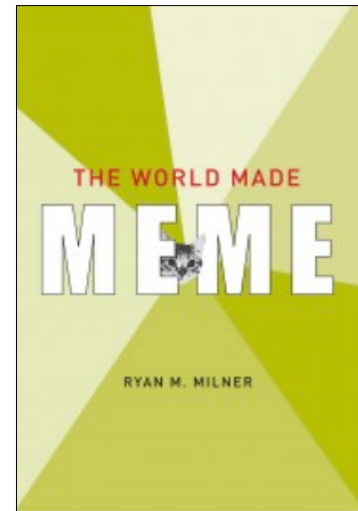Ryan M. Milner, **The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016, 272 pp. $32 (hardcover), $22 (paperback).

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After Richard Dawkins (1976) first coined the term *meme* as a name for the cultural analog of the biological gene—the basic unit of cultural transmission—some imagined *memetics* as an entirely new approach to analyzing culture. In the early 2000s, the term *meme* was adopted in online subcultures, and ultimately in the wider English vernacular, to describe remixes and imitations of found media content. Noting that the basic informational properties of memes in Dawkins' sense—their longevity, fecundity, and copy fidelity—were enhanced by digital media, Limor Shifman (2014) argued that Internet memes gave new theoretical viability to Dawkins' original concept.

Ryan M. Milner's **The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media** builds on Shifman's (2014) discussion of Internet memes, though it is equivocal when it comes to her argument that digital technology revitalizes "memetics." In a polished analysis, Milner examines a series of memes generated by Anglophone, U.S.-centered subcultures on sites like 4chan, Imgur, and Reddit in the period from 2010 to 2015. He describes memes as artifacts of digital "folk culture," strands or threads woven into "the interwine" of online subcultures and the wider mass culture. Memes themselves, of course, weave together disparate images, phrases, and performances.

Milner defines memes as "multimodal texts that facilitate participation by reappropriation, by balancing a fixed premise with novel expression" (p. 14). *Multimodality* refers to the way memes mix together different media, from still images to audio, video, and text. It is the first of five "logics" that Milner discerns in memes. The other four logics are *reappropriation*, *resonance*, *collectivism*, and *spread*. Multimodality and reappropriation are about memes as artifacts or forms in themselves, while the last two logics, collectivism and spread, are about the shared social experience that memes generate and sustain. The logic of resonance—how memes move and inspire those who encounter them—is in the middle, touching on texts both in themselves and in context.

When Milner says "multimodal," what he is usually talking about is the centrality of images to Internet memes. Memes, he says, are only the most recent expression of a long tradition of visual vernacular communication that can be traced as far back as caricatures of Egyptian pharaohs. Digital reproduction, it seems, completes the process initiated by the age of mechanical reproduction. Decontextualization is consummated by ready recontextualization. Just as large phenotypic changes result from small genetic changes, large changes in meaning result from small digital annotations that transform the relationship between images and their contexts. Recontextualization also happens through rapid digital

circulation. All traces of Walter Benjamin's *aura* disappear (Benjamin, 1968)—a point underlined by the ironic, often profane content of memes.

The first half of the book moves from these logics to memes' "grammar," and then to the "vernacular" this grammar sustains. The grammar of Internet memes is explained mainly through the multimodal and reappropriation logics of memes as forms. The vernacular, meanwhile, is understood through social rather than formal logics, in particular, collectivism. Internet memes offer a new common language to online collectives, playing a central role in holding together—and policing the boundaries of— digitally mediated subcultures.

Vernacular and *grammar* imply an analogy with verbal language that Milner makes explicit, though the analogy is inevitably imperfect. Unlike speech in live conversation, Internet memes tend not to be immediately identifiable with their individual authors. The logic of collectivism means that, to use Pierre Lévy's Latin terms, memes appear to emerge from a plural *cogitamus* rather than any individual *cogito* (Lévy, 1999). Also, whereas the spoken word vanishes into air, memes are inscribed in a relatively durable medium. Just as etymology emerged after printing made the recording and reproduction of language ubiquitous, Milner's book seems to suggest that memetics emerges as the recording and reproduction of imagery become ubiquitous too.

The second half of the book turns to the ambivalent role memes play in public discourse, and in the wider cultural tapestry. A pair of chapters explore, in turn, the democratic challenges and democratic potential of memes. These are followed by a final chapter on the reciprocal relationship between the mass media and online culture. With a dash of ahistorical overstatement that may inadvertently reflect the digital acceleration of culture, Milner describes mediated culture as still dominated by "age-old culture industries" (p. 201).

The discussion in this second part of the book might be read as a precursor to *The Ambivalent Internet,* a book that Milner coauthored with Whitney Phillips (Phillips & Milner, 2017). In the book under review here, Milner already considers meme-based discourse "ambivalent." Ambivalence is intensified by the ironic, detached, "lulz" register that online conversation is famous for. Hence Poe's law: "It is difficult to distinguish extremism from satire of extremism in online discussions unless the author clearly indicates his/her intent" (p. 142). As images gain currency through digital networks, their nonpropositional language does not lend itself to clear indications of intent.

Milner is clear-eyed about how misogyny, racism, and exploitative culture industries work through memes and online subcultures more generally. He voices concern about privacy in an era of "hyperpublicity." Acknowledging the continuing power of the culture industries, he seems to accept Christian Fuch's argument that Web 2.0 is not a "participatory system" (p. 202). But Milner has not really let go of the tendency toward optimism associated with "participatory culture," something expressed in his repeated use of the adjective *vibrant*. It is *vibrant*, not *ambivalent*, that appears—twice—in the final sentence of his conclusion.

If Milner has since become less ambivalent about the Internet's ambivalence, it is noteworthy that *The World Made Meme* was published in the decisive year 2016, and so was researched and written before the events of that year slowed optimism's roll. The level of cultural–political antagonism reached in 2016 has been interpreted as a matter of online trolling seeping into the mainstream (Nagle, 2017). Others argue that online trolling only reflects tendencies and conditions in the culture at large (Phillips, 2015).

Either way, Milner's research gives insight into aspects of the democratic crisis that surfaced in the Anglophone North Atlantic the year his book was published. It reveals "vibrant collectives spreading information without signature or citation, to the point of difficulty in assessing accuracy and credibility" (p. 201). It leads him to contemplate Chantal Mouffe's distinction between "antagonism" and "agonism"— between unproductive, antidemocratic discourse that dehumanizes and excludes, and the necessary impoliteness of productive civil argument. If Poe's law says it is impossible to tell the earnest from the ironic, is it likewise impossible to distinguish antagonism from agonism? As Milner says at one point, "the debates in memetic collectives often come with ambiguities in their tone and tenor, which might mute their vibrancy" (p. 136).

Vibrancy can be muted in more categorical ways. Since 2016, antagonistic memes spread on Facebook have contributed to mob violence in Sri Lanka and Indonesia and to genocide in Myanmar. Such tragedies are warnings of the perils of online antagonism, and a reminder of the need to look beyond the U.S. context. That said, Milner's discipline in looking through a narrow aperture makes for an exemplary work of in-depth research, a clear contribution to serious conversations about online culture—in particular, its visual dimension. Some would no doubt prefer to see more attention paid to political–economic factors, and even readers satisfied with Milner's more phenomenological approach might like to see greater attention given to how memes originating on sites like Tumblr spread through social media platforms—an increasingly important nexus between the subcultural Internet and mass culture.

Taking him on his own terms, the least satisfying aspect of Milner's book may be his own ambivalence about some of those terms themselves. For instance, while he seems to equate "a shared social vernacular" (p. 84) with "lingua franca," he also implies these are two separate things, writing that the "lingua franca" possesses, along with logics and grammar, a "vernacular" (p. 8). Most crucially, Milner's methodology is discourse analysis, and when he uses phrases like "memetic contestation," it is not always clear what the adjective adds to the discussion. Does it simply mean "pertaining to Internet memes," or does it indicate a more general theory that promises insights into culture at large? Milner justifies this ambiguity as "nuance," which is only partly convincing. Nuance is necessary for understanding culture, but here at least, it muddies the analogy with biology.

The age of digital reproduction has accelerated cultural evolution, making culture more demotic, if not always more democratic. Along the way, "an errant idea from the biological sciences happened to resonate on 4chan" (p. 9). The happenstance means that "meme" is here to stay, but it does not follow that the content Dawkins first suggested for this form—"an irreducible unit of cultural transmission or of imitation" (Dawkins, 1976, p. 206)—will prove theoretically productive. Dawkins derived *meme* from the

same Greek root as *mimesis*, prompting a question Milner leaves hanging: What does the neologism *memetics* offer to cultural theory that the more venerable *mimesis* does not?

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