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The Archive as the Repertoire

Mediated and Embodied Practice on Imageboard 4chan.org

Bio:

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### 1 – It's a Dance, Not a Website

In the years 2008 to 2010, imageboard website 4chan.org achieved considerable notoriety both within the wider web community and by mainstream media. Three main incidents and their mediatisation contributed to this relative rise to fame of an otherwise modest seeming website and its unassuming owner, Christopher Poole aka moot, who founded the board in 2003 when was 15, seeking to create an English language alternative to Japanese imageboards. 4chan first drew the attention of corporate news media in early 2008, when video material of Hollywood actor Tom Cruise, enthusiastically praising the merits of pseudo-religious organization Scientology, was leaked on the Internet, followed by attempts of the organization to suppress the material, citing copyright infringement. This was the prelude to 'Project Chanology', also known as the 'War on Scientology', an ad hoc activist cause organized on the web, involving both attacks on Scientology infrastructures as well as demonstrations outside of Scientology centres. The collective behind the cause referred to itself as "Anonymous", a name derived from the default user name on 4chan.org, where registering and thus laying an exclusive claim on a nick name is impossible. When appearing in public, members of "Anonymous" wore Guy Fawkes masks in the style popularized by *V for Vendetta*, the graphic novel and film. The second incident: in 2009, moot was voted top finalist in the TIME 100 Internet poll, earning him the title of the world's most influential person. "Moot denies knowing about any concerted plan by his followers to influence the poll, though TIME.com's technical team did detect and extinguish several attempts to hack the vote."<sup>1</sup> This estimation provided by TIME staff would emerge as wishful thinking: the

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<sup>1</sup>

TIME 2009

initials of moot and the next 20 finalists' first names spelled the phrase M-A-R-B-L-E-C-A-K-E A-L-S-O T-H-E G-A-M-E – marblecake reportedly being the name of the IRC channel used to organize the scientology protests, and “the game” referring to an inside joke of Internet culture, where thinking or reading about the game inevitably meant losing the game. Rather than having extinguished hacking attempts, the vote had been the result of a precision hack.<sup>2</sup> The third boost in public recognition came with the appearance of Christopher Poole as an invited speaker at the *TED 2010* conference, discussing “The case for anonymity online”,<sup>3</sup> which centred on 4chan.org's policy of neither requiring a user registration nor keeping records of posted data. With the exemption of web server and banned user logs,<sup>4</sup> all messages and images published on 4chan.org are deleted routinely. There is no 4chan archive, at least not on 4chan.org itself. Instead, users keep copies of images and screenshots of conversations they deem worth preserving on their computers; if the occasion arises, they might use these personal, sediment-like archives to weave some of their contents back into the forum discussion or to contribute to the documentation of highlights to websites such as the wiki-based EncyclopediaDramatica.com (see also: section 5). Christopher Poole has accredited 4chan's reputation as a “meme factory” – a place where Internet memes, i.e. viral jokes in form of text or image, are likely to originate – to this lack of retention and resulting reliance upon user interaction. As he stated in a talk given at the 2009 *Paraflows* symposium:<sup>5</sup>

The way kind of threads work on 4chan is that if you post something and it's crap, it's washed away. The site has no memory and it's just washed away by all of these new posts. And if it's a genuinely good idea or something that people identify with then either somebody will save it and repost it and that's how we get memes.

The ‘meme factory’ approach thus takes a quasi-evolutionary stance: only the best (funniest, weirdest, boldest) ideas survive. It is true that meme theory – as proposed by Richard Dawkins and furthered by Susan Blackmore – has won new popularity with the emergence of Internet memes such as Rickrolling and Lolcats,<sup>6</sup> yet its analytical gain is mostly limited to the observation that *something* is being passed on. While disciplines such as linguistics and semiotics have developed a rich vocabulary for classifying elements that carry and convey meaning – e.g. *seme* as the smallest unit of meaning in words, *phoneme* as the smallest unit of

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<sup>2</sup> The blogger Paul Lamere (2009) documented the precision hack, based on hints he had received from an icognito hacker through IRC.

<sup>3</sup> Poole 2010

<sup>4</sup> These log files became instrumental in a court case against the hacker who targeted Sarah Palin's Yahoo account. Cf. US District Court 2010: 15-16

<sup>5</sup> Poole 2009

<sup>6</sup> Rickrolling: the practice of distributing a seemingly interesting link (‘This is cool, check this out!’) which, when opened, starts the music video “Never Gonna Give You Up” by Rick Astley. Lolcats: photographs of cats with captions that comment the scene or voice the animal's ‘thoughts’.

sound, more complex semiotic systems such as Christian Metz' "grande syntagmatique"<sup>7</sup> for classifying sequences in film –, meme theory subsumes virtually all things and phenomena under the concept of the meme: "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of buildings arches" (Dawkins),<sup>8</sup> left-hand traffic, right-hand traffic, or a predilection for "Currywurst" (Blackmore).<sup>9</sup> Still, the revival of meme theory is little surprising if one considers that the digital domain has brought forth the 'killer app' of all cultural techniques for passing things on: *copy-and-paste*.

But even copy-and-paste is not a virus that propagates without the action and intervention of human beings: with the following discussion, I am going to reach out for the *human, embodied factor* in human-computer interaction, a factor which, curiously, is often neglected in debates of the cultural consequences of emerging technologies. Does our body indeed become obsolete if we engage online, or less relevant than the information that is being exchanged? Instead of thinking of forums such as 4chan.org as a competition of bodiless ideas, I propose to think of it as a dance: as something that requires the communion and participation of humans, their simultaneous engagement with each other and with the cultural meaning of the artefacts they exchange, rhythmically and periodically, both making use of and collaborating with the digital technology at hand. Such a dance, inevitably, must transgress the borders between mind and matter, media and body, information and perception, which the dominant discourse has so meticulously established.

## 2 – The Real vs. Virtual Fallacy

From its inception and continuing into the present, the discourse about online interaction has been marked by the insistence that the distinction between offline and online, between face-to-face and mediated encounters must be congruent with the distinction between the 'real' and the 'virtual' and its various derivatives: factual versus fictitious, true versus false, authentic versus deceptive, embodied and reliable versus fleeting and fickle. The assumptions that underlie such divisions between 'real' life and the „consensual hallucination“ (William Gibson) that has come to be understood as cyberspace – specifically the assumption that online interaction must be understood as a *disembodied* form of interaction – often go unchallenged. I thus seek to contest this view of the virtual as a disembodied sphere of media or as a lesser reality, departing from two propositions:

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<sup>7</sup> Metz 1966

<sup>8</sup> Dawkins 2006: 192

<sup>9</sup> Quoted from Meister/Simon/Teichmann 2003

First, and from a phenomenological perspective,<sup>10</sup> online interaction is always already inclusive of the body. This requires that we accept that the phenomena appearing on a computer screen are not brought forth by themselves, but to appear require the existence of a body acting as the subject of perception. From such a perspective, virtual reality, cyberspace, or online interaction do not appear as belonging to the realm of pure data and information, not as a sole affair of the mind, but as simultaneously pertaining to a living, breathing body, a body-subject situated in front of a device. Appearance and perception coincide in phenomena, a separation of one from the other, of aspects of the mind from aspects of the body is impossible. The phenomenological approach seems particularly fitting for a discussion of human-computer interaction as the phenomena on the screen are also intimately tied to the behaviour and response of the body-subject: A computer without any input device – the most basic: the POWER button – does yet have to be conceived (and for now exists merely in the science fiction of singularity prophets). The means to translate human thought, behaviour and even emotion<sup>11</sup> into computable input are varied and many; we need not resort to a machine that is able to divine the user's thought, the keyboard serves this purpose well (and as a writing tool, as Nietzsche has noted, works on our thoughts as well). Online interaction – which builds on human-computer interaction and adds to it the specificities of a website's interaction design – depends even more profoundly on an incessant stream of user interaction: If nobody ever moved a cursor, clicked buttons, entered letters, hit 'enter' keys, the whole World Wide Web would immediately go into a deep state of hibernation.

Secondly, to interact online does not mean to engage solely with a machine, but is always embedded in social scenarios. While this seems particularly applicable to the type of online interaction that can be found on the so-called Web 2.0 or Social Web, the ability to harness the power of the social and to foster community has been a characteristic of online interaction since the days of the electronic bulletin board. The social manifests itself in various forms online: for instance in dialogic forms such as text or video chat or forums, which resemble or mimic face-to-face-communication or other, older forms of mediated communication, but also in data-driven scenarios: for instance in form of tag suggestions based on user behaviour in social bookmarking services (e.g. delicious.com) or rankings of content items based on popularity with users. Social relevance is not immediately related to whether an interaction took place online or face-to-face: an email exchange, a forum discussion, the number of views on your online video, all these are mediated forms of interaction, and they are undoubtedly

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Merleau-Ponty 1945

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Machulis 2011, in this volume

socially relevant. Online interaction, due to its social dimension, reaches beyond the boundaries of the human-computer interface and beyond the content dimension of the bytes loaded in a website, to include the activities of all users (all body-subjects) who are contributing or have contributed to the interaction, who have left behind data traces and shaped its conventions. To be able to grasp what is brought in by the participation and performance of the users, I am going to explore this entanglement of information technology and the collective of body-subjects in more detail, building on the distinction between the archive and the repertoire as suggested by performance studies scholar Diana Taylor.<sup>12</sup>

### 3 – Archival Memory and Embodied Practice

“My particular investment in performance studies”, Taylor writes, “derives less from what it *is* than what it allows us to *do*. By taking performance seriously as a system of learning, storing and transmitting knowledge, performance studies allows us to expand what we understand by ‘knowledge.’”<sup>13</sup> In particular embodied practices such as song, dance, and ritual have been excluded from the script-dominated Western canon of legitimate knowledge – yet it would be too simple to dismiss this conflict as one of written and oral culture, Taylor argues, introducing her notion of the *archive* and the *repertoire*:

The rift, I submit, does not lie between the written and the spoken word, but between the *archive* of supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral *repertoire* of embodied practice (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual). ‘Archival’ memory exists as documents, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones – items supposedly resistant to change.<sup>14</sup> [...] The repertoire, on the other hand, enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

Even when working in tandem, archival practices often serve the purpose of containing practices of the repertoire; Taylor has discussed this with application to colonial history in the Americas. Today, 16<sup>th</sup> century Franciscan missionary Bernardino de Sahagún is considered one of the founding fathers of ethnography, for the practice of containment he advocated involved acquiring first-hand knowledge of indigenous religious practices through interviews, e.g. with village elders. Sahagún, who was able to speak Aztec language Nahuatl fluently, compiled the *Florentine Codex*, twelve books documenting the work of his trilingual team and was mainly written in Nahuatl. But his intentions must not be confused with the aim of

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<sup>12</sup> Taylor 2003

<sup>13</sup> Taylor 2003: 16

<sup>14</sup> Taylor 2003: 19

<sup>15</sup> Taylor 2003: 20

contemporary anthropologists to gain an emic ('from within') understanding of a studied culture. Rather, Taylor observes, the archival practice of writing

served as a recognized weapon in the colonial arsenal. Sahagún maintained that he needed to write down all the indigenous practices to better eradicate them: "It is needful to know how they practiced them in the time of their idolatry, for, through [our] lack of knowledge of this, they perform many idolatrous things in our presence without our understanding it."<sup>16</sup>

Ironically, the *Florentine Codex* simultaneously served as a document to what it sought to extinguish, even though it included instructions "not to permit anyone, for any reason, in any language, to write concerning the superstitions and way of life these Indians had"<sup>17</sup> One copy of the *Codex* has survived – it has become one of the most important resources on ancient Aztec practices.

In contemporary culture, the rift between the archive and the repertoire and its associated valorisation of legitimate and illegitimate knowledge reveals itself in the perception of various popular practices. One example of a popular embodied practice that has come to some recognition through its documentation on film (i.e. through an archival practice) is a type of street dance originally performed in South Central Los Angeles: *krumping*, a dance style which grew out of *clowning*, a type of entertainment created by Thomas "Tommy the Clown" Johnson who made a living as a hip hop clown performing at kids' birthday parties. *Krumping*, as its less comedic, more physically explicit, polyrhythmic and confrontational variant, often takes on the form of a battle, spontaneously erupting among participants who switch between dancer and observer, keeping the repertoire of dance moves in constant evolution. In the documentary *Rize* (USA 2005, directed by photographer David LaChapelle), the dancers themselves describe krumping as a collective, dynamic practice, unknowingly echoing Taylor's definition of the repertoire as ephemeral and non-reproducible: "The style changes every day, believe it or not, every day the style changes. And if you haven't danced in two days and you come to a krump session, we're gonna know, we're gonna know you been slacking off." Even though krumping has meanwhile made its way into mainstream, the original dance style cannot be pinned down as a fixed set of movements. Instead, as a practice of the repertoire, it is newly defined with every dance, drawing on the embodied knowledge of participants and evolving from their interaction. Taylor:

The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by 'being there', being a part of the transmission. As opposed to the supposedly 'stable' objects in the archive, the actions that are the repertoire do not remain the same. The repertoire both keeps and

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<sup>16</sup> Taylor 2003: 41

<sup>17</sup> *Florentine Codex*, book 1, 37; quoted from Taylor 2003; 41

transforms choreographies of meaning.<sup>18</sup>

While the repertoire unfurls in the present and through the presence of the gathered body-subjects, archival memory “works across distance, over time and space; investigators can go back to reexamine an ancient manuscript [...]. [...] archival memory succeeds in separating the source of ‘knowledge’ from the knower”.<sup>19</sup> With David LaChapelles film, krumping has left the streets of South Central LA and, through the filter of the archive, become something else: a standardized practice that can meanwhile be learned independently from the communal event, for instance from DVDs in which protagonists from *Rize* explain “Krumping 1.0 – Basic Techniques”. Yet how – if so – does this apply to online interaction?

While Diana Taylor herself has suggested thinking of the digital as yet another system of knowledge transmission alongside the archive and the repertoire,<sup>20</sup> I would like to argue instead that this distinction allows us to understand some of the ideological underpinnings of the discourse about the digital, in particular with regard to the ‘real vs. virtual’ fallacy discussed above. While Western culture is very well attuned to reading and interpreting archival practices – with mediating and remediating archival memory constituting the core techniques of its institutions of ideological reproduction: schools, universities, libraries, etc –, it tends to be dismissive of embodied practices, or recognizes them only if associated to archival practices (wedding ceremonies may hold a cherished place in the Western imaginary, yet neither the exchange of vows nor the wedding band is considered as legally binding, unless endorsed by a marriage certificate). Similarly, the discourse about online interaction reveals an acute awareness for all aspects that are represented through archival forms, become manifest in form of signs or symbols – information, data, code, and their visual/symbolic equivalents –, but pays little attention for the embodied practices associated with and/or eliciting these forms. In its early accounts, the condition of “being digital” (Nicholas Negroponte) was conceptualized as an immediate effect of binary encoding, with (symbolic) worlds being recreated fluidly, unencumbered by the clumsiness of the physical: “[B]its commingle effortlessly”, Negroponte wrote. “They start to get mixed up and can be used and reused together or separately. The mixing of audio, video, and data is called multimedia; it sounds complicated, but is nothing more than commingled bits.”<sup>21</sup> But there is more to online interaction than commingled bits: the ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge invested by users/body-subjects as they engage online, the performative quality of their perceptions,

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<sup>18</sup> Taylor 2003: 20

<sup>19</sup> Taylor 2003: 19

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Taylor 2003: 4, 21, 22

<sup>21</sup> Negroponte 1995: 18

actions, and communications as they connect in the human-computer-interface, mediated through websites and with other users, synchronically and a-synchronically. The notion of the archive and repertoire may be valuable for gaining a new understanding of how the sphere of data, information and code (the so-called 'virtual') relates to the sphere of the body (the so-called 'real') – requiring, however, that we consider the digital not as yet another system of knowledge transmission, but as one that relies both on techniques of the archive and of the repertoire. Usability optimization – i.e. the fine-tuning of information and interaction architectures – can be considered as an effort to decrease the effort the user/body-subject has to undertake to use a website effectively. In terms of usability, the ideal website reduces the potential to be reminded of the clumsiness of the physical to the lowest possible degree, e.g. through requiring as few clicks as possible, building on a consistent set of use cases for the various tasks, through the analysis and anticipation of user-behaviour, corresponding adjustment of interaction opportunities and through increased measures to prevent that a user ever loses data. Yet some websites force users to put in more effort than would seem advisable according to the maximum usability paradigm, making interaction with other users a bewildering game, requiring arbitrary commands and deleting data constantly. 4chan.org is such a website, and as such, it relies on techniques of the repertoire much more intensely than those furnished with award-winning usability concepts and streamlined navigations.

#### 4 – The Archive as Repertoire: Hybrid Practice on 4chan.org

The first-time visitor to 4chan.org will probably not know what to do on this website: unlike the alpha and beta-tested, venture-capital funded and social media-optimized specimen of web 2.0 websites, 4chan's appearance does very little to give away its rank of one of the most popular English-language forums on the web, attracting about nine and a half million unique users within 30 days.<sup>22</sup> 4chan's information architecture is adapted from readily available forum software,<sup>23</sup> giving it a generic, rather than unique 'look and feel'.

From a technical point of view, the entry bars to 4chan.org have been lowered as much as possible: as there is no registration and no login, users may just get on the site and start posting. Captchas – images and letters presented as an image that users have to type in to confirm that they are indeed human – have only been added as late as 2010 to prevent automated postings by spam robots. This low-threshold policy is also cited by Poole as one of

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<sup>22</sup> In spring 2010, US District Court 2010: 4

<sup>23</sup> Japanese board Futaba's code with a few adaptations, making it now proprietary.



Anonymous 12/01/10(Wed)16:11:39 No.291303XXX

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Anonymous 12/01/10(Wed)16:12:46 No.291303XXX

File1291237966.png-(12 KB, 419x99, Screen shot 2010-12-01 at 3.12(...).png[Screenshot of the comment field, containing the word "NOOOOOOOOOOOO"])

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While such interventions by moot have the potential to strengthen the community of existing users – subjecting all of them to the same trial (here: the silencing of their messages through their replacement by “puddipuddi”) –, they are probably more confusing than persuasive to first time visitors. To make things even more complicated for first-timers, parts of the forum software have been reprogrammed in a non-conventional way, requiring users to perform arbitrary actions (e.g. entering the word “„noko” in the email field to stay in the same thread after posting). In other words: while the technical obstacles to using 4chan might seem low, the cultural and conventional obstacles are considerably higher on 4chan than on other, mainstream-oriented platforms.

Returning to the issue of archive vs. repertoire, it would at first appear only logical to assume that 4chan – being an Internet forum – must be considered an example of an archival practice. As all media technologies do, it separates the knowledge from the bearer: the human-computer interface, in its afore-mentioned function as writing tool, is a knowledge extraction tool par excellence, allowing thought to take on the objectified form of the written record. Knowledge management systems exploit this in their attempt to turn tacit into explicit knowledge, prompting individuals ‘in the know’ to fill in fields, upload files and provide meta-data so that others might benefit from their knowledge even in their absence.

On social media websites, data entry fields and upload options extract mainly two types of information: on the one hand information relating to the *individual*, creating a data-based representation of him or her – i.e. his or her profile –, and on the other hand information relating to ongoing *communications*, i.e. so-called content. There are currently two main types to organize this information into knowledge: on the one hand, an individual’s *social graph* (also: address book, contact or buddy list) maps the relations of an individual’s profile to the

profiles of other individuals, and on the other hand, the individual's *timeline* (also: activity stream) organizes the content he or she has produced chronologically, generating a past and present, i.e. a history of his or her activities. The currently most dominant social networking site Facebook.com actually keeps a full record of both profiles (the default option merely allows to deactivate, but not to delete a profile) and of timelines – with the latest system updates from December 2010, it is even possible to download a personal archive of all data one has ever published, from first wall post to latest photo. Even if a person never logged onto Facebook again, this archive, in Taylor's sense, would work across distance, over time and space, and investigators could go back to it and reexamine it like an ancient manuscript.

This is not what happens on 4chan. First of all, with the lack of a registration and the absence of profiles, there are also no means to build a social graph to understand the relations between users. This trickles all the way down to the level of the ongoing communications. As becomes apparent from the "puddipuddi" example cited above: if all users are represented as "Anonymous", it is not actually possible to figure out who has been talking to whom. While conventional anonymity online meant that one's real name and identity were protected through the use of (unique and/or registered) nicknames, 4chan takes this one step further: Because no one can register, no one may claim a nickname for him or herself. Users still have the opportunity to specify a nickname with every post they publish – but if one user picks the nickname "OprahWinfrey", this doesn't prevent that other users post as "OprahWinfrey", too. And if no nickname is specified at all, "Anonymous" will appear as the name of the author. With the number of "Anonymouses" posting on 4chan, identifying who said what becomes impossible – the suspicion that a user has been talking to him or herself in order to stimulate a debate is ubiquitous on 4chan: this practice is called "samefagging". Posting as "Anonymous" has become so much part of 4chan's culture, especially on the Random forum /b/, that there is also a word for *not* posting anonymously: "namefagging". During the "puddipuddi" intervention, one user praised the virtues of anonymous posting as follows (the message was posted as a \*.gif image):

In the past few months, we've watched /b/ turn into a shitty version of facebook, filled with morons that post more than they lurk, and ignorant to the fact that what makes /b/ great is that when you're here, you are not you. You are anonymous. / Moot is the only one that had both the understanding and the ability to chemo the cancer. The understanding in that he recognized that the answer wasn't to flood cancerous threads with gore, but to take away your ability to post your idiotic opinion, wait 30 seconds, then post it again. And the ability, obviously, because, after all, this is his site. / I hope it stays like this forever. [...]

Tl;dr Thank you Moot. You are the oncologist.

With the rejection of profiles and the social graph model, the timeline model also suffers: when there is no profile, there is also no other user timeline than the collective timeline of all

posts in a forum. On 4chan, instead of user IDs, individual posts are attributed with IDs. While user handles are used to respond to other users e.g. in chat communication or on microblogging platforms such as Twitter.com (e.g. "@unicorn47 male or female?"), on 4chan, users respond to individual posts, using a nine-digit ID (e.g. ">>291499636 tits or GTFO"). This move from the concept of profile ID (representing an individual) to the concept of post ID (representing just one aspect or position in an ongoing debate) further contributes to the dissolving of the boundaries of self as it (supposedly) manifests itself online: while anything I say on my Facebook page will be subject of a consistency check (is it line with what people have read and learned about me so far?), I need not worry about such forms of social control on 4chan: on 4chan, I am not me. I am anonymous. If the imagery and opinions expressed on 4chan are often radical and extreme, it is because 4chan – rather than being about self-representation like other forms of social media – serves as a semiological laboratory, where body-subjects collectively explore meaning, the potential scope of a debate, and in particular the boundaries between what can and what cannot be said. These experimental conditions are aggravated through the mentioned lack of retention: sooner or later, all posts, text and image, will be deleted – on popular forums such as /b/ after just a few minutes. Poole.<sup>26</sup>

Every board has a maximum number of threads, say a hundred. Every time a new thread is posted, something has to be removed. Eventually all of the threads are cycled off and then pruned that way. It's time based and on some of the boards it's popularity based. The oldest least replied to thread gets bumped off. Inactive threads basically get bumped off.

If a new thread fails to attract the attention of other users, it will quickly drop to the bottom of the page, receive even less attention and soon be deleted – which is yet another reason why posts on 4chan tend towards the extreme. Every thread vies with others for its existence. At the same time, with an archive that autodestructs after a certain period, the onus of maintaining and perpetuating 4chan's knowledge is delegated to the user community: the collective of body-subjects that uses, reads and knows the language, conventions and narratives of the site, saves images to their hard-drives if they seem interesting enough, weaves them back into circulation if the occasion seems fitting, creates new symbols and forms, new knowledge online. This is not an activity that can be automated: it requires the semiological capacities of the users as body-subjects, their ability to read and comprehend as much as their ability to create and destroy. If "puddipuddi" has had an influence on the negotiated knowledge on 4chan, then even those who were not present on December 1 2010 will learn about its rhetoric and symbols when they return online. This is indeed the point

where 4chan resembles a collective of dancers. It reminds us of the confession of the krumps: "The style changes every day, believe it or not, every day the style changes." Or as Taylor put it: "Dances change over time, even though generations of dancers (or even individual dancers) swear they're always the same."<sup>27</sup> And just as the repertoire requires presence, 'being there', being a part of the transmission, 4chan, too, demands that users as body-subjects engage and participate both synchronically and a-synchronically. With its users being distributed across all time zones, 4chan never sleeps. But if the site was suddenly shut down, what would remain – the few pages that evaded deletion – would not be enough to recreate it from scratch: not without the embodied knowledge of the collective of body-subjects that constitutes 4chan.

## 5 – 4chan and Beyond

This account of 4chan as a hybrid of archive and repertoire is not complete. 4chan has no fixed boundaries: its knowledge follows its users, and while the site itself may neither provide profiles nor an archived history, attempts at making this knowledge explicit are made on other sites. One such example is the initially mentioned website EncyclopediaDramatica.com (ED) which chronicles major events and terms of internet culture, relating to 4chan and its collective, but also to other sites such as DeviantART.com or SomethingAwful.com. It runs on the same software as Wikipedia, but in contrast to the free encyclopaedia's objectivity aims, language used on ED is idiosyncratic to a degree that some familiarity with Internet culture is already required to use it.<sup>28</sup> Another site where terms relating to 4chan can be looked up is UrbanDictionary.com where users may add and vote for definitions for any term: for instance for "tits or GTFO", which currently has six different definitions, with the top-scoring one having received 1277 "ups" and 119 "downs" (2 December 2010).<sup>29</sup> To gain a full understanding of the way in which archival and embodied practices work together and support each other, one would have to analyze this network of websites, user communities and the streams of mediated and embodied knowledge between them – still, each individual user's story would paint a different picture. If we consider 4chan not just as either a website or either a community, but as a collective, embodied practice enabled by digital technology, we are also able to understand some of its performative aspects, its status as a contemporary, adolescent or post-adolescent ritual. "They dared to touch the wild beasts of 4chan and they

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<sup>27</sup> Taylor 2003: 20

<sup>28</sup> From the article „Something Awful“: „[a]n unfunny comedy website owned by Lowtax, and traces its roots back to the good old days of Web 1.0, where Goatse was the pinnacle of shock and the LJ in ‚LJ drama‘ did not yet exist.“

<sup>29</sup> No. 1 definition: „An expression often used on imageboards. It is often heard when a girl posts in a thread. *Camwhore: Hi am i hot? Person: Tits or GTFO.*“

lived to tell the tale," this is how A-list blogger Marshall Kirkpatrick described how a social media campaign, surprisingly, managed to charm 4chan users.<sup>30</sup> Social media spaces bear resemblance to the liminal social spaces of initiation rituals in that they first remove all signs of the subjects' previous social status, and then conjoin them under the egalitarian spirit of what cultural anthropologist Victor Turner has described as *communitas*, an "unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders".<sup>31</sup> 4chan's culture, with its collective of anonymous users and its loathing of "namefagging" is also antithetical to social structures and hierarchies, which otherwise re-establish themselves quickly in online communities. Its inclination towards the extreme and the bizarre as well as its appearance as a masked collective in public resembles Turner's descriptions of initiation rites:

Even in liminality, where the bizarre behavior so often remarked upon by anthropologists occurs, the *sacra*, masks, etc., emerge to view under the guise at least of „collective representations“. If there ever were individual creators and artists, they have been subdued by the general „liminal“ emphasis on anonymity and *communitas*, just as the novices and their novice-masters have been.<sup>32</sup>

In traditional societies, such bizarre behaviour in liminality often involves impersonating grotesque animals, "caricatures of human outsiders" as Elizabeth Isechei put it, referring to the African masking society of the Chewa: "The dancers, as wild beasts, stand outside of Chewa society and reverse its norms. They are often violent, and their songs obscene."<sup>33</sup>

Looking at 4chan, its lore and its symbols, one might suggest this as its epigraph: "Our images are violent, yet our songs are obscene."

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<sup>30</sup> Kirkpatrick 2010

<sup>31</sup> Turner 1990: 148

<sup>32</sup> Turner 1982: 43

<sup>33</sup> Isechei 2004: 258

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