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The profane media logic of anonymous imageboard culture

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Summary

Between Mass and Mask: The Profane Media Logic of Anonymous Imageboard Culture

This study seeks to critically interrogate the profane media logic of anonymous imageboard culture and its opposition to the mainstream social media culture of platforms like Facebook. The imageboard 4chan was chosen as the main case study for the way it radically embodies and thereby uniquely renders visible the “profanating” forces that I argue inhere in contemporary (digital) culture as a whole, but whose emancipatory legacies are neutralized by the “face culture” of social media platforms. In contrast to the latter, the media practices that characterize 4chan’s “mask culture” are anti- and impersonal rather than personal; ephemeral and aleatory rather than persistent and predictable; collective rather than individual; stranger- rather than friend-oriented; and radically public and contagious, rather than privatized, filtered and contained. These practices are reflected in 4chan’s subcultural iconography, which thereby offers a unique view on mask culture that takes the vernacular perspective of its participants into account.

The part of 4chan’s iconography relevant to this study is comprised of four main thematic strands. Firstly, contrary to platforms who interpellate the user as an individual possessing a persistent personal identity clearly distinct from others, on 4chan the user is imagined as an anonymous and opaque voice that is interchangeable with an indeterminate number of unknown others (as exemplified by the anon and Anonymous pseudonyms, the Guy Fawkes mask, and the stock avatar tropes). Secondly, contrary to platforms’ politics of authenticity centered on “real names” and “true identities”, 4chan remains committed to an earlier Internet imaginary which takes the Internet to constitute a “virtual” space of parody and play (as exemplified by the demotivational poster format and “Internet. Serious Business” meme). Thirdly, users on 4chan represent online interaction in carnivalesque terms as a festive immersion in a grotesque media body, which undermines the personalizing logic of social media platforms and their insistence on clearly delineated identities (as exemplified by the human centipede, the naked obese man, and the green monster tropes). Fourthly, contrary to the idealizing ideology of platforms, 4chan users imagine the Internet as a cruel media spectacle (as exemplified by the memetic phrases “Co-existence has created a fucking monster”, “Internet Hate Machine” and “No one is as cruel as all of us”).

Chapter 1 familiarizes the reader with 4chan, and develops the opposition between mask and face culture. Sections 1.1 and 1.2 introduce 4chan as well as its roots in Japanese imageboard culture and the North American forum Something Awful. Section 1.3 situates 4chan within the larger transformations of the Internet in the previous decades, showing how social media platforms have marginalized an earlier formation of web culture centered on the kinds of anonymity and collective identity play that sites like 4chan continue to cultivate.

Chapter 2 discusses the anon and Anonymous pseudonyms, the Guy Fawkes mask, and the stock avatar as subcultural tropes that I argue reflect the ephemeral and impersonal modes of sociality that characterize 4chan. After introducing these tropes and their significance in online mask culture (2.1), subsequent sections develop a genealogy of the different meanings of anonymity that these tropes can be seen to mobilize and articulate. I will look at shifts in anonymity from merely signifying unknown authorship to a symptomatic modern condition (2.2), to an impersonal mode of existence that inheres in everyday life (2.3), to a phenomenon of *mediation* (2.4), using various sociological and phenomenological accounts of anonymity.

Chapter 3 looks at how 4chan’s impersonal iconography traces back to the larger deterritorializing and profanating forces unleashed in and by capitalist modernity. Section 3.1 looks at how the modern formulation of a right to privacy in the US at the end of the 19th century can be linked to class-specific anxieties over the increasingly impersonal forces of modernity and its new mass-mediated publics who Benjamin argued desired to bring things closer by means of their technological reproduction. Section

3.2 discusses Kracauer's similar reflections on the mass ornament, as embodying the potential for a truly progressive mass culture. Section 3.3 discusses the term "profanation" as the name Agamben gives to this conflicted development, as well as the roots of this idea in Marxist and sociological accounts of modernity as entailing the "disenchantment" of the world. Finally, section 3.4 discusses two instances of anonymous mass publicness: the public restroom as a place for anonymous reading and writing, as well as for fleeting (homo)sexual encounters, and the random videochat portal Chatroulette.

Chapter 4 sets out to investigate the affinities that pertain between "mass" and "mask", i.e. between the "profanations" of mass media culture and those of popular festive culture. Section 4.1 turns to the way mass-modern forms of collectivity are described in terms of the carnivalesque. Section 4.2 looks at how this thematic intersection manifests itself in anonymous imageboard culture as a "commoning of faces". Section 4.3 then turns to the carnivalesque significance of laughter as tethered to the impersonal and comic-materialist world view inherent to online mask culture. Finally, section 4.4 takes up the connection between mass and mask in the context of 4chan's essentially parodic and playful use of online discourse.

Chapter 5 explores the subcultural significance of 4chan's "excremental visions", the way it describes itself in carnivalesque terms as a grotesque media body. Section 5.1 discusses how 4chan is represented by both insiders and outsiders as the bottom of the web, e.g. as its sewer or underbelly. Section 5.2 analyzes the human centipede meme, which represents the Internet as a gigantic digestive tract. Section 5.3 analyzes the image of a naked obese man which represents 4chan as a single, mass body. Section 5.4 argues that images like the human centipede or naked obese man celebrate the collective and im-personal life of language and subjectivity, the common element in culture, and the constant metamorphosis of the mass body over the self-same identity of the individual person, as these phenomena are manifested on 4chan. Finally, section 5.5 looks at the green monster image as enacting the darker, more problematic aspects of online mask culture, and of the modes of cruel spectatorship that the Internet enables more generally.