mt

Genre Trouble, Feel Tanks and Memetic Flailing

CHLOE TURNER

Goldsmiths, University of London, UK

REBECCA COLEMAN

University of Bristol, UK

Abstract

This paper explores how Berlant's concept of 'genre flailing' offers productive ways of understanding the circulation and sharing of memes during the Covid-19 pandemic. It focuses on our collaborative research project that deployed Feel Tanks to consider experiences of pandemic time, and specifically on how one participant unexpectedly responded to research prompts with a series of disjointed memes. Genre flailing refers to the thrashing around that happens when conventions and expectations about the world are paused or ruptured. Through the text, we grapple with the memes to explore their flailing as research data, as a response to the invitations extended in the Feel Tanks, as a popular pandemic medium, and more widely as a genre. We work with Berlant's emphasis on embracing irresolution and their attentiveness to unfolding scenes of encounter which we argue offer valuable frameworks for sense-making with media and popular culture amidst crisis and uncertainty.

Keywords

Memes, Feel Tanks, Time, Affect, Berlant

> Genre flailing is a mode of crisis management that arises after an object, or object world, becomes disturbed in a way that intrudes on one's confidence about how to move in it (Berlant, 2018: 157).

> Defined by the technology of their replication, mutation, and circulation, memes have begun to break loose from the old forms that preceded them. Foreshadowed by propaganda and advertising (the circulating image-texts of the modern era), memes nonetheless follow new trajectories (Hardesty, Linz and Secor, 2019: 496-497).
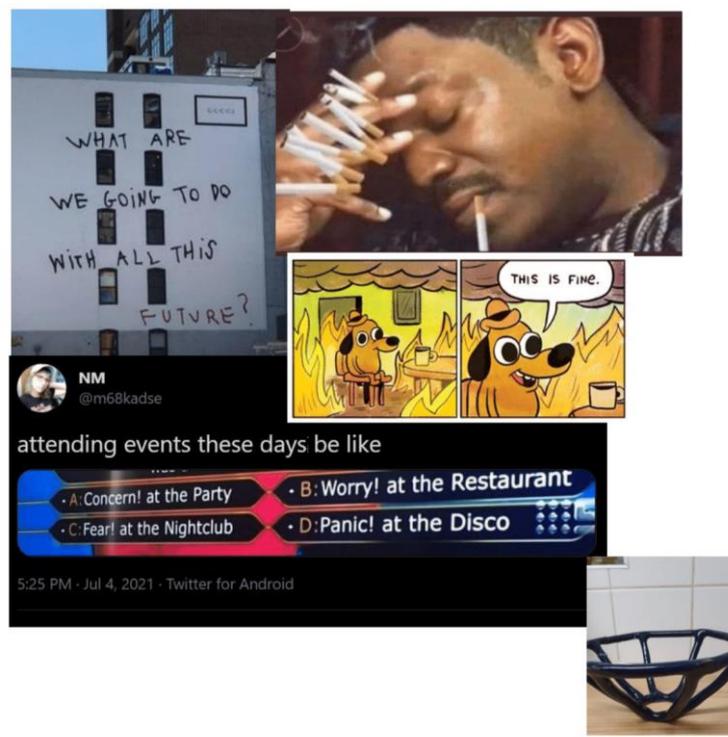
Figure 1: Feel Tank diary by participant FT4, 22 July 2021

Our paper responds to a series of exchanges that emerged when a participant, asked about how their experience of time had shifted during the pandemic as part of our collaborative research project 'Feeling, Making and Imagining Time: Everyday Temporal Experiences in the Covid-19 Pandemic', responded with the three pages of memes which break up the text here (figures 1-3)[1]. The memes were sent by a single participant, haphazardly layered over one another in a Microsoft Word document in response to our project prompts. The collaborative and multi-faceted project, initiated during the early days of lockdown in the UK, is an attempt to study and understand time and feeling as they are experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic. Elsewhere, we call this a live sociology of present feelings and feeling present (Coleman, Lyon and Turner, forthcoming). The project included commissioning and analysing a Mass Observation directive where volunteer writers were asked to reflect on their experiences of and feelings about time and Covid-19, and holding Feel Tanks on this theme with young people. The Feel Tanks were led by Chloe Turner and inspired by Lauren Berlant's and others' attempts to highlight affect in understandings of public life. In the context of our research project, they are understood as an affect centred

focus-group. While most research participants reflected on our questions verbally or with a written diary, the memes were unanticipated and prompted a series of reflections as we grappled with how best to engage and interpret the irruptive response. Here, we explore how Berlant's work figured in our grappling with these issues.

When we say 'Berlant's work', we are referring to the concepts they initiate and deploy, the worlds they engage, and the style of their thinking-writing. We draw inspiration from Tavia Nyong'o's point, written in the wake of Berlant's passing, that 'writing under the influence of Berlant, I am tempted to imitate the forking pathways of their sentences, which so often managed to arrive at two places at once' (Nyong'o, 2021). The double meaning of Nyong'o's opening phrase is not lost on us. '[W]riting under the influence of Berlant' has meant that throughout our research and writing process we have become slightly tipsy – on the complexities they lay bare, the conceptual jumps they enable and the inventive form their writing takes. Nyong'o's use of the forking metaphor functions in terms of two pathways; we, though, could not keep to two pathways, two forks. Rather, feeling with the winding sentences of Berlant's texts as we have tried to understand our participants' three pages of memes, we have veered off course, fallen into digressions, lost, found, lost again our train of thought and come up with new ones; but this very lack of coherence perhaps mimics the experiential logics that Berlant's work demands we attend to, disrupting traditional ideas of narrative and argument. It also accounts for the floundering that characterised our exchanges with the memes, which can be explored both in terms of the unexpected way in which we received them and more generally the 'technology of [meme's] replication, mutation, and circulation' which have the capacity to generate 'new trajectories', as Robbie Hardesty, Jess Linz and Anna J. Secor put it in one of the epigraphs (2019: 496-497).

In particular, we have become taken with Berlant's concept of genre flailing, which we have found helps us to sense-make with – if not make sense of – the memes. Indeed, now we have noticed it, we see genre flailing everywhere. As indicated in the other epigraph, genre flailing refers to the attempts to manage a situation that emerges when the contours, framings, conventions of that situation are disturbed. It is a means of thinking with and thinking through crisis ordinary. A pandemic, for instance, is a situation in which genre flails as the normal or ordinary is thrown into relief. And a

pandemic is also, perhaps, a situation that requires new genres of writing, or at least gives pause for us to consider whether the genres through which we usually express ourselves are up to the task. In his short piece 'The Berlant Opening', Caleb Smith (2021) takes up Berlant's assertion in *Cruel Optimism* that 'the problem of detaching from the normal applies to writing criticism (2011: 21). The form of writing is, let's not forget, work. Work to wriggle into gaps between the overdetermined generic conventions and parameters of criticism that threaten to reinscribe the limits of the present. Painstaking work in crafting sentences 'in a way I can live with takes work' (2007: 435), as Berlant reminds us in 'Starved', so as not to be fooled into thinking it is effortless. 'The Berlant Opening', 'at once an invitation and a provocation, is by design disorienting' (Smith, 2021: online). The initial act of estranging oneself from habituated ways of thinking – gaining a critical and/or affective distance on the familiar and compulsive routine – constitutes a challenge of writerly craft as of intellectual labour. Put another way, the project of unmooring thought from the flows of the normal emerges, among other difficulties, as a problem of establishing a grammar of interruption.

Taking this task seriously involves us unfolding the three pages of memes, more or less explicitly, through the concept of genre flailing. We use the term 'unfold' deliberately here to refer to how the following discussion does not always progress linearly but rather opens out in a shuttling back and forth between the conceptual, methodological, technological, social and personal. Taking inspiration from Berlant's writing style and the open-ended circulation of memes, we seek to stay with our floundering to refract and reflect on how genre flailing helps us sense make with the memes. We have numbered our sections to try to draw attention to how they function as a series of points that develop laterally as well as linearly[2]. Our co-authoring has also become an intriguing exercise in reciprocal unfolding, as we have worked to articulate our own flailings prompted by the memes to one another. In conversation about *The Hundreds* (2019), co-authored with Kathleen Stewart, Berlant, when asked about the dialogic nature of the 'theoretical poems' , responded that they were meant to 'actively produce ideas about the ordinary of composition not just on the page, but also in the encounter with words, worlds, people, animals…we were interested in a wilder citational environment' (2019: 290). While decidedly more modest in scope, our co-

authorship through each gnarly draft has attempted to convey our generative conversational work within the text through our series of returns to the scene. Perhaps irritatingly or counter-intuitively, then, we swerve a more conventional analysis of the memes to explore how the memes functioned pedagogically, prompting our own tentative flailings and our inclination to further explicate this flailing. Central to this inclination is a conviction that Berlant's concept of genre flailing and their mode of writing are both incredibly productive for engaging with contemporary forms and circulations of digital media, and for expanding how media theorists may appreciate and work with them. Our shuttling discussion aims to highlight this potential while also enacting and embodying a mode of analysis that mimics the winding digressions of both Berlant's writings and the proliferating chain of memetic circulation.

In section 1, we introduce our Feel Tank method and discuss how the three pages of memes were sent to us as part of our collaborative research project. 2, we introduce Berlant's concept of genre flailing, drawing attention to its emergence alongside crises, and its potential contradictory character where it may initiate creativity as well as induce more normative reverberations. 3, we return to the Feel Tanks to consider how conceptually and methodologically they can themselves be seen as a mode of genre flailing, an invitation to 'meet us in the ellipsis' (Turner in Anderson et al, 2023: 125) and be together in the hesitation of the present. 4, we consider the broader landscape of unscripted exploration the Covid-19 pandemic has foisted upon seemingly stable social forms and genre. We double back to the explanation of genre flailing as a characteristic of, and characterising, a crisis as we examine in more detail how the Covid-19 pandemic is a situation in which genres flail. We begin to consider how this situation of genre flailing involved a pivot to digital technologies for many, if not all, of us. 5, we focus more specifically on memes, tracking their proliferation during the first stages of the pandemic as well as how they have been understood by academic researchers in terms of genre. Unpacking the popularity of memes during the pandemic requires us to think about memes as media, and so – 6 – we think how in their format, circulation and technicity, memes more generally might be understood as genre flailing. 7, we return to explore how the participant's meme response disrupted expected genres of qualitative research and reoriented the terms of encounter. The

memes realised the playful possibility that the ellipsis of our research design gestured toward but could not have anticipated.

Figure 2: Feel Tank diary by participant FT4, 22 July 2021

1. Feel Tanks

Above we noted that as part of our collaborative project on Covid-19, time and feeling, we incorporated the method of Feel Tanks. Since 2018, Turner has been using 'the phrase "Feel Tanks" as both intellectual enquiry and call-to-arms, to consider what it means to live under the complexity of capitalism in the current moment' (Turner in Anderson et al, 2023: 125; Turner, 2020). Turner's theorisation expands on what, in the one-page essay 'Feel Tanks' (2012), Berlant outlines as the political motivations

behind Feel Tank Chicago, active from 2001 onwards, which brought together academics, activists and cultural producers engaged in 'taking the emotional temperature of the body politics' (Feel Tank Chicago, 2012: n.p) through a series of collaborative performances, art and collective writing. Feel Tank Chicago is/was a splinter working group of the larger Public Feelings Project. The Project proceeded from the premise that examining the texture of affect and embodied experience provides vital insight into the mechanisms by which power dynamics and social inequities are reproduced (Berlant, 2004; Cardmody & Love, 2008; Cvetkovich, 2007; 2012a; 2012b). The Public Feelings Project emerged in 2001 as a response to the escalating political disenchantment and disaffection in the post-9/11 and Iraq war United States, where 'rather than analyzing the geopolitical underpinnings of these developments, we've been more interested in their emotional dynamics' (Cvetkovich, 2007: 460). Feel Tank Chicago referred to the period as one of 'political depression': 'the sense that customary forms of political response, including direct action and critical analysis, are no longer working either to change the world or to make us feel better' (ibid).

As part of our project, Turner designed and led four Feel Tanks to discuss how time and the future had been experienced by the participants amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. The project emerged as an attempt to conduct inquiry on the instability and uncertainty of the Covid-19 pandemic, a moment of crisis that saw existing genres of response destabilised and exposed as inadequate. As the pandemic unfolded, and in contrast to an increased reliance on quantified data responses from academic and policy researchers alike, in employing Feel Tanks we attempted to dwell in the felt but unmodelable realities of the pandemic. This approach attended to the granular textures of lived experience as events unfolded without narrative or end in sight in real time. In this particular methodological formulation, Feel Tanks were deployed not to extract predetermined outcomes or circular conversations but to sound out possibilities available at the register of feeling from new connections, an offering to the question Berlant poses through their elliptical thinking, 'How can our encounter with something become a scene of unlearning and engendering from within the very intensity of that encounter?' (Berlant, 2014, n.p.).

2. Genre flailing

For Berlant (1997), a genre is an emotionally invested patterned set of expectations about how to act and how to interpret, which organises a relationship between the acting and interpreting subject, their feelings and impressions, their struggles and their historical present. With the present 'under constant revision' (Berlant, 2011: 4), genres aid sense-making, providing framings, forms and conventions through which subjects can articulate experience and tether themselves to the world and others. They are reaffirmed through their repetition. Maggie Hennefeld (2021: n.p.) explains that 'Berlant approaches genre convention as a kind of stockbroker between ordinary fantasy and vital possibility. In other words, genre powers the fusion that allows fantasy to melt into reality. TV sitcoms, for example, celebrate the spectacle of episodic normalcy, reassuring family-oriented viewers that somehow all the little moments will finally add up'.

Genres become unstable during times of crisis – both evental and ordinary – 'when one's defences are made manifestly insecure by an uncontrollable disturbance in the object's stability' (Berlant, 2018: 157). Put slightly differently, the unsettling of genre involves a crisis. In times of instability, we 'flail around wanting something other than what is' yet fear confronting our lack of imagination and 'trust in the patience and inventiveness of others' (Berlant & Edelman, 2014: 110). Berlant (2011) highlights how standards of recognition and satisfaction in relationships are mediated through genres that conceal the labour of real connection. 'Forgettable encounters' that require 'minor attention' reproduce these genres even as they promise relief from precarity (Berlant & Edelman, 2014: 110). Deliberating austerity, Berlant explains it as a crisis ordinary:

> when the transitions of the present are revealed as precarious by the loss of genre and a hyperactive scavenging for genre. These scatterings of agency are crises of genre, and crises of genre are crises of the common. As predictable relations of cause and effect no longer obtain, the concept of event itself suddenly appears post-normative, which is to say, during crisis times the event emerges not as a thing that goes without saying but as a genre whose conventions are stunned, disorganised, and open for change (2011: 3).

Genre flailing is the 'crisis management' (Berlant, 2018: 157) that we do when what goes without saying is thrown into relief. We genre flail 'so we don't fall through the cracks of heightened affective noise into despair, suicide, or psychosis. We improvise like crazy, where "like crazy" is a little too non-metaphorical' (2018: 157).

Genre flailing can disrupt and re-invent genres. Hennefeld notes (2021: n.p.) the 'recent wave of genre mutant films and television shows' that have emerged to account for/in the wake of the documentation of sexual and racial violence across mainstream and digital media formats (i.e. where it has been difficult to avoid this documentation). As one example, *I May Destroy You* (HBO), created, written, co-directed and executive produced by and starring Michaela Cole, examines racism, sexual violence and trauma, inspired by Cole's own experiences. Hennefeld argues it addresses its 'extremely serious topic' by 'assert[ing] resilient laughter': 'Cole's laughter echoes across the show's haunting soundscape, viscerally combatting the canned laughter of the culture industry's 24/7 carnival of dystopian enjoyment. Laughter gives voice to what's irreparably broken rather than merrily filling the void' (2021: n.p.). In so doing, the series exposes the constraints of the genres through which such trauma has typically been expressed and puts together different frames, forms and conventions to make new genres that give sense to the brutality of everyday life. Mutant genres emerge when 'genres no longer provide discrete containers for cathartic emotions but actively solicit the messiness of mixed feelings (play and mourning, anger and despair, creativity and anxiety) to overspill their distance from materialist class conflict' (Hennefeld, 2021: n.p.).

However, genre flailing does not have to re-invent, nor does it have to be conducted through or in relation to mainstream or relatively stable mediums. 'When crisis is ordinary', Berlant writes, 'flailing – throwing language and gesture and policy and interpretations at a thing to make it slow or to make it stop – can be fabulously unimaginative, a litany of lists of things to do, to pay attention to, to say, to stop saying, or to discipline and sanction. Often in the pinch of a crisis we return to normal science or common sense – whatever offers relief in established clarity' (2018: 157). We should not see such flailing as failing. The flailing amid the disturbance of a genre, or many genres, is a means of 'holding off the pressure pushing at the survival wall. When we brainstorm and listen to each other in the solidarity-aspiring spaces of the present that

many of us already wanted to disrupt we're all learning, flailing, even when we're quiet, and even when we don't think so; this is what it means to make elbow room amid crisis' (Berlant, 2017: n.p.).

This dynamic of 'holding off the pressure' is an acknowledgement of an unsustainable relational configuration, where what was promised fails to be delivered. The very act of deferral or delaying indicates a fraught relationship characterized by a tension that cannot be productively negotiated within the constraints of current paradigms and practices. The pressure that must be held at bay suggests a divergence between what the relation demands and what the participants in that relation are presently capable of giving. At each stutter and stall, the limitations of the relationship are reignited, forestalling any substantive transformation that might alleviate the underlying tensions. The orientation toward 'holding off the pressure' represents a recognition, however implicit, of the maladaptive nature of this relation. To make elbow room in these instances is to reaffirm a commitment to transform the smoothness of our habits of interaction towards 'demanding encounters' (Berlant and Edelman, 2014: 110), thus requiring us to confront the genres that facilitate efficiency at the expense of attentiveness and vulnerability. In cultivating the creative capacity to extend relational genres, we side-step, however fleetingly, the trap of 'cruel optimism'.

3. Feel Tanks as genre flail

In both the initial iteration of Feel Tank Chicago (2012) and Turner's more recent Feel Tank methodology (in Anderson et al, 2023) there is enacted a form of genre flail attuned to a world appearing to unravel. We will expand on Feel Tanks as a form of genre flail in two ways: conceptually and methodologically.

First, as Berlant elucidates in ArtForum, their thought progresses in an 'elliptical [way that] both tracks concepts and allows for unfinishedness' (2014: n.p.). This approach cultivates an animating incompletion in the act of thinking itself. In this way, Berlant's elliptical unfinishedness enables thinking that is alive to fluctuations, starting over when necessary, without the constraints of an end point in space or time. This 'unfinishedness' is mirrored in the Feel Tank Chicago manifesto where they state they named themselves so 'to produce a double take' (2012: n.p.) To prompt a second look is to disrupt, re-enact and re-evaluate temporality. To read the phrase 'Feel Tank'

through the act of the double take is to acknowledge their tongue-in-cheek play on 'think tanks' and consider how the phrase holds both political and emotional dimensions in dialogue. In addition, the term 'Feel Tanks' often initially elicits a response of 'Excuse me, sorry?' as listeners perform a double take to ensure they heard correctly. This second glance is a looking back that can simultaneously become a looking forward, a double take that unveils and welcomes in a concealed temporality within time. It is 'to be out of time' (Turner in Anderson et al, 2023: 325). We argue that this self-referential act, in conceptually opening an interstitial temporality, suspends habitual frames of time and thought.

Second, this conceptual flail is both informed by and recursively informs the methodological flail of the Feel Tank methodology proposed by Turner (in Anderson et al, 2023). Our aim in the project to think with Covid-19, time and feeling was to account for the imposed, urgent, public attention to time as regular routines, rhythms, plans and expectations were thrown into doubt (Coleman and Lyon, 2023; Lyon and Coleman, 2023; Beynon-Jones et al, 2023). The un-mooring of genre and violence of the world, 'makes us flail about for things to read with, people to talk to, and material for inducing transformations, that can make it possible not to aspire to, feel at war, or to be right; but to be disturbed together, thrashing with, and creating value through a shift in the object' (Berlant, 2018: 161). Feel Tanks then, as an invitation to meet in the space of the ellipsis, invent a methodological grammar of interruption; a thrashing about together. That is, a Feel Tank methodology addresses the uncertainty and disruption of a faltering world by extending, in return, an open ended and exploratory invitation to flail. In understanding Feel Tanks as their own reciprocal invitation to flail and respond otherwise, we argue here the series of encounters between the Covid-19 research climate, Feel Tanks and the participant meme-based response all inform each other through their intention/attention to flail.

4. The pandemic as a genre flail

It is not a stretch to see the Covid-19 pandemic as a crisis in which social forms and collective meanings become untethered and indeed flail. Berlant's explanation of austerity 'as the State losing its own bearings' (2011: 2) elucidates the turbulence and precarity of the pandemic conditions:

> No longer with resources or the will to be proactive, the state becomes an emergency responder, stumbling over broken roads and expectations; meanwhile the people experience the state of emergency not as an exception but as an embedding in the ordinary in which they are always tipped over, walking ahead while looking around, and feeling around their pockets for something, both focused and distracted and getting by, without assurance (2011: 2-3).

As with the 2008 financial crash which precipitated austerity becoming crisis ordinary, the Covid-19 pandemic initially rocked and startled existing genres as states across the globe struggled with how to respond to the emergency. Indeed, if we are to follow Robbie Duschinky and Emma Wilson's understanding of genre as a 'mooring, or placeholder, for intensities within streaming experience' (2014: 179), Covid-19 left all, to varying degrees, unmoored. At the same time, the pandemic was for many – but not all – experienced as an impasse or 'holding station' (Berlant, 2011: 199), a period of waiting (Baraitser and Salisbury, 2021), or of multiple temporalities and rhythms being held in tension (Coleman and Lyon, 2023; Lyon and Coleman, 2023; Coleman, Lyon and Turner, forthcoming). Sian Beynon-Jones, Emily Grabham, and Nadine Hendrie (2023) describe the 'polyrhythmic temporalities' of the early period of the pandemic in the UK, as rules appeared rapidly, and yet were often felt to come too late, and changes to them were anticipated and yet sudden.

The Covid-19 pandemic therefore produced and was experienced as a situational genre rupture, suspending people, resources and futures as established frameworks faltered. As a crisis temporality, it intensified preexisting tendencies toward digital immersion and quantification as a means of orientation amid upheaval. With lockdowns globally coming into effect from March 2020 onwards, for many, mediating the world through a screen became the primary mode of information, sociality and work (Kemp, 2020; Panday and Pal, 2020). Perhaps unsurprisingly this was coupled with public communication with a heightened reliance on statistical analysis (Corner, 2021) and data modelling in the 'dashboard pandemic' (Everts, 2020) to track and make sense of the shifting terrain. Amidst the proliferation of future forecasting models, Feel Tanks offer a vital mode of collectivised meaning-making in the here and now.

These arguments delineate two strands in the communication of healthcare – the intensified use of social media by health practitioners and medical educators versus the public's social media engagement. Prior to Covid-19, as Adrian Wong et al (2021) argue, despite an increase in healthcare professions engaging social media platforms there remained 'significant debate as to the merits of social media in terms of actual learning and improvement in the quality of care provided' (2021: 256). In similar ways to how Covid-19 prompted a global re-evaluation of who and what constitutes an 'essential worker' (Farris and Bergfeld, 2022), traditionally 'apolitical' scientists evolved into science communicators during the pandemic. The lack of clear and consistent guidance from official institutions in the pandemic's early stages created a knowledge vacuum on social media which saw medical professionals leveraging platforms like Twitter and Instagram to disseminate data insights, including lists titled '50 Experts to Trust in a Pandemic' (Elemental Editors, 2020). They gained prominence as trusted social interpreters of complex findings. As Berlant notes, normal science as well as common sense become moorings 'in the pinch of a crisis' (2018: 157).

Wong at al (2021) raise important questions on the validity of publishing findings without due diligence, thorough peer-review in a present marked by 'an unparalleled rush to publish content' (2021: 256). Whilst they are referring to academic publications, this argument could also be extended to the overall spike in the infographic economy. Despite the proliferation of infographics as information tools, they risk reductive flattening of complex discourse and embedded biases, even when created by knowledgeable or trusted sources. This is matched by the dimensional confines of social media's graphical frameworks that shape how complex issues are represented and reduced to fit standardized form. Drawing on feminist theory and visual culture analysis via Khloe Kardashian's pantry, Kelly Prendergast in 'Merchandising the Void' argues that 'the grid is the ultimate platform for modern economic activity' (2023: n.p,). Whether in reference to the grid of Khloe's decanted shelves 'corralling and containerizing everything from cookbooks to Cheerios' (ibid), or the Instagram grid structuring an endless stream of bite-sized infographics, Prendergast elucidates how grids, through repetition and continuity, arrange and curtail information. These modular grids shape content into a continuous stream of squares, fragmenting complex issues into truncated, sharable tiles that communicate in certain ways. As a

mechanism of control and regimentation, online grids – whether Instagram or a wall of Zoom faces – hold similarities to the two metre/six foot social distancing guidelines, invisible grids upon public areas to modulate the flows of people. Floor stickers demarcating approved standing areas in queues and public spaces literally overlaid the grids onto their architecture (Lury and Day, 2021; Day, 2020).

The participant's memes in many ways reveal issues within these confining visual grids. Laine Nooney and Laura Portwood-Stacer (2014) define memes as 'digital objects that riff on a given visual, textual or auditory form and are then appropriated, re-coded, and slotted back into the internet infrastructures they come from' (2014: 249). Through collaborative design and viral circulation, memes signal a non-institutional effort to inject difference, playfulness and ambiguity into increasingly homogenous and predictable visual architectures online. Their participatory aesthetics open space for divergent meanings and representations even while being slotted back into the platforms they are successfully disrupting. Similarly, the iterative nature of memes allows them to be continually edited and reshaped, creating evolving networked conversations across time and digital space. A meme may be modified and recirculated, taking on new meanings in different contexts through the creative labour and viewing of anonymous publics. As memes are reshaped and passed on, they generate dialogues full of divergences, tangents and contradictions that spill beyond the frameworks seeking to corral them into tidy squares. The ongoing transformation and circulation of memes plays with the boundaries of the grid rather than being wholly defined by it. Each iteration further unravels any reductive clarity.

5. Memes as pandemic genre flail

Alongside grids then, memes are a core way in which information is arranged and circulated in contemporary popular culture. Across her various work (2013; 2014; 2018), Limor Shifman has argued that the communicative character of memes is key to 'an era of blurring boundaries between interpersonal and mass, professional and amateur, bottom-up and top-down communications [and] [i]n a time marked by a convergence of media platforms (Jenkins, 2006), where content flows swiftly from one medium to another' (2013: 363). As a central part of participatory – if not unified or undifferentiated – digital culture, memes therefore facilitate the constitution of

collective experience. Noam Gal, Shifman and Zohar Kampf (2016) argue that memes can play a significant role in negotiating and constructing 'collective identity', focusing especially on LGBTQ+ identity. In particular, they argue that memes 'are closely related to the process of norm formation. The memetic practice is not merely an expression of existing social-cultural norms, it is also a social tool for negotiating them. The relationship between memes and norms is thus twofold: memes both reflect norms and constitute a central practice in their formation (Shifman, 2014)' (Gal et al, 2016: 1700).

Taking up this relationship between memes and norms, memes can be seen as a means of creating, sharing and normalising collective experience during a period of extraordinary disruption. Maria Francesca Murru and Stefani Vicari (2021) analyse the proliferation of memes on Italian social media during the first wave of the pandemic, arguing that they account for 'everyday memetic practices' whereby memes move from subcultural to more heterogeneous contexts (2021: 2423). Murru and Vicari emphasise the significance of both the content and format of memes in this process, pointing to the importance of irony, satire and humour in constituting a 'silly citizenship' (Hartley, 2010), whereby mundane, informal and often affective collective experience is shaped. And they note the significance of what Sean Rintel (2013) terms 'the templatability of memes' in times of crisis: 'the combination of timeliness, timelessness and seriality allowed by templatable memes is particularly relevant at times of crisis since it allows a collective narration of challenging events through an already experienced and familiar format' (2021: 2425-2426). Discussing the prevalence of memes concentrated on the experimentation of daily life during the first month of lock-down in Italy, they argue:

> Memes emerging in this context acted as a sounding board for the whirlwind of emotions generated by the pandemic outbreak. The kick-off of pandemic memes consisted of the humorous manifestation of all those feelings of dismay, disorientation and fear for the future that unavoidably accompanied an epochal transition such as a global epidemic could be. Memetics allowed this affective wave to flow and perhaps be normalised and streamlined. This could happen because memes, as peculiar combinations of standardised scripts and original variations on the theme, act as social rituals connecting individual practices to collective meanings

and can therefore serve solidarity functions for both individuals and communities (Yang and Jiang, 2015) (2021: 2431).

Murru and Vicari's analysis, in some ways, accounts for the affective floundering of the pandemic. They argue that memes become ways of securing and stabilising the 'whirlwind of emotions' because they are 'peculiar combinations of standardised scripts and original variations on the theme'. In this sense, the content and format of memes constitute a genre that can hold and articulate 'all those feelings of dismay, disorientation and fear for the future'. Here, memes are genres along the lines of what Shifman (2014) proposes: they are collections or clusters of texts which share form and/or content and/or cultural specificities, and which 'function as "horizons of expectations'" in that they set expectations between readers and authors through 'nuanced negotiation' (2014: 342). They are normative in both coalescing around established norms and in further reinforcing these norms.

While such approaches to memes as genre note the transformative character of memes – they are always developing and functioning through variation – their interest lies in identifying and solidifying the contours of memes and their emphasis falls on the capacity of memes for social binding through ritual and repetition. Memes provide generic stability during a time of crisis. The world is flailing, but the genre is not. Indeed, the genre helps to establish new norms, or bolster existing ones, at this moment when the world is flailing.

6. Memes as genre flail

But memes themselves, we think, are, or at least can be, a kind of genre flailing. This is to pick up on the capaciousness, variability and participatory character of memes. As Shifman notes at another point during her attempt to define the specificities of memes as a key aspect of digital culture, '[m]emes are a pain' (2013: 362) because they have 'accumulated many meanings' (2013: 364) that encompass a diversity of concepts and practices. As well as being a medium through which norms and stability might be established, their technical form and modes of circulation also lend them to mutation, to use Hennefeld's term, where different formats, conventions and content are brought to bear on each other and messiness rather than cohesion is definitional. For example, templatability provides not only, or not so much, a standardisation and

solidification of memes into a genre as a transmuting format that repeats with difference. The template provides a scaffold for experimentation with content and circulation. Continuing their argument, including in an epigraph, that the technology of memes facilitates the possibilities of them 'follow[ing] new trajectories', Hardesty, Linz and Secor argue:

> The meme takes flight from the ideological straight-jacket of propaganda to incite a volatile affective politics. Likewise, the meme departs from the advertisement's circulation-for-profit to enter into a heedless, frenetic circulation-for-the-sake-of-it. In this becoming, memes detach us from stale genres and open onto the as yet un-known (2019: 496-497).

Central to the argument here is that method – 'replication, mutation, and circulation' – as well as content – what they are of – characterise memes. Building on Walter Benjamin's ([1929] 1999) argument that the new, early-twentieth century mechanical reproduction of art (in photography and film) 'unleash[es] new possibilities for a revolutionary politics of art' (2019: 497), Hardesty et al argue that in the early twenty-first century, memes are technological objects that offer similar potential. 'Whether still images or GIFS', they propose, 'memes are created by picking up what is found, by repurposing the hollowed out, alienated things/images of our times in order to create a flash of recognition' (2019: 497).

Working with these understandings of genre mutation, ritual and repetition, and the 'flash of recognition', the prevalence and popularity of memes during the early waves of the pandemic were in part due to their capacity for new insights – witty and tragic – to be generated and shared via familiar formats, or templates. Memes 'touche[d] a nerve' (Hennefeld, 2021). As the social worlds they emerge from and help to make flounders, the adaptability and pertinence of memes register. Their capacity for floundering – for generic mutation, implosion, explosion, opening up – resonates hard with the floundering of the pandemic world. Memes as genre flail resonate with the world as genre flail. They do this in concert with the pandemic as it is happening. In Berlant's terms, this is to account for the improvisation that occurs when genres flail and that defines genre flailing. At the same time, though, 'crisis management' through the attempt to shore up, or re-moor, genre flailing remains important. Memes are

thrown around to re-establish clarity, to relieve or hold off pressure, to slow the situation or stop it altogether. Holding on to the tension that memes enact through genre flailing – the stabilising and disorienting experience – is key.

7. Feel tank memes as genre flail

That memes flail, both generically and as a core component of the pandemic, helps us to think with the three pages of memes that the research participant sent to us. We feel like these memes are an enactment of genre flailing: they manifest the pandemic as a genre flail through the flailing genre of memes. Berlant's concept of genre flail helps us sense make/make sense of these memes and also the difficulty we as a research team had in knowing how to respond to them. In part, our flailing was because the memes did not constitute the data we had anticipated in our design of the research. While we had tried to be expansive in the mediums and materials we invited participants to engage with – voice notes, written diaries, sketches – we had not thought of memes. Further, once we had received the memes, we flailed in trying to work out how to incorporate them into our analysis, eventually settling, in this essay, on an attempt to stick with this flailing rather than treat the memes as more traditional research data. We document this flailing as a reflective exercise that opens up our research process, and in particular to re-consider the Feel Tanks as an invitation to flail – to thrash around together through the sharing of feelings about time and the pandemic. In this way, we see Berlant's work as facilitating a sensitivity to research process – methodology, analysis, styles of thinking-writing, modes of sharing – that, for us, is important for how media may be approached, studied and theorised.

We don't want to speculate on the reasons the participant sent us memes. What we do feel qualified to say is that their response to our questions about time, feeling and Covid-19 through memes was itself a flail. They addressed our research questions through a popular medium which refuses to stay still. Part of why the three pages of memes do not easily lend themselves to analysis is that they communicate through circulation and repetition with difference. Their genre thrives on recombination and excess, which is why we argue they enact a genre flailing; the Feel Tank memes are a genre that is defined by its capacity to mutate as it seeks to shore up or revise the instability of the present. Their contribution gestures toward generative irresolution,

illustrating how attempts to address temporality through the Covid-19 pandemic may most meaningfully be through genres, much like this essay, that remain productively adrift.
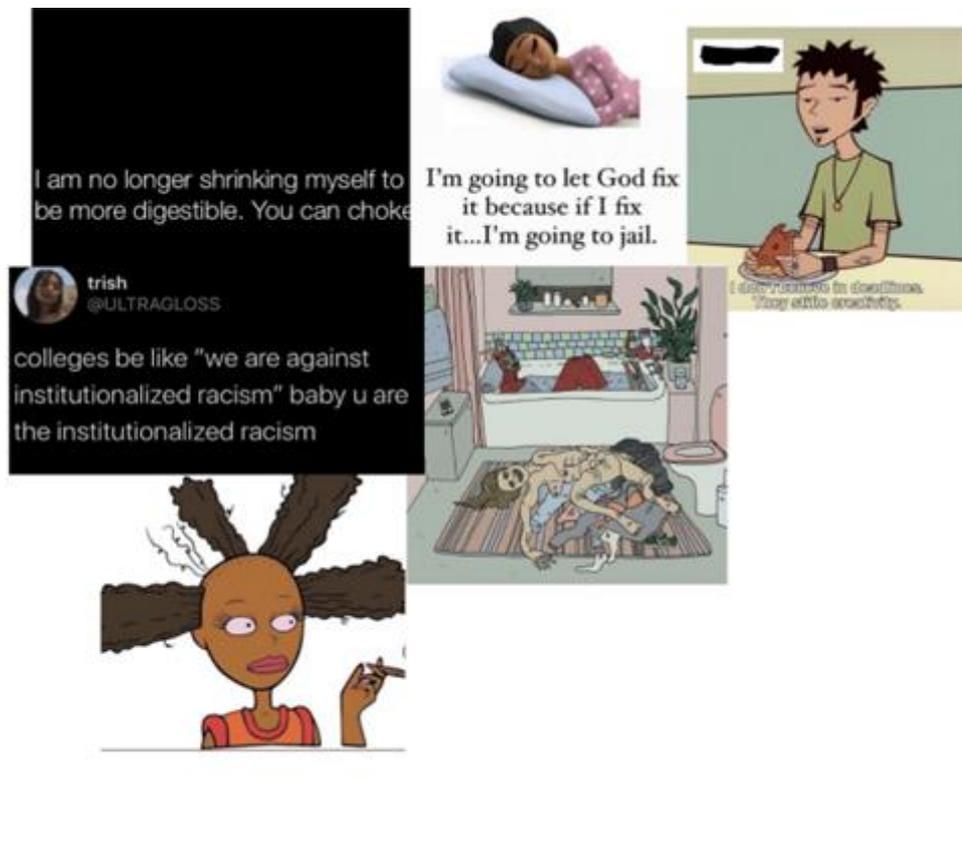

Figure 3: Feel Tank diary by participant FT4, 22 July 2021

Acknowledgments

References

Anderson, B., Aitken, S., Bacevic, J., et al (2023) 'Encountering Berlant part one: Concepts otherwise', *The Geographical Journal,* 189: 117–142. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12494

Baraitser, L. and Salisbury, L. (2020) '"Containment, delay, mitigation": Waiting and care in the Time of a Pandemic,' Wellcome Open Research [online]. Available from: https://wellcomeopenresearch.org/articles/5-129 [Accessed 1 Jun 2023].

Benjamin, W. ([1929] 1999) 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in: *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books.

Berlant, L. (2011) *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Berlant L. (2008) *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Berlant, L. (2011) *Austerity, Precarity, Awkwardness*. [online]. Available from: https://supervalentthought.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/berlant-aaa-2011final.pdf [Accessed 1 Jun 2023].

Berlant, L. (2014, January 30) 'Interviews: Lauren Berlant discusses "reading with" and her recent work', *Art Forum*. https://www.artforum.com/interviews/lauren-berlant-discusses-reading-with-andher-recent-work-45109

Berlant, L. (2018) 'Genre Flailing', *Capacious: Journal of Emerging Affect*, 1(2)

Berlant, L. (2019) 'The Hundreds, observation, encounter, atmosphere, and world-making', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 18(3): 289–304. https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412919875404.

Berlant, L. (2017) 'Big Man', *Social Text* [online] Available from: https://socialtextjournal.org/big-man/

Berlant, L. and Edelman, L. (2014) *Sex, or the Unbearable*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Beynon-Jones, S., Grabham, E. and Hendrie, N. (2023) '"The Rules are All Over the Place" Mass Observation, Time, and Law in the Covid-19 Pandemic', *Journal of Law and Society*, online first: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/jols.12446

Carmody, T. & Love, H. K. (2008) 'TRY ANYTHING', *Criticism*, Winter, 50(1): 133-146.

Coleman, R. and Lyon, D. (2023) 'Recalibrating Everyday Futures during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Futures Fissured, on Standby and Reset in Mass Observation Responses', *Sociology*, 57(2): 421–437.

Coleman, R., Lyon, D. and Turner, C. (forthcoming) 'Present Feelings, Feeling Present: Liveness in Research on Time and Feeling During the Covid-19 Pandemic', *Sociological Review*.

Corner, J. (2021) 'Figuring Covid: A Note on Media Flows and 'Statisticality'', *Media Theory*, 5(1) 147-158.

Cvetkovich, A. (2007) 'Public Feelings', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 106(3): 459-468 https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-2007-004.

Cvetkovich, A. (2012a) *Depression: A Public Feeling*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Cvetkovich, A. (2012b) 'Depression is ordinary: Public Feelings and Saidiya Hartman's Lose Your Mother', *Feminist Theory*, 13(2): 131-146.

Day, S. & Lury, C. (2020) 'Covid-19's 2-metre rule as Grid Reaction', *People Like You Blog* [online] Available here: https://peoplelikeyou.ac.uk/blog/coronavirus-19s-2-metre-rule-as-a-grid-reaction/

Duschinky, R. and Wilson, E. (2014) 'Flat Affect, Joyful Politics and Enthralled Attachments: Engaging with the Work of Lauren Berlant', *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 28: 179-190.

Elemental Editors (2020) '50 Experts to Trust in a Pandemic' [online] https://elemental.medium.com/50-experts-to-trust-in-a-pandemic-fe58932950e7

Everts, J. (2020) 'The Dashboard Pandemic', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 10(2): 260–264.

Feel Tank Chicago (2012) 'Who Are We', February 5, http://feeltankchicago.net/about_us/#more-45

Gal, N., Shifman, L. and Kampf, Z. (2016) ''It Gets Better'': Internet Memes and the Construction of Collective Identity', *New Media & Society*, 18(8): 1698–1714.

Farris, S. R. & Bergfeld, M. (2022) 'Low-skill no more! essential workers, social reproduction and the legitimacy-crisis of the division of labour', *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, 23(2-3): 342-358.

Hardesty, R., Linz, J. and Secor, A. J. (2019) 'Walter Benja-Memes', *GeoHumanities*, 5(2): 496–513.

Hennefeld, M. (2021) 'Genres Fall Apart - Affective Combustion in the Belly of the Beast', *Flow Journal* [online]. Available from: https://www.flowjournal.org/2021/12/genres-fall-apart/ [Accessed 1 Jun 2023].

Jenkins, H. (2006) *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press.

Kemp, S. (2020, April 24). 'Report: Most important data on digital audiences during corona-virus. The Next Web. https://thenextweb.com/growth-quarters/2020/04/24/report-most-important-data-on-digital-audiences-during-coronavirus/

Lury, C. & Day, S. (2021) "Two by Two: How 'People Like You' Enter Noah's Ark" *People Like You Blog* [online]. Available here: https://peoplelikeyou.ac.uk/blog/two-by-two-how-people-like-you-enter-noahs-ark/

Lyon, D. and Coleman, R. (2023) 'Rupture, Repetition and New Rhythms for Pandemic Times: Mass Observation, Everyday Life and COVID-19', *History of the Human Sciences*, 36(2): 26–48.

Murru, M. F. and Vicari, S. (2021) 'Memetising the pandemic: memes, covid-19 mundanity and political cultures', *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(16): 2422–2441.

Nooney, L. and Portwood-Stacer, L. (2014) 'One Does Not Simply: An Introduction to the Special Issue on Internet Memes', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 13(3): 248–252.

Nyong'o, T. (2021) 'On Lauren Berlant'. [online] Available here: https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/on-lauren-berlant/

Pandey, N., and Pal, A. (2020) 'Impact of Digital Surge during Covid-19 Pandemic: A View-point on Research and Practice', *International Journal of International Management,* 55. doi: 10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2020.102171

Prendegast, K. (2023) 'Merchandising the Void' [online]. Available here: https://dilettantearmy.com/articles/merchandizing-the-void

Rintel, S., (2013) 'Crisis Memes: The Importance of Templatability to Internet Culture and Freedom of Expression', *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture*, 2(2): 253–271.

Shifman, L. (2013) 'Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 18: 362–377.

Shifman, L., (2014) 'The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 13(3): 340–358.

Shifman, L. (2018) 'Testimonial Rallies and the Construction of Memetic Authenticity', *European Journal of Communication*, 32(2): 172-184.

Smith, C. (2021) 'The Berlant Opening' [online]. Available here: https://critinq.wordpress.com/2021/07/20/the-berlant-opening/

Sontag, S. (1964) *On Camp*. London: Penguin.

Turner, C. (2020) 'Feel Tanks as Method: Why We Can't Wait Any Longer'. [lecture] Centre for Feminist Research, Goldsmiths, University of London, 5 November 2020

Wong, A., Ho, S., Olusanya, O., Antonini, M.V., Lyness, D. (2021) 'The use of social media and online communications in times of pandemic COVID-19', *Journal of the Intensive Care Society*, 22(3): 255-260. doi:10.1177/1751143720966280

Yang, G. and Jiang, J. (2015) 'The networked practice of online political satire in China: Between ritual and resistance', *International Communication Gazette*, 77(3): 215–231.

Notes

[1] The project, 'Feeling, Making and Imagining Time: Everyday Temporal Experiences in the Covid-19 Pandemic' was conducted by Dawn Lyon and Corine van Emmerik as well as ourselves. It was supported by a British Academy Small Grant (SRG2021\211073, 2021-22). This project is part of a larger research programme, A Day at a Time, which includes Simon Bailey, Michelle Bastian, Sian Beynon-Jones, Rebecca Coleman, Emily Grabham, Nadine Hendrie, Dawn Lyon, Dean Pierides, Chloe Turner and Corine van Emmerik. More details can be found at: https://research.kent.ac.uk/25ata-coronavirus/

[2] At the risk of further muddying the waters, this numbering is inspired by Susan Sontag's essay, 'On Camp' (1964), which explores Camp as a sensibility. While clearly differently focused, what Sontag says of Camp seems to us to resonate with what we take from Berlant's work for an understanding of memes: 'To snare a sensibility in words, especially one that is alive and powerful, one must be tentative and nimble. The form of jottings, rather than an essay (with its claim to linear, consecutive argument), seemed more appropriate for getting down something of this particular fugitive sensibility' (1964: 1-2).

Chloe Turner is a PhD researcher with the Centre for Feminist Research, Goldsmiths University of London, UK, focusing on how to create more just and pleasurable futures for queer/trans communities. In Summer 2023 Turner was a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy at Columbia University, USA.

Email: c.turner@gold.ac.uk

Rebecca Coleman is Professor in the Bristol Digital Futures Institute (BDFI) and School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies (SPAIS), University of Bristol, UK. She is currently Researcher in Residence at Knowle West Media Centre (2023-24) working on the co-creation of digital futures with community tech.

Email: rebecca.coleman@bristol.ac.uk

352

This article is part of a special section on 'Lauren Berlant and Media Theory', edited by Carolyn Pedwell and Simon Dawes, introduced by Carolyn Pedwell, and featuring articles by Ben Anderson, Ali Azhar & Megan Boler, Lisa Blackman, Sarah Cefai, Angharad Closs Stephens, Chole Turner & Rebecca Coleman, Yasmin Gunaratnam, Chris Ingraham, Henrike Kohpeiß, Susanna Paasonen & Vilja Jaaksi & Anu Koivunen & Kaarina Nikunen & Karoliina Talvitie-Lamberg & Annamari Vänskä, and Greg Seigworth & Rebecca Coleman.

A key detail about Lauren Berlant and pronouns: Laurent's estate provided a brief statement on this, which we quote here: "Lauren's pronoun practice was mixed – knowingly, we trust. Faced with queries as to 'which' pronoun Lauren used and 'which' should now be used, the position of Lauren's estate (Ian Horswill, executor; Laurie Shannon, literary executor) is that Lauren's pronoun(s) can best be described as 'she/they'. 'She/they' captures the actual scope of Lauren's pronoun archive, and it honors Lauren's signature commitment to multivalence and complexity. It also leaves thinkers free to adopt either pronoun, or both of them, as seems most fitting in their own writing about her/them".