Call for Papers

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Special Theme Issue: *Appropriation Revisited: Memes*

Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft is a German research journal published by the Gesellschaft für Medienwissenschaft, which appears twice a year both in print and online Open Access: https://zfmedienwissenschaft.de

Every issue contains a peer-reviewed selection of articles on a special theme («Schwerpunkt»). The special theme of ZfM 33 is **Appropriation Revisited: Memes**.
We are looking for original contributions which have not been published before. English papers which succeed in the peer-review will be translated to German for the print and OA issue (while the original English text would also be accessible on the ZfM website). We also consider texts in other languages for a translation into German, but in this case, please contact us beforehand.

About the special theme:

It is not only since the recent debates on *cultural appropriation* that the term ‹appropriation› has been frequently used in media studies. As one might expect, there is no uniform use of the term. It can refer both to specific media practices (from quotation to remix to reenactment) and to the fundamentally ‹secondary› nature of art as a creative reference culture («Good artists copy, great artists steal», as a well-known slogan has it, its copyright not clarified beyond doubt). While the question of ownership inscribed in the term has always been at play, appropriation has usually been understood within the context of cultural studies as an attitude of reception. This implies that the viewer has an active role in the negotiation of meaning when it comes to media artifacts – and thus also the polysemy of pop cultural productions. However, with the emergence of digital participatory cultures, and as the affordances of social platforms favor the intertwining of reception and production, the promise of user empowerment has shifted primarily towards the activities of ‹prosumption›.

This shift is the starting point for the journal issue's special theme. We invite its contributors to rethink the concept of appropriation in the light of everyday digital- and pop culture. While cultural studies referred to different «readings» in order to plausibilize the socially situated processes of «encoding/decoding» (Stuart Hall), appropriation in social networks, on image boards and video portals manifests itself in concrete, visible practices such as in quoting/copying, collaging, reworking and sharing. It is therefore no longer sufficient to think of appropriation as subsequent misappropriation (in the sense of Michel de Certeau), since appropriation processes have tended to become the ‹main thing› in contemporary digital everyday culture.

This transformation is accompanied by potentials and problems which, as we propose in this special theme issue, are exemplified meme cultures. Internet memes are based on media quotations, on found images, film or sound excerpts that are appropriated via copy & paste, further processed and fed back into circulation. The significance of meme cultures to understand appropriative processes (not exclusively) under digital conditions is clear from their conspicuous omnipresence, but also from the genealogical references to artistic predecessor practices (for example in the historical avant-gardes, pop or appropriation art or subversive media art). Above all, however, the hybrid status of memes – between art and pop culture, do-it-yourself empowerment and platform capitalism, global circulation and community orientation, humor and politics – promises insights into the specific forms of *agency* that characterize media-based appropriation. Such processes are of course not limited to memes in the narrower sense as intermedia text/image constellations; meme cultures are a highly dynamic field of creative activities, with fluid transitions into other formats and practices (such as digital copying processes like GIFs, mash-ups or deep fakes, «digital folklore» (Olia Lialina & Dragan Espenschied) or artistic works that, be it digital or analog, respond to the challenges of proto-artistic meme practices).

The special theme issue aims to contribute to a more precise definition of the potential agency of memetic appropriations as an interaction between appropriated material, social platforms and prosumers. This also includes taking into account the reciprocity of these processes (and thus following Marx's suggestion to think of appropriation as a relationship that changes both sides). How can appropriation be thought of as a reciprocal relationship that addresses subjects not only in their activity, but also in their porosity and receptivity? At the same time, even idiosyncratic, creative and – in the sense of Stuart Hall – ‹resistant› reinterpretations of memes are by no means an expression of individual agency, due to their (also platform-dependent) *templatibility.* Memescan certainly also reinforce ‹hegemonic› readings. It is not only in view of their platform-capitalist infrastructure that meme cultures challenge us to critically confront the supposedly subversive character of appropriation, and to account for the fact that right-wing groups also often rely on guerilla practices of digital communication. In a possibly heightened form, meme cultures thus inherit the fundamental ambivalences of appropriative practices. When can appropriation be resistant, and in which cases does it confirm or reproduce prevailing social conditions?

In view of current debates, there are two perspectives from which to work out the partly old, partly new potentials and problems of digital appropriation practices in more detail: on the one hand, the critique of *cultural appropriation* and on the other, concepts of digital *commoning.* In existing research, the community-building function of meme cultures is usually emphasized on the basis of content (for example, in the case of right-wing or feminist memes). However, since appropriation takes place here with the intention of sharing, memes are also always the result of community-creating *processes*. *Commoning* also emphasizes the common as the result of community-creating

processes, as a social *form* that is only produced as such through collaborative and mediating processes and practices. Since memes are also used on the net as *commons* for maintaining contacts and phatic communication, we would like to expand the research perspective directed at political collectivizations with this special theme issue. And if *commoning* as a social practice also stands for forms of recognition and care work, can the appropriation and sharing of memes in turn be understood as care work?

But this optimistic view can be countered by the fact that the uncontrolled and seemingly undirected appropriation processes in meme cultures also tend to invisibilize their socio-cultural stakes. Not only have objections to cultural appropriation challenged the perspective on global circulation movements as intercultural exchange and translation processes, they also criticize the enrichment of a white majority from the media and cultural productions of people of color. How are the ‹own› and the ‹foreign› negotiated and positioned in this constellation? When, by whom and under which conditions is appropriation in meme cultures exploitative? When can it be a sign of solidarity and support or transformative and creative? Given that people of color's meme practices are themselves diverse, the fact that in our digital everyday lives appropriation is a never fully regulated daily business raises complex ethical questions.

We would like to invite potential contributors to build and expand on the problems and questions mentioned here. We are looking for submissions that take into account the scope of the concept of appropriation and show under which aspects it can be made productive. We welcome material-related studies that work out the embedding of media practices of appropriation in broader cultural and economic contexts and address implicit and explicit power relations.

Special theme editors: Florian Schlittgen, Brigitte Weingart, Elena Meilicke

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Submission of contributions (and images, if applicable) by **February 28, 2025** to: memecultures@udk-berlin.de