things and people are actants, or things which have the power to create change in the world around them	Obama Hope inspired, angered, and awakened people to engage in various causes.
6. Principle of Virality	things can spread quickly	Obama Hope soon appeared at Occupy Wall Street and Climate Change Summits, as well as other venues.

Using these principles, Gries argued that the Obama Hope images (and the authors of them) were actants working to create and recreate meaning through their interactions. On a smaller scale, a comparable thing happens in the PhotoShopBattles community.

Table 2: Gries' Six Principles of New Materialism applied to Reddit

<i>Principle</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Example</i>
1. Principle of Becoming	opening of events to unknown future	A photo editor creates a new image without knowing what further transformations it will undergo via other Reddit users.
2. Principle of Transformation	rhetoric unfolds in unpredictable, divergent, and inconsistent ways	The image may be added to, subtracted from, combined with others, or even animated.
3. Principle of Consequentiality	meaning of matter is determined by its consequences	Images have the ability to procure at least three outcomes: Up/Downvotes, comments, and response submissions that further manipulate the picture.
4. Principle of Vitality	things have lives of their own	Once a submission is uploaded, the OP has no control over what others do to it.
5. Principle of Agency	things and people are actants, or things which have the power to create change in the world around them	Images often inspire others to vote, comment, and reply with new manipulations.
6. Principle of Virality	things can spread quickly	Thousands of users vote and comment on strong submissions within days of being posted.

Each use of an image (or meme, or element) contributes to the meaning of that image (as a social critique, running joke, etc.) and in doing so, contributes to the outcomes that are (and can be) achieved with that image. If, like the members of Edbauer's community, these images do not exist in a bubble, then their multiple iterations influence the community in which they are present. They are both a result of and contributor to their environment. This project seeks to understand how the PhotoShopBattles members and their repeated elements work together and against one another to create and recreate meaning as the images are altered.

The Importance of Visual Rhetoric to Modern Users

Mobile technologies and the applications that animate them have turned consumers of digital content into producers. Rhetoricians have attempted to make sense of creating (Hocks, 2003; Weis, Benmayor, O’Leary, and Eynon, 2002), modifying (Gries, 2015), and circulating (Porter, 2009) these images. They have studied contexts such as memes (Huntington, 2013), MetaFilter (Warnick, 2010), and Twitter (Busch & Shepherd, 2014) to analyze the rhetorical moves users make on those various platforms and the inherent problems with such unrestricted communication. Gries (2015) looked to Douglass Rushkoff (1996) to explain how Generation Xers have a novel relationship with technology. They (and subsequent generations) grew up with the technology used to edit images. It is natural for them to manipulate images. Today, people use their smartphones to snap pictures, then they crop, add filters and text before they even save or share them.

In 2003, Mary Hocks studied the students in a college composition class as she tried to help them to use a combination of writing and visuals to critique and write about a topic in a digital environment. Although her initial aim had been to teach writing and critiquing of the subject matter (in one example, Shakespeare), Hocks noted that online writing today is generally multimedia and the students were proficient in many aspects of that multimedia approach. In the midst of the online project, she said, she found herself teaching design as much as writing and critiquing when students decided to add images and hyperlinks – links to other media and images – to their projects. The use of these skills, she determined, helped the students to “try to shape the social and cultural environment in which they found themselves by bringing together research and their own perspectives online to define a concept for English Studies” (652).

The year before Hocks did her research, Weis and colleagues (2002) also studied the use of digital technologies and multimedia in the classroom and noted the effect these pedagogies had on the creativity and critical thinking proficiency of the students who used them. They wrote about the results of their study:

New digital technologies and multimedia are transforming how we teach and learn. They are transforming our classrooms from spaces of delivery to spaces of inquiry and authorship. New digital media are empowering students to become researchers, storytellers, historians, oral historians, and cultural theorists in their own right. Whether constructing their own life stories or interpreting the life stories of others, the digital format transforms students' capacity to synthesize, interpret, theorize, and create new cultural and historical knowledge. In this way, digital formats potentially democratize learning and produce critical subjects and authors. (p. 153)

In the image that Gries (2015) tracked in her study, technologies were employed by authors in a multitude of ways, beginning with Shepard Fairey's use of Photoshop. Obama supporters then used social media to perpetuate that image. MoveOn.org even celebrated Obama's victory by posting an altered version of Obama Hope on their site.

James Porter (2009), in his article "Recovering Delivery for Digital Rhetoric," studied how delivery – and the other components of circulation – of a message must be "re-theorized for the digital age" (p. 207). To study the characteristic of the delivery of a message, he begins with a discussion about the invention of the printing press in the 15th century and carries his discussion of delivery through to today's digital age. In order to fully appreciate the way modern digital users interact with visual rhetoric, we may have to re-theorize the way we perceive those

users. The content produced and consumed via websites and social media circulates and goes viral in a way scholars never considered before.

Heidi Huntington (2013), studied internet memes as a form of visual rhetoric. Internet memes are passed from person to person online and may go viral. Memes, similarly to other forms of visual communication, allow an author to convey a new message to an audience using a familiar form. One popular internet meme – not mentioned by Huntington but that has gone viral in the past year – is the Be Like Bill illustrations that show stick figure Bill in various situations. The creators of these images are, in fact, making passive-aggressive comments about other people’s lifestyles. For instance:



Figure 7: “Be Like Bill” Memes

For his dissertation in 2010, Quinn Warnick did a year-long case study of the online community MetaFilter.com to explore the concept of ethos there. MetaFilter is a general interest online community blog created in 1999 where members discuss a myriad of topics. Warnick’s purpose for this study was to determine the ethos at work in that environment – the convincing of someone due to the credibility of the persuader. In his data collection, Warnick explored the statistical information on the MetaFilter site, read discussion threads, interviewed the MetaFilter

community members, and surveyed them. The author felt that his findings would help researchers better understand the members of other such online communities such as Reddit.

Thorston Busch and Tamara Shepherd (2014), on the other hand, studied mainly the problems associated with Twitter as a nearly unrestricted venue for communication. Their discussion of Twitter having responsibility is reminiscent of Latour's (1996) in his description of Actor Network Theory; the network itself is an active participant in what takes place between group members. Busch and Shepherd's (2014) argue that Twitter as a corporation bears responsibility for conversations that take place on their network. Being a community forum-based site, Reddit has seen its fair share of concerns regarding its own responsibility.

Methodology

This project applies Gries' new materialist approach to visual rhetoric to the microcommunity of the subreddit PhotoShopBattles. By focusing on the rhetorical moves made by each participant over the development of a series of photos, I will discuss the outcomes (by way of votes) each move has on the audience. Can Gries' method can be used beyond the scope of Obama Hope to illustrate the outcomes of moves made by internet users in PhotoShopBattles? Moves, here, are decisions the photoshoppers make in regards to which elements they add/remove/modify/focus on. Each of these moves amount to a rhetorical choice made with a specific meaning or outcome in mind. The success of that desired outcome is largely determined by the votes and attention the image receives. Occasionally, submissions that don't initially procure a large response are referenced in other submissions, showing their work was still influential, but that the outcome was delayed.

This project acknowledges both linear and divergent change in PhotoShopBattles, while focusing on one linear set of images. Here, I amended Gries' method in order to apply it to Reddit, following a single thread on the subreddit page that hosts the images studied in this project. Unlike Gries' multi-year, worldwide trace of the Obama Hope image, the set of images took place on one thread over just a few days. Due to the size of the subreddit and similar interests of its members, it may be possible for an Original Poster (OP, or one who posts original content) to know his or her audience better than a protester holding a Sarkobama sign (more on this later). In this way, the audience may actually realize authorial intent, though many argue intent can never be known. New materialists don't generally regard intention as an area of study because we cannot speak to an author when viewing his or her image. However, it's worth noting

that OPs and their interlocutors on Reddit can interact with each other, clarifying interpretation almost instantaneously. Keeping these opportunities in mind, I trace the evolution of a set of images in a fashion similar to Gries' work with Obama Hope.

The blueprint for this approach is described by Gries in her 2015 book, *Still Life with Rhetoric*. In the book, Gries drew upon Spinuzzi's (2011) work concerning runaway objects to build the method for her case study. Her five steps included:

- “Dwelling” in the relevant area
- Identifying “divergent collectives” that are using the image
- Identifying “various rhetorical activities” the images use to participate
- Identifying trends, key actors, and their rhetorical activities in a case study
- Describing the “common rhetorical roles” images play to achieve their outcomes

Gries' (2015) approach first requires “dwelling in data long enough to identify a particular image that transcends media, genre, and form” (p. 93). In regards to dwelling, Gries argued that the studied images and rhetorical moves “appear to researchers only when the researchers have followed a thing's transformations long enough for traces of collective engagement to become evident through empirical investigation” (p. 94). Gries followed and recorded the evolution of the Obama Hope images for years, noting this collective engagement as it unfolded. She also had to employ her next tactic: embracing uncertainty. She noted how messy and complex understanding the rhetorical life of things can be. Gries wrote, “If we want to investigate how wildly consequential a visual thing is, we cannot help but confront materiality's radical openness and flux no matter how much uncertainty such research creates” before reminding the reader that “rhetorical transformation is a dynamic process in which a thing's virtual potential is actualized with time through its unfolding relations” (p. 97).

Gries (2015) cited Massumi (2002) in making her case that “studying visual rhetoric [is] a distributed event always undergoing the process of change” (p. 98). Though Gries followed the Obama Hope image for years, she hesitated to draw conclusions about its ultimate meaning, because that meaning was constantly in flux, changing slightly with each use. However, after all of this research she was able to identify “divergent collectives” using Obama Hope; “various rhetorical activities” occurring; and “trends, key actors, and their activities” (p. 98). These reflect steps two through four of Gries’ approach as discussed above. Each of these are explored further below.

Identifying “divergent collectives of which actualized versions of that image have become a part” is slightly easier in the PhotoShopBattles case discussed below because the scope is limited to one subreddit, but noting the trends of these images outside of the subreddit proves a bit more demanding (Gries, 2015, p. 93).

Describing

Gries defines describing in terms of *disclosure*, as “making transparent a single image’s divergent actualizations as well as the diverse material consequences that emerge via a single multiple image’s varied collective activities” (p. 101). Her new materialist principles’ aim is to illuminate the images in a way that they can speak for themselves about their contributions and importance to the collective life in which they exist. For Obama Hope, this involved a larger conversation than just the image and its uses to persuade different audiences. The image also became the center of a debate over fair use and copyright.

The final step of describing the rhetorical role the images play in the situation is based on combining the context surrounding the images’ elements with the rhetorical choices made in

each edit or evolution. This leads us towards the outcomes of the author's rhetorical choices, and the way they are received by the audience.

One can use visual rhetoric to dissect and discuss the images, but this is not enough. Acknowledging circumstances surrounding the conception of a work can lead to a richer understanding of an image. For the evolution of Obama Hope, this took the form of discovering public outcry over pollution standards in Europe or the NSA surveillance scandal. This project seeks to understand the context, the inter-related images that each image plays off, speaks to, responds to, or imitates. By considering the rhetorical ecology of the images, the elements within them, and the references involved, this work hopes to explain the way the members of this community communicate.

Following an image through its evolution of form and media is called *iconographic tracking* (Gries, 2015). However, completing work with this information can be difficult. Gries asked "how can we actually collect, organize, analyze, and visualize data in ways that help disclose how a single series of images flows and contributes to collective life as it materializes in divergent manifestations?" (p. 108). This type of work is immensely difficult when dealing with the massive number of iterations of Obama Hope. It's unreasonable to think any person could collect all the images – or even a large portion of them – but the internet and social media helped Gries peruse a greater amount than would have been possible even fifteen years ago. Gries termed a key part of her method *data hoarding*, in reference to the "save it all" mentality she employed. One never knows when an image, comment, or other data might be altered or deleted online, so she found it safest to catalog everything she could in anticipation of wanting to use it later.

Method

Gries' first step towards applying her methodology in practice is immersion. In order to get a sense of the context surrounding any image, one must become familiar with images and the way they are used by members of a community. Before beginning my formal research for this project, I spent over four years frequenting Reddit and familiarizing myself with its content. When the PhotoShopBattles sub was launched in late 2012, it grew slowly, as most subreddits do. By early 2013, I began following the posts semi-regularly. I had noticed a number of common themes (e.g. Star Wars, video games, historic events), but had done no formal exploration.

Upon deciding to pursue the idea further, I devised a strategy to cover in a systematic way as many of the images as possible over the two-year period this subreddit has existed. In this sub, there are two types of battles in which users can participate. User-submitted battles are submitted all hours of the day, every day of the week. There are thousands and thousands of these battles, but participation varies greatly. The moderator-submitted battles are much more organized. They started posting once per week (now up to two), and usually gather a more consistent, higher quality participation rate. Between the inception of the weekly battle and late January 2016, there were 195 officially sanctioned battles. Battles grew in popularity over the first few months, and over the span of two years averaged over one hundred image top-level submissions – those that respond directly to the call for images.

The data collection phase is one in which my project had advantages. The images that took place in the conversation were all centrally located on a single web page. The divergent paths all begin as top-level comments and the chronological development can be followed by simply tracing how posts are nested underneath one another. While an active battle, this page

contained fewer than two hundred top-level submissions, and only a small portion elicited more than one response. It was easy to find the most extensive response chain, because it began with one of the highest-rated submissions, and therefore appeared near the top of the list. I had dwelled long enough to find the data to which I would apply Gries' method. Next I needed to identify the characteristics outlined in her steps two through four.

The corpus of images examined to determine recurring themes in battles was approximately 20,000 individual, edited pictures. As mentioned, some of these were re-edited images in response to another's post, but the majority of them were top-level comments. After reviewing these posts that represented both a large number of users and the entire lifetime of the weekly battles, I concluded that world leaders, including Vladimir Putin, were fairly common subjects that would be interjected into seemingly random situations for comedic effect. One thing I did not find in these battles was a chain of responses that grew past two or three images based off of previous ones. At this point, I expanded my search to include user-submitted battles, with an eye toward finding a conversation involving Putin and/or other world leaders.

Submarine Putin



Figure 8: Original "Submarine Putin" Image

Digging back through posts from the past year, I came across one titled “PsBattle: Vladimir Putin in a submarine in the Black Sea.” This post turned out to be more interesting than almost any other I’d seen for several reasons. First, it contained a large number of top-level comments (nearly 200). Second, an abnormally high number of those comments received several responses in a chain. Third, a couple of these chains split into two more chains, showing divergent variations. Finally, the thread studied in this project was the most coherent, extensive visual rhetorical conversation I’d come across in the two-plus years of this subreddit. It stretched ten images long and totaled 11,599 upvotes. In Submarine Putin, I witnessed Gries’ steps two through four. The thread had become a jumping off point for a discussion of international politics (or at least some of the most powerful leaders) in an unusual setting. It was time to determine the rhetorical moves redditors were making to reach these outcomes. Fortunately, Gries’ book outlined the principles involved.

Gries (2015) devised these six principles that she felt applied to understanding the different facets of Obama Hope (refer back to Table 1). Due to the differences in media, timeline, and participants, not all six apply as directly to Submarine Putin, but some of them are quite relevant. Let’s take a look at which ones carry over from the real world of political activism to the online world of political satire. The table that follows summarizes this application of Gries’ six principles to the Submarine Putin series of images.

1. *Principle of Becoming*: We can’t know the future for an image.

For Obama Hope this meant that once Shepard Fairey released his image – both sold as physical prints and as a free high-quality download from his website – the life it would take on afterwards was unknowable. Even the wisest among us could not have predicted the wild journey ahead.

For any PhotoShopBattle, the principle of becoming is clear: the stock photo is uploaded to the subreddit and a user announces the new challenge with the post. The state of flux is acknowledged and the changes are invited. The unknown future is what the audience is most excited about – they hope to be surprised.

2. *Principle of Transformation*: “Rhetoric unfolds in unpredictable, divergent, and inconsistent ways” (p. 86).

Shepard Fairey’s version of Mannie Garcia’s photograph was the first step in many long evolutions in completely different directions for Obama Hope.

In this subreddit, users strive to make their submissions original and creative. Being unpredictable is a necessity – predictable would be boring, and would not garner many upvotes. Occasionally, users have similar ideas, but two submissions being the same is highly unlikely. Each top-level comment in this subreddit must contain an original “shopped” image. This post had nearly 200 original top-level images, and a few of those had responses containing re-edits that further modified the first user’s submission.

3. *Principle of Consequentiality*: The meaning of something is determined by its consequences.

The consequences of Obama Hope vary greatly. Its intended purpose of helping Obama’s presidential campaign is only one of the many outcomes the image provided. As mentioned above, Sarkobama, (a portmanteau of French President Sarkozy and President Obama) was one of the evolutions of Obama Hope portraying Sarkozy and Obama as similarly out of touch. This iteration was used to argue for stricter greenhouse gas regulations in Europe. When the NSA spying scandal broke, Obama Hope became Obama Snoop, reflecting peoples’ dissatisfaction with the revelation. Another iteration

boosted sales of cola in Africa. Of course, one of the most obvious outcomes of Obama Hope was influencing the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections. Other less notable outcomes include the minting of commemorative pennies and one farmer plowing the image into his cornfield, attracting tourists.

The consequences in the Submarine Putin are less wide-ranging, but still evident. The original post that started the chain inspired the first response, and each response in turn inspired the next post. Fitting into the new materialist focus on futurity, these consequences occur *after* the first image was produced and distributed. Further outcomes include upvotes, downvotes, and comments.

4. *Principle of Vitality*: It takes on a life of its own.

According to Gries (2015), Obama Hope took on a life of its own after being shared across the country. The image became more than just a promotional material. It began to take on deeper meaning, especially to people who wanted to change the image to represent their own cause (e.g. Sarkobama, Obama Snoop).

While focused in a much narrower field (one subreddit), Submarine Putin did become the impetus for others to get involved, especially as the world leader theme slowly materialized. As each user added to the image, the theme became clearer, more robust. No single edit had as much effect as the composition as a whole, so the power of the image snowballed with each manipulation. Rarely had users seen the type of beginning-to-end growth that was visible in this thread – at least not growth so complete. The comments point to the rarity of this evolution occurring in just a few days. Trombone_Hero92 wrote, “This is an accurate representation of American politics,” while RetoriskD stated, “This is the greatest, most accurate Photoshop chain I’ve ever

seen” (Reddit, 2015). Thousands of people agreed. The first image received nearly 3200 upvotes. Typically, responses to posts receive only a fraction of the votes the original comments do. However, the fourth-level comment (response to the response to the response to the original top-level comment) still received over 1800 upvotes. By the time the thread reached the ninth-level comment, SimonLash’s post received nearly 500 votes of approval from redditors. Threads in this sub don’t typically reach a ninth-level comment, and certainly don’t receive that much attention if they get there. This chain of images certainly took on an unexpected life of its own.

5. *Principle of Agency*: Things and people are actants.

Gries (2015) argued that the many versions of Obama Hope had “emergent and unfolding exterior relations” (p. 87) with the people and events surrounding the image. For the purposes of this battle, each iteration may have had a slightly different relation to the audience, but in a far less varied way than Obama Hope would have.

6. *Principle of Virality*: Things can spread quickly.

While Obama Hope, when it reached this stage, was already being re-imagined via different media for different purposes, Submarine Putin didn’t have the same widespread applicability. It *did*, however, go viral Reddit-wide by reaching the front page of the site. The front page aggregates highly-voted posts from across the 800,000+ subreddits, giving them further exposure, and generally garnering even more votes. If it is possible to be “locally viral,” then this would probably be the label for the Submarine Putin thread.

Table 3: Gries' Six Principles applied to "Submarine Putin"

<i>Principle</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Example (Obama Hope)</i>	<i>PhotoShopBattles</i>
1. Principle of Becoming	opening of events to unknown future	Fairey created Obama Hope without knowing how popular and varied it would become.	A stock photo is uploaded, but the responses of redditors is unknown. Anything is possible.
2. Principle of Transformation	rhetoric unfolds in unpredictable, divergent, and inconsistent ways	Obama Hope was turned into stickers, billboards, protest signs, and many other things.	Each top-level comment is required to be a new, "shopped" image that changes the original.
3. Principle of Consquentiality	meaning of matter is determined by its consequences	Obama Hope, in part, influenced the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections.	The first Submarine Putin response had the consequence of influencing the replies that followed.
4. Principle of Vitality	things have lives of their own	Fairey had no control over how pervasive his image became after he published it.	Each edit that followed created a bigger and more thematic image that further sculpted the path of the images produced.
5. Principle of Agency	things and people are actants, or things which have the power to create change in the world around them	Obama Hope inspired, angered, and awakened people to engage in various causes.	Replies affected audience response, but likely in a more limited way than Obama Hope.
6. Principle of Virality	things can spread quickly	Obama Hope soon appeared at Occupy Wall Street and Climate Change Summits.	The Submarine Putin battle went viral reddit-wide, gracing the front page of the site, and is the third most popular battle out of the thousands in the past year.

The Battle as Conversation

Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia, has been regularly featured in PhotoShopBattles since the early days of the subreddit, which began just over four years ago. In fact, he is the subject of over 300 battles. The stock images include the leader attending political functions, engaging in shirtless activities, and posing for odd photo ops. On August 18, 2015, a battle began that yielded a series of pictures that evolved in notable fashion.

The original image for the thread I examine here is titled “Vladimir Putin in a submarine in the Black Sea.” Putin is dressed in a white uniform shirt adorned with some sort of crest on the sleeve. He is next to two sailors or officers who are both dressed in black uniforms. The submarine is partially submerged, and all three men peer out through the clear, domed canopy of the vehicle (refer back to Figure 8).

This image received close to 200 top-level responses (as of Feb. 7, 2016), or “parent comments.” Nested within each of these are generally anywhere from a couple to over 100 responses, known as “children.” The thread I tracked for this project contained 138 children, making it particularly interesting to examine. Furthermore, the parent comment spawned a line of descendants that totaled nine images that evolved from the original stock photo. Seven of the eight responses were from unique users – the Original Responder, or OR, did contribute a second time after his submission engendered a response from another user. Also, each user responded by adding content of a similar theme: politics. The mix of personalities, ideas, and cultures found online generally leads to widely varied submissions. The cohesion of theme that occurred in this thread was particularly fascinating.

It all started so innocent – or so it seemed. The first user in this thread, admancb, “shopped” (the subreddit lingo for having used Photoshop or any other editing software to create an image) the image of the men under the submarine’s dome into a frog’s eye (Figure 9).



Figure 9: “Top Secret Amphibious Vehicle”

The light green tree frog sits on a branch, with the men peering out from inside his bulging eye. The submission was captioned, “Top Secret amphibious vehicle.” Encountered anywhere else on the internet (or off), the editing might go unnoticed or at least unappreciated. PhotoShopBattles participants, however, can’t seem to help themselves. What took place over the next several days was the closest thing to the Obama Hope virality that I’ve witnessed online.



Figure 10: “Kim Jong Un”

The first response to admancb's image (Figure 10) was posted by GallowBoob. This user added a saddle to the frog. Supreme leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea Kim Jong Un smiles smugly from the saddle.



Figure 11: "Don't Mind Me, Just Taking My Pets for a Walk"

After this, Danirama uploaded an image (Figure 12) titled "Don't mind me, just taking my pets for a walk." It shows President Barack Obama casually walking on the (presumably White House) lawn holding a leash and waving. At the end of the leash is the frog, ridden by Kim Jong Un, with Putin and his men still in the eye. GallowBoob apparently took this as an invitation to respond and did just that.



Figure 12: "Trump"

The next version of the image (Figure 12) added Donald Trump poking his head in from the bottom left corner of the frame. The frog's tongue is extended, sticking to Trump's upswept hair, and making it look even messier than usual.



Figure 13: "Merkel"

Next, moosenaslou, posted a response (Figure 13) that added German Chancellor Angela Merkel to the scene. She stands slightly off behind Obama and appears to be upset, her arms stretched wide as if she were pleading with Obama.



Figure 14: "Biden"

Following this, Miraten posted a version of the image (Figure 14) that added a miniature Vice President Joe Biden sitting on Obama's shoulder. Biden appears relaxed, legs crossed as he leans into Obama.



Figure 15: "Return of Putin"

User personstolemyname2 responded by replacing Merkel's head with a second image (Figure 15) of Putin; his bust is shown peering out of the submarine window, but it has been edited to look like an astronaut's (well, cosmonaut's) helmet.



Figure 16: "朋友们, Stop Fucking Around, I Think We're Being Watched"

Thunderbird2678 titled his response “朋友们, stop fucking around, I think we’re being watched.” This image (Figure 16) added Chinese President Xi Jinping to the picture. The entire frame was switched to black and white in this edit. Xi stands close to the viewer, facing the others in the frame, but his head is turned to look directly at the audience. Finally, this image was animated into a gif, which zooms in on Xi. The gif ends with the words “Great Job!” in script as Xi winks at the audience (Figure 17).



Figure 17: “Great Job!”

PhotoShopBattle & Obama Hope

This evolution parallels that of the Obama Hope image Gries documented. What excited me about this series is that the timeline is clear, and we know the exact image that the participants in the conversation were responding to when they made their own manipulations. Each of the images also fit Gries' (2015) definition of rhetoric, the "ability to induce change in thought, feeling, and action" (p. 11). Every respondent was inspired enough to download the existing image, expend both time and energy to make edits in the software of their choosing, then upload the new version to the website.

They must have acted out of some urge to participate, to add something to the conversation that they were seeing take place. The question raised for me was, "What were they trying to say?" In order to understand some of the elements (mostly political figures) used in this series, I first looked to the events surrounding those people during the time these images were made.

The first edit, which placed Putin in a frog's eye, was titled "Top Secret amphibious vehicle." This image isn't all that politically charged. It doesn't involve any other countries' leaders, and few people would be surprised if an ex-KGB lieutenant colonel turned head of state would be involved in Top Secret vehicle testing. At this point, there wasn't a conversation going on – just one user's submission. It became a conversation once GallowBoob responded by adding a saddled Kim Jong Un (Figure 11).

What could this imply? In the image, the North Korean leader is literally riding on the back of Putin's new vehicle. For years, the countries have been close. The Soviet Union had been the North's main trading partner since the end of the Korean War, and in 2014 Putin ratified

an agreement that Russia would forgive 90% of the debt incurred by Pyongyang (“Russia writes off,” 2014). The metaphor of Kim Jong Un riding on Putin’s back likely references the alliance between the two countries “ready to ride into battle” together. Also, neither country has a great deal of allies in the West, which takes us to the next image.

Danirama expanded the picture (Figure 11), by taking the frog off a tree branch and putting it on a leash controlled by Obama. The president looks nonchalant in his short-sleeved casual-dress shirt with no tie. In the title, the other two world leaders are referred to as “pets.” The argument here is clear: Obama is far and away a superior being to the others. They are merely domesticated animals in the world Danirama created for Obama in this image. A number of international issues have strained relations between Washington D.C. and Moscow, including Russia’s harboring of Edward Snowden and invasion of Ukraine. Here, Obama comes out victorious in the rift between countries.

Things got weirder in GallowBoob’s response (Figure 12). As Trump enters the image, and is subsequently licked by Putin’s frog vehicle, two billionaires connect in the frame. Ever since Trump announced his candidacy for the U.S. presidency, the two have expressed mutual admiration for one another in the media. Moosenaslon added Chancellor Merkel, and she appears to be pleading with Obama. In January 2015, Merkel had announced that Putin would not be invited to the 2015 G7 summit, which Germany hosted in June of that year. The former G8 informally suspended Russia over its annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Waterfield, 2014, n.p.). It appears moosenaslon thinks Merkel would not approve of Obama keeping Putin and his friends as pets (Figure 13).

Miraten built upon this scene by editing in a relaxed, miniature Biden (Figure 14). His posture and facial expression suggest a carefree demeanor, as he rests on Obama’s shoulder. In

the public eye, Biden is often seen as far from maverick. In fact, one week prior to this PhotoShopBattle, the *Washington Times* ran an article detailing Biden's weak political stature after two failed presidential bids. The story quoted George Washington University political science professor Laura Brown saying, "The only thing that makes him more viable this time around is President Obama's coattails" (Miller & Wolfgang, 2015). Whether Miraten read that article or not, a common sentiment on Reddit at the time seemed to be that, if he ran, Biden would not be running on his own merits.

In a reply to Miraten, personstolemyname2 brought the attention back to Putin, placing his cosmonaut-helmeted head on Merkel's body (Figure 15). It's possible the intent was to bring Putin back into the spotlight because he was the focus of the original image. There were also reports just after the June 2015 G7 summit that Japan hadn't decided whether it would invite Russia to the 2016 meeting, which it was scheduled to host (Wheatley, 2015). This left the door open for Putin to be involved in the talks once again. Another possibility is that the helmet is a reference to Russia's two failed rocket launches in April and May of 2015. CNN ran an article that June titled "Is Russia's space program in crisis?" (Chance, 2015). Alternatively, the recurrence of his image might signify that just when the world political arena has stopped focusing on Putin, he does something to irk the international community, such as the aforementioned incidents concerning Snowden and Crimea. In any case, the evolution of this PhotoShopBattle seems to have come full circle.

That's when Thunderbird2678 took the opportunity to involve one last major player in the world political scene: Chinese leader Xi Jinping (Figure 16). In addition to being the President of the People's Republic of China, Xi is the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China and the Chairman of the Central Military Commission. To the outside world, Xi

appeared to be a bit of a control freak, clamping down on internet freedom, ideological expression, and claiming large swaths of the South China Sea. In 2015, much of the focus was on cyber-spying between the United States and China. The Xi government rebuffed U.S. claims that Chinese hackers were responsible for attacks on the Office of Personnel Management (Segal, 2016).

The irony here is in Thunderbird2678's caption for his image. Xi says, “朋友们, stop fucking around, I think we're being watched.” First, 朋友们 is Chinese for “friends,” which, given the cast of characters present, hardly sounds like the way they would address one another. Second, Xi is worried about “being watched” – something the leaders from China, Germany, North Korea, Russia, *and* the United States have been accused of doing on their own people (although Chancellor Merkel publicly came out against spying after these revelations). Leaders in China have limited citizen access to popular social media sites, such as Facebook. The few North Koreans that have computers don't connect to the internet, but “Kwangmyong,” a small intranet. “It's free to use and open to anyone who can get access to a computer. However, few people can: you need government permission to own a computer,” wrote Matthew Sparks (2014).

In the wake of the NSA scandal in the U.S., Russia passed a law making it mandatory for companies to store Russian customers' personal information on company servers (Steffan, 2015). In America, the week before this battle a group of *New York Times* journalists broke the story about AT&T working with the NSA for a decade to give the agency access to user data including personal emails (Angwin, 2015).

It is at this point the seemingly innocuous edits these redditors had been making add up to a very real conversation between community members on a very real subject matter. The final

upload of this thread is a somewhat self-congratulatory high-five to the group. When SimonLash uploaded his gif (Figure 17), he captioned it, “Sorry I’m late but I just wanted to say awesome show everyone! Great Job!” At first glance, the winking Xi Jinping seems to be congratulating all the submitters – whether for a job well done on their edits, or for having a fairly complex discussion via image manipulation, we’ll never know. I’d like to think both.

Outcomes

Now that I've attempted to dissect the messages of the users, what can be gained in the new materialist perspective? Here we turn back to Gries' treatment of the Obama Hope image. For iconographic tracking, one follows the path the image took from its beginning to its most current form. Obama Hope evolved over a period of years, and took many iterations, repeatedly switched forms, and served multiple purposes. Being that this PhotoShopBattle existed entirely on one page of one subsection of one website and lasted only a few days, Submarine Putin followed a much more constrained evolution.

Beginning with the stock image, each user added only one element that is a portion of another photo. Whether a frog, Obama walking the dog, or some foreign political figure, each reply advanced the story slowly, leaving it recognizable from the last iteration. Also, the medium remained the same all the way through, save for the last upload being animated. In contrast, Obama Hope at times varied drastically, from one iteration to the next. All sorts of media, from print to pennies, from Coke cans to cornfields, were employed. In these instances, the purposes were also widely varied. Some authors used Obama Hope to draw attention to a cause they deemed worthy, such as Greenpeace's use of Sarkobama to call for a reduction in greenhouse gases in Europe. Others used versions of the image to sell soap and soda in Africa or to motivate voters to lobby their representatives to end spying in America. In any case, these authors used some version of the image to engage an audience out in the real world.

Submarine Putin was used in a different way. There are only three real outcomes for a post on the PSB subreddit: getting voted up or down, receiving comments, and generating response images. The best posts might receive all three, but any one of these would meet the

criteria of causing actual change in the world. Will that change affect global warming or government surveillance? That's unlikely, but an informed critical visual discussion on international politics could lead non-participants to think about these matters differently. Clearly, the users who manipulate these images know something about the leaders they lambaste. How else would they know there is humor to be had at these leaders' expense? Humor can be a convincing force. If an author can disarm his audience and present his argument in an entertaining way, he stands a better chance of persuading the viewer than he would by attacking the viewer's beliefs outright.

Many participants in PhotoShopBattles report spending from several hours to several days to get their images precisely right. That's a significant time commitment for an activity that only rewards imaginary internet points. In fact, that is more effort than it takes to buy something an advertisement convinced someone they needed. A person making even minimum wage can buy a can of coke after less than half an hour of work, post-taxes. If Coca-Cola ads are considered persuasive, then these online conversations too are persuasive.

As observers, we can learn one more thing from studying these images. The recurrence or omission of certain elements tells us not just what users find funny, but also the subjects that are of interest to them. Commonly repeated elements that are associated with one particular topic (in this case politics) are an indicator of the author's knowledge of the subject. This knowledge might indicate what an author loves, but more often it shows what that author finds important, confusing, or frustrating. These images allow us to learn more about the situations from which they arise by noting the dates they were created and researching issues and events that occurred simultaneously.

Conclusion

Bringing this work back to where we began, with Foss' (2005) definition of rhetoric (having meaning, requiring human action, and needing an audience), we consider the images in the Submarine Putin thread and conclude that these images are rhetorical. They are symbolic and carry meaning. While slightly different with each evolution, the meaning has something to do with interactions between world leaders and/or the nations from which they hail. Second, these images involve human intervention. It is clear that the images would not change from one iteration to the next without the concerted efforts of talented and dedicated photo manipulation artists. Third, the images are presented to their audience via Reddit, where an audience of thousands views them.

Having met Foss' criteria, we look for the type of changes in *use* of an image Lucaites and Hariman (2001) noticed when tracing "Migrant Mother" through the last century. In the case of Submarine Putin, each redditor used the existing image slightly differently due to the addition of a new element in each frame. By changing the contents of the image, each post brought a slightly different meaning, changing the way the image was being used by shifting the focus to the newly added person (or animal).

As Hocks (2003) noted, studying these images is important for educators due to the increasing visual nature of newer (often internet-related) technologies in the world of our students. Understanding the rhetorical moves of visual pieces is a necessary skill for effective modern communication. Dissecting how redditors used visual elements to converse revealed a great deal about (a) the events surrounding them at the time and (b) which of those events they

considered important enough to spend hours working into the conversation. Gries' new materialist approach to visual rhetoric supplied the tools to deconstruct both of these.

Image editing, for these redditors, is conversing. They use the elements of their images like words – rarely inventing new ones, but constantly putting them together in novel ways to create new meanings. The consequentialist lean of new materialism asks us to judge rhetoric by its outcomes: the actions inspired in the audience. The outcomes I traced in the Submarine Putin thread were threefold: votes, comments, and further-edited photos. While the exact numbers for the three categories varied for each submission, it is safe to say they all did very well. We can conclude from these overwhelmingly positive responses that these images all conveyed their messages well enough to have gotten results in their community (i.e. action from their audience).

Much like Gries saw with Obama Hope, Submarine Putin saw an evolution of the original image. In both instances, authors created and recreated images, changing both the image and the message being sent with it. The final forms had little to do with the message of the originals. By changing and re-changing the message, the context surrounding the original – and even its message – has changed. Anyone familiar with the later, negative Obama Hope versions now might see the original as a symbol of hopefulness for an ideal that was never reached. Likewise, those familiar with the later outcomes of Submarine Putin might have re-contextualized ideas about the original image – that Putin is merely a puppet-like pet in the eyes of other leaders; that he is seen as an instigator by the others; or that he is a reminder of the declining dominance of Russian space exploration.

There are a few key differences between Obama Hope and Submarine Putin, but there are also many similarities. The largest difference is that Obama Hope existed in such a wide range of mediums. Few images have ever been so pervasive and varied in their iterations. While that

made for an intriguing study, attempting to expand the application of new materialism to the types of images that might occur more frequently gives us the opportunity to make adjustments to the method in order to best apply it on an individualized basis. Some of the most important facets of Obama Hope – evolution, outcomes, etc. – parallel the ones found in Submarine Putin. By adjusting the scope of the method, I was able to gain insight into the visual rhetorical work being done by users in this subreddit. For this reason, I believe that Gries’ new materialist approach can be applied to more constrained applications of visual rhetoric, such as this subreddit dedicated to the art.

As the mobile users mentioned above take advantage of camera phones and 3 and 4G networks – which have the ability to transfer pictures quickly – visual texts have become increasingly common as casual communication. Mattias Drefs (2014) noted that, “Our brains process visuals far quicker than text,” about “60,000x faster” (Visual, para. 1). Given the fast-paced lifestyle of young adults who embrace these technologies, communicating with image makes for efficient use of their time. Editing and sharing programs, such as Instagram and Snapchat, have proliferated the practice even more than forum sites like Reddit. According to DMR, 18% of social media users use Snapchat and 65% of those people contribute content daily (“By the Numbers”). Future research on visual rhetoric through the new materialist lens may lead to even better understanding of how members of the digital native generation communicate on these new platforms using images.

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