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The Meme is Dead, Long Live the Meme

Roy Christopher

*"This proud picture of human grandeur is
unfortunately an illusion and is counterbalanced
by a reality that is very different."*
— C.G. Jung[1]

We're all home for the holidays. Looking around the living room today at the family assembled there, most were clicking around on laptops, two were also wearing headphones, one was fingering a smartphone. The television was on, but no one was watching it. Each of us engrossed in his or her own digital experience, be it a game, a TV show, or some social meta-medium.

My friend Mark Wieman noted recently that the Long Tail has gotten so long and so thick that there's not much left in the Big Head. As the Internet-enabled market supports a wider and wider variety of cultural artifacts with less and less depth of interest, the big, blockbuster hits have had ever-smaller audiences. This wasn't the case just a decade ago, and it certainly wasn't two

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1   C.G. Jung, *The Undiscovered Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 24.

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or even three decades ago. The audiences seem to decrease in proportion to the size of the screens. I have found this splintering more and more in the classroom as I try to pick somewhat universal media artifacts to use as examples. Even the biggest shows and movies I brought up this semester left most of my students out, and if I ever got into the stuff I actually like, I was greeted with little more than cricket sounds. The postmodern promise of individual viewpoints and infinite fragmentation is upon us.

Attempts to unify this splintering are nothing new. In the 1990s, events like the X-Games and Gravity Games and websites like Hardcloud.com and Pie.com tried to gather long-tail markets that were too small by themselves into viable mass markets. It happened with the recording artists of the time like Sheryl Crow, Alanis Morissette, Dave Matthews Band, and Counting Crows. What was the label "alternative" if not a feeble attempt at garnering enough support for separate markets under one tenuous banner? If you can get both the kids and their parents, you might have a real hit. As Mark Lewman writes, "this is teen cool *and* mom cool."[2] Then in the 2000s, sub-brands like Nike 6.0 (in which the "6.0" referred to six domains of extreme activities: BMX, skateboarding, snowboarding, wakeboarding, surfing, and motocross) tried again. Whatever the practitioners of such sports might share in attitudes or footwear, they do not normally share in an affinity for each other. We remain in our silos, refusing to cross-pollinate in any way.

If marketing can't bring us together, mass tragedy will. In his 2009 novel, *Neuropath,* R. Scott Bakker describes the unifying effect of news of a mass or serial murderer, in this case, "The Chiropractor" (so named because he removes his victims' spines):

In these days of broadband it was rare for anything nonpolitical to rise above the disjointed din of millions pursuing millions of different interests. The niche had become all-pow-

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2   Mark Lewman, "The Coolhunter," 2009. [URL defunct]

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erful. The Chiropractor story was a throwback in a sense, a flashback to the day when sitcoms or murders could provide people a common frame of reference, or at least something to talk about when polite questions gave out.[3]

Regarding recent actual events of a mass and violent nature, Mark Follman at *Mother Jones* writes:

> When I asked threat assessment experts what might explain the recent rise in gun rampages, I heard the same two words over and over: social media. Although there is no definitive research yet, widespread anecdotal evidence suggests that the speed at which social media bombards us with memes and images exacerbates the copycat effect. As Meloy and his colleagues noted earlier this year in the journal *Behavioral Sciences and the Law,* "Cultural scripts are now spread globally… within seconds.[4]

Cliff Goddard and Anna Wierzbicka describe cultural scripts as "common sayings and proverbs, frequent collocations, conversational routines and varieties of formulaic or semi-formulaic speech, discourse particles and interjections, and terms of address and reference—all highly 'interactional' aspects of language."[5] Cultural scripts are the way our fragmented networks coalesce into unified interests and concerns.

The mainstream might not be much of a stream anymore. It seems now like culture is sliced and split among various niches, but in trial or tragedy that mist can condense into a wave as quickly as it needs to. The question is *how?*

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3   R. Scott Bakker, *Neuropath* (New York: Tor Books, 2009), 71.

4   Mark Follman, "Inside the Race to Stop the Next Mass Shooter," *Mother Jones,* Nov./Dec. 2015, https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/10/mass-shootings-threat-assessment-shooter-fbi-columbine/.

5   Cliff Goddard and Anna Wierzbicka, "Cultural Scripts: What Are They and What Are They Good For?" *Intercultural Pragmatics* 1, no. 2 (2004): 153–66, at 154.

Meme Weavers

As you know if you're reading this book, as originally conceived by Richard Dawkins, a meme is a unit of humanity, "a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation."[6] It is the smallest spreadable bit or iteration of an idea. Where some try to reconcile his original conception with the Internet version, I think we can call a moratorium on Dawkins's original idea.[7] This is an elegy for the meme.

Memes are based on genes, Dawkins's original analogy contends. He writes:

> Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.[8]

Others have taken the idea, the "meme" meme, further. Kate Distin has perhaps taken up the idea most earnestly with two books, *The Selfish Meme* (2005) and *Cultural Evolution* (2011), the latter of which moved away from memes and looked closer at languages, written, spoken, and musical.[9] In her book *The Meme Machine* (1999), Susan Blackmore distinguishes between memes that copy a product and memes that copy instructions.[10] Similarly, in *The Electric Meme* (2002), Robert Aunger extends the meme metaphor by adding phenotypes and conflating them

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6 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 192.

7 Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), for example.

8 Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene,* 192.

9 Kate Distin, *The Selfish Meme* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Kate Distin, *Cultural Evolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

10 See Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

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with artifacts.[11] With *Memes in Digital Culture* (2013), Limor Shifman does a noble job attempting to reconcile Dawkinsian memes with internet memes.[12]

Distinguishing imitation or replication as a process of communication, as well as integrating Everett M. Rogers's closely related diffusion of innovations theory, Brian H. Spitzberg proposes an operational model of meme diffusion. He writes, "communication messages such as tweets, e-mails, and digital images are by definition memes, because they are replicable transmitters of cultural meanings."[13]

In his book of the same name, J.M. Balkin imagines memes as bits in a "cultural software" that makes up ideologies.[14] In *Genes, Memes, Culture, and Mental Illness* (2010), Hoyle Leigh writes that "a meme is a memory that is transferred or has the potential to be transferred."[15] There's even T*he Complete Idiot's Guide to Memes,* which only discusses Internet memes in one chapter of its 23, and as an afterthought (Appendix E).[16]

Both biological and cultural evolution require competition and collaboration, and no one knows at what level the selection, transfers, and changes happen: Genes? Individuals? Groups?[17] Where memetic theories are concerned, another major problem is one of scale. What size is a meme? Where are its borders? What do memes add up to? Like genes, germs, and viruses, Dawkins gave memes "fitness," which means that a very "healthy" meme that grows big and strong can still be very negative and quite

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11   See Robert Aunger, *The Electric Meme: A New Theory of How We Think* (New York: Free Press, 2002).

12   See Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture.*

13   Brian S. Spitzberg, "Toward A Model of Meme Diffusion (M3D)," *Communication Theory* 24 (2014): 311–39, at 313.

14   J.M. Balkin, *Cultural Software: A Theory of Ideology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

15   Hoyle Leigh, *Genes, Memes, Culture, and Mental Illness: Toward an Integrative Model* (New York: Springer, 2010), 91.

16   See John Gunders and Damon Brown, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Memes* (New York: Alpha, 2010).

17   See Spitzberg, "Toward A Model of Meme Diffusion (M3D)."

dangerous.[18] As Brodie told me, "memetic theory tells us that repetition of a meme, regardless of whether you think you are 'for' it or 'against' it, helps it spread. It's like the old saying 'there's no such thing as bad publicity.'"[19] This is an overlooked aspect of memetics that also applies to Internet memes.[20] Retweets might not equal endorsements, but they do strengthen the memes.

Another problem you may have noticed in the "meme" meme via the brief and selective literature review above, is that the genetic analogy is not universal. Some theorists prefer an analogy with viruses. As many aspects as they might share as useful metaphors, genes and viruses are not the same thing. Douglas Rushkoff's *Media Virus!* (1994), Richard Brodie's *Virus of the Mind* (1995), and Aaron Lynch's *Thought Contagion* (1996) all take up the virus analogy over the gene one.[21] Maybe it's a better model, as when something is "viral," it spreads. When something is "genetic," it doesn't necessarily. Sure, genes are passed on, but viruses are inherently difficult to stop. Spreading is what they do. This epidemiological view of culture has been most thoroughly explored by anthropologist Dan Sperber. His 1996 book, *Explaining Culture,* goes a long way to doing just that, using a naturalistic view of its spread.[22] Some prefer to skip the memes altogether. Malcolm Gladwell, whose 2000 bestseller, *The Tipping Point,* also takes an epidemiological view

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18   See Carol Cadwalladr, "Interview with Daniel Dennett: 'I Begrudge Every Hour I Have to Spend Worrying about Politics'," *The Guardian,* February 12, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/feb/12/daniel-dennett-politics-bacteria-bach-back-dawkins-trump-interview.

19   Interview with the author, June 2, 1999.

20   Think here of Internet users reposting memes with which they do not agree and commenting to say so. Regardless of the context, the meme still spreads. That is, even if it is presented in a negative light, the meme is fitter, healthier, and stronger as long as it spreads.

21   See Douglas Rushkoff, *Media Virus! Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture* (New York: Ballantine, 1994); Richard Brodie,*Virus of the Mind: The New Science of the Meme* (Seattle: Integral Press, 1995); Aaron Lynch, *Thought Contagion: How Belief Spreads Through Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

22   See Dan Sperber, *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach* (New York: Blackwell, 1996).

of culture and marketing but without ever mentioning memes, told me in 2002:

> As for memetics, I hate that theory. I find it very unsatisfying. That idea says that ideas are like genes — that they seek to replicate themselves. But that is a dry and narrow way of looking at the spread of ideas. I prefer my idea because it captures the full social dimension of how something spreads. Epidemiologists are, after all, only partially interested in the agent being spread: they are more interested in how the agent is being spread, and who's doing the spreading. They are fundamentally interested in the social dimension of contagion, and that social dimension — which I think is so critical — is exactly what memetics lacks.[23]

If memes are indeed analogous to genes, then the real power of memes is that they add up to something. I'm no biologist, but genes are bits of code that become chromosomes, and chromosomes make up DNA, which then becomes organisms. Plants, animals, viruses, and all life that we know about is built from them.[24] "The meme has done its work by assembling massive social systems, the new rulers of this earth," writes Howard Bloom. "Together, the meme and the human superorganism have become the universe's latest device for creating fresh forms of order."[25]

Perhaps that was true two decades ago, when Bloom wrote that, or three decades ago when Dawkins wrote *The Selfish Gene,* but the biases and affordances of memes' attendant infrastructure has changed dramatically since. After all, memes have to replicate, and in order to replicate, they have to move from one mind to another via some conduit. This could be the oral culture of yore, but it's more and more likely to be technologically ena-

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23 Interview with the author, November 12, 2002.

24 See Elizabeth Parthenia Shea, *How the Gene Got Its Groove: Figurative Language, Science, and the Rhetoric of the Real* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008).

25 Howard Bloom, *The Lucifer Principle: A Scientific Expedition into the Forces of History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1995), 101.

bled. Broadcast media supports one kind of memetic propagation. The internet, however, supports quite another.

Units vs. Unity

Since the meme came on the scene, the mainstream has become less of a stream and more of a mist. Narrowcasting and narrowcatching, as each of us burrows further into our own interests, we have less of them in common as a whole.

Cultural divisions as such used to be framed as high versus low culture. *New Yorker* writer John Seabrook argues that we have evolved past such hierarchies into what he calls "nobrow culture."[26] Definitely erring on the high side, Seabrook doesn't know Stormtroopers from Sand People. Depending on which side of the high/low fence you stand, he and his ilk have "condescended and/or pandered" to you for far too long.[27] The monobrow mixing of high culture's concerns with low culture's lack thereof only makes sense if there's a market in the middle.

It's never made much sense to describe something aesthetically in terms of the mainstream, and now it makes less than ever. Working the ends against the middle trying to get the best of both worlds, so-called "nobrow culture" ends up with the bad of both without any of the good. Watered-down, diluted, widely disseminated, what's left of the mainstream is the cultural equivalent of the muddy, middle heartland viewed from an airplane window: flyover culture.

In our switch from television screens to computer screens and on to mobile screens, we fundamentally changed the infrastructure by which memes spread. We gather together around the former big screens to watch passively, while we individually

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26 See John Seabrook, *Nobrow: The Marketing of Culture and the Culture of Marketing* (New York: Knopf, 2000).

27 Hal Foster, "Slumming with Rappers at the Roxy," *London Review of Books* 22, no. 18 (2000): 16–18.

engage with the latter smaller screens also to watch passively but also to connect actively with each other.[28]

What Means These Memes

How are we to understand culture through a metaphor that's based on another metaphor? Genes are figurative as well, a rhetorical tactic deployed simply to give a name to something.[29] Meta-metaphors are known as pataphors, and they are so useless as to be called a fake science by their originator Alfred Jarry. Pataphysics is to metaphysics what metaphysics is to physics. It's one level up. "Pataphysics [...] is the science of that which is superinduced upon metaphysics," wrote Jarry, "whether within or beyond the latter's limitations, extending as far beyond metaphysics as the latter extends beyond physics." He added, "Pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments."[30] If ever there were a scientific concept that proved pataphysical, it is sure to have been the meme. Virtual. An imaginary solution.

In her book, *How the Gene Got Its Groove,* Elizabeth Parthenia Shea writes:

> As a rhetorical figure, the 'gene' moves from context to context, adapting to a broad range of rhetorical exigencies (from the highly technical to the intensely political to the ephemeral and the absurd), carrying with it a capacity for rhetorical work and rhetorical consequences. As the examples in this book show [...] the rhetorical consequences of the figure of the gene often include the assertion of boundaries, with

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28 See S. Craig Watkins, *The Young and The Digital: What the Migration to Social Network Sites, Games, and Anytime, Anywhere Media Means for Our Future* (New York: Beacon, 2009), passim.

29 See Shea, *How the Gene Got Its Groove.*

30 Alfred Jarry, *Exploits & Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician* (Cambridge: Exact Change, 1965), 21–22.

authoritative knowledge on one side and playful language, stylistic devices, and rhetoric on the other.[31]

Sound familiar? Memes only work if they move. If they are units of culture then in order to build and maintain that culture, they have to move.[32]

Memes are what supposedly make us different from all other species in that we can deny our biological genes because of our cultural memes.[33] As we've seen, memes have been touted as units of thoughts, belief, ideology, memory, learning, influence, and, of course, culture. As media theorist Douglas Rushkoff told me in 1999:

> I've been into memes off-and-on since *Media Virus!* (1994), and I still think they're an interesting way to understand culture. But meme conversations spend much more time explaining memes than they accomplish. In other words, the metaphor itself seems more complex than the ideas it is meant to convey. So, I've abandoned the notion of memes pretty much altogether.[34]

Even in the 1990s, the web's salad days, the concept was so beleaguered by explanation that one of its major champions dropped the idea. Rushkoff continues:

> I remember I was doing an interview about *Media Virus!* for some magazine, and it was taking place at Timothy Leary's house. And he overheard me mention memes, and the journalist asking me to explain to him what 'memes' are. Afterwards, Timothy teased me. 'Two years you've been carrying

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31 Shea, *How the Gene Got Its Groove,* 3.
32 See Greg Urban, *Metaculture: How Culture Moves Through the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); E.M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations,* 5th edn. (New York: Free Press, 2003)
33 See Daniel Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).
34 Interview with the author, June 2, 1999.

on about memes,' he said. 'If you still have to explain what they are every time you mention them, it means they just haven't caught on. Drop 'em.'[35]

Now everyone knows what a meme is. One is far less likely to have to explain what memes are as you are what they aren't. Forget it. An Internet meme is a meme now. Dawkins's idea has been hi-jacked by the jacked-in.

Ludwig Wittgenstein once said there was no such thing as a private language.[36] The presumption being that language, the prime mover of ideas if ever there were such a thing, only works if it is shared. The same can be said of culture. It only works if it is shared. If memes never add up to anything larger than memes, the concept is dead, and so is its culture.

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35 Ibid.

36 See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing, 1953). Conflating the idea further, Daniel Dennett says that "words are memes that can be pronounced" (Daniel Dennet, "Daniel C. Dennett: Religion's Just a Survival Meme," 2006, https://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/dennett/papers/ScienceTheologyNews.pdf).

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