

1 Introduction

Painted between 1843 and 1845, Gustave Courbet's famously overwrought *Self-Portrait as The Desperate Man* (1843–1845) is a work that was likely never intended for the open market and remained in the artist's studio until his death in 1877. Featuring a wide-eyed and tormented twenty-four-year-old Courbet, this painting is commonly read by art historians as an 'expressive head' – an artistic exercise completed in the tradition of French artist Charles Le Brun (1619–1690). In the modestly sized painting (just 45 × 55 cm), the artist stares wild-eyed at the viewer. His hands tear at his shoulder-length, unkempt hair and his white shirt billows under a blue painter's smock. Painted at a time when Courbet had experienced several rejections by the Paris Salon (considered by many to be the greatest annual art exhibition in the Western world at the time), the self-portrait depicts Courbet as the quintessential tortured artist – a man who suffered for his art and was becoming disillusioned with his youthful Romantic ideals. When asked in older age to reflect on his early struggles, Courbet would later comment, 'How I was made to suffer despair in my youth!' (The Met Museum Gustave Courbet Exhibition, 27 February–18 May 2008).¹

Fast-forward to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in May 2020, and a digitised image of Courbet's self-portrait finds itself shared as an image macro meme on the Facebook page of the Department of History at Florida State University. This time, instead of representing Courbet as a tortured artist in a moment of existential crisis, Courbet's face is used as an emotional proxy for the face of every university student who attempts to log in to a Zoom session only to anxiously discover that they are twenty minutes late. As a digital media artefact shared by an academic institution, *The Desperate Man* meme serves as humorous and cautionary commentary on the emotions of being late for an online meeting or class. The audience, in this case, university-level history students and academics, are likely to understand the inherent humour of mixing this text with this particular artistic reference, yet it barely matters if they don't; Courbet's face does the emotional work and messaging for them. In his wide eyes and flared nostrils, students and staff are expected to recognise a sensation of something like alarm and distress, and can readily transplant those feelings onto their own experiences of running late for an online class or meeting. The meme, therefore, serves as both a humorous in-joke for a specific group of people, and a warning about the unnecessary stress that running late will engender. For a brief moment, the intended recipients of this meme are asked not simply to 'identify with' Courbet's emotion, but rather to *become* the meme and take on Courbet's emotion as if it were their own.

¹ www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2008/gustave-courbet/photo-gallery



Figure 1 'When you realize your zoom session started meme', *Department of History, Florida State University Facebook Page*, 20 May 2020.²

Several important questions arise as we reflect on the historical art memes' appropriation of historical emotions. What does it mean to use the facial expressions and emotions of historical agents as a stand-in for contemporary emotional experiences? In what ways do historical art meme makers usurp and rework historical emotions to express digital selves? What is the significance of the emoting historical face in these memes? And which emotions are most commonly expressed in this unique meme sub-genre? As we discuss in this Element, *The Desperate Man* meme is just one of many that use either exaggerated or impassive facial expressions from historical art works as a way of articulating contemporary emotional experiences. In some cases, the emotions expressed in these memes are consistent with those intended by the original artist, while at other times, the emotions are misread or consciously reinterpreted to create new, ironic or self-reflective statements about human emotional experience in digital culture. In most of the examples, however, the locus of the historical emotion is reflected away from the individuals depicted in the original artwork and appropriated by the individuals who create and/or share the meme across various digital platforms. The creators and recipients of historical art memes deploy historical emotion as a form of self-expression. Put simply, historical

² www.facebook.com/139850989436/photos/meme-tuesday-when-you-realize-your-zoom-session-started-20-min-ago-meme-credit-l/10158308585264437/

art memes are used as a mask in a performance of an emotional self, often to convey emotions that are contested, uncomfortable or difficult to express or in situations of novelty or confusion, like the expectations for pandemic living in the digital age.

In this Element, we explore the intersection of contemporary emotional expression and historical art through the lens of digital media studies and histories of emotion. We reflect on how emotions are lived, performed and (re)negotiated across time and place and consider how groups of people who share specific temporal, demographic, psychographic or algorithmic commonalities find a sense of community, belonging and self-expression within the historical art meme. Understanding the interplay between art history, emotions and digital culture necessitates a convergence of theoretical approaches. As such, this Element draws on relevant scholarship produced within the fields of communications and digital media theory, the history of emotions, art history, and feminist new materialism. When deployed together, these approaches provide insight into how we understand, communicate and share emotions across time and place. Specifically, in applying the ‘more than human’ philosophical approaches of feminist new materialist scholars such as Barad (2003, 2007), Haraway (2003) and Braidotti (2019), the ways in which emotion-based meanings and understandings are perpetually configured and reconfigured through assemblages of human and non-human interaction can be articulated.

This work particularly considers how these (re)assemblages of emotion occur over time and place. We extend Rosenwein’s (2015) concept of ‘generations’, where historical emotions are redeployed by later generations for new purposes, to highlight the intentionality and playfulness that can be inherent in such new configurations of historical feeling. This work therefore contributes to a scholarship that seeks to understand the nature and basis of transhistorical emotions (e.g. D’Arcens, 2014; D’Arcens & Lynch, 2018), furthering our understanding of the relationship between historical and contemporary emotional life and the way that modern publics engage with the past. It also contributes to meme scholarship by considering how the historical art meme uses the faces and gestures of historical actors as a way to explore, express and perform feelings that are often difficult to express in contemporary digital culture. Given the limited space, this Element concentrates on exploring the theoretical and conceptual issues that help us interpret the efficacy of the historical art meme, providing a framework for future empirical analysis.

Historical Art Memes

Discussions around memes as forms of emotional performance have peppered academic literature over the past decade (Bristow & Bown, 2019; Gal, Shifman,

& Kampf, 2016; Miltner, 2014; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2015; Silvestri, 2018). However, to date, little sustained academic research has been conducted on the historical art meme. In seeking to address this gap, this Element explores the complexities of how specific historical depictions of emotion are (re)interpreted, expressed, coded, datafied, dispersed, and re-imagined across digital media platforms. It considers the layering of emotional expressions and cultural politics that are present within such memes and asks how we understand, share, embody and utilise these emotions in our current historical moment. This Element explores what historical art memes tell us about how we currently read and communicate emotion, our desire to connect and identify with these emoting bodies and faces, and why historical artistic representations of emotion are so useful as social commentary.

Contemporary internet memes, commonly referred to just as ‘memes’, are sharable links or files that are rapidly spread via digital networks and social media platforms (Shifman, 2014). One of the most common forms of memes, and the type that we will discuss throughout this Element, is the image macro meme, a piece of digital media that typically features a photo or artwork with text superimposed over the image. The text of an image macro meme usually contains a witty and/or satirical message, which works playfully with the image being used. Today, image macro memes are a central part of participatory digital culture and play a key role in user experiences of online networks such as 4chan, Quora, and Reddit, as well as social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Tik-Tok, and Instagram. In their totality, these digital media networks combine with easy-to-use image editing software to enable individuals to share their feelings about a wide range of popular issues to large audiences at a rapid pace.

As digital media artefacts, internet memes are powerful conduits of emotion. Easily produced and quickly disseminated by the real-time affordances of digital and social media platforms, memes function as accessible and rapidly reproducible forms of vernacular communication, through which the frustrations, triumphs, joys, and power struggles of everyday life can be easily shared and expressed. From gender roles, relationships, and sex, through to workplace cultures, technology usage, and food consumption, memes have the power to connect and conflate the minutia of personal experience with a seemingly endless array of macro-level social, cultural, and political phenomena.

Most commonly characterised by their transient, irreverent and often perverse humour, memes are far more than fleeting internet jokes shared by like-minded individuals. Instead, they exist as unique cultural units, capable of conveying important insights into how individuals and communities emotionally ‘manage’ the present (Silvestri, 2018). Indeed, as is increasingly acknowledged within contemporary scholarship on the topic, memes themselves exist not simply because they are ‘funny’ and easy to spread, but because humans

have emotional investments in them. As Milner and Phillips (2017) argue, people save, share, and remix cultural units not solely for play but also from a sense of anger, fear, or confusion. Memes provide space to express and perform emotion in relation to a changing environment.

While internet memes are by nature ephemeral, certain types of memes have managed to achieve a type of ‘sticking power’ that enables them to stay culturally relevant over a number of years. One such genre is the historical art meme: a unique amalgam of art history, political commentary and dark humour that is characterised by a juxtaposition between fine arts and present-day participatory culture. These memes typically use art styles that provide access to the expression and performance of emotion, with a particular focus on emotion as expressed through faces, gestures, and bodies. From the tense and extravagant works of Rubens and Caravaggio through to the dramatic portraiture of Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Woltze, historical art memes are ripe with an aesthetics of fear, despair, anger, sadness, love, lust, piety, and boredom.

In their totality, art-history memes occupy significant digital real estate. They frequently appear in online magazines such as Bored Panda and Art Space, and on media aggregation sites such as Reddit. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and Facebook are also regular points of dissemination, with one particularly popular historical art memes Facebook page currently attracting well over 5 million followers (Classical Art Memes),³ all of whom are likely to have their own assortment of political, social, religious, and demographic realities. While some of the memes that we have used in this Element are shared by identifiable sources with predictable audiences (such as the University of Florida History Department), most have surfaced in disparate corners of the internet and are replicated widely, making it difficult to pinpoint the precise creator and their intended audience. As a result, we can only make a series of educated assumptions about the creators and ‘audiences’ of our chosen memes.

As Wiggins (2019) has argued, defining the exact audience of a meme isn’t always an easy task. It is often not possible to detail specific audiences and modes of reception in digital media, largely because online media does not usually follow the same ‘top-down’ producer-receiver approach that once existed for traditional media sources such as letters, manuscripts, newspapers, radio, or television. Where scholars of non-digital media can often specify the intention, dissemination, and reception of media texts, the reception and production of memes is far more diffuse and volatile. Memes are by their very nature polysemic and instantly transformable – they can be taken up and interpreted in a wide variety of ways by a diverse assortment of people, and

³ www.facebook.com/classicalartmemes/?ref=page_internal

in some instances, a single meme can receive several vastly different receptions depending on where or when it is shared. Following Wiggins, we therefore recognise that when it comes to understanding memes, we are at best only able to discuss what he terms as an ‘imagined audience’ – one which is addressed through various forms of digital and social media, and one which is constituted by a mix of both ‘real’ and hypothetical individuals, and their perceived desires, whims, and proclivities.

As aggregate digital artefacts of the twenty-first century, memes are collectively created, circulated and transformed by large numbers of participants across diverse social networks. Fuelled by the velocity of digital media platforms, memes allow individuals to make far-reaching social connections and become active agents in the creation of public conversations and cultural debates. In observing the participatory nature of this phenomena, several meme scholars have drawn attention to the ways in which memes help to form and signify communal belonging (Jenkins, Ito, & boyd, 2015; Moreno-Almeida, 2020; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2015). In particular, Limor Shifman (2014) has referred to the proliferation of memes in digital culture as being akin to a type of postmodern folklore, in which social norms and values are created through shared cultural objects and come to shape and reflect larger social mindsets. Following Shifman, Milner (2016) has noted that memes allow small, individual strands of commentary to be woven together into larger, vibrant cultural tapestries and media ecologies.

The capacity of memes to shape and reflect social sentiments has led to a considerable amount of academic attention. Notably, scholars in the fields of communication and digital media have had much to say about the ways in which memes invoke a sense of belonging (Milner, 2016), demonstrate cultural capital (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2015), and construct collective identities (Miltner, 2014; Nagle, 2017). A shared touchstone of many of these explorations is the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1986), whose concepts of cultural capital and habitus have led to rich conversations around the ways in which the popularity of memes relies upon their ability to demonstrate familiarity with a particular culture’s symbols, nomenclature, and social norms (DeCook, 2018; Ignatow & Robinson, 2017).

This Element gives particular attention to historical art memes that act as a social commentary on gender relationships or feminist politics, a popular form of historical art meme that provides some boundaries on a large field of evidence. Given that creating or sharing a meme implies a belief that the sentiment or world view expressed within it will resonate with others, we are able to identify a series of social, psychographic, and demographic commonalities that the creators and imagined audiences of our chosen memes are likely to

share. These commonalities are as follows. Most of the memes presented in this Element likely favour an educated audience who are both internet savvy *and* to some degree interested in art history. Many of the text-based jokes and juxtapositions used within our selected historical art memes show a leaning towards progressive, feminist-inspired politics, and commonly use ‘dark humour’ and satire as a way of expressing personal emotions around social issues such as gendered power relations, female sexual frustration, sexual harassment, and/or mansplaining. The selected memes that do not include a feminist message of this kind tend to focus on the emotional sensitivities of men as they perform themselves online – specifically, how the (assumed male) meme creators felt about being shocked, late, shamed, or ridiculed in an online or digital setting. It is worth noting here that in all of the ‘non-feminist’ examples we selected, the central visual motif seems to be about a ‘feminised’ vulnerability that men profess to feel about performing themselves and their gender identities online. Specifically, visual attention is drawn to open and/or leaking facial orifices, wide eyes, or absurd representations of femininity that come to stand in for the men who create the memes. Across all of these memes is a concern with gender presentation and power relationships that is suggestive of the anxieties of the culture under study. If this is only one possible reading of the material, the larger principles of how historical art memes come to be deployed as part of contemporary emotional expression have wider application.

The use of dark humour is a common thread throughout nearly all of the memes that we have selected for this Element. This is representative of the type of humour that appears in the historical art memes in our research. It is also consistent with what Silvestri (2021) has identified as ‘internet gallows humour’. Silvestri (2021) makes the argument that many of today’s internet memes showcase the emergence of a ‘gallows humour’ that is common among millennials who identify with a certain upwardly mobile class, and possess an adequate level of education, financial independence and social capital. She notes that this ‘audience’ relies on ‘relatively new technological affordances to create and circulate meaning’ amongst themselves. Many of the memes selected for this Element reflect the humour and world view of the demographic outlined by Silvestri. However, where Silvestri investigates gallows humour via a selection of ‘nihilist’ memes which show a lessening of attachment to the promise of a ‘good life’, the memes selected for this volume do something different. They evidence not so much a letting-go of the cruel optimism of an impossible ‘dream’, but rather an expression of struggle, emergence, and frustration over issues such as social power, bodily autonomy, and the online self. To this end, we argue that many historical art memes actively express emotions that are otherwise hard to articulate within digital culture.

Doing Emotion with Memes

Community building and belonging are emotional processes, yet how memes ‘do’ emotion is still underexplored, as is their role as emotional artefacts that operate within today’s commercialised and datafied media environments. The role of emotion in enabling digital media to function, including its role in the operation of big data collection, algorithms, and monetisation, is yet to be given sustained attention. Within communication and digital media scholarship for example, many contemporary discussions about memes have tended to bypass conversations about the social and temporal relationality of emotions in favour of the political, technological, and sociological throughputs of those emotions. Thus, while an abundance of meme research now focusses on the capacity of memes to bring people together (Merrill & Lindgren, 2021), make money (Williams, 2000), influence politics (Chagas et al., 2019), and mobilise grass-root political protests (Makhortykh & González Aguilar, 2020), much less attention has been devoted to understanding how emotions in and of themselves are understood, (re)produced, and refracted across digital media landscapes. This observation is in keeping with a larger point made by Ellis and Tucker (2020), who note that while understanding emotions in social media is a developing field, a sustained consideration of how emotions are inevitably relational, situational, and socially produced is lacking.

Analysing digital media artefacts through the lens of historically and socially situated emotions is yet to be fully explored in contemporary scholarship. Indeed, future studies into memes will likely be enhanced by the work of affect and emotion scholars who repeatedly demonstrate that reading and interpreting emotions in cultural texts requires a robust understanding of how emotions themselves are socially contextualised, received and (re)produced across time and place (Ahmed, 2014; Barclay, 2020; D’Arcens, 2014). The efficacy of such readings is perhaps exemplified in the historical art meme, which places historical emotion – in the form of a historical artwork – at the centre of contemporary emotional practices.

Far from being human universals, emotions – as well as their expression and representation, not least on the body itself – are shaped by culture and society (Barclay, 2020; Boddice, 2018; Plamper, 2015). The naming of an emotion, its characteristics, valence (whether we view it positively or negatively), and how it should be felt and expressed vary. Significantly, cultural norms for emotional life are not simply an overlay on a shared biology, but actively enable the embodied experience of feeling, how it is interpreted, and what actions should arise from an emotional experience. Not all emotions exist in all times and places, and the emotional repertoire available to individuals shapes their

feelings and emotional expression. People are educated in the display of emotion on the body, and in how to represent that in art and writing, which in turn shapes how emotions are understood across generations and how historians access past emotion. Historical sources, like artworks, are not emotions, but as well as giving insight into how a culture understands emotion, they – like memes today – could be deployed as part of emotional practices or performances. The early modern love letter not only shared an expression of love between writer and recipient, but acted as an emotional object that could be used, among other things, as a memory aid, a contract, and physical evidence of the intangible (Barnes, 2017). Through emotional practices such as this, people give expression and shape to embodied feelings and extend them to produce emotional communities (Rosenwein, 2011).

Historical sources must be deployed carefully as evidence of emotional life. Each source – a letter, a novel, a painting – is informed by genre rules that set expectations for its form. Emotions expressed in historical sources are mediated through these cultural rules and an understanding of form is required to interpret the expression and functions of emotion within different cultures. Contemporary interpretations are significant too. Historians' understanding of the past and past feelings is rapidly expanding, and as they do, how we interpret past source materials evolves. Thus, historical emotion is multiply mediated, not only through the source materials that give it shape but contemporary knowledges and interpretative frameworks. Many engagements with the historical art meme, often intentionally, ignore the contexts of their production and how these originally shaped the emotions on display. Indeed, the humour of many historical art memes arises from an awareness that contemporary uses of such imagery rely on 'misreadings' of historical emotion displays, and so consideration of the historicity of emotion is critical to the efficacy of the meme. This Element unpacks the layers of emotional expression evident in historical art memes and considers them within the social contexts of the original artwork as well as their present-day usage. Throughout emotions are treated not as 'fixed' or innate biological entities but as cultural products. As such, this Element highlights the intersections between the ways emotions are understood and practiced and how different societies operate and are organised.

Memes, History and Emotional Life

This Element is designed to provide readers with the tools to understand how the historical art meme works to produce a transhistorical emotional engagement, and how that engagement in turn becomes an effective mode of emotional

performance in the digital world. Early sections offer an account of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks from digital media studies and the history of emotions that are brought together in this volume to explain the phenomenon of the historical art meme. Cognisant that this is an interdisciplinary project, sections 2 and 3 outline the key insights of the fields combined here that help us understand the operation of emotion across time and in the digital environment. Section 4 attends to historical art as a source of emotion, seeking to ‘denaturalize’ the portrait and provide some basic insights into the generic rules that shape how emotions are expressed in this form. This was felt to be important as the humour of the historical art meme often revolves around the disjuncture between the seeming ‘realism’ of the face or body on display and its redeployment in ‘unnatural’ ways, that disrupt or at least put into question our capacity to interpret historical emotion.

Later sections apply the ideas discussed in earlier sections to two case studies of historical art memes that provide social commentary on gender and feminist politics and which use art works originally produced in Europe from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Gender politics is a core theme of the historical art meme genre and the examples selected here are popular and widely disseminated. The period when the original art was made – where portraiture and conversation pieces offer numerous examples of delicately rendered emotions – offers a rich array of material for meme users and so reflects a considerable share of the works used in the historical art meme genre. These constraints are used here to offer some parameters for discussion, but the wider principles of how historical art memes are deployed to enable contemporary emotional practices applies to the genre more widely.

This Element considers the historical art meme as a complex digital media phenomenon in which past and present emotions are profoundly interconnected yet strangely disjointed. As a product of an always-on, always-active, always-monetised digital media environment, historical art memes demonstrate not only how emotions reverberate and morph through time and space, but how they are appropriated as modern-day technologies of the self.

2 How Memes Do Emotion

When Florida State University’s History Department circulated Courbet’s portrait as a commentary on the emotional experience of pandemic life, they used a historical artwork to express emotion and to create a community around that shared emotional experience. This process was enabled by several factors, including the semantic richness of the meme, which allowed it to convey a relatively complex message, the emotions that its audience associated with