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# The Meme Museum

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by KENNETH GOLDSMITH

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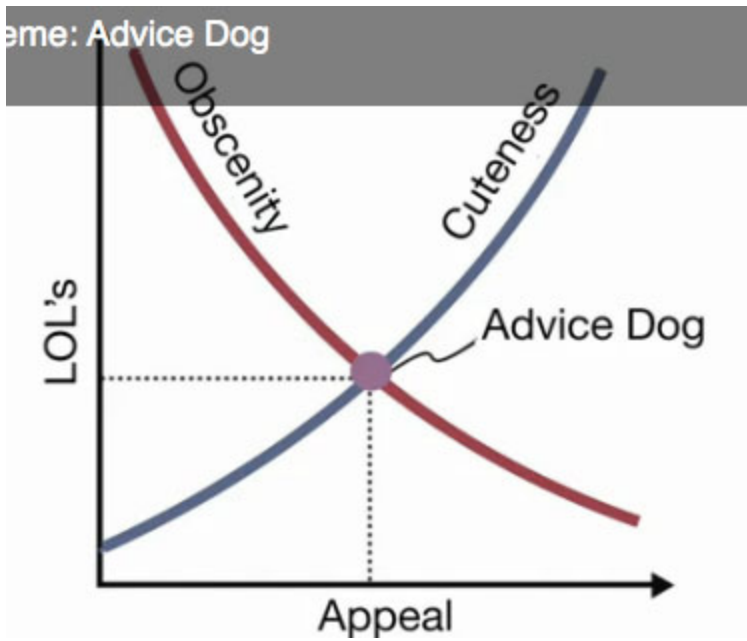
Darren Wershler has coined a term, “conceptualism in the wild,” to describe practices which rage through the internet that are predicated upon earlier avant-garde tendencies without having the slightest knowledge of them. These most often involve memes. A typical “conceptualism in the wild” meme would be the series of re-subtitled Downfall Hitler Bunker videos, thousands of which have been created without any knowledge of the Situationist artist Rene Vignet’s 1974 re-subbed Japanese Porn film *The Girls of Kamare* or his 1973 *détournement* of a kung-fu flick *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?*

Poetically, some of the most intriguing “conceptualism in the wild” language-based memes occurs in “badges” such as Advice Dog, Courage Wolf or Philosoraptor, where the interplay between text and image is nuanced and incredibly dumb at the same time, resulting in language more akin to Dada or Language Poetry than to anything found in popular culture. In order for these memes to achieve maximum effect, they must create disjunction between the text and image. Advice Dog, for example, shows a picture of an incredibly happy puppy, framed by language which is dark and ambiguous, such as the above image: DRINK BLEACH / LIVE FOREVER. While the idea of living

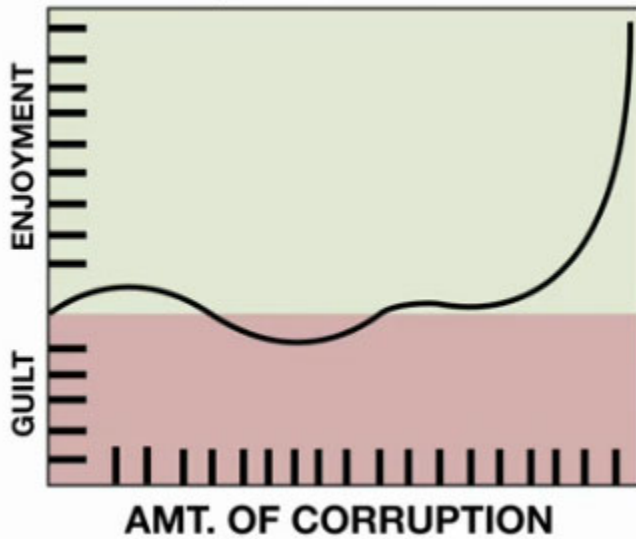
forever appears to be in sync with the cheerful (but purposefully clumsy) rainbow and the optimistic dog, clearly drinking bleach is not the way to achieve this. It's this number of conflicting emotions, visuals and imperatives which make for a "successful" badge meme.



I often have my students attempt to use meme generators to create their own series of badges as poetic exercises. It's wildly challenging. Although automated and templated, achieving the balance between sense and absurdity is nuanced and complicated. At first, they'll generally come up with memes that are too focused — perhaps giving an actual "message" or direct expression — and thus fail. Other times, students will try to make them "funny," which also fails. It's only after much critique and play, do they begin to understand how such language is constructed. In this way, it's not much different than writing, say, haiku, where form and content must come together in ways are both ambiguous and self-evident at the same time. A good haiku always has that "ah ha!" moment, in which an innate understanding of the form is merged with proper content to create a "successful" poem.



In terms of Advice Dog, its success has been analyzed, achieving its best form in the intersection of obscenity and cuteness, resulting in



a mix of guilt and enjoyment mixed with corruption. Try it. It's not easy to do.



But the takeaway for me is that in a culture hell-bent on black and white dichotomies, one-dimensional punch lines, clear winners and losers, and quantifiable ups and downs, it's inspiring to see an entire cultural phenomena emerge based on subtle poetic ambiguity — while being entirely ignorant of its avant-garde pedigree.

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