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Internet Memes as a Field of Discursive Construction of Identity and Space of Resistance

Abstract: This paper deals with Internet memes as a form of viral content that spreads via the network varying a basic concept while constructing and deconstructing different identities. If memes are understood as a discursive field in the completely new world of social media, in which different groups, their attitudes, ideologies and interests are represented more clearly and more directly than ever before through the appropriation of popular contents and images, then this form of viral content can be also viewed as a space of resistance and criticism in which identities are decentralized and ready for change.

Keywords: Internet meme, identity, representation, resistance, *Charlie Hebdo*

1. Introduction

The expansion of the Internet, specially the emergence of Web 2.0 platforms that enable interaction among Internet users, launched numerous discussions on the need to redefine the old concept of media culture, but it also initiated the need to re-think new facets of social development, relations, communication and identification. The fact that Internet users are able to create and distribute their own content goes in favor of the Internet as a new, creative social media. Hito Steyerl in his text *In Defense of the Poor Image* points to the proliferation of the immense number of so-called *poor images* with low resolution in compressed digital formats, which saturate the Internet with their numerous variations.[1] Technical quality has been replaced with availability as this form of audio-visual content is easily uploaded onto and downloaded from the Internet and is easy to process and modify. They are often opposed to the values of mainstream culture, heritage and copyright legislation. Poor images are marked

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[1] Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image", *e-flux Journal*, http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/, acc. 10/01/2015.

by a certain paradoxality: they can express collective social interests and at the same time they can be a field for commercial purposes, they can place experimental and art content, but they can also place pornography, they can provide participation for users in the process of creation, editing and criticism, but can also include them in the production process. Steyerl asserts that poor images are popular because they express all the discrepancies of modern society.

2. From viral strategy to participative culture

The logic and economy of poor images, to a great extent coincide with the textual poverty and intertextual connectivities in popular culture that John Fiske is dealing with. Just like the poor image that is circulating as a commodity or a representation of commodity, texts of popular culture are nothing more than commodities. According to Fiske, that is the basis of their incompleteness and technical imperfection, hence popular culture can be interpreted only intertextually, through the circulation of meaning of different layers of text. In this respect popular texts are not completed, self-sufficient objects, they are agents and open sources of materials that are repeated and copied and distributed in that manner. Popular texts are very often contradictory, but their contradiction is exactly what enables them to give multiple resistances to the homogenizing powers of social order. [2] It could be said that, in contemporary conditions generated in digital culture and distributed via the Internet, different formats are taking over the strategies of the circulation of meaning within texts of popular culture. Thereby, they open an unimagined field of freedom for different kinds of reading, identification, communication, participation, resistance or simply pleasure. The poor image Steyerl is referring to, that gains global popularity by means of modifying and varying its basic content, becomes the Internet phenomenon, or *Meme*.

An Internet meme is a viral content that varyies a basic concept, and is distributed rapidly via the network. Etymologically, the word originates from Ancient Greek and is represented in an abbreviated form of word mīmēma, μίμημα [míːmɛːma] which means "something imitated". The word was coined by Richard Dawkins, the popular and influential neo-Darwinist and evolutionary biologist, in his famous book *The Selfish Gene*. His intention was to invent the notion that would be an adequate phonetic equivalent of the word gene. In that sense, according to Dawkins, memes are cultural equivalents of genes – they are replicated and spread from one mind to another by imitation, analogous to genes. Dawkins originally defined the *meme* as a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation and replication, but in his latter works this definition has been modified and extended. As a form of cultural practices or ideas, memes are similar to a virus that is spread verbally or by repetition, and they frequently resemble parasites. Ultimately, the sets of successfully copied memes construct to culture, tradition, language and certain kinds of religious practices, and as

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[2] Cf. John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, London, Routledge, 1991, 123–127.

Dawkins indicates, people are mostly passive recipients of all cultural and civilization patterns without any significant prospects of participation in changes.[3]

Although, Dawkins' theory was very popular during the 1980s, at the same time and quite reasonably, it has been criticized as reductionist theory or even as pseudoscientific dogma that can easily fall into dangerous generalizations. Semiotician Kalevi Kull regards the concept of meme as a primitivistic concept of a sign which includes only its ability of being copied, but lacking a triadic structure (signifier – signified – sign).[4] In other words, memes are objects of copying, and signs are objects of translation and interpretation.

In the last ten years, with the Internet expansion and the emergence of Web 2.0 platforms, these strands have become relevant and they have received new conceptualizations. Nevertheless, the term "meme" has been reactivated and redefined as a concept that is specific to Internet culture and environments. At the 2013 conference organized by the company Saatchi & Saatchi dedicated to the phenomenon of memes, Richard Dawkins explained how they represent "abduction" of original ideas. Instead of coincidental mutations and Darwin's natural selection, we are now faced with the notion of human creativity as a conscious agency.[5] In other words, Internet memes represent a critical form of an original idea and that form is not much different than its primary definition because viral character has always been an important trait of memes. According to Dawkins, the meaning of the term has mutated.

Internet memes appear in many different forms: as images, animations, hyperlinks, hashtags and videos. Memes also appear as phrases or as just one misspelled word placed in different contexts. As Internet phenomena, memes can remain the same for a long term, but can also mutate and can be developed mostly by comments, parody or imitation. Like biological viruses, memes spread rapidly and sometimes gain worldwide popularity in just few days. Some forms of memes exist for a very long time because of variations of their content, while others lose their popularity very quickly and disappear. Memes are intertextual and, very often, they are generated from popular culture contents. Also, they can be products of social interaction, expression of certain subculture or, in a narrower sense, specific comment of certain fan clubs. In that sense, popularity and comprehension of memes depend upon global popularity and contemporaneity of their contents. Memes can be sharp social and political criticism and commentary, they can be relentlessly sarcastic or they can just be amusing. Quite often they are created as a reaction to other memes. They can concern a single person, occurrences, or social situations. In other words, memes can pass on any message very efficiently.

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[3] Cf. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2006, 189–201.

[4] Kalevi Kull, "Copy Versus Translate, Meme Versus Sign: Development of Biological Textuality", *European Journal for Semiotic Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2000,101–120.

[5] Cf. Olivias Solon, "Richard Dawkins on the internet's hijacking of the world meme", *Wired*,http://www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2013-06/20/richard-dawkins-memes/viewgallery/ytG-Fn-ixX9edg, ac. 30 November 2014.

Within cultural and mass media studies memes have become a relevant source for understanding the mass media content which is no longer transmitted from just one institutionalized source. However, we must take into account the blurred boundaries between interpersonal and mass communication, as well as between amateur and professional communication. In digital surroundings, imitation and remix are not just prevailing practices, they are also important parts of the so-called *participatory culture*, which is the result of individual development of civil, critical and activist consciousness.[6]

3. Identity positions and digital image dispersion

If memes are understood as a discursive field in the completely new world of social media, in which different groups, their attitudes, ideologies and interests are represented more clearly and more directly than ever before through the appropriation of popular contents and images, then this form of viral content can be also viewed as a space of resistance and criticism in which identities are decentralized and ready for change. Chris Barker stresses that the most important insight of Stuart Hall's concept of identity is the interface between the discursive "outside" (described by Foucault) and the identifications of the "inside" (illuminated by psychoanalysis and Lacan).[7]

For Hall, identity is the point of suture between, on the one hand, discourses and practices which attempt to interpellate, and on the other, the processes which produce subjectivities, "which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken'. Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us [...]. They are the result of a successful articulation or 'chaining' of the subject into the flow of the discourse [...]."[8] At the same time, Hall is calling for reconceptualization of binary oppositions in regard to deconstruction, previously made by anti-essentialist theories, but these theories have not been able to remove the historical influence of binary oppositions, which are still present in many political practices.[9] In that sense identities are important, because, for Hall,

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[6] For more about changes in the positions of power entities and reaffirmation of individual power in the virtual space see: Isidora Todorović, "Political Network: Rethinking Power Relations and Disobedience Strategies on The Internet", *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies*, Issue No. 2, 2012, 63–69.

[7] Chris Barker, Dariusz Galasinski, *Cultural Studies and Discourse Analysis, A Dialogue on Language and Identity*, London, Sage Publications Ltd., 2001, 32. This definition primarily implies consideration of Lacan's process of subjectivisation in the mirror stage and at the same time consideration of Althusser's concept of interpellation (identifications of the 'inside'). On the other hand, in Michel Foucault's genealogy research, the subject is the product of relation between the individual social activity and its inscription within discursive subject position (discursive 'outside').

[8] Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?" in: Stuart Hall, Paul Du Gay (eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity*, London, Sage Publications Ltd., 1996, 6.

[9] Stuart Hall argues that every meaning has its own position in the spectrum between the outermost, binary oppositions. Hall understands binary oppositions from the structuralist point of view, as the expression of modeling of the spectrum, but in order to comprehend the identity positions placed between abolishment and appearance, Hall uses Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance* beyond binary terms. He calls that concept the cultural logic of difference.

they represent sets of instantaneous different positionalities, the site of enunciation and the site of agency, which are constantly reconstructed within a given discourse. Hence, the initial point when questioning one's identity is to examine: "how do we see ourselves and how other people see us?"[10]

Internet memes, created some twenty years after Hall's famous text appeared in *The Question of Cultural Identity*, have called upon theoretical conceptualizations of identity positions of postmodern subjectivity, in an unexpected and witty manner. Memes generated under the name *What People think I Do / What I Really Do* are represent in the series of slides that show, at the first place, different stereotypes of certain professions or areas of knowledge and also problematize the representations of identity positions. These memes directly demonstrate that, as a social construct, identity is related to the forms of representation. The first *What People think I Do / What I Really Do* meme appeared on Facebook, February 7, 2012, and the *Contemporary Artist* meme was posted two days later by the artist Garnet Hertz, on his Facebook page (Figure 1). On February 13 the web portal *PCmag* reported in a short article on the series of new, very popular memes, with approximately ten examples.[11] The instantaneous success of this meme demonstrates that contemporary society understands the discursive character of the identity whose decentralization is evident through the images of professional specialization. Also other aspects of identity representations can be analyzed in a similar manner. Every meme of this type with no exception contains images concerning "discursive outside" (*What my friends think I do, What my mom thinks I do, What society thinks I do*) and "identifications of the inside" (*What I think I do, What I really do*), which actually illustrate Hall's definitions of identity positions, and, in some way, Barker's assumptions of the existing differences between personal and social identity.

More particular semiological analysis of every single slide, namely symbolic patterns or representation, decodes multitude of hidden, Barthesian mythological meanings that contribute to stereotypization.[12] For example, if one looks closely at meme a representing different discursive levels being used to construct the position of the contemporary artist, one can notice that the marijuana cigarette in the first slide is being smoked by a black male. The transgressive behavior of artists, which has been tolerated and even accepted as long as it could define and emphasize autonomy of the profession during the avant-garde and modernist periods, became the place of leisure and inactivity in modern society (and, by stereotype, it is often attributed to afro american population, minorities or marginalized social groups). On the other hand, reception of the position of the artist in public sphere (*What society thinks I do*) is limited to white male whose activities appear inapprehensive, inadequate and unproductive in the unified terms of capitalistic business surroundings.

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[10] Jelena Đorđević, *Postkultura*, Beograd, Clio, 2009, 357.

[11] Cf. Damon Poeter, "Memeology, The Best of the 'What I Really Do' Jokes on Facebook", *PCMag*, http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2400219,00.asp, ac. 30 November 2015.

[12] Cf. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, New York, The Noonday Press, 1972, 84–87.
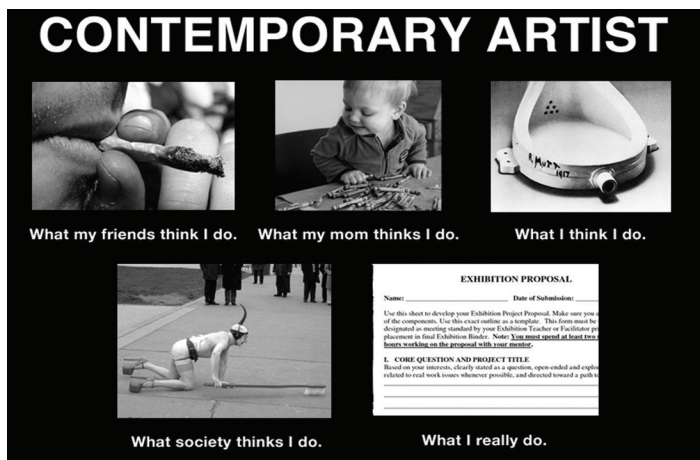
Figure 1 Meme *Contemporary artist* has been posted by Garnet Herc
in 9ᵗʰ February 2012. Source: http://conceptlab.com/whatireallydo/

"What you might call your 'self' is composed of the different positionalities or identities that you are willing to 'subject' yourself to, to be 'subjected' to."[13] Self-critical, self-ironic attitudes towards the multitude of professional orientations and also regarding other positions of identification (ethnic, sexual, subcultural etc.), plus the ability to realize and accept different perspectives and therefore different meanings, are signs that contemporary, developed society is able to think *différance* through discursive resistance, in the conditions of homogenized global society.

When individual positionality becomes the site of agency, it includes construction of a group identity built over a shared political project. For that purpose Hall introduced the notion of 'diaspora' or in other words, diasporic identities. These identities are more solid and less contingent because they are provoked within the "existing domain", i.e. history, but on the other hand, they are related to the ideas of hybridity and mobility leading them into dissemination that is not a reversible process. Genuine questions regarding the identity concern the use of historical, linguistic and cultural resources in the process of becoming: "not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. They relate to the invention of tradition as much as to tradition itself, which they oblige us to read not as an endless reiteration but as 'the changing same': not the so-called return to roots but a coming-to-terms-with our 'routes.'"[14]

Different identity positions and disseminations of meaning leading to production of broader cultural, political or ethnic identities can be traced through memes

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[13] Peter Osborne, Lynne Segal, "Culture and Power: Interview with Stuart Hall", *Radical Philosophy*, No. 86, November/December, 1997, 33.

[14] Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?", op. cit., 4.

called *First World Problems* (Figure 2). The Internet site *knowyourmeme.com* contains all available data about the origin, production, potential meanings, distribution, formats and derivations of globally popular memes. A multitude of links guiding to social networks and platforms for generating and distributing memes, like *Tumblr*, *Reddit* or *Quickmeme*, are located here. Regarding *First World Problems* memes, the site tells that the first known reference dates to 1995 from lyrics of a bonus track on the debut album of Canadian alternative rock band *Matthew Good Band's ("And somewhere around the world / Someone would love to have my first world problems...")*. The term "the first world" has been constructed as the opposite of the term "the third world", which was coined by French anthropologist Alfred Sauvy in 1952 to mark the countries non-aligned with either (Western or Eastern) Bloc. The meme was created on November 26, 2008 with *Tumblr blog* under the name *The Real First World Problems*, and the first Twitter hashtag (#firstworldproblems) appeared only a few months later. The peak of popularity was around noon on July 1, 2011.[15]

Figure 2 *First World Problems* memes in image macro forms have been produced since 2011. Source: http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/first-world-problems

Since 2011, thousands of memes of this type have been created in different digital formats. Image macro memes, for example, usually depict a melodramatic scene in which the protagonist is white male or female and the text that is about trivial frustrations and problems only privileged, rich people can experience. With that juncture of representation and text, one can find sharp, satirical criticism of closed and privileged social groups that are building their identity through the conformity and desires developed in the capitalistic, consumerist "first world" (Figure 3).

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[15] Cf. http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/first-world-problems, ac. January 10, 2015.

Figure 3 Derivatives: *White Girl Problems*, *Over-Educated Problems, First World Metal Problems*.
Source: http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/first-world-problems

Numerous derivatives generated as a reaction to *First World Problems* memes enable insight into the rhizome structure of memes, i.e. the ways of their widening and dissemination (Figure 4). Therefore, the basic concept should not be understood as essentialist.[16] Linguistically and semiotically, there is not only one source of memes, although it is possible to determine the place and time of its origin, as well as its author.
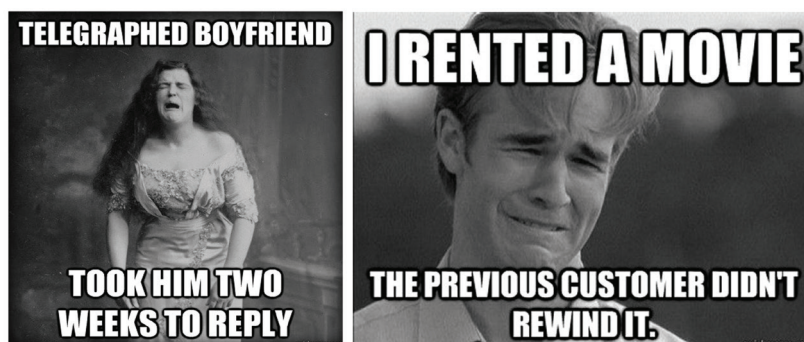

Figure 4 Derivatives: *1890's Problems*, *1990' First World Problems*.
Source: http://www.quickmeme.com/search?searchwords=1990%E2%80%99+First+World+Problems

According to Hall, different histories that "make your difference different from my difference"[17] are inscribed into the positionality that determines ethnic identity. Diasporic identities presume the recognition of necessary heterogeneity and diversity that make them hybrid. Those identities are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference, retracting numerous antagonistic discourses and practices, which are very often intersected.[18] Therefore, identities are positions one must take, although it is understood that positions are repre-

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[16] Formally, every digital content is constructed within the programming, computer languages, and memes are very often generated from preset, basic structures. Image macro is an example of meme generated in software that automatically analyzes short text and decodes it for a predefined image.

[17] Peter Osborne, Lynne Segal, op. cit., 34.

[18] Cf. Stuart Hall, "Cultural identity and Diaspora", in: Jonathan Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, 235.

sentations. Representations are always constructed through deficit, division, from the place of the Other, and therefore they can never be completely adequate to the process of identification. In other words, through memes "the first world" is discursively constructing and deconstructing identity positions and "in the era of globalization, we are all becoming – diasporic" (Figure 5).[19]
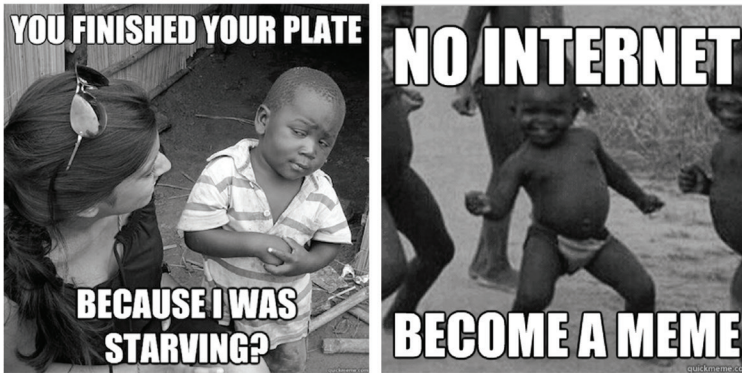

Figure 5 *Skeptical Third World Success Kid, Third World Success.*
Source: http://www.quickmeme.com/search?searchwords=Third+World+Success

The Internet meme "I am Charlie" (*Je suis Charlie*) appeared on Twitter on January 7, 2015, just one hour after two armed men burst into the offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris and killed 12 people. It was generated by French journalist Joachim Rocin, using the typography of *Charlie Hebdo,* in order to draw public attention to the tragic event.[20] Hundreds of people all over France and Europe protested on January 8, carrying signs reading *Je suis Charlie* (Figure 6).

Figure 6 *I am Charlie* and rugby supporters at a game in Toulon, January 10, 2015.
Source: http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/je-suis-charlie

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[19] Peter Osborne, Lynne Segal, op. cit., 34.

[20] Cf. http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/je-suis-charlie#fn6. ac. January 12, 2015.

The Internet meme, as a representation of an unambiguous discursive statement of identity (*I am Charlie*), has become a direct signifier of identity that comprises a broad spectrum of social and political values. Also, it has become the symbol of unity from which the social field of resistance is constructed. In this case, such identity homogenization should also be considered from a position of political power and exclusion. In this context, it should be stressed that identities are constructed through differences, through the relation with the Other, through discursive 'exteriority'. Every meaning that is approaching or equating itself with binary oppositions, becomes radical and trapped in its attempts to make clear demarcation lines. If we look at politics as the "mobilization of social identities for particular purposes"[21] then we can talk about the changes in the political field that uses movements on the socio-cultural level, by appropriating them for their own purposes.

4. Conclusion

 "The poor image is no longer about the real thing – the originary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities. It is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation. In short: it is about reality.," stressed Steyerl.[22]

In the contemporary, globalized world the postmodern subject does not possess its own fixed, whole and definite identity any longer. Complex and manifold systems of meaning in cultural representation contributed to this decomposition. From the perspective of cultural studies, theoretical approaches that underline processuality, also emphasize the concept of dynamic and variable identifications. According to Hall identity is continuously transformed, and it is the site where psychical life invests (is momentarily invested) within the public discourse. Therefore the question of identity positions is inseparable from representational politics in which the power is actualized into concrete social framework and conjuncture.

Translated into English: Ana Stevanović

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[21] Peter Osborne, Lynne Segal, op. cit., 36.

[22] Hito Steyerl, op.cit.