McLuhan's Window.
The Online Meme

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Why deal with something so ephemeral and ridiculous? Ephemeral, maybe, but ridiculous? This is an unjust epithet. For what it's worth, we are talking about one of the most common genres of contemporary communicative culture. This in itself makes it a "serious" phenomenon for the researcher, be it semiotician, media specialist, sociologist, philosopher, political studies specialist, linguist, social psychologist, communication specialist, anthropologist of culture, or cognitivist. Hence, it is a phenomenon worthy of scholarly attention, which takes nothing away from its lightness and *ésprit,* which it depends on.

If Marshall McLuhan were alive today, he would surely be interested in the increasingly popular phenomenon of the meme. This supposition is permissible, given his interest in advertising, which goes back 50 years. Perhaps McLuhan would discern in the success of such messages positive signs of communicative activities of participants in a network. Maybe this phenomenon would even make him revise his own predictions concerning the negative effects of the digital era in the lives of homo digitalis.

Posed again, the question "why?" reveals the superficiality of doubting the point of reflecting upon the phenomenon of internet memes. In what follows, a number of arguments will be put forward in support of a deepened study of the meme, which is a complex phenomenon. In any case, the meme is an extremely popular internet genre and as such deserves an attempt at recognizing the functional properties of its poetics.

Abandoning all hope of convincing the unconvinced, we will try to demonstrate at least some of the many aspects of the poetics of online memes, without usurping the right to claim that these will establish a complete index.

The morphology of a meme

The model of the meme structure looks quite conventional against the backdrop of a constantly expanding family of digital messages; the meme as such is hardly a breakthrough. In general, it consists of a word (written or spoken) and/or an image (still or moving, silent or audio). Characterized so vaguely, the structure of a meme is not unlike, say, the morphology of ads. Without suggesting the two are equivalent, let us try to expand on this comparison.

Sometimes a meme is just a verbal message, sometimes it is just an icon. More often, however, we are faced with a semantic structure of a higher level, comprising a combination of different types of signs. They occur, both in a meme and in an ad, in three alternative forms: visual, auditory or audio-visual. Let us add at this point that, in line with the nature of digital communication, whatever is featured in a meme, becomes a digital image: silent, auditory or audio-visual. This principle is binding for all elements of a meme, including the written and spoken word respectively. Emphatically, the lexical material operates not unlike the image.

Does this suffice to capture the rules of a meme structure, which govern its poetics? Unfortunately, not. This is definitely not enough. It seems that what has been introduced so far is merely a prerequisite for creating this kind of messages. Their specific manner of social functioning, however, is dependent on the existence of quite different characteristic features.

The dialogic of the message

The *sine qua non* condition for including a particular specimen of digital communication in the morphological category of memes is its dialogic, polemic nature. Without the element of a purposefully orchestrated dialogic there can be no meme. Genre properties of memes are determined by their intertextual component. Image versus image. Text against text. The view of a meme's author directed against a fallacious and manipulated view circulating in society.

The term 'meme' also refers to a pre-text. For a newly created message to be fully received, its predecessor – a pre-text – must be recalled in the recipient's mind. In that sense every meme possesses and utilises its own (rejected) textual past in order to both recall and reject it conceptually (Lat. *concipere* 'to connect, combine together'). Utilising its author's irony, it transforms cliches and nonsensicalities into its own absurdity: as an appeal of the sender to the addressee's mental capacities.

We are now much closer to ascertaining the characteristics of an online meme, but this is still not close enough, because what has been stated so far sounds too much like a journalistic commentary. The common denominator for the two is the use of "somebody else's word", "somebody else's image", etc. The difference between the two lies in the epigrammatic manner of their use. A meme's meaning structure is an integral part of the message structure.

This is not something completely novel, unprecedented in the practices of communication and in the rhetorical culture of humankind. Recalling Jerzy Ziomek's terminology, which he developed for his study of pastiche, parody and travesty, the meme features a play and tension of meanings. These are caused by the fact that the matter of a given message operates on various levels by means of a contra-matter produced from somebody else's text. This sudden tension, emanating as a curt retort (Lat *acuto* 'blade') makes the meme irresistible in the eyes of internet users.

The meme as a manifestation and expression of modern iconoclasm becomes a testament to the freedom of expressing polemical views. Privacy (unofficiality, personal views, one's opinion) participates in a clownish fight with high-handed, opinionated officialdom. It is "a free voice, one which protects freedom". In its familiar shape the meme is a highly democratic genre of

communication, closely connected with the existence and daily life of the network agora of the 21ˢᵗ century. Its foundation is always a (usually anonymous) sender's polemical reaction, disguised as derisive parody.

To parody, to mock, to deride, to stick one's tongue at someone. These are a must. The parody the life of a meme seems to be its obvious property. The question is, are we not too eager to accept this obviousness, taking it to be something natural? "Il est bien aisé de le sentir que de le conaître" ('it is felt rather than understood', as declared by the French clergyman and grammarian of the Baroque, Dominique Bouhours, 1671)

Towards genre studies

At first sight the internet meme seems to be a new genre, unlike any other. Marshall McLuhan is not the only one who would disagree with this rash opinion. Genre affinities of the meme throw light onto the specificity of its poetics. Some of these affinities have a historical dimension; others are more contemporary. The former include, among others, Menippean satire, epigram, prank, acumen, lampoon, joke, retort, couplet and parody. The latter category comprises caricature, satirical cartoon, comic book (which combines the verbal and iconic codes), collage, news, journalistic commentary, street graffiti, etc.

The above-listed indexing might create an impression that the internet meme is a young and new genre, whose birth coincided with the dissemination of the Internet as a social medium, but the communicative strategy it relies on has a rich corresponding past and culture. For example, in the inter-war period in Poland excellent memes in the form of photomontage were created by Mieczysław Szczuka, Mieczysław Berman, Teresa Żarnower or Kazimierz Podsadecki. In Polish People's Republic the functions of contemporary memes were performed by satirical cartoons by Andrzej Czeczot, Andrzej Mleczko, Wojciech Wołyński or Henryk Sawka.

Towards stylistics

The meme-type of internet products leads to a rehabilitation of the low-brow style. Acuteness and directness of the expression, aiming at ridiculing the view under attack by means of deconstructing the image represented by that image, requires exaggeration. Perhaps this has contributed to the promotion of the low-brow style, which, frequently occurring in messages belonging to the genre in question, becomes a jocular answer of the meme's creator to the loftiness of official newspeak, which imitates high-brow style.

The key issue for the poetics of the internet meme, determining its specificity, is the social function of the meme; the function it is supposed to perform in the modern iconosphere and audiosphere. Each meme can carry a variety of meanings but there is a common denominator for this genre of messages. It has a broadly defined *cathartic function*. It is that function which governs specific rhetorical devices, figures and stylistic-compositional patterns, which organise the poetics of reception.

Each and every internet meme is a retort to a specific message, which provokes opposition - this is an intrinsic element of the meme's function. For the meme retort to be effective and make an appearance online, a trigger-referent must appear first in the common consciousness. That referent becomes a specific pre-text, which evokes the sender's and recipient's objection and is parodied by the meme author.

Regarding the relationship between a virtual sender and a virtual addressee of the internet meme, one might describe its *modus operandi* by referring to the "call-answer" model, utilised in many other communicative contexts. The first step in that model is to recall from memory the counter-material of a pre-text. The next step is to spring away from it, to make an about-face in front of the addressee by mocking that pre-text. This is how deconstructing image 1, prepared by somebody else, shows its underbelly in the author's own created image 2. The two remain together for a moment, connected by the incongruous concord, the aim being to express the unacceptability of the former in the demonstration of the latter.

This game requires initiating the addressee's memory, which results in recognition (a reflex of the recipient's competence). Image 1 becomes the rejected meme, image 2 becomes the rejecting meme. We are then dealing with a reaction and counter-reaction: a sender's action, causing the intended recipient's reaction. Utilising the slogan "let us keep calm, people", this newly arranged meme would then be something like a makeshift appeal for saving common sense; an appeal sent to everybody for whom the latter is dear.

 This brings us to the important issue of the addressee's disposition. Whoever is searching for and expecting an authoritative sender in the Web will not appreciate or enjoy a meme. Gravitas, typical for this kind of people, attracts an organic lack of a sense of humour. The goal of a meme will thus never be achieved. The psychological and communicative barrier mentioned here prevents laughter from becoming the reaction to the reception of the meme.

Internet memes produce laughter. Let us add, however, that this is a particular kind of laughter. The type of comedy practised by meme authors is revolting for the addressee's consciousness; it is intended to create a parodic reaction in the process of reception; one which allows a release of sorts. This reaction, both in the life of an individual and in a community, has a healing function. It is not, of course, "medicine for all diseases", but it is a factor which brings back the violated or otherwise disturbed order of thoughts.

The meme's intentionally destructive effects depend on the deconstruction of somebody else's message, hitherto operating in common consciousness with impunity. By recalling that message and "working on it", the meme turns it on its head. At the same time, importantly, the meme reveals the underpinning of manipulation, performed by that message. Following Jeremi Przybora, one might say that "a song is a chorus-based method for another ugly song".

The meme does not remove from view the text with which it deals. Quite on the contrary, it deconstructs it, leaving some elements of it to be used as a negated subtext for achieving its own purposes. The core of this devious operation performed on somebody else's message is the cunning creation of "discordant concord" between the material and counter-material of the new message.

We then have somebody else's image, its imitation in the shape of a purposefully reversed reflection and the fun-house mirror of a parodic effect. This is how nonsense, which is the object of a polemical attack, is dismantled. The internet meme expresses a personal and social need to unmask falsehood and declare the truth, whose existence it refers to and towards which it is extended.

Other authors studying the poetics of the internet meme and searching for its general rules, make an important observation regarding the semantic structure of the meme. This reflection uncovers a repeated process of deconstructing somebody else's message performed with a view to reconfiguring (reversing) its meaning. This is a kind of organising principle, which results in the following operation: somebody else's construction – deconstruction – one's own re-construction, preserving recognizable remnants of the deconstructed image.

A kind of classic air at the basis for the model for this new genre of the internet meme, can be described within the framework of poetics developed by Aristotle and his modern followers, especially Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski (viz. the Baroque treatise "De acute et arguto").

The essence of the poetics of an internet meme is then an iconic, verbal, iconic-verbal or audio-visual *concept*. This concept leads to a short circuit– a glitch aimed at evoking a critical reaction in the recipient. The same concept allows the new message to destroy a ridiculous idea, a mistaken belief or disavows the brazen manipulation of the primary message.

Towards axiology

One meme is unlike any other. The vulgarity of some rivals the finesse of others. Hunting dagger versus lancet. Club versus rapier. Brevity is a highly desired, if hard to achieve, feature of a well-structured meme. Brevity on its own, however, will not do. This is because it is not the central aim of a given message but a tested means of achieving optimal succinctness, elegance and precision of the visual or audio-visual message.

The value of memes is measured by a symbolic element of surprise, caused by a master stroke aimed at the opponent's weak spot. The most valued feature of a meme is the accuracy of its criticism towards a message or set of messages to which it refers.

It is in this surprise, causing delight in some and indignation in others, that one encounters a moment of intellectual questioning, emphasised by a specific meme. A meme joke performs a complex cathartic function; parodically bringing to order the common sense, attacked before. This happens through laughter, by referring to somebody else's position, point of view or a mistaken belief: a harmful conviction already in public circulation. A circulation previously abused and used in ill-faith, which the attacked message tries to appropriate.

I am emphasising the importance of rationality in meme creation. This activity does not preclude faith; on the contrary; it restores and reinforces it in a way, by assuming that no normally coexisting community can function without trust: between people, neighbours, authorities and citizens, as well between citizens and authorities.

It is not hard to go astray in thinking, both on the individual and community levels, in the era of "post-truth" whose current invasion threatens reason. At every step we are threatened by various dogma and "hard truths" (to use Ralph Keys' terminology), whose *raison d'etre* in a compliant society is obedience and eradication of any debate. It is not easy to stop this process. Memes are a useful phenomenon in that they become a public emanation of individual dissent and common resistance.

It is good to know that there are also others who resist the invasion of the thoughtlessness, ideological nonsense and cynicism of manipulators. The meme, let us reiterate, performs an important cathartic function. It makes its addressee think independently; it purifies and paves the way to rational reasoning.

Is this not enough? Not really. In cultural anthropological categories this phenomenon is a form of defense; a symbolic revenge of the oppressed, of people experiencing the pain caused by the trauma of contempt. The creation of internet memes cannot be viewed as a cure for all ailments. Still, this activity belongs with the light side of the force. By occurring – hopefully as often as possible – in the digital sphere; it releases our common right to a critical reflection, to productive doubt and resistance against negative emotions we encounter in private, community and public life.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

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KEYWORDS

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communication

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ABSTRACT:

An interdisciplinary analytical study devoted to key issues of the poetics of the internet meme; one of the most popular genres of contemporary iconosphere and audiosphere.

g e n r e s t u d i e s

MEME

c a t h a r s i s

poetics of audio-visual messeges

laughter

SOCIAL MEDIA

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