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**Memetic Aesthetics between Artistic Production and Cultural Heritage.  
This is why we must consider memes the multimodal artifacts of the 21st  
century.**

Danilo Petrassi

University of Macerata, Dept. of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism (Italy).

d.petrassi@unimc.it

**Abstract**

Today there is nothing in the giant cauldron of the internet that doesn't create an avalanche of memes in response. Considering memes as the result of the use of creativity to express ourselves, our humor, values and generally our understanding of the world, we can say that memes are a kind of digital and personal form of art with the purpose to involve creativity in the selection and manipulation of symbols, images and texts, to convey specific messages or emotions.

But, what could be nowadays the relationship between artistic production and memetic aesthetics (the process behind memes creation and the ways in which these engage with and reinterpret

cultural symbols and references)? and what could make memes a form of digital contemporary cultural heritage? The aim of this paper is trying to gain a deeper understanding of memes as multimodal artifacts that reflect and shape contemporary culture in the digital age.

Keywords: internet memes, multimodal artifacts, semiotics

## **Introduction. In the Beginning was Dada**

It has always been difficult to define the concept of art, as there is a whole range of possible definitions. One of these, the most generalistic, presents art as any form of human activity that enhances the inventive talent and expressive capacity of those who create it. Another, definable more pragmatic, describes art, and therefore artistic production, as a complex of techniques and methods that are applied in the field of different applications. Having said this, it is stated that art underlies every human activity, carried out individually or collectively, which leads to forms of expression, relying on technical devices, peculiar skills and behavioral norms derived from study and experience. The emblematic result is the so-called "artwork", an artistic creation that implies a primarily aesthetics function.

When Marcel Duchamp rectified Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* by drawing a mustache and goatee on it, people began to question the integrity of the sense of "work" in artistic production. The new idea of art that was taking hold in a world characterized by technological progress was a fervent symptom of the countertrend, which was born under the influence of Dadaism. Following the Dadaist ideology, the most natural thing would be to imagine artistic production as something made as an imitation of a work that already exists. In this way we can talk about an "artifact". The artifact is the manifesto *par excellence* for the dissemination of conceptual art of the last century. Taking up the canons of "Dada", Duchamp attempts to fight art with art, creating the first rectified ready-made in history. Duchamp's goal was to create something new. The work called *L.H.O.O.Q.*, is an attempt to challenge the way people passively venerate artworks. The *Mona Lisa*, in fact, had lost meaning in aesthetic contemplation: it had become a simple object of worship, because it was very famous and because it belonged, in fact, to the collective artistic imagination.

The complete manifestation of Duchamp is the ready-made, something that is "already made, prefabricated, ready for use". It refers to an object available on the market, which an artist appropriates and deprives it of its utilitarian function. In this way any object becomes art with the addition of a new element, a title, a date, sometimes an inscription. In other words the artwork is manipulated and emptied of its sense and meaning and acquires artistic status once presented in another context despite the original one, such as an art exhibition. For Duchamp everything wants to be irreverent, provocative to create a new, allusive meaning, which leads us to reflect on the original and on the reason for the intervention carried out by the artist who modified it. Memes like readymades use something as a starting model and through a rectification process become multimodal (digital) artifacts.

Mimesis, memetics and memes

The notion of "memetic aesthetics" represents a contemporary phenomenon that warrants analysis through a comparative lens with Aristotle's concept of mimesis and his broader aesthetics. Although Aristotle did not directly address memetics, he established fundamental principles relevant to understanding the evolution of artistic creation and aesthetics over time. It's precisely for this reason that it is possible to use Aristotle to understand more deeply the emerging memetic aesthetics on the Internet. Aristotle's concept of mimesis, as articulated in his *Poetics*, revolves around the idea of art as an imitation or representation of life and reality. According to Aristotle, individuals (or artists) engage in creative copying by mimicking aspects of the world around them and transforming these imitations into a kind of artistic expression. This process involves a selective interpretation of reality in which artists convey their own perspectives and insights through their creations. Memetic aesthetics (as we will see later) similarly involves the creation of digital artifacts that imitate and reinterpret aspects of reality, often with humor, satire, or social commentary. Using Aristotle's mimesis we can understand how memes today serve as representations of human experience, values, and cultural phenomena. The key aspects of Aristotle's mimesis concern the importance of emphasis, creativity and interpretation: it is not only necessary to simply reproduce reality as we see it, but it is essential to interpret and transform it through one's own personal creative vision. In this sense, memes are a perfect example of mimesis because they represent a form of artistic expression that blurs the boundaries between creator and audience. Internet users actively

participate in the process of co-creation and dissemination of cultural artifacts (memes) and the memetic aesthetics involves the creative reinterpretations of cultural symbols, images, and texts to convey specific messages or emotions.

Furthermore, Aristotle's aesthetics explore the relationship between art and society as a cathartic function by allowing audiences to experience emotions vicariously and purging them in the process. In the context of digital culture, memetic aesthetics fulfill a similar function by providing a platform for individuals to express and process emotions in a digital environment. Memes can tap into shared cultural references and experiences, fostering a sense of community and belonging among internet communities. Additionally, Aristotle's mimesis theory addresses the role of audience reception in the interpretation of artistic production. The effectiveness of mimesis depends on the audience's ability to recognize and empathize with the emotions and experiences depicted in the artworks. By considering mimesis, we can understand how memetic aesthetics contribute to the cultural diffusion and significance of memes, and how they are frequently shared, remixed, and adapted by internet communities, resulting as a dynamic and iterative process of cultural and artistic production.

### **Semiotics of Memes**

The word “meme” represents a particular case for linguistics because it is a neologism whose author and appearance are known but which has undergone a semantic shift over the time. Meme derives from the Greek “*mimema*” (meaning “imitated”) and is defined by the biologist Richard Dawkins as a "single element of a culture" (Dawkins, 1976), capable of spreading and replicating like genes but in a cultural way. Memes appear primarily as units of cultural information that spread from brain to brain to influence social attitudes and behavior (Brodie, 1995). Limor Shifam, professor of communication at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, started to study memes from a digital culture perspective, stating that “behavior-driven memetics views memes as behavioral artifacts rather than ideas. In the behaviorist model, the meme vehicle and the meme itself are inseparable: the meme has no existence outside of the events, practices, and texts in which it appears; that is, it is always experienced as codified information. Furthermore, this approach argues that if memes were really just abstract units of information” (Shifman, 2013).

The most common meme structure generally consists of three distinct parts. The first one is the textual part(s), which is usually placed with a top and bottom text above the image (that is the second one) that introduces a semantic frame as a clue to possible interpretation and the third one is the meaning that it is generated from the interpretation conveyed by the first two parts.

The process in which a particular image becomes a meme template is decentralized and it's a result of a complex process of creation, dissemination, and evolution facilitated by digital communication technologies and internet communities. Memes often emerge from cultural references, current events, or shared experiences that resonate with a broad audience. Images that are easily recognizable or relatable are more likely to gain traction as memes.



Figure 1: USA's TV comedy series *The Office* is a perfect example of a content that turned into an avalanche of meme templates thanks to the use and remixing of the original frames.

The history of internet memes begins with the advent of Web 2.0, which began an important era of change on the internet. Through the development of new media and their tools it was possible to create the first internet memes. These technologies incorporate all the characteristics that make memes truly multimodal artifacts: participation, self-creation, free work, amateur culture (Cannizzaro, 2016). In recent times even if the word meme does not refer to a specific kind of content, the most famous and used form are the “templates”: captioned images (basically what most people associated with the word meme) accompanied with the use of a top and bottom text on it. In order for an image to be considered a potential meme template, first it needs to go viral and then become something capable of being continuously remixed by the users and becoming something easily shareable and spreadable (Jenkins, 2013). The word meme can refer to all those

contents (mostly are images), capable of spreading (like viruses) through imitation (like genes) on the internet. Memes come from everywhere: such as popular media references, photos, classical art, and, of course, movies and TV series frames and similar to American Pop Art, memes are a fusion of high culture, subculture and everyday culture.

Although they are often understood as synonyms, templates is what makes memes recognisable: in the meme structure the template becomes an actant (Greimas, 1966) that can dialogue and rework pop culture products. The template separated from its original context becomes, to quote Charles Peirce, an icon and loses all its temporary connotations and becomes a symbol of a universal meaning, readable even to those who do not recognize the origin. The innovation and manipulation of memes, easily achievable by numerous web apps present on any device, allows to create a specialized language composed of the juxtaposition of images (can be frames from films, artworks, references to pop and mainstream culture, pictures that have gone viral and so on) and to the possibility of creating with freedom and originality, through the textual part (totally customizable), its own interpretation of a specific semantic area of reference. It is extremely important to underline that all the templates that are uploaded into various meme's web app creation software automatically become copyright free.

Potentially any image can become a template used to create memes for different purposes and uses. Overlaying text on the template allows memes to produce a different meaning. The intent is to create an effect of recognition with the viewer depending "by particular audiences watching in specific circumstances" (Rose, 2001).



Figure 2: I created this meme using Meme Generator, one of the most used software for creating memes. I used a frame template from *The Office* to create a (meta)meme to explain, basically, how memes work.

The audience can be very broad or specific and depends on the type of message that is conveyed with the meme. Returning to Aristotle, the effectiveness of mimesis (memes) depends on the audience's ability to recognize and empathize with the emotions and experiences depicted in the artworks. The exact same template can address both a heterogeneous and very specific target. The meaning of memes is to rely on audience participation and engagement for their dissemination and impact.

#### A collective and digital artistic production

Mememes nowadays testify to the spontaneous creativity that characterizes our digital artistic creation. They are a current example of *détournement*, created and published in a totally irreverent and decentralized way and people, without exception, have the opportunity to actively intervene, creating their own personal content. This is why memes are a tool that mediate collective cultural participation (Milner, 2016). Memes therefore represent a certain type of artistic production on the collective culture using specific patterns capable of contextualizing pre-existing images and situations to express more general thoughts and feelings and effectively transforming them into "open" metaphors. Umberto Eco says that "text is therefore open: All interpretations of it are potentially unlimited, but not every act of interpretation has a happy end.

By interpretation we mean "the semantic actualisation of everything that the text means, as a strategy, with the cooperation of its Model Reader" (Eco, 1979). This means that memes are perceived as "open" texts: subject to constant modification as the result of collective remediation (Bolter; Grusin, 2002) with a specific intentionality directed at the audience to which they refer.

At the culmination of these reflections, considering memes as a form of collective visual art means drawing similarities between memes and the works of art that have marked the avant-garde artistic movements of the last century. Darren Wershler research chair at Concordia University said that "memes should be understood as the digital descendants of artists such as Man Ray, Walker Evans, and Andy Warhol - all avant-gardes whose practices largely concerned informational and social disruptions". The nature of memes is elusive and often ephemeral, but the way they are used to encode layered messages presupposes a full-fledged artistic activity. Apparent filiations could be drawn to connect memes with the irreverent movements of the Historical Avant-gardes by associating the irreverent and current memetic provocations with the reflection on the absurdity of the existence of the Dadaists and the subversive operations of the Situationist movement. Memetic aesthetics presupposes a common language, a "meme language" (Petrova, 2021) in which the connection between creators and consumers of these artistic products finds no linguistic, social or cultural barriers. The interactivity and simplicity of memetic aesthetics would identify them as the ideal heirs of the radical artistic experiments of the past century, committed to rewriting the concept of art towards the foundation of its increasingly inclusive accessibility.

From a post-structuralist point of view, memes are the definitive disappearance (death) of the author (Barthes, 1971) in the era of digital reproducibility (Benjamin, 1963) of the artwork, that definitively cancels the authenticity and originality of traditional artistic canon. In the memetic aesthetic the origin of the image doesn't matter, they are all just potential vehicles (Blackmore, 1999) for communicating something. Almost always the image from which a meme is obtained is completely de-signified and re-signified (Tanni, 2020) in a completely new and ironic way. Images are just pre-existing cultural products ready to overcome their original sources and become artworks of themselves.

Regardless of the image's origin, it can be transformed into a meme template to convey any message. Even images that refer to important historical events with social and political



implications can be used as templates to convey unrelated messages. However, like Gabriele Marino said, even the serious things have now become “memefied” (Marino, 2019).



Figure 3: “I Am Once Again Asking for Your Financial Support” is a quote by Bernie Sanders in his December 2019 fundraising video for the 2020 Democratic Party presidential nomination.

The quote gained popularity as a template on social media and soon created a lot of memes. The main mechanism of memes is irony which is understood in its total meaning. The template becomes ironic because it is layered, it loses track of its original meaning as it takes on new levels of interpretation.

### **Memetic aesthetics**

Guy Debord in his prophetic *La société du spectacle* stated that «within a word really on its head, the truth is a moment of the false» (Debord, 1967). One of the main problems to deal with memes as avant-garde art of the 21st century concerns the template(s). If, as we said before, templates are a pre-existing cultural product, how should we consider its status compared to the original work? Part of memetic aesthetics concerns precisely its ability to question the concept of originality and authorship of art in a manner similar to Dadaism: many works of that artistic movement were born as a reaction to the spread of photographic printing and the first mass

media. For example, Hannah Höch's collages exhibited at the National Museum in Berlin were new works but created from pre-existing photographs. Even Duchamp's *Fountain* was not physically created by Duchamp (it is a ready-made work that was recontextualized by the artist who makes it his own). Or the *32 Campbell's Soup Cans*, an artwork created in 1962 by Andy Warhol which consists of thirty-two canvases in synthetic polymer on canvas, depicting all the varieties of Campbell's soup cans (products that could be easily found on the market at the time).

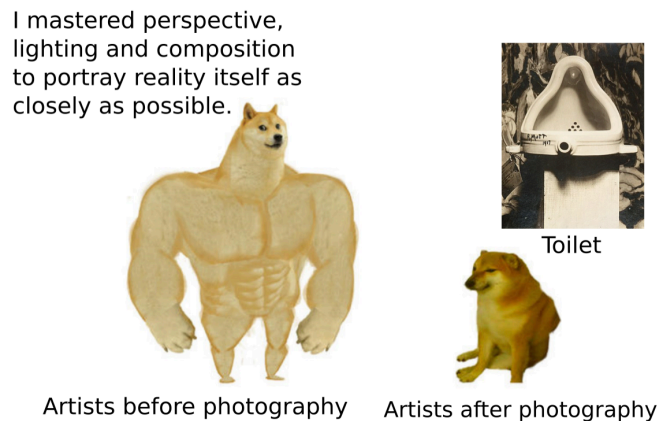


Figure 4: a typical example of the latest memetic aesthetics is using different templates to create memes with a collage-like style. In this example the photos of the dogs, a photoshopped Shiba Inu, are accompanied by Duchamp's famous *Fountain* and the two dogs simulated a ironically conversation on the way in which the concept of artistic production has changed with the advent of photography

Returning to the relevance of the template, it is this that creates the semantic framework of memes as the first clue to a possible interpretation. Considering a famous case as all of the scenes from *The Office* used as a meme template. There is practically a potential *The Office*'s template for any and all occasions, and the curious part is that there is no need to know or have seen the series to understand these memes because they work perfectly without any explanation of the sources, creating a unique aesthetics in which every actualization of the original is always partial as a result of different compounds.

In a certain sense it is the same mechanism that a musical composer uses when he uses the sample of a song to create a new base: that sequence of notes is taken, recontextualized and overwritten by a creative act that makes it a new original work. Yes, it is a process that questions the authorship of a certain work but at the same time continues to presume in any case the

unifying presence of an individual or a collective to create/add something new to something known. Memetic aesthetics doesn't give importance to the single iteration: the template cannot have an owner and whoever "created" it (it would be more correct to say who discovered it) originally is just part of a historical accident (Lolli, 2017). When a meme becomes a repeating mechanism, it creates a particular effect: the template is continually re-functionalized toward new and unlimited meanings. Here's what memes are: a paradigm of something that happens again and again.

The manipulation of the original and the disappearance of an author recalls the same attitude of the avant-garde artistic movements. While at the time this process was implemented by a small number of intellectuals and artists, memes, and consequently memetic aesthetics, are products of pop culture, accessible and manipulable by all, and for this reason they represent a radically freer form of art.

## **Conclusion**

If, as Aristotle agrees, artistic production serves as a creative copying function by reflecting the world as perceived into human behaviors and emotions, memes and memetic aesthetics nowadays serve as reflections of contemporary culture, reflecting societal norms, trends, and attitudes within the digital culture. Examining Aristotle's concept of mimesis, we can understand how memes function as cultural multimodal artifacts that capture and comment on the *zeitgeist* of our time. The process of memes creation is simple, collaborative and decentralized, with the purpose to collectively contribute to the creation and dissemination of cultural artifacts that reflect and shape contemporary digital culture. In fact, mimesis and memetics involves not merely copying reality but interpreting it through the creative lens inside artistic production. Today memetic aesthetics is currently the anti-ideological manifestation *par excellence* because it exposes and demonstrates the contradiction inherent in the artistic production of visual art: the devaluation of pre-established values, the denial of an absolute truth and a continuous and unlimited reversal of the initial message using products of pop culture. In other words, memes in a certain sense like the artworks of the avant-garde movements can be used as a language to spread strong Marxist ideals among the internet. And as Marshall McLuhan prophesied “in a

culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1967). After all, as Duchamp teaches us with his *L.H.O.O.Q.*, nothing is more effective than reworking and manipulating something to create a precise reaction.

Despite the similarities between Avant-gardes movement and memetic aesthetics, a further debate which has animated the art world in recent years still remains open. The concept of "intangible" art. All artworks, even the irreverent of Avant-gardes, have one characteristic in common: they can be physically touched. If considering memes as potential cultural and multimodal artifacts is now a fact, understanding how to collect and preserve the memetic aesthetics as a digital artistic production is the real challenge for the imminent future.

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