Book Review

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Internet memes are a new and significant form of online communication that often rely on humor to critique, grab attention and warrant further dissemination. However, their fleeting nature not only underscores their importance in digital culture but also poses an obstacle to carry out research on them. In his book *The discursive power of memes in digital culture. Ideology, semiotics, and intertextuality*, Bradley Wiggins creates a useful framework for the systematic study of memes that is of great value to humor scholars. His understanding of these digital artifacts is marked by the importance of ideology. Already in the preface, the author considers them units of digital culture, within which ideological practice takes place (p. XV). However, semiotics and intertextuality are not to be overlooked, since their role is essential for the construction of meaning in memes.

Besides the aforementioned preface, the book is organized in 8 chapters and an afterword. In Chapter 1 the author elaborates on previous research on memes, more precisely on theoretical considerations by Dawkins (1989). Wiggins starts off by providing a brief history of the term meme and its function. He explores in detail the similarities and differences between Dawkins' concept of meme and its digital counterpart, thus establishing a clear distinction between them: digital or, as Wiggins calls them, *internet memes* inhere a critical component and a creative capacity, whereas the dawkinsian meme, since its inception, was devised as a unit of cultural transmission with only imitative force. Therefore, the power of internet memes lies on their agency and not on their reproductive power. At the end of this chapter, Wiggins provides a comprehensive definition of internet meme in which its discursive capacity is underlined (p. 11).

In the following chapter the author aims at situating internet memes in terms of their discursive power in digital culture. Memes are discussed with respect to ideology, semiotics, and intertextuality. Concerning ideology, the author indicates that memes, like language, are neutral (p. 64). Nevertheless, in the computer-mediated process of interpretation and comprehension, users ascribe meaning to them and this becomes a process of ideological formation indicative on an ideological practice. In terms of semiotics, internet memes can be seen as signs. Any meme can be easily remixed or altered to convey a semiotic meaning resonant of any particular ideological discourse. As for intertextuality, memes are artifacts of participatory digital

culture. They cannot exist without referring to something other than the subject they contain and consequently are dependent on remix, parody and intermemetic referentiality. In these referrals choices are made in the interest of meaning-making, and thus discourse and ideology are constructed.

In Chapter 3 Wiggins argues that memes can become a full-fledged genre of communication if certain conditions are met regarding their transformation and dissemination. Genres are understood as "activities that guide and alter the dynamics of human culture" and as such are "central to understanding culture" (p. 40). Two memes – *The Most Interesting Man in the World* and *Distracted Boyfriend* – are analyzed for the purpose of addressing the matter of memes as a genre. In order to carry out this analysis, Wiggins draws upon Anthony Giddens' structuration theory (1984), that focuses on the interactions between individuals and the social structures in which they act. Structures (understood by Giddens as rules, resources, norms, tasks…) and individuals maintain a relation of reciprocally constitutive duality, akin to the relation that exists between internet users and the generation of memes. Essentially, spreadable media maintained, elaborated, or modified by internet users becomes an emergent meme. If it is remixed, imitated and rapidly disseminated across online spaces, it evolves into an internet meme and finally develops to a genre.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to the ways in which internet memes are deployed for and about political purposes. For Wiggins, political memes are a sub-genre of internet memes that address some aspect of political philosophy or ideology. They are used by individuals to engage in and extend conflict through discursive practice and are deployed by internet users to criticize or undermine politicians and political movements as well as indirectly support different political options. The chapter includes three case studies in which the deployment of memes in the political arena reveals a deeper look into the discursive power of memes in digital culture: the movement for Catalonian independence, the use of memes by a Russian-based internet agency during the 2016 US presidential election, and the censoring of internet memes in China and its implications. Here Wiggins resorts to the work of Baudrillard (1994), whose concepts of hyperreal and simulacra are of use to understand the functioning of political memes. Weary and disillusioned with the state of the real world, internet users flee to the hyperreal world produced by mass media in order to experience a simulacrum of life, more real than the reality.

Wiggins analyses the use of memes in advertising in Chapter 5. Memes have a communicative function and, as such, they are deployed in commercially motivated strategic messages because they have a social salience that resonates with audiences. Internet memes have the ability to grab the attention of consumers, often resorting to humor. The author believes that the deployment of memes in advertising communicates not only how the company views consumers in general, but also demonstrates awareness about internet users. Wiggins brings up here the semiotics of cool,

a structural concept rooted in the idea that an entity such as a for-profit business can deploy a meme in an attempt to reach out to people and appear socially cool.

In the sixth chapter, the author broadly discusses audience with respect to memes. He warns that the term audience should not be applied to memes as it is applied to a film or advertisement. Firstly, because meme audience does not always share certain characteristics. Internet memes inhere directionality and are addressed to at least two groups: the audience poised to appreciate the message and the audience targeted by it (Wiggins 2014). Secondly, meme audience is not passive: it does not only receive the content (as it happens with TV viewers), but its responses are desired. Thirdly, memes defy the fraction of selection approach used in media studies to determine audience choices, by which the least amount of effort required will likely lead to the greatest or most satisfying reward. It seems instead that internet users take part in meme creation and curation because of the "tantalizing aspect of virality and networked participation structures" (p. 108). It is therefore incorrect to assume that memes are created to address an audience or, at least, an audience in the broader sense of the word. When an internet user posts a meme, that person's motivation for doing so has something to do with the people that the person has in mind when posting.

Chapter 7 deals with identity, an integral part of any investigation of internet memes according to Wiggins, since the research of these units is related to the way in which individuals see themselves and present themselves to others. After a review on previous scholarship on identity – the author relies on Judith Butler's work on gender (1988) and perspectives introduced by Anthony Giddens on identity frag-mentation (1991) – it is acquiesced that identity can be approached from an essen-tialist and a constructivist point of view. Wiggins believes that the social constructivist approach has more relevance to internet memes since the semiotic construction of memes relies on a process of negotiation of meaning and memes have a role in the negotiation of identity. In this chapter two case studies are provided, both related to the LGBTQ+ community: the *Babadook* meme and the "March for Our Lives" movement that partially resulted from the school shooting in 2018 in Florida. In both cases memes offer individuals an opportunity to show and receive support, therefore reifying identity. In his analysis, the author notes how internet memes can be deployed strategically to reinforce identity using emotions such as fear and hatred to further a message.

In the final chapter of the book it is posited that internet memes are a new form of artistic expression. Particularly those memes that incorporate a critical message (normally through the use of humor) contain a structural and conceptual relation-ship to Dada and Surrealist art, movements that Wiggins conceptualizes, more than overt attempts at artistic creation, as critical reactions to society. Similarly, memes are produced and shared in the public sphere and, as such, function as a kind of

Gesamtkunstwerk or total work of art that requires the collaboration of the public. The creation of memes as a reaction to a mad world is a sentiment that links early Dada to 21st-century memes. Memes are used to express a general sense of disillusionment with the modern age that connects directly with the motivations of the Dada and Surrealist movements. However, Wiggins notes that the communicative function of memes is restricted to online discursive practice. In other words, apart from procuring a show to internet users, memes seem not to accomplish much more (p. 152). Precisely here lies Wiggins' main critique of internet memes: although they highlight societal issues and are good at initiating reactions to real-world events, they do not engage people in social movements that can actually bring any form of change. Chapter 8 is followed by a postface in which the author provides a wrap-up of the main ideas contained in the book. However, it is in this last chapter where Wiggins summarizes his own views, rather pessimistic, about memes: "It is my contention that meaningful action and opportunities for social change, regardless of the desired political leaning, is being replaced by hypermemetic spectacle" (p. 152).

Wiggins' *The discursive power of memes in digital culture. Ideology, semiotics and intertextuality* is a remarkable book for anyone interested in the study of memes. The general reader will find valuable information about the ways in which memes interact with reality and how far they are from being the ideal means to create real social change. For humor scholars, it is also a notable book, especially due to the way it frames the use of humor in memes. Far from being an essential component of internet memes, humor operates in a superficial way and works, in a utilitarian manner, to ensure their further spreading.

References

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