

Master Thesis – Cover Page

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TITLE:

Internet-memes and everyday-creativity

Agency, sociability and the aesthetics of postmodernism

ABSTRACT: This study focuses on internet-memes and proposes a shift of stances in which to understand the phenomenon – from one based on memetics to one based on everyday-creativity and the aesthetics of postmodernism. In order to substantiate this shift, the following question is addressed: In which ways are internet-memes creative and not simply memetic? A selection of internet-memes is then analyzed in their semiotic and discourse attributes with focus on their aesthetic characteristics. The study concludes that through agency and sociability, the composition of internet-memes entails much more than simple imitation. It involves using familiar ideas and previous knowledge in order to make creative unfamiliar combinations; appropriating, remixing and then recontextualizing different elements into novel, amusing, unexpected, and often humorous ways, thus creating something original out of something that has been copied. In sum, internet-memes are a result of individuals playing creatively with memetic elements within the aesthetics of postmodernism.

Key words: Internet-memes, everyday-creativity, postmodern-aesthetics, agency, intertextuality

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By Juliana Brunello

1. Introduction

A meme is a term coined by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene*. Originally used to describe packets of cultural information, it was adopted by the internet to describe viral lulz or Frunz. Its original meaning is no longer used except by sociology majors. In short, memes are a way for even friendless losers to have unfunny inside jokes. [...] In the real-world, the meme is known by its true name, "idea." (Encyclopedia Dramatica contributors, n.d.: Meme)

Though sarcastic, this explanation about memes is actually quite fitting, especially if one is critical of the original concept and can sustain a good sense of humor when confronted with some self-criticism. There is some controversy about who coined the term meme, but Richard Dawkins was surely the one who made it popular. This study will deal with the original meaning not only because I am a sociology major, but because the concept of memes is problematic and still very much used to define the phenomenon elsewhere.

The meme was originally invented to represent the cultural counterpart of the gene. It's original meaning as defined by Dawkins was supposed to signify "a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation [...]" (Dawkins, 1976). His examples of memes include catchy ideas in form of behavior,

styles, beliefs, tunes, catch-phrases, fashions, etc.; which are imitated and thus “propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain” (Dawkins, 1976). Another way of putting it and avoiding the biological jargon, a meme is an idea that is imitated, spreading from person to person within a culture or subculture by a process transmission that is mediated; be it through speech and interaction, through writing, or through analog and digital media themselves. The term internet meme refers to the latter. Though its concept is connected to that of the meme, an internet meme is reduced to ideas that are imitated and spread rapidly “from person to person via the internet, largely through internet-based email, blogs, forums, Imageboards [sic], social networking sites, instant messaging and video streaming sites [...]” (Wikipedia contributors, 2012).

Dawkins’s original concept of the meme was coupled with that of evolution and led to the emergence of the rather obscure science of memetics; a science based on the catchy idea of Universal-Darwinism (Blackmore, 1999; Blute, 2005; Brodie, 1996; Dawkins, 1976; Hofstadter & Dennett, 1981). This view is problematic for several reasons, but mostly because it reifies the meme and puts subjects into a passive position, as victims of ‘viruses of the mind’ (Brodie, 1996), unable to defy the power of memes and make their own choices.

What I propose in this study is a shift of stances: from a memetic stand and its conception of a passive subject, who is a mere ‘meme machine’ (Blackmore, 1999), and is afflicted by a ‘virus of the mind’ (Brodie, 1996); to one based on everyday-creativity and agency.

In order to substantiate this proposed shift of stances, I ask the following question: *In which ways are internet-memes creative and not simply memetic?* It is clear that internet-memes have a memetic element in themselves, namely, an element of imitation. But this is not all. Memes ‘evolve’ in a certain way, but not in the sense that *memeticists* propose, as if memes had acquired a will of their own and evolve inevitably through natural selection and random variability, like genes do. What I argue here is that what makes them ‘evolve’ is the creative work of individuals. In this sense, the answer to this question should show how elements that are present in the composition of internet-memes can be perceived as the result of creativity and not simply of imitation. For instance, how are (exaggerated) parody, satire, sarcasm and irony used cleverly in internet-memes? Additionally, how are hyperstereotypes, self-criticism, radical-eclecticism, intertextuality, remixing, appropriation and recontextualization, incongruities, and humor in general used in a creative way in their composition?

This study will not deal with memes in general, as their existence in the real-world is debatable, but will focus solely on internet-memes, whose existence is there for anyone with the right technology to see. This study is socially relevant as internet-memes are a contemporary social phenomenon that is widespread in the online environment, thus deserving of attention. What makes this study additionally interesting is that, though widespread, this phenomenon is often unrecognized. People have seen it, but not really noticed it. Maybe it is because memes permeate

the internet in such a way that their presence becomes taken-for-granted, making them hard to be 'perceived'. 'Naming the beast' and studying it might contribute not only to its understanding, but also, in a more basic level, to its 'reveal' to the general public.

This lack of 'visibility' could also explain why internet-memes are greatly understudied from an academic perspective. This study will not only contribute to the understanding of this phenomenon, but also provide a new stance in which to look at it; one based on everyday-creativity and guided by a postmodern perspective instead of one solely based on memetics. This study can also provide for further insights on how everyday-creativity works in the internet, especially by looking at how jokes build on one another and the central role that previous knowledge, media-literacy and sociability plays in the composition of internet-memes. Finally, it can contribute to the understanding of the emerging meme-culture that nowadays permeates the internet.

First a critique on the memetic stance will be developed. Following that, the proposed shift of stances will focus on the concept of everyday-creativity. Afterwards, some of the central features concerning the aesthetics of postmodernism will be introduced. Having this theoretical background in mind, a selection of internet-memes will be used as empirical examples and an analysis will be conducted focusing on their semiotic and discourse attributes; after which a conclusion shall be presented.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Memetics: A critique

"Memetics can [...] be defined as the theoretical and empirical science that studies the replication, spread and evolution of memes" (Heylighen, 1998). This 'science of memetics' emerged after Richard Dawkins (1976) came up with the term meme. As we have seen, a meme was supposed to mean "a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation [...]" (Dawkins, 1976). One of the problems of this definition is that no one could isolate this 'unit of cultural transmission/imitation'. This is still a problem in the real-world, and one must question whether there is such a unit in the first place. On the internet, however, a meme has gained a peculiar form, namely of images, catchphrases and videos that embrace a particular catchy idea that is then widely copied and spread throughout the digital world.

Yet, isolating this unit of cultural transmission or imitation in the real-world is not the only problem of memetics. These units, the memes, were embedded with a will of their own and a power to infect people's mind like a virus, making individuals their machines, and making them act under the influence of their will (Blackmore, 1999; Brodie, 1996; Hofstadter & Dennett, 1981). The meme

became reified as an active agent in the pursuit of replication, and individuals were defined as simple passive 'hosts' with no choice but to succumb to their incredible power.

Blackmore (N.d.), a strong supporter of this view, emphasizes that memetics is based on the principle of 'Universal-Darwinism', a principle that "explains all design in the universe". Blackmore's active meme is a replicator that "selfishly copies" itself. She goes as far as stating that "they're using you and me as their propagating, copying machinery, and we are the *meme machines*" (Blackmore, n.d.). Moreover, she affirms that memes inevitably evolve. An example she gives are the 'technological memes', or 'temes'. In a science fiction like scenario, Blackmore (N.d.) predicts that "we're going to have all kinds of implants, drugs that force us to stay awake all the time. We'll think we're choosing these things, but the temes are making us do it." The evil 'temes' are even "using us to suck up the planet's resources to produce more computers", so that "they could carry on without us." The meme is here completely reified as a living creature with its own desires of replication (and world take-over), and the human 'hosts' of these memes are represented as passive empty receptacles just waiting to be parasitized by these memes.

Brodie (1996), another supporter, has memetics in such high regards that he predicts a paradigm shift in psychology, even comparing it to the paradigm shift created by Darwin's theory of evolution. He claims that "memetics has uncovered the existence of *viruses of the mind*", which are "infectious pieces of our culture that spread rapidly throughout a population, altering people's thoughts and lives in their wake" (Brodie, 1996, p. 14). One could think of it in metaphorical terms, but this is not what he is claiming. The active meme is reinforced by him as he states that "[o]nce created, a virus of the mind gains a life independent of its creator and evolves quickly to infect as many people as possible" (Brodie, 1996, p. 17). The author then writes a self-help book in order to combat this science fiction creature and poses it as scientific.

What all these *memeticists* have in common is that they ignore the fact that individuals can actually interpret the ideas they come in contact with (Atran, 2001; Fracchia & Lewontin, 2005). Moreover, Universal-Darwinism reduces everything to systems of inheritance, including complexity of sociocultural change.

Other memeticists are not as extreme as the ones mentioned above. They do, nevertheless, adopt a sociocultural evolutionist approach; an approach that is itself controversial. Heylighen (1996), for instance introduces the concept of memes as "[i]deas, habits and traditions [which] are communicated from individual to individual" and interprets it as a form of *replication*. He also acknowledges *intention*, giving individuals back their agency, and argues that people imitate other people's behavior because they consider such behavior worth copying, hence, *agency* (Heylighen, 1999). Additionally, he brings the medium into play: "The media by which a meme is communicated [...] will greatly influence its eventual spread" (Heylighen, 1996). He argues that digital technologies

allow for memes to be copied with higher fidelity, fecundity (greater amount of copies), and longevity (since information can be more easily stored). Success can become harder though, as there is increased competition for a user's attention.

Heylighen (1996) also affirms that "memes can be said to cooperate if they are coherent or support each other"; so that "mutually supporting memes will tend to group together".

Unfortunately he concludes that due to a kind of 'conformist selection', everyone in a group will end up believing in the same things, and due to the power of new technologies in spreading memes, the end result will be a "globally shared ideology, or a 'world culture' [...]". This is not only technological-deterministic, but very much an extrapolated sci-fi assumption of a dark future. People may also join a group because they believe in the same things, thus 'separating' ideology-different groups from one another, preventing the formation of what he calls 'a global brain'. Moreover, he confusingly attempts to explain that there are selfish and non-selfish kinds of memes. The selfish ones apparently have a life of their own, since such memes' "[...] only goal is to spread themselves, 'infecting' a maximum of hosts without regard for their hosts' well-being" (Heylighen, 1998).

A study conducted by Knobel and Lankshear (2007, p. 201) focused on internet-memes defines them as "'catchy' and widely propagated ideas or phenomena". They point out that the nature of these memes is often collaborative, cumulative and distributed; "generated out of networks of shared interests, experiences, habits, worldviews and the like that pick up on or use texts, events, phenomena, icons, cultural artifacts, etc., in particular if not socially idiosyncratic ways" (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 220). They also argue that a meme can be perceived as recognizable, bounded phenomena, though they do not develop this idea any further. Although the authors still adhere to some of the biological jargon, their approach is focused on memes as cultural phenomena, the same approach that will be used in this study. By means of content and discourse analysis they investigate some of the most popular internet-memes. The outcome revealed that fecundity is improved when a meme mutates, as when people contribute their own version. They argue that hence it is not only replicability that needs to be taken into consideration when analyzing a meme's success, but also its remixing qualities. They mention that remixes are often funnier than the original, "due to the creative uses of key phrases and the celebration of quirkiness that they embody" (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 211). This is an important insight, as the role of agency and creativity are both emphasized in the composition and spread of an internet-meme. In the end, they propose that more attention should be paid to the role memes play in developing culture and creativity. This study will take their advice and adopt a similar focus, one that focuses in the aesthetics of internet-memes and the creativity involved in them.

2.2 Everyday-creativity: Shifting the stance

Creativity has been most frequently associated with works of ‘high-arts’ and important scientific innovation (Sawyer, 2006). This association is, however, based on subjective values that are socially constructed and thus framed by one’s worldviews; as well as being based on the current aesthetics, which is time-space and culturally bound (Boden, 2010). Brink (2010, p. 5) explains that ideas are considered creative “in relation to a person or some people in a certain field at a certain time”. The definition of what is creative and of attributed values is, therefore, *relative* and socially constructed. But most importantly: “The stupidest possible creative act is still a creative act” (Shirky, 2011, p. 18).

Internet-memes are, for certain, no examples of high-arts, and neither of scientific innovation. They involve, nevertheless, a more ‘mundane’ and ‘ordinary’ kind of creativity, one that is often referred to as ‘everyday-creativity’.

Everyday-creativity is defined as a form of creativity that is not bound to any ‘artistic’ quality criteria, in opposition to the canonized high-arts (Hennessey & Amabile, 2010; Jansz, Slot, & Tol, 2011). It rather embraces purposefully making unfamiliar combinations of familiar ideas and actively using personal skills and knowledge in order to combine existing elements into new products, ideas and solutions that are of value for an individual or the larger social group (Boden, 2010).

Gauntlett (2011, p. 10) defines creativity as being composed of three elements: “a culture that contains symbolic rules, a person who brings novelty into the symbolic domain, and a field of experts who recognize and validate the innovation”. He explains that novelty and innovation can occur quite routinely in the everyday environment though, including that of “witty or insightful speech” (Gauntlett, 2011, p. 11). In the case of internet-memes, the person who brings the novelty is the one who uses a certain idea, image, video and/or catchphrase cleverly, so that others recognize the creativity embedded in it. Validation is done through the meme’s imitation in form of copying and remixing, causing its eventual spread. An idea that is not considered clever, witty or insightful – thus creative in some sense – will not spread. Hence, creativity is essential for a meme to actually become a meme.

Additionally, Boden (2010) points out that what is a bright idea to an individual might have been ‘out there’ already. It is nevertheless new to him/her. This is what she calls P(sychological) creativity, as opposed to H(istorical)-creativity, which occurs when an idea comes up for the first time in history. In meme-culture, as we will see in the analysis, one can say that both types of creativity, P and H are involved. H when the idea first comes about, and a mixture of P and H when the idea is remixed by using some of the old elements of the original creative idea together with new insights and ideas in form of remix.

A ‘common-sense understanding of creativity’ is proposed by Brink (2010). He argues that for something to be creative it should have some, if not all of the following properties: “novelty,

unexpectedness, fertility, surprise, adequacy or correctness, and finally in some sense be deliberate” (Brink, 2010, p. 5). This last part is very important, as it emphasizes the agency of the individual in being creative. Previous knowledge plays here an important role as well, as it is what will qualify an idea as creative instead of just some randomly attained results. As Berger and Luckmann (1967) point out, agency involves autonomy and dependency: the autonomy to create, and the dependency upon the social world and knowledge that has been constructed by previous creative acts.

Gauntlett (2011) also points to human agency in the process of creativity, and more importantly, in relation to online creativity. He says that the amateur craft of being creative online is a matter of choice: one can choose to produce something instead of just consuming what is available. The joy in doing it, he says, relies in the absence of experts and elites that usually act as gatekeepers for the circulation of ideas and their validation. However, I must add, it is usually the community in which the creative idea is embedded that acts as gatekeeper and validates, or not, what is being produced in terms of ‘likes’, comments, and copying/remixing. Gauntlett (2011, p. 4) recognizes this as a source of motivation though, as one could wish to be “recognized within a community of interesting people”. This reinforces the idea that being creative is not only an isolated individual act, but in many ways powered by and motivated by the surrounding social world, which provides for the knowledge necessary to come up with new ideas and a community that validates it as creative.

2.3 The Aesthetics of postmodernism

Postmodernism is a contested term that means different things to different authors, who, additionally, often contradict each other. I will not attempt to provide a complete overview of the discussions surrounding this term, but to pinpoint some important aesthetic-features attributed to postmodernism, which can be seen in a variety of cultural productions ranging from architecture to animated television series. What I argue here is that such postmodern-aesthetics can also be recognized in internet-memes. I shall demonstrate throughout the analysis how internet-memes are manifestations of this aesthetic style, as well as develop an argument to how the use of such aesthetics relates to creativity.

In this regard, the aim of this discussion is neither to celebrate nor to critique postmodernism, but to use it instrumentally in the analysis of internet-memes. For that, some of the aesthetic-features frequently attributed to postmodernism will be further explained. Yet, the separation of these aesthetic-features is artificial and done in an ideal typical way in order to enhance readability. So keep in mind that topics actually overlap in reality. These features, which will be discussed in more detail in the next subsections, are: anti-foundationalism; hyperstereotypes/clichés, extreme self-consciousness and ironical self criticism; extreme intertextuality in form of radical-eclecticism,

remixing and appropriation/recontextualization; and humor in form of exaggerated irony, sarcasm, parody, and satire, Extreme-referentiality and incongruity.

2.3.1 Anti-foundationalism

Collins (1992) and Hutcheon (1988) point out that postmodernism signals a move away from modernists' elitism and rejection of its favored style, namely realism; replacing it with various forms of abstraction and symbolism. In this context, Hutcheon (1988) emphasizes the contradictory character of postmodernism. Though challenging modern humanism, postmodernism has not replaced it. What it has been doing is to question all sorts of certainties and truth claims, a form of *anti-foundationalism*, pointing to narratives' positional status within a broader sociocultural context (Collins, 1992; Hutcheon, 1988; Lyotard, 1984).

2.3.2 Hyperstereotypes/clichés, extreme-consciousness and ironical self-criticism

Just like in other cultural productions – such as animated adult sitcoms (Family Guy, American Dad, South Park, etc.) –, internet-memes also make use of hyperstereotypes, highlighting cliché characteristics attributed to certain social groups, some of which are nowadays frequently seen as politically incorrect. However, the process of hyperstereotyping is a criticism on stereotyping itself, and not on specific social groups (Dhaenens & Bauwel, 2011). Extreme-consciousness, in this context, means that individuals that understand and use these hyperstereotypes are aware of the 'incorrect' status of such clichés and use it strategically by emphasizing them to the point of ridiculous. Such hyperstereotypes can also be self-attributed, as when one makes fun of oneself or the group s/he belongs to. In this case there is not only extreme-consciousness of one's own status, but also a form of ironical self-criticism targeted at both, the stereotypes and one's own social group, as some of the stereotypes can actually apply.

2.3.3 Extreme intertextuality

Intertextuality is a kind of referencing or allusion to other texts in form of written or spoken language, (moving) images, music pieces, genres, styles, etc. Most texts are intertextual; and some even affirm that all of them are in one way or another, as signs point to other signs in a never-ending chain of signification (Derrida, 1978). Having this in mind, the question of originality and authorship is put into a different perspective. Here I will elaborate on three ways a text can be intertextual, namely 'radical-eclecticism', 'remixing', and 'appropriation and recontextualization'.

i) Radical-eclecticism

A constant presence in film and television productions that are based on a postmodern-aesthetics, is what is often referred to as 'radical-eclecticism' (Collins, 1992). This involves the juxtaposition of heterogeneous genres; some of which simply don't 'fit', forming a kind of incongruity that in many

occasions may cause a humorous effect. See for example the drama-series *Twin Peaks*, whose radical-eclecticism borrows from genres dealing with the supernatural, horror, American soap opera, camp, melodrama, black and absurd humor, and so on (Collins, 1992). What often results from this radical-eclecticism is that the borders of stylistic genres, and even of art itself, become ever more fluid; so that the distinction between high and low culture is blurred (Collins, 1992).

ii) *Remixing*

As mentioned earlier, creativity always involves previous knowledge and the combination of pre-existing ideas into something new. In this sense, creative works, even the 'highest' examples of it, are in some way intertextual, and composed of different references to or remixes of previous creative works and general knowledge.

Lessig (2004) exemplifies this point by mentioning Walt Disney's creations, which he argues are not original, but actually remixes. He calls it "Walt Disney creativity – a form of expression and genius that builds upon the culture around us and makes something different" (Lessig, 2004, p. 24). This means that remixing has been around for quite some time, however nowadays, "[w]e are less and less a free culture, more and more a permission culture" (Lessig, 2004, p. 8); so that the aspects of remixing are made more visible by the cultural industries.

Remixing can often serve a subversive function, but one must keep in mind that this is not always the case. Some can be just funny, without the component of (political) critique. *Subversive-remixing*, however, does engage in social criticism (McIntosh, 2011). They are also often humorous, but their main goal is rather to serve as a form of social commentary.

iii) *Appropriation and recontextualization*

Though existing before the emergence of digital technologies, appropriation and recontextualization have only become notorious with their emergence. Before digital remixing, it took place in form of 'found footage filmmaking' – "a practice of *appropriating* pre-existing film footage in order to *denature, detour or recontextualize* images by inscribing new meanings onto materials through creative montage" (Horwatt, n.d., p. 1, my emphasis). With the emergence and proliferation of digital technologies, this practice became more easily accessible, both in terms of technology and price, so that not only professional artist, but also amateurs, could give it a try. It is a form of intertextuality that uses and abuses signs of different origins; recirculating and giving them new meaning to fit specific purposes.

2.3.4 *Humor*

Humor can come about by playing with institutionalized meanings. Or as Mary Douglas (1975) puts it: jokes are *anti-rites*; "they mock, parody or deride the ritual practices of a given society". Humor, in this sense, can also be seen as a form of *transgression/subversion*, as "the play with a system that

likes to think of itself as serious” (Gunkel & Gournelos, 2011, p. 7). Religious and political systems like to think of themselves as rather serious, so that they are often the target of transgressive/subversive humor, which frequently comes in form of irony, sarcasm, parody and/or satire.

i) Exaggerated irony, sarcasm, satire and parody

Irony, sarcasm, satire and parody have existed prior to the emergence of postmodern-aesthetics, so one could argue it is nothing new. What makes these forms of humorous expressions typically postmodern is, however, their exaggeration. They are exaggerated by being *explicit*, often transforming what is figurative into *literal*, and by the *overwhelming* and *conscious* number of allusions and references used.

According to the Oxford Dictionary (OD), *irony* is “the expression of one’s meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect”, whereas sarcasm makes “use of irony to mock or convey contempt”. Satire can make use of irony and sarcasm, as well as exaggeration or ridicule for a humorous effect. Its goal is “to expose and criticize people’s stupidity or vices” (OD), and point to the disparity of “[...] an ideal, about which people love to talk but according to which they rarely live” (Zijderveld, 1983, p. 18). Satire, therefore, has a critical function (Berger, 1997). Moreover, satire can make use of parody, imitating particular styles with deliberate exaggeration for a comic effect.

For Linda Hutcheon (1988, p. x) parody is a way of “signaling ironic difference at the heart of similarity”, and offers a way to exercise an “authorized transgression of conventions”. She explains that through parody, postmodern art self-consciously points to paradoxes within conventions; as well as to their provisional status – as narratives are time-space bound and not eternal – in an exaggerated manner (Collins, 1992; Hutcheon, 1988; Knox, 2006).

ii) Extreme-referentiality

Since humor is grounded on the experiences and shared knowledge of the group members, one can say it is essentially intertextual. What is interesting though, is that part of this shared knowledge are jokes themselves, as “joking remarks build on each other” (Fine & Soucey, 2005, p. 3); which makes humor *referential*. This means that in order to decode humorous metaphors one must understand the layers of meaning that have been developed by the group, which often includes references to other recurring jokes. “Recurrence, reference and recognition constitute the characteristics of a group culture” (Fine & Soucey, 2005, p. 7). The same can be applied to internet-memes and the community involved in this meme-culture, as memes essentially build on one another. They are mixed and remixed, so that the understanding of different references becomes essential. Memes also build in current and previous cultural productions and their characters, genres, styles, events,

news and so on. This makes memes extremely referential; so that high media-literacy becomes essential in order to comprehend them.

iii) Incongruity

“Joking is a creative production, involving the combination of previously familiar elements into a novel form” (Hebb in Fine & Soucey, 2005). In his regard, humor and creativity in general are very similar. Both involve the “capacity to associate, to draw together two (or more) previously nonassociated aspects of reality” (Berger, 1997, p. 61).

Wit, for instance, as Berger (1997, p. 54) explains “is characterized by a playful approach to reality, by the discovery of hidden similarities and connections, by linking up what is normally separate, and by giving sense to what is normally perceived as non-sense.” Basically, it involves joining together what morality and convention keeps apart (Berger, 1997). Some philosophers of the comic argue that laughter then occurs in response to the perception of such *incongruity*. Zijderfeld (1983) makes a similar point and refers to it as *playing with common-sense logic*. He explains that “common-sense logic is a taken-for-granted series of rules which indicate (if not dictate) what can and cannot be thought or said” (Zijderfeld, 1983, p. 13). Humor, then, takes place when taken-for-granted causal chains are broken, social practices are turned inside out, and “common sense rationality [is] left in tatters” (Critchley, 2002, p. 1).

Though incongruity is not always related to humor, it is often used as a tool to produce it. Internet-memes make frequent use of this technique, joining incongruous images and life-worlds together, as the selected examples will show in the analysis/results section of this study.

3. Methodology

It would be an impossible task to analyze each single meme available on the internet qualitatively due to their sheer amount¹. I have selected four different internet-memes to serve as case-studies. This selection was not made randomly, but deliberately. A more thorough explanation to why I chose each specific meme for analysis will be given at the introductory paragraph to each one in the analysis/results section of this paper. Additional criteria for selection were: First, all selected memes are humorous and composed by simple image-macros plus caption style, hence excluding animations, videos and other formats. Secondly, each has at least one outstanding postmodern-aesthetic-feature that is present, to a greater or lesser extent in its composition. Third, all selected memes have been popular over a period of time and are still popular today. Keep in mind, however, that selection was not based primarily on popularity because it is not the goal of this paper to examine whether and why they are successful, but whether and why they are examples of creativity within an aesthetics of postmodernism.

For the selection I used the KYM database, a collaborative website dedicated to the documentation of internet-memes. It took a great deal of lurking at this website in order to finally pick the memes being used in this analysis. They are: First World Problems, Internet-Slang: Filename Extensions, Advice God, and If it fits I sits/Cat Rule #1.

This deliberate selection of only four memes can be seen as a down-point. The selection is indeed not representative of the quantity of internet-memes out there, so that meme-interested might miss their favorite or find the selection biased. Yet, the selection was not meant to generate a quantitative distribution of aesthetic-features. Rather, the goal was to find internet-memes that could adequately generate the best insights into the phenomenon and provide for clear examples concerning the range of different postmodern-aesthetic-features; features that have been noticed in most of the internet-memes during intensive lurking at the KYM database.

As mentioned earlier, both semiotic and discourse analysis will be used in order to scrutinize the selected examples. These methods have been chosen as both of them are involved in deconstructing a sign or a text and making possible hidden meanings visible (Chandler, 2011; Larsen, 2002; Tonkiss, 1998). Whereas discourse analysis fits more appropriately the analysis of written texts, semiotic analysis fits more appropriately the analysis of images. Since the composition of an internet meme often involves both – an image (sign) and a caption (text) – a mixture of both methods seems to be the best approach. The analysis will proceed as follows: First the selected meme will be presented and an example of it will be described. Then an interpretation of its postmodern-aesthetic features will follow. Finally, a connection to creativity will be established.

¹ 8295 (KYM, 01.07.2012)

4. Analysis and Results

4.1 First World Problems

Image 1: FWP - List of Problems



First World Problems (FWP) is a meme that serves to point to the futilities of some of the problems experienced in first-world countries when compared to 'real' problems faced by the less fortunate, such as extreme poverty, hunger, diseases, lack of education and sanitation, etc. There are a variety

of internet-memes that deal humorously with everyday social situations and dilemmas that are common to many individuals, such as *Socially Awkward Penguin*, *Scumbag Steve*, *Success Kid*, *High Expectations Asian Father*, and so on. *FWP* was chosen because it deals with such situations and dilemmas with an intense sarcastic and often politically incorrect tone, characteristics that are present in many memes and could be reason why *FWP* is placed among the favorites by the KYM community.

Different image-macros have been used to express the meme's main idea. I will focus on one of them. The image above is constituted by the drawing of the weeping / whining image of actor James van der Beek (as Dawson Leery in the TV show *Dawson's Creek*) with a series of captioning underneath it.

First, most of these 'problems' are related to conveniences that only the privileged have access to: the box of Pringles, art, too much food, mobile-phone, GPS/car, itunes, delivery-pizza, laptop, TV/crunchy snacks... They also point to other privileges that are often taken-for-granted in developed countries: the fact that one has easy access to drinking water and food, or that one is free to choose a spouse. The irony and humor of this meme lies in turning such conveniences and privileges into futile problems, instead of actually enjoying them.

The act of sharing these complaints under the heading of 'FWP' is what makes it clear that the authors of such captioning are aware of the futility involved in complaining about it. This indicates a kind of *extreme-consciousness* that points to the awareness of how superficial and rather ridiculous these 'problems' actually are. At the same time that it is a true complaint, sharing it under this heading also turns it into a sort of *ironical self-criticism* in form of self-mockery: one knows these 'problems' are ridiculous when compared to 'real' ones. This critical function is what makes it a form of *satire*, which often comes in form of critical observations of the peculiarities of regular human beings, slating certain features attached to certain people (Berger, 1997; Zijderfeld, 1983) – in this case, the privileged 'first-worlders'. *FWP* nevertheless still constitutes the kind of futile 'problems', or rather inconveniences generated by conveniences, that is often shared by many privileged individuals who know that they should not be complaining about it as there are worse things happening in the world. Thus, the meme *FWP* can be said to constitute a kind of *ironic-satire*, one that "reveals the disparity between the ideals of mankind and the realities of daily life in an objective and playful manner" (Zijderfeld, 1983, p. 19).

The irony is further *exaggerated* by the image-macro used in the composition of the meme. The image is highly dramatic. Such a facial expression is expected to be seen when something really bad has happened, as when someone close to you died or you received terrible news of some unexpected disease. No one really expects that reaction just because you forgot your phone when

you went to poop and got bored; or because you had to tilt the box of Pringles as your hand did not fit in it.

This meme also involves the use of *hyperstereotypes*. This means that all ‘first-worlders’ are put under the same exaggerated category of having everything and being spoiled to the point of placing great importance on trivial things since they are assumed not to have any ‘real’ problems to complain about. Some individuals do not understand the exaggerated irony that comes from superimposing a tragic image with the hyperstereotype of privileged individuals complaining about trivial things and are offended by it – either because they live in a ‘third world country’, but don’t like being put under the category of underprivileged (see comments from *danielepicwin* or *phantom.widow*² in KYM), or because they belong to the privileged first world but take the meme too seriously and literally (see comment from *BallJointedWing* in KYM).

Nonetheless, many individuals identify and understand the satirical humor involved in sharing such shallow problems. As the KYM episode on FWP mentions, at some point ‘Redditors’³ tried to outdo each other with increasingly shallow complaints. One can see how such futilities are shared within a certain group, and that this group is aware of the vain aspects involved in complaining about it. It thus becomes a sort of *inside-joke*, one that only privileged self-conscious individuals that share a certain background knowledge and a taste for exaggerated irony share. This reinforces the idea that what counts as interesting, creative or novel, as well as humorous, is strongly dependent on context, values and previous knowledge (Berger, 1997; Boden, 2010; Brink, 2010; Zijderfeld, 1983), so that it “will differ from domain to domain, and to some extent from person to person” (Boden, 2010, p. 3). Some people find it funny, others offensive.

It is nevertheless an example of everyday-creativity, as it involves the clever play with social realities in form of ironical self-mockery and being critical of social norms. Its extreme-referentiality involves the clever use of knowledge one has from different provenances, such as the knowledge one has from being privileged in comparison to the underprivileged, the knowledge of previous jokes done around this meme, and the knowledge of the character Dawson Leery – who could be considered a successful *parody* of FWP due to the shallow first-world problems this character was often involved with in the series Dawson’s Creek.

² See Appendix A

³ See: <http://www.reddit.com/r/firstworldproblems/>

4.2 Internet-Slang: Filename Extensions

Image 2: Grandmother.rar

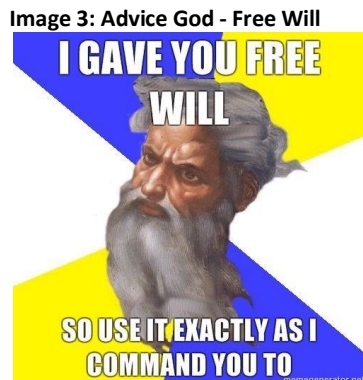


The meme *Filename Extensions* was chosen first because it serves to exemplify ‘internet-slang’, which often involves the use of acronyms, idioms, intentional misspellings, references to programs and program language, emoticons, etc – all of which have acquired their current meanings in the internet and are a paramount part of internet-culture. Secondly, it was chosen because it clearly shows the juxtaposition of two life-worlds, that of real-life events with that of computer programs. In the example above two completely different life-worlds are put together: that of death, loss, old age (referenced by ‘Grandmother’), grieving, and spirituality (the cross symbolizing Christianity); and that of computer programs, indicated by the caption ‘.rar’ and the program icon in the lower-right corner. This image involves a sort of *witticism* where two sets of meanings which should logically be kept apart are confronted (Zijderveld, 1983, p. 14), so that the perception of something *incongruous* emerges. The hidden similarity is that ‘.rar’ indicates a program that serves to compress files, and the grandmother has been ‘compressed’ into ashes by cremation. Creativity here lies in finding such hidden similarities, thinking along lines that are not dictated by common-sense logic, and in cleverly playing with the meanings attached to both life-worlds.

Nevertheless, one must keep in mind that the understanding and appreciation of the humor involved in this meme is relative to the background knowledge, social context and values one has. First, joking is part of a social interaction (Zijderveld, 1983) that involves a kind of social contract between the teller and the audience, a certain “agreement about the social world in which we find ourselves as the implicit background” (Critchley, 2002). This means that humor needs a certain social *context* in order to make sense; and for that the joke-teller and the audience must share (or at least have a good understanding of) each other’s social background (Berger, 1997; Krichtafovitch, n.d.; Zijderveld, 1983). More specifically; what is perceived as incongruous depends on what is perceived as normal. A person with no knowledge of the program that uses the file-extension ‘.rar’, or of the image of a cremation urn and its normal usage, will not understand the joke.

Additionally, *values* play an important role in regards to humor (Zijderveld, 1983). Some people may find this kind of humor quite distasteful, or even offensive. As Fine and Soucey (2005) explain, joking must respect group norms – there has to be a kind of implicit negotiation within a group in order to define what is proper or improper joking content, so that if the joke falls off the proper bounds reserved to the comic, than one may be strongly reprehended. Simply put, if a joke goes too far, its appreciation quickly fades (Kuipers, 2006).

4.3 Advice God



The meme *Advice God* was chosen because it clearly shows the power of *subversive-remixing*, *recontextualization*, *sarcasm*, *irony* and *parody*, all in the name of religious *anti-foundationalism*. There are many other memes that deal with this kind of religious anti-foundationalism, such as the Crocoduck, the Flying Spaghetti Monster⁴, the Invisible Pink Unicorn, Zombie Jesus and so on. Advice God was chosen because its criticisms are quite straight to the point and understandable for anyone with some knowledge of the Bible.

The image used in this meme is that of an old man with grey beard. This *remix* involves a cut out image that has been *appropriated* from Michelangelo's artistic interpretation of the Christian God in 'The Creation of the Sun and Moon', which was ridiculously put together with a simplistic background. This generated what could be considered a work of *radical-eclecticism* that joins high and low artistic styles; as well as *humorous incongruity*.

Captioning over this image deals mostly with pointing to different biblical contradictions and paradoxical religious interpretations, as well as showing some harmful behaviors attributed to the all-loving Christian God. Michelangelo's grandiose artistic rendition of the wise Christian God is thus *recontextualized* and *parodied* as a God that is neither grandiose nor wise.

Some famous contradictions which are sarcastically pointed out in the meme are: "Humanity descended from one man and one woman, who only had sons" (so how did they procreate?); "Create entire universe out of nothing, need Adam's rib to create one more thing" (why not out of nothing

⁴ Though its status as a meme is contested.

again?); “Demand Adam and Eve follow a rule that requires the understanding of right and wrong. Don’t give Adam and Eve the knowledge of right and wrong” (in reference to being commended not to eat the apple). As for paradoxical interpretations, some notorious examples are: “I gave you free will, so use it exactly as I command you to” (as one should follow the Christian doctrine); and “Unconditional love, with conditions” (as apparently God loves only Christians). And finally, some of the mischievous behaviors attributed to God: “Let me save you, from what I’m going to do to you if you don’t worship me” (for instance, eternal hell); and “Born in non-Christian country, doomed” (again, if one is not Christian, s/he is doomed for eternal damnation).

These examples portray what Hutcheon (1988) referred to as signaling *ironic* difference at the heart of similarity – Advice God is similar to the Christian God, but ironically different, as the *paradoxes* involved in the Christian doctrine and their common interpretation of God are not hidden, but explicitly emphasized in form of a biblical/Christian *satire*. This results in a kind of critical *anti-foundationalism* that questions the certainties and truth claims of Christianity, thus highlighting their provisional and positional status within a broader sociocultural context

This kind of anti-foundationalism is *transgressive* and *subversive*, as it *sarcastically* criticizes what shall not be criticized, what is taboo to even think about, thus de-sacralizing canonic readings and the Christian doctrine. Through ridiculing what belongs to the sacred and defying what should not be said or thought, Advice God thus acts as a subverting agent, transforming the original purposes embedded in the Christian doctrine of achieving uncontested agreement by means of blind acceptance and unquestioned faith into the exact opposite. In other words, by playing with Christian meanings, Advice God disturbs their taken-for-granted definitions of the ‘Christian’ reality, making one question assumptions, values and the very foundations of the social reality one lives in (Zijderveld, 1983). One could argue, that this kind of subversive humor based on satire, parody, irony and sarcasm could turn out to be very well the postmodernist’s weapon of choice, as it serves to question the “‘given’, or ‘what goes without saying’ in our culture” (in Hutcheon, 1988, p. xiii), thus often acting as critical device against ‘foundationalisms’ of all kinds.

Creativity here lies in finding and playing with paradoxes within what is often seen as uncontested truth and taboo, portraying it in a humorous way by means of irony, sarcasm, parody and satire.

4.4 If it fits, I sits/Cat rule#1

Not all memes are full of witticisms and exaggerated satire – some are quite simpler, such as those involving the ongoing jokes with cats. This example was included first because cats are an integral part of internet culture and as such, should not miss from this analysis; and secondly to show that even these are still examples of creativity and not simply memetic.

The meme ‘*If it fits, I sits*’ involves a clever play with words and an *intertextual reference* in form of *appropriating* the slogan from a TV commercial by the United States Postal Service that said “If It Fits, It Ships” (KYM contributors, 2012). Furthermore, it involves the *recontextualization* of this slogan plus the *juxtaposition of incongruous realities* involving cats’ behavior and the implicit reference made through the caption ‘if it fits, I sits’ to the reality of advertising and parcel services, transforming it into something new, incongruous and funny.

Image 4: Egg-carton



According to KYM, the first image with the *appropriated* and *recontextualized* slogan portrayed a cat sitting in the opposite side of an egg-carton, into which it barely fit (image 4). The humor in it is not only due to the clever play with words, but also because it involves a play with common-sense logic, since it is quite *absurd* for a human to think about sitting in the opposite side of an egg-carton. If humans sat regularly on the opposite side of egg-cartons, this would most probably not have been funny.

Following this initial image, the catchphrase “if it fits, I sits” became memetic in portraying cats trying to fit into small containers that they could only barely fit into, enhancing the comic effect as jokes started building on each other, and ever more absurd images of cats trying to fit into tiny objects flooded the internet. This catchphrase gained such notoriety that it became known as “cat rule #1”. Examples can be found in which a cat tries to fit into a cereal bowl, a tiny box or basket, a bucket, a vase, a shoe, a hat, a purse or even a bidet, sink or toilet – all absurd places to sit and chill if you are a human.

Image 5: Tupperware



Image 6: Cat&Dog



The initial meme-caption became later the target of creative remixing itself. “Even if I don’t fits in it, I sits in it”, or “cat rule#2” (image 5), shows a picture of a cat trying to fit into an even smaller

container, which, this time, is really too small for it to fit in it. A further development is “if you no fits in it, I still makes you sits in it”, showing a cat sleeping in the big dog’s basket, and this big dog trying to fit into the tiny cat’s basket, while ‘sadly’ looking at the cat sleeping in its big basket very comfortably (image 6) – an obvious *incongruity*, since a big dog is expected to rule over the cat and demand his basket, and not just look sadly at it as if he could do nothing about it.

Image 7: Human



In the end, not only the caption has been the target of remixing, but also the content. A humorous effect was also created when it was applied to an obese human sitting on a chair in which he/she barely fit, and not to a cat (image 7). In order for one to fully understand the humor of this image, however, one must have had some previous knowledge about the “if it fits, I sits” meme and its development, so that intertextuality becomes paramount not only in form of *referentiality* to the advertisement, but also to previous memes, in order to grasp the humor contained in this image.

Creativity here is present not only in the initial play with words, but also in the act of taking it out of the original context and successfully finding hidden similarities between the life-worlds involved in the composition of this meme. Remixing the caption and image based on previous memes involves not only knowledge, but also creativity in order to do so. In sum, being able to cleverly appropriate, recontextualize and remix, as well as build on previous knowledge and jokes are forms of creativity, all of which are present in the composition of this meme.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

One could argue that the conceptual device used by Dawkins as a metaphorical analogy – the meme – to support his ideas of replicators as the driving force of evolutionary change – the gene – became a real thing that can now be ‘isolated’ and studied in the digital world. Whether it is a unit of cultural transmission is still debatable. What is certain is that in each meme there is what could be called an element of imitation. There is always an image, a catchphrase, or a leading idea, that forms the basis of the meme and is thus imitated and transmitted by means of communication. But mimesis is not the only element present in the composition of internet-memes.

In addition to the memetic element present in each internet-meme, their composition involves a great deal of creativity as well as agency, sociability and high degrees of media-literacy – all of which, together and within an aesthetics of postmodernism, form the basis of what I have been calling meme-culture.

This study sought to show in which ways internet-memes are creative and not simply memetic. The result of the analysis shows that by means of creating something new out of something old; creating something original out of something that has been copied, and using familiar ideas and previous knowledge in order to make unfamiliar combinations; creativity finds its way into the composition of internet-memes. More specifically, creativity can be perceived in how familiar images, genres, characters, life-worlds, etc. are appropriated, remixed and then recontextualized in novel, amusing and unexpected ways. Additionally, knowledge acquired through high-media literacy is portrayed in form of intertextual references to other cultural productions and memes themselves ingeniously; narratives are transgressed and subverted through the clever use of parody and satire; hidden similarities are found between incongruous aspects of reality and intelligently put together; and hyperstereotypes are ironically and sarcastically used as a form of social-criticism. In this sense, composing an internet-meme is playing creatively with memetic elements but giving them a twist, thus transforming initial ideas into something novel, surprising, interesting, and humorous – all of which are features of creativity and not simply of imitation.

Nevertheless, questions of authenticity are always embedded in this kind of creativity that openly acknowledges remixing, copying and imitating. Some will argue that the web is making us stupid; that the ‘low-quality’ of user created content undermine the ‘high-quality’ of professional outputs; and conclude that the internet is hampering “our ability to think deeply and creatively” (Carr, 2011, p. 140). Others will argue that this kind of creativity that takes and modifies the creation of others is, in a way, the only kind of creativity around (Ferguson, n.d.). What cannot be denied is that many, if not all features attributed to everyday-creativity are present in the composition of internet-memes. What may vary is their appreciation, since the perceived value of such a creative

enterprise and the adequacy of the humor contained in it are relative according to one's sociocultural background.

Another element that is paramount for something to be creative is agency: creativity has to be deliberate. Berger (1997) explains that humorous situations can be deliberate or unexpected. In the case of internet-memes, the humorous creation is deliberate, even though the original image, video or catchphrase might not have had such humorous intent. That is because internet-memes are, as we have seen, often the result of a play with meanings, appropriating the original one and intentionally altering it by placing it out of the original context. In this sense, internet-memes are creations out of one's own will; they are the deliberate result of someone's creativity. One creates a meme not because one is compelled to, or is taken over by a 'virus of the mind'. Creating internet-memes is a choice one makes, one that involves a creative act, even if of 'the most stupid' kind. In this sense, internet-memes are not simply memetic; they are the result of putting together several elements through creative thinking. Consequently, memes are neither willful themselves, nor simply memetic; but the result of human agency and creativity.

A final important aspect of creativity worth mentioning in this conclusion is that of sociability, as creativity is a social, and not an isolated act – the basis of any creative work lies in the knowledge one has from the world. In meme-culture the role of sociability is extrapolated, as the memetic element makes it quite visible. Digital media also plays an important role, as they provide us with tools to express ourselves and share our ideas more easily, and without them, this culture would not have developed, at least not in the way it is today. And as Leadbeater (2009, p. 6) argues, "the more ideas are shared the more they breed, mutate and multiply, and that process is ultimately the source of our creativity, innovation and well-being". The composition and spread of internet-memes is a clear example of the creative and social use of digital media. One can come up with something oneself or simply enjoy the work of others, re-post it somewhere else, share 'likes' and 'dislikes', post comments in social networks and this way spread ideas that others might find useful for their own creativity.

Meme-culture is a culture that permeates the virtual-world in such a way that it is often taken-for-granted, often being perceived as the natural way things are done in the internet. This is what makes this culture so strong and worth of further scrutiny. This study has approached this topic from a new theoretical perspective, developing new criteria to analyze internet-memes from a creativity-agency-postmodern perspective. Additionally, it has developed a way to use theories related to postmodernism instrumentally. It has also provided further insights on how everyday-creativity works in the internet. This study has, nevertheless, faced some limitations. First, the number of selected memes to be analyzed was minimal when compared to the number of existent memes provided by the KYM database. Further research could refer to bigger numbers of memes to

strengthen and possibly extend these criteria. Secondly, this study has focused solely on content, namely, internet-memes themselves. As a next project, I propose a study concentrating on the audience, namely the group-members of this meme-culture. How do they interpret the creative efforts allocated to the composition of internet-memes? How do they collaborate with one-another? What are specific reasons/motivations for the liking, creation, modification and spread of internet-memes? As one can see, it is a fruitful field of study, whose exploration has only begun.

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7. Images

Image 1: FWP – List of Problems. Retrieved from: <http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/194147-first-world-problems>

Image 2: Grandmother.rar. Retrieved from: <http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/271109-filename-extensions>

Image 3: Advice God – Free Will. Retrieved from: <http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/90399-advice-god>

Image 4: Egg-carton. Retrieved from: <http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/264092>

Image 5: Tupperware. Retrieved from: <http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/268049-if-it-fits-i-sits>

Image 6: Cat and Dog. Retrieved from: <http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/268072>

Image 7: Human. Retrieved from: <http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/294312-if-it-fits-i-sits>

Appendix A: Comments on KYM

Danielepicwin: i'm from a third world country i have this problems , 3rd world countries dont exactly means poor, read a fucking book people.

phantom.widow: This meme is stupid, I'm from colombia and we have the same problems, being from a 1st world country doesnt mean you are privileged, in fact, some things here are better than in some called 1st world countries.

BallJointedWing: One person's suffering does not negate another's. People VASTLY over estimate how well off we are because we're in a "First World Country". People who believe that term blankets us from starvation, struggle, and sacrifice are ignorant beyond all hope. I know what It's like to starve, and freeze, and I am an American.

So rarely am I really offended by a meme like this, but to be told my life is perfect because a few people who live a few towns over from me are living comfortably is incredibly insulting. some people know so little about the countries they live in.