

BOOK REVIEWS

ERA OF MEMES IN DIGITAL CULTURE

Limor Shifman. *Memes in Digital Culture*. The MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013. 216 pp.

The most recent book by Limor Shifman, communication researcher at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, is dedicated to the ongoing processes in digital culture. The author does not pose a question about what digital culture is. It is a sphere of life, the expressions of which are disseminated by way of digital media, i.e., computers, smartphones and computer networks. The components of digital culture (texts, pictures, videos, Internet language, behavioural practices and their representations) are usually created by means of relevant technology, or by intertwining digital and physical acts. The sphere also requires the existence of pre-digital materials on the Internet or other cloud repositories.

As strange as it seems to be, the reader can greatly benefit from being unspoiled by the “old” meme theory. Also, one should not expect the author to develop a folkloristic meme theory. The reader is provided with a clear definition of which memes are dealt with and what they are. If the analysis were a song, the meme definition would be the refrain deserving repetition and remembering. Limor Shifman defines the Internet meme as a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form and/or stance, which were created with awareness of each other, and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users (pp. 7, 41).

The issue of continuity with the original formulation of the meme concept contributed by Richard Dawkins, has instigated Henry Jenkins, a renowned theoretician of digital culture, who, after Limor Shifman’s book had come out, published an interview with the author on his blog (see <http://henryjenkins.org/2014/02/a-meme-is-a-terrible-thing-to-waste-an-interview-with-limor-shifman-part-one.html#sthash.doq7VMU2.dpuf>). In the interview he asks Shifman to comment on the changes in the use of the meme concept in comparison to the 1970s. We learn that the focus is not on a single cultural unit that has propagated well, but groups of content units; not self-replicating culture but meaningful components of culture that are shaped and diffused by active human agents.

So, Shifman set herself an aim not to redefine the meme concept in its general sense, but to suggest a definition for the emergent phenomenon of Internet memes. Internet memes are user-generated concepts, which in digital culture denote products of an ongoing creative process. Part of this process is certainly sharing, continuous forwarding of memes, to which Limor Shifman devotes special attention in her book. In social media memes appear especially quickly, in a continuous flow; yet, blogs and possibilities offered by instant messaging protocols are not left aside either. Shifman regards as meaningful



the fact that those who process and forward the material circulating on the Internet have adapted namely the meme concept: there is a fundamental compatibility between the term 'meme' and the way contemporary participatory culture works. The mediated content that passes along from person to person gradually scales into a shared social phenomenon, cultural information. In her interview to Henry Jenkins, Shifman avows that in this respect, Dawkins's formulation and contemporary participatory culture are in unison. Although the number of forwarders is much higher than that of those who reproduce basic images and launch new memes (and there are even more of those who just observe and rarely post), all individual participants are aware of what content is processed with which methods. As examples of the latter, the author of the book repeatedly mentions repackaging, imitation, remixing and mimicry – the main methods that give birth to or make go viral the products and reflections of the creative activity of Internet users.

Shifman presents and characterises nine meme genres: both those in the case of which the basic material and transformations proceed from the web, and those based on real-life moments or presupposing participation in specific physical action (pp. 99–118).

Another aspect I would like to emphasise in the context of this book review is that Shifman highlights and describes, besides the definition of the Internet meme, the existing meme genres. In chapter 7, the author presents vivid examples of each of them, which make the interested reader to google, in order to understand what is what. Interactive reading is also possible if you, following Shifman's well-elaborated logic, travel through the vernacular web searching additionally for relevant keywords, watch videos, read blogs and users' discussions about their own activity at the sites where Internet memes and viral phenomena are submitted by regular users (for example, <http://knowyourmeme.com/>).

According to Shifman, the nine meme genres are as follows:

Reaction Photoshops / photo processing – digitally altered photographs as comments on events and official news;

Photo fads – photos and videos (one of the most well-known examples is “planking”);

Flash mob – a group of strangers gather in a public space and perform a particular act simultaneously. After that they just leave the scene (the Baltic Chain – see <http://www.balticway.net/index.php?page=baltic-way&hl=en> – has certain features of a *flash mob*). Advertisers/advertising agencies have detected the power of such actions and organise *flash mobs* for marketing purposes;

Lipsynch – videos in which a person or persons try to match their lip movements to popular songs;

Misheard lyrics – funny mistranslation of spoken sounds or songs to written words; usually added in the subtitles of an existing video clip;

Recut trailers – the re-editing or remixing of film footage by the users;

LOLCats (*lolpeak*) – pictures of cats accompanied by systematically misspelled captions, which refer to the situation shown in the photo;

Stock character macros – so-called 'advice animals' macros: animal picture macros with absurd advice phrases as if uttered by a dog, penguin, wolf, frog, etc.;

Rage comics – featuring a set of expressive characters, each associated with a typical behaviour or emotion.

The names of sub-genres that potential target groups use for indentifying the material cannot well be translated into other languages. Even a cursory glimpse into the realisation and reflection of meme genres, for example, on some Estonian websites, refers to the unwillingness of the participants to coin local-language terms. Shifman in her book (p. 155) also mentions that English operates as *lingua franca* on the Internet, yet also points to the gradual diversification in this sphere.

The issue of locality and/or globality in the spread of concrete memes is separately discussed in chapter 9 (p. 151). It appears that memes can be signs of global message forwarding, yet others spread also if translated into local languages. Photoshopped memes based on the events and facts of the physical world do not necessarily evoke a global response and go viral. It is interesting that series of verbal jokes translated into local languages are disseminated, which characterise human predicaments by means of computer technology (Shifman refers to this example). A concrete flash mob watcher has no problem with adaptation: the video makes it possible to see anyone's flash mob performed in any form. Yet, in the case of a flash mob, sharing and initiation are essential: in a most perfect case, this requires bodily action, so-called translation into the language of an individual body. Typical characters of rage comics (*Rage Guy*, *Poker Face* and *Troll Face*, see p. 116) seem to attract specific user groups, whereas the users' non-digital locality is totally irrelevant. It is namely in the case of this meme genre that Shifman warns, with a reference to Ryan Milner's study, that digital literacy is not enough in order to participate in the "rage discourse", or, to put it in a simpler way, a computer user with office background should not even try. The rage comics community watches, shares and creates memes by specific subcultural codes and norms, which evolve within the community.

Besides, as Shifman admits, meme creation and forwarding logic feature influential socio-psychological and subcultural factors. On the one hand, hypermemetic logic dominates (p. 4, 22), releasing vernacular creativity (p. 97, 99), and this in turn sprouts a stream of memes at almost every public event. On the other hand, memes often involve meanings and ways of information processing from smaller user communities, which cannot be understood by the wider public, not to mention those who are not active Internet users.

The question of which earlier cultural practice or folkloric expression could be described as an example of a seemingly new category contended by types of Internet memes is rather inspiring. Limor Shifman's book provides a smartly structured overview of a vernacular creative process independent of the ways of official information channeling expressed in digital culture. Multilayered material flows abounding in information and all kinds of allusions have been skilfully placed in an analytical focus. *Memes in Digital Culture* provides material for contemplations both to the observers of Internet phenomena and the researchers of folklore born directly in digital culture. I believe that folklorists who are well acquainted with classical expressive genres can, by means of our special language and knowledge, contribute substantially to the interpretation of the novel cultural phenomena.

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