Reproduction of Memory:
Violence through Visuality in Social Media

1. Preface

Welcome to a totally "visible" world !

As the development of digital techniques, plenty of images, videos and online databases of public or personal narratives have been reproduced. However, the overwhelming vividness tend to draw away the focus on truth or reality, and it seems that the more could be visualized, the more would be erased.

Also based on social media, memories are reproduced as a segmented collection rather than a historical event in series. Just browse, copy, paste and edit, every netizen can dress their own memories and eventually reconstruct the whole collective history. Nevertheless, during the process of digital collecting by posts and reposts, the original context of memory can hardly remain.
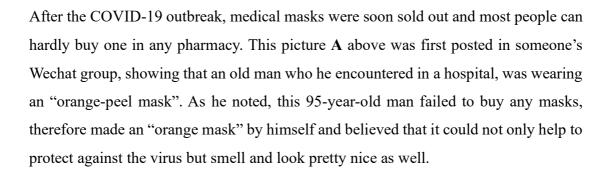
In this essay I try to argue that digital media just blur the boundaries between the veracity and mendacity as the process of historical circulations still be greatly affected or even controlled by ideological assumptions, especially in the post-colonial era.

By analyzing a specific case during the outbreak of 2019-nCoV, I propose to examine how personal memories become "disappearance" and how history can be reshaped through visuality in social media. No matter how the images are represented, it is the ideological violence that gradually emerge.
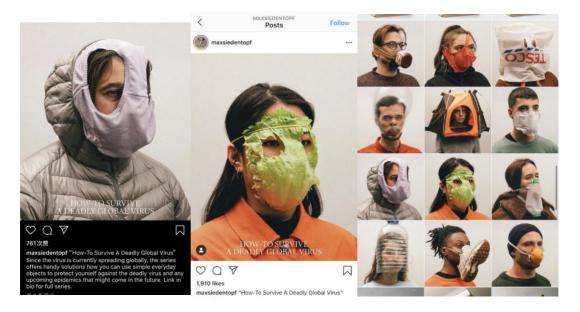(reviews with three pictures below namely A, B, and C)

2. Visuality and Disappearance: reposting personal memories

Picture **A**   Picture **B**

After the COVID-19 outbreak, medical masks were soon sold out and most people can hardly buy one in any pharmacy. This picture **A** above was first posted in someone's Wechat group, showing that an old man who he encountered in a hospital, was wearing an "orange-peel mask". As he noted, this 95-year-old man failed to buy any masks, therefore made an "orange mask" by himself and believed that it could not only help to protect against the virus but smell and look pretty nice as well.

The person who posted at first meant to share his admiration for the wise elder with such a positive attitude towards life. Perhaps not surprisingly, that striking image was reposted and spread rapidly on Chinese social media, as so many people were swamped by their sorrowful resonance or deep sympathy. All those reposts collect each individual's memories and reflections, reconstructing the history by touching people's real life. What makes it "incredible" is precisely the "*credibility*" of the orange-mask during such a tough time.

Through the posts and reposts, people express their indignation and disappointment as most civilians cannot even protect themselves. Ironically, most of those reposts with that photo soon disappeared under Chinese rigorous online censorship. (Picture **B**)

3. Distortion and Violence: eliminating the original

Picture **C**

However, just a few days later in February, that "disappearing" photo was somehow reborn or reproduced in another way. Posted by a Namibian-German visual artist on Instagram, a series of photos (Picture **C**) named *<How-to survive a deadly global virus>* show that some people are posing with an unusual assortment of face masks substitutes, such as a shoe, a bra, a piece of lettuce, etc. He wrote that, "inspired by masks found on social media during the Corona Virus outbreak [...] the series offers handy solutions how you can use simple everyday objects to protect yourself against the deadly virus and any upcoming epidemics that might come in the future".

What does he mean by "*inspired*"? On social media platform, can artists insensitively feature the people out of desperation and even make fun of them with mocking captions? Are the representations through social media that keep netizens away from ongoing reality but in a privileged distance?

If the artist meant to create "art", I have to say that the "art" is cheap, which profit from the suffering of victims and even with racial discrimination against Chinese.

4. Conclusion: How Social Media reshape memories

When the original photo was firstly posted, it just tried to mark personal memory as part of the history. Then, based on Chinese social platform, it was reposted and circulated with all the struggle of suffering to resist the absence of individual memory, which may be soon erased by the authorities. After the "disappearance", from the perspective of a western artist, the photo was arbitrarily represented and transferred into other manifestations, filtering out and eliminating the original meaning and position.

Here in the dynamic circulation, more than cultural appropriation, it is the violence and even the post-colonization, emerged.

> "Many new media objects do not tell stories; they don't have a beginning or end;
> in fact, they don't have any development, thematically, formally, or otherwise,
> that would organize their elements into a sequence. Instead, they are collections
> of individual items, where every item has the same significance as any other."[1]

On social media, memories somehow become a floating puzzle, of which pieces can be easily removed and substituted. Even though we struggle to find the disappearing pieces, it may be hardly completed and then inevitably be interpreted in any other way in all the cruelty, as they are conceived of which something no more significant than any other else. "Disappearance" might eventually be distorted and then repositioned as visual exhibitions with violence.

After all, social memory was woven into popular culture and social media, when we lose the right to speak for or represent our own memories, handing it over unconsciously on social media, the memories are bound to be constantly shaped and reshaped—which also means that, we are losing its original meaning, and we're losing our own history.

From the privileged distance, something needs that violence to be present still, but somehow dispersed into images, images that represent the violence that is now done to us—"the others", who are in parts of the world that don't exist to the "privileged", except as ***images***.

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[1] Lev Manovich, "Database as Symbolic Form", in Database Aesthetics: Art in the Age of Information Overflow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,2007)