Book review

Wiggins, Bradley E. (2019). *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture Ideology: Semiotics, and Intertextuality.* **New York: Routledge.**

Memes are not merely humorous artifacts. Despite their association with humour, studies frequently assert their essential role in digital culture as an element for understanding our society and culture and for their evocative power in understanding how we see day-to-day events. The full breadth of such interdisciplinarity in research perspectives on memes is captured in the 180-page book by Bradley E. Wiggins entitled *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture Ideology, Semiotics, and Intertextuality*. This work conceptualises memes as a discursive unit with a component of ideological practice (political, economic, etc.), which arise from a process of co-creation and can be recontextualised by adjusting their sign and meaning to illustrate different social developments. The book focuses on an analysis of Internet memes from the perspective of ideology, semiotics and intertextuality.

The author's thesis is that Internet memes are units of discourse in digital culture and, as such, *ideological practice* underpins their construction, comprehension and dissemination. The author considers the role of semiotics and intertextuality in the construction of the meaning of memes, which assumes an audience made up of individuals capable of understanding the message of the meme without needing to know the authorship to assign it an ideological meaning. Rather, he clarifies, it is in the sharing, curation, remixing, etc. where this ideological practice is manifested.

In its eight chapters, Wiggins' book traces a journey that starts with the conceptualisation of the meme based on the classic precepts of authors such as Dawkins (1989) and Shifman (2013), and ends by opening up research horizons for defining the potential of these objects as works of art.

Chapter 1 addresses the *meme* concept of Richard Dawkins, the author who first coined the term in his book *The Selfish Gene*, and whose concept alludes to "the idea of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation" (1989: 182), a concept which, in the words of Wiggins, has "mutated" due to human interaction with the Internet (p. 1). Starting from this premise, Wiggins explains the similarities and differences between the Dawkinsonian meme and the digital meme.

The conceptual framework of Dawkins' meme, based on imitation (*mimeme*), is inadequate for referring to the essence of a digital phenomenon such as the Internet meme, whose main feature is not derived from imitation but from the capacity to suggest, oppose or *remix* a discursive argument through visual and/or verbal interaction. In this respect, the *enthymeme* concept would more precisely designate the nature of the Internet meme, defined by the author as "a remixed, iterated message that can be rapidly diffused by members of participatory digital culture for the purpose of satire, parody, critique, or other discursive activity" (p.11). Another differentiating element with the Dawkinsonian meme lies in the fact that the production and diffusion of Internet memes requires *human agency* in which identity is unimportant.

The chapter also addresses the tripartite typology of Shifman's mimetic dimension (2013), which is based on content (ideas and ideologies conveyed), form (physical incarnation of the message), and stance (how the addressers position themselves). This typology requires

elaboration as a model for analysis in order to utilise the content and stance categories in a more precise way in relation to the creation of meanings from the semiotic and intertextual standpoint.

Chapter 2 analyses the discursive power of memes in the context of digital culture from the perspective of the interrelationship between ideology, semiotics and intertextuality. This analysis draws on theorists of discourse such as Foucault (1989), Barthes (1977), Althusser (2006). Discursive power implies an *agency* that participates in the construction of social relationships online. In the context of digital culture, discourses emerge as a consequence of human interaction; however, this participatory culture is not a utopia where everyone has the same access, entry point and impact. The author identifies discourse with ideology, and it is in this sense that Internet memes contain a semiotic sign that is linked to an ideological practice. This practice also underpins intertextual relationships through semiotic selections that are always deliberate and intentional.

Chapter 3 addresses the evolution of the meme from a simple independent artifact to a full-fledged genre with its own rules and conventions. The transformation from a single iteration of an artifact to a complete genre involves an evolution of the meme from its appearance in the dissemination media to the emerging meme and, once remixed and recontextualised in multiple adaptations, to an Internet meme. The meme as a genre also is explained by means of Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration, used for analysing group communication. Genres are activities that guide and alter the dynamics of human culture. From a structural perspective, memes are messages that operate within social structures comprised of discourses and, as such, they constitute an online communication genre characterised specifically by consumption-production agency.

Chapter 4 focuses on political memes, which are considered a sub-genre of Internet memes. It analyses the memes of Obama and Trump characterised as the Joker, Batman's antagonist; the macro meme of the Distracted Boyfriend, remixed to illustrate the possible political relationships between Spain, Catalonia and the European Union during the Catalan sovereignty process; and the memes circulating on Russian platforms to express opposition to the prolonged leadership of Putin. This analysis allows the author to consider political memes as artifacts of participatory culture. The discursive practice of political memes replaces knowledge and facts with fascination and spectacle, especially in areas of political participation or unrest. They would represent, to paraphrase Snyder (2018), a visual affirmation of the politics of eternity. In this sense, memes would be the result of a society immersed in spectacle, in which social relationships between people are mediated by images.

Far from the limiting humorous perception of memes, in Chapter 5 Wiggins discusses their commercial usage as an advertising benefit or gimmick. In doing so, he explains the tensions that can arise at a legal level in this type of reuse of image and meaning, using the example of a manipulation of an image of Dustin Hoffman by a magazine, a case the actor ultimately lost in court.

The process of appropriation of new meanings which is perceivable in memes and which generally defines today's digital culture is ahead of current legislation and ahead of the line separating where an act is considered communicative or commercial. The author explores the role of virality and commercially motivated messaging in an interesting way. This media virality precedes the digital explosion, as he demonstrates with the example of the *Where's the Beef?* campaign, in which the concept of virality is built into the design of the campaign itself. This increases in the case of using Internet memes as an element with advertising value outside their original medium. This can be seen in the examples of #TFWGucci by the Gucci brand, the use of social media platforms for advertising the Dennys restaurant chain, or the use of the "Success Kid" meme by Virgin Media. The utilisation of these campaigns led Wiggins to speak of the "Semiotics of Cool" (p. 92), which employs the meme as something non-mainstream and alternative.

It is worth considering, however, whether this concept can be applied to the communicative and political use of the meme. Memes already occupy a prominent place in the serious daily press as a way of illustrating the present and taking the pulse of any social or informative event, in a supporting role or even as the subject of news. Nonetheless, their connection with the commercial spectrum is of interest, as well as the risk that their use as mechanisms of collective expression represents for companies. This is due not only to legal or copyright problems but also to the risk that lies in using a collective creation as a commercial mechanism and the meaning the collective may give it, which may differ from the company's objectives.

The importance of the audience and of how they receive the memetic messages is the subject of Chapter 6. This concept becomes very broad when linked to memes due to the complexity and diverse factors that affect their virality, reproducibility and spread. For this reason, the author's efforts to define a series of conditioning factors that determine this new audience are very enlightening.

As Wiggins explains, the meme as a communicative object does not fit into the traditional parameters of audience, nor can it be categorised by traditional patterns of reception of media content. This is why the term *audience* is too rigid when we speak of this type of cultural consumption. Given its dynamic nature, the same iconography can be reused for diverse ends, and therefore we need to explore the prior intentionality behind the message of the meme, taking into account that this, like everything else in digital culture, can be distorted or modified by adding layers of meaning that differ from the ones for which it created.

To categorize the concept of 'audience', he turns to Hall (2012) to explain the polysemy of these cultural objects. Thus, he reflects that, compared to the dominant decoding, and regarding reading processes based on participatory decoding (called either *negotiated reading* or *oppositional reading*), the resulting reading can be radically opposed and run counter to the dominant one. The author provides several examples of the reading of iconic memes, concluding that, regardless of their origin, readers unquestionably contribute to the creation of meaning.

The author ends the chapter by trying to reduce the complexity surrounding the notion of the audience and the construction of the meaning in memes by turning to the concept of *imagined audience*. Likewise, the author talks about a bidirectionality in content elements (especially political ones), the first directionality being the audience capable of understanding the content of the meme (often humorous), and the other being the receptor of this criticism. That process of directionality of the meanings is constructed around the concept of *identity*. The author devotes Chapter 7 to this concept.

He wisely introduces the concept of identity in the book in connection with the concept of audience, given that, paradoxically, the authorship of these memes is diluted by anonymity. The author, wisely, defines his idea of identity using Butler's notion of gender, which is defined as an unstable identity constituted in time. This idea perfectly connects with identity in the diffusion of memes, a reality created *a posteriori*, namely after multiple reuses of texts, images and, ultimately, meanings. The author uses two fundamental examples in this chapter: one positive, *Babadook* and its use as an icon by the LGTBI collective and, in contrast, the use of the image of Emma Gonzalez (activist and survivor of a school shooting in 2018). Memes are seen here as creators of identities secondary to those for which they were created, and, thanks to social media, ultimately, as a source of polarisation. In this sense, the author seems to allude to issues such as the informative biases introduced by social media (accentuated by algorithms or filter bubbles) as a fertile environment for the meaning of certain memes to become much more pronounced and act as glue for a self-assumed identity.

He closes the book by reflecting on the artistic dimension of memetic culture (Chapter 8) as a part of popular digital culture with a strong dose of irony and humour that turns the meme into an interesting artistic object. Thus, memes share certain characteristics with movements like Surrealism and Dadaism (also with Neue Sachlichkeit), such as the remix for ironic

purposes. In parallel, the author continues to break down the complexity in the definition of this object, which Shifman (2013) calls a "conceptual troublemaker". Having defined memes from a communicative and social perspective and as part of digital culture, the author characterises them as a new form of artistic expression that reacts to real-world events. The design of the "Neo-Dadaist Semiotic" is especially useful for expanding Shifman's original classification presented in Chapter 1, which classifies memes by their *content-form-stance*.

In closing, Wiggins' book is of interest to researchers on memes and digital culture. Likewise, it provides important research elements for connecting it to research on humour. His efforts to conceptualise these objects, their connection to aspects such as identity and audience are noteworthy. The book also is of interest for research in Sociology, Cultural Studies and other humanistic fields. It constitutes a comprehensive study of these objects, the frivolous and ephemeral nature of which can cause them to be neglected, but which offer hints about how society is moving and entertaining itself and what semiotic codes it uses to this end.

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