

THE MEME: A NEW POSSIBILITY OF DIGITAL HUMANITIES

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Talking about the humanities has never made more sense than in this 21st century, the century of the great revolution of digital technologies that have brought new possibilities to human coexistence in this world. Although it seems a misleading statement, as it is a time dominated by technology and not by humans, it is precisely this predominance of communication technologies that poses a need to rethink the role of the human as to their role as “user” of digital artifacts, as well as the scope that these technologies can achieve in terms of the development and dissemination of humanistic knowledge.

The present work serves somewhat more as a repository of questions about this complex relationship between the human being and digital communication technologies, characteristic of this 21st century. In a first time, there will be a brief tour of the historical sense of the humanities; Subsequently, the adaptation they suffer to the digital context in which we live will be reviewed; for, at a last moment, to generate a reflection about humanism in the era of social networks, in particular, with the production of Internet memes.

The fundamental purpose of this text is to state that the Internet meme can be understood as a tool

capable of projecting humanistic knowledge towards new dimensions, in a context where technology seems to be a factor that eliminates the human sense. With this, research on the meme and its epistemological value is questioned and promoted. Likewise, it is intended to stimulate the study of the meme from the humanistic perspective.

A brief account of the humanities in human history

The historical definition of the origin of the humanities is somewhat complicated. Although there are ancient antecedents in Greece and Rome through the Homeric and Socratic thought that became the conception of the so-called liberal arts, organized through the Trivium and Quadrivium, the generalized meaning of the origin of the humanities is usually set in the known historical period like Renaissance. Around the merchant dynasties that arose in Italy, mainly in Florence and Milan, the development of the arts and sciences occurred thanks to the sponsorship of the new noble families that required people who had some outstanding ability in activities such as painting, sculpture, architecture, music, development of war artifacts, diplomacy, among others. From there emerge the figures of Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael and even Niccolo Machiavelli.

However, this blossoming of human knowledge made no difference between science and art. In a way, the sense of art prevailed as “ability”, which could encompass many activities. The best example is Leonardo himself, who stood out as a painter, but also as an inventor and even as an anatomist. In a different context, Machiavelli was also a mix between political adviser, speechwriter, and ambassador to the Medici court.

If a humanistic sense is attributed to the time, it is because all these disciplines listed are developed in a context opposed to the previous intellectual movement that had dominated Europe, known as the Scholastic, current that placed reason alongside faith as necessary elements for understanding the figure of God. The Renaissance is shown to be

humanistic when contrasted with a theocentric philosophical trend, even when everything human is intermingled.

If there was any figure with a humanistic sense in those times, it was Erasmus of Rotterdam, who not only recovered the meaning of the ancient Greco-Latin texts, but also freed thought from the ties of religious and social institutions. With his *Praise of Madness*, he established the keys to a complete and consistent humanism. With Erasmus came the idea that they are the crazy, the different, the ones who get out of the mold, the only ones who can bring about a change in society. Over the years, one might think that there is an overvaluation of madness, but without it, humanity would remain static in the physical and hypocritical in the moral. Erasmus represents the possibility of an authentic liberation of the human being from its moral and social limitations.

Erasmus' inheritance would take several years to materialize with the humanistic sense that today we confer on the idea. It can be said that it was until the establishment of scientific theory in Isaac Newton's *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* that science distanced itself from thought that was difficult to verify, such as philosophy, the arts, literature, history, and history, which begins to be the basis of the so-called social sciences. The so-called Scientific Revolution of the late seventeenth century and culminating in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century established the parameters to separate scientific thought from humanistic thought, so the true origin of the humanist notion began at this time.

The great paradox is that this moment that represents the independence of humanistic thought also embodies the beginning of its own end. The enlightened scientific movement became the fundamental pillar of industrial development and, consequently, the epistemological base of capitalism. Science began to assume a monopoly on truth and its moral superiority through a promise of progress. Of all the disciplines of humanistic knowledge, only economics would be able to get on the ship of scientific modernity thanks to Adam Smith; as well as his mathematical explanation that makes it seem like an exact science and not a social science.

The rest of the humanistic activities gradually lost brightness. Although the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries occurred the great nov-

els, the opera, the Victorian theater; impressionist painters and symbolist poets; it is also the time of the great inventions that generate the emerging capitalist modernity: the telegraph, the automobile, photography and the cinematograph. With the advances in technique, the humanist's dreamy story lost echo in a society excited by the possibility of transmitting his voice on a cable or crossing the Atlantic in unsuspected times. Reality was fantastic enough on its own to cater to grandiose tales.

The horrors of world wars in the 20th century were not enough to change this course of view on humanism, despite the advent of the artistic avant-garde. With the rise of the phonograph and music recording technologies, sound art became one more commodity; throughout the century; cinema and television turned off the floodlights in theaters; and the visual arts became a sumptuous commodity that today generates more morbid than human ties between those who work in the whimsical "art market". Thinking about the arts and philosophy seriously became an activity for a few misfits. With the arrival of the 21st century and the digital era based on computers and smartphones, the picture seems more bleak. However, in the presence of these technologies a paradox underlies where you can find sustenance to recover the value of the humanities in the so-called "information society".

The digital humanities, or the humanization of the computer

The first moment in which humanistic studies encountered digitization was in 1949, when a priest set out to make a concordance index of the works of Saint Thomas Aquinas with a series of related authors. In sizing the volume of work this would entail, he turned to IBM for assistance in this work. Thus, until 1974, the so-called *Thomasticus Index* was completed, which includes more than eleven million words in medieval Latin.

This project allowed us to visualize a world of options that opened up at the crossroads between computer science and humanistic activities. This first stage of the so-called "digital humanities" consisted mainly of the incorporation of the computer to organize and systematize informa-

tion related to humanistic studies. Various databases and catalogs of relevant documentation on the subject were organized. Subsequently, tools were also developed for the analysis of all this information.

With digital 2.0 technologies, a whole new field of exploration opens up. This new stage of the digital revolution has several fundamental characteristics, namely:

- a. There is no longer a passive role for the recipient. Today, anyone with a computer or smartphone is capable of producing content that can be made public online.
- b. Exponential multiplication of information. Now, the information available on the Internet doubles every 18 months (Moreno, 2012).
- c. The right of authorship is shifted towards the right to share. The 21st century internet system is designed so that a large amount of content is republished by users regardless of who is the original author of it. (Himanen, 2001)
- d. The principle of collective intelligences appears. Second generation Internet systems allow the co-production of content, giving rise to truly concordant spaces for information.
- e. Appearance of personalized content. Just as there is collective work, the use of algorithms to analyze publications allows digital companies to direct extremely accurate information related to the personality profile of each user.

These qualities are present in practically all Internet content from the second decade of the 21st century. In the same way, it impacts the proliferation of funny videos as well as ambitious academic projects, similar to Thomas Aquinas' submission to data processing. The digital humanities take a very particular path from the new role that a much more active internet user acquires, a prosumer (Humphreys, 2008) who, as well as receiving information and consuming it, participates in the generation of information.

Digital Humanities 2.0

In 2010, the University of London launched The Bentham Project, which consisted of the transcription of more than 60,000 manuscripts by the philosopher Jeremy Bentham. The objective of the project was to speed up the processes of transcription and editing of the manuscripts, expand access to Bentham's texts and contribute to the long-term preservation of the collection of the university library.

The project would last one year, but a trial period of 6 months was established, in which a little more than 1,200 participants were registered who edited a little more than a thousand manuscripts; all this from more than 15 thousand visitors to the site, of which almost half with unique visits. A working average of 35 weekly manuscripts was achieved.

This is a great example of how collective intelligence has vast results when implemented in academic projects. Likewise, the principle of sharing is observed here, when the library itself opens its catalog to public participation, and a text can be edited by different users, which translates not only into a greater number of transcripts, but also with higher quality.

Likewise, it is important to highlight the new dimension that academic papers and conferences have acquired due to the incorporation of digital social networks. The first tool that was used to accompany the exercise in rhetoric was microblogging, in particular Twitter. Some network users who attended academic events highlighted the most important phrases of what the exhibitor said, thus allowing the audience to be extended outside the room. The external ones not only attend to the messages of the exhibitor; they also have the possibility of asking questions or statements about what has been said through the social network.

The Facebook network has also been used for these microblogging purposes. However, it is important to emphasize that, since it had the possibility of transmitting live video in 2016, the capacity to extend the audience of an academic event outside its walls has increased considerably. I myself have used this tool during some exhibitions and I find that it allows to expand audiences and have viewers outside the room watching and commenting on the subject of the presentation.

In this same sense, it pays the nature of YouTube, the network expressly dedicated to videos, which also broadcasts live and also allows users to consult the video at any other time. A very notable case was the debate held by the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek and the Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson at the University of Toronto on April 19, 2019. The event was broadcast live through the aforementioned video network and, to the, at the time of typing these lines, more than half a million views (Peterson, 2019).

So far everything seems impressive, networks increase conference audiences and allow new interactions with viewers. However, visits to broadcasts or the issuance of written messages are no guarantee of true attention from the recipients. Analysts of the impact of social networks formulated the law 90: 9: 1, which tells us that 90% of visits to a video or tweet are just voyeurs, 9% hold their attention for a short time, while only 1% are really attentive and actively participate in the event. Taking the Žižek-Peterson debate as a parameter, the debate would have only about 5,000 e-viewers attentive to the event that lasted about 2 and a half hours.

Despite this pessimistic rule, that very small percentage of new participants allows the presentation to have scope that would not otherwise be possible. In addition, networks are themselves a record of events that have occurred, making documentation of academic events easier when using these digital tools. Again, the transmission of oral academic expositions through cyberspace recovers the characteristics of the 2.0 information that we previously exposed: the receiver inside the room becomes the sender, for which he must use the right to share, while multiplying the information available. Networks are a strong enhancer of humanist activity in the 21st century. However, it should be reviewed whether other formats of digital communication are also elements that enhance the humanities in technological formats.

Concentrated wisdom: the meme as a humanistic tool

In the second decade of the 21st century, the use on the Internet of images taken from popular culture - TV programs, films, photographs with very expressive faces - that are accompanied by small phrases with a metaphorical meaning and a high sense of humor. These images are popularly known as memes, whose name is not a mere product of chance.

The creation of the term is attributed to biologist Richard Dawkins, who, when writing about genetics, coined the concept hinting that the human differential with the rest of life lies in culture, which is based on memory:

The new broth is the broth of human culture. We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that carries the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation. "Pamper me" is derived from an appropriate Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds something like "gene." I hope my classicist friends forgive me if I abbreviate meme and leave it in meme. If it is any consolation, it is possible to think, as another alternative, that it is related to «memory» or the French word *même*. In English it should be pronounced "mi:m". (Dawkins, 1993: 218).

From an evolutionary sense, Dawkins was aware of the power that his idea would have, although he never dimensioned it in a computerized sense, but rather cultural:

Apparently, the term "meme" is turning out to be a good meme. It is widely used today and in 1988 it joined the official list of terms to consider in future editions of the Oxford English Dictionaries. That is why I feel more compelled to repeat that my proposals regarding human culture were modest almost to the point of boredom. My true ambitions - and they are truly great - go absolutely in another direction. I intend to postulate almost limitless power for slightly inaccurate self-replicating entities, as soon as they arise anywhere in the universe. (...) By analyzing the memes in the last chapter I was trying to make a defense of the reproducers in general, and show that genes were not the only important members of that class. I'm not sure if the medium of human culture is really in possession of what it means to keep a form of Darwinism going. But in any case it is a secondary question. (...) My purpose

was to cut genes to scale, and not to sculpt a great theory of human culture. (Dawkins, 1993: 218).

It seems to me that, like many sociocultural aspects, the images that circulate on the Internet with the intention of generating laughter go beyond the biological and organic analogy that the social Darwinists tried to make since the 19th century. However, it is possible to sustain the meme-gen analogy considering that both notions deal with information transmission units for the infinite reproduction of the first information pattern. It is a behavior no longer genetic but epidemiological; it is an entity that replicates, spreads, multiplies: it is a virus. This meaning is conferred on the term meme by scientist Dan Sperber, for whom the concept also acquires a strong sense of representation:

A representation can be slowly passed down through the generations and is comparable to the endemic; other representations spread rapidly throughout an entire population and have a short expansive life, comparable to the epidemic. (Sperber, in Castaño, 2013: 85).

This epidemic quality is not exclusive to funny images. Tweets, Instagram influencers or web reports that expose 20 reasons to read this article, all keep the quality of representation that has become characteristic of the Internet. This is “writing to n-1”, Deleuze dixit.

It can be said that memetics is the new standard of cultural transmission and preservation. In this sense, it would be worth asking if the meme, understood in its epidemic sense, can also function as a means of transmitting the humanist sense and join the repertoire of the so-called “digital humanities”.

In my opinion, there is a specific type of “meme” that can fulfill these qualities. There are various profiles on the Internet that create and disseminate these images with humanistic content: Literary Memes, Philosophical Memes, Social Science Memes, Learned Memes, Society of Applied Philosophy, National Institute of Beautiful Memes, Memero Institute of Anthropology and History, just to mention some of the most popular. Their common feature is to take pictures or phrases of famous intellectuals, such

as Edgar Allan Poe, Karl Marx, Michel Foucault or Diego Rivera, among others. His image, famous phrases or consummate works are used in different contexts in images that circulate on social networks.

The obligatory question in these cases is if we can consider that these memes represent some variant of “digital humanities”. The first reaction based on what was stated in the initial part of this text, we would have to say no, since the bulk of humanistic work in the digital field is based on the recovery and organization of assets such as the *Thomasticus Index* or the *Bentham Project*. Nor does it seem that through meme profiles it is possible to increase the audiences of academic events as social networks do. However, we consider that these social media profiles that spread jokes in meme format have a fundamental value for humanistic studies.

The contribution of viral jokes on the Internet underlies the very five characteristics mentioned in this text about the potential of Internet 2.0. Let’s review one by one and how this adapts to memes with a humanistic flavor:

The receiver is not a passive entity. From the possibility of forwarding the image to also intervening it and adapting the content to a certain space and time context, the receiver is also part of the information dissemination process. This active role implies knowledge of the theme of the meme, which requires a receiver not only active in networks, but in humanistic knowledge.

New memes on humanistic issues circulate daily, not only of content created by the aforementioned specialized profiles, but also users themselves can take the meme of the moment to create new content with a more humanistic approach.

The most popular humanistic meme dissemination profiles have friendly, easy-to-remember names. These same profiles are the only records of authorship of memes. Sometimes memes carry a watermark that identifies authorship; at other times, there is not the slightest attempt at signing. They are made to be shared and spread massively.

Humanistic content memes are products of great creativity and require both knowledge of the authors and their respective works and sufficient creativity to apply such knowledge to images or situations of

popular culture. This process can hardly be done individually. It requires the participation of different minds with different talents that are combined in ingenious and intelligent images at the same time.

Finally, each of the humanistic meme profiles establishes its own personality. By calling themselves literary, sociological, historical, philosophical memes, among others, the meaning of each of the profiles is clear.

This analytical exercise allows us to recognize the qualities of the meme, but it could be insufficient to determine if they have the quality of being considered digital humanities. Perhaps one can criticize the lack of seriousness in the treatment of the subjects, or the selectivity of the public that is spoken to. One could also argue for its superficiality and banality, including the ambiguity caused by anonymity. Despite all these criticisms, the humanistic meme has great didactic potential. It is a medium that has the ability to contrast classical ideas with contemporary situations.

This text is intended to influence a different vision of the meme on the Internet, which is not only a means of entertainment, but also an instrument of association of ideas, contribution to reflection on issues of human meaning that never cease to be important. In the midst of a technologized and technologizing environment, the meme with a humanistic sense reminds us that before the automated artifact exists the human being, there is no completely autonomous artificial intelligence that is not preceded by natural intelligence.

In this sense, what is intended is to question the banality of our times and influence new ways of visualizing the so-called mass self-communication that allows an occurrence to become a worldwide message. The meme is a powerful tool to update the thinking of the great authors, to question the great problems of our time and also to document the thinking of the dawn of the 21st century.

This work tries to reassess the meaning of the meme and locate it in the original intention of Richard Dawkins, as a minimum unit of transmission of cultural information. If we visualize it this way, the popular use of these digital communications goes beyond its first humorous function, but also becomes a tool for spreading knowledge and cultural values.

Thus, making a meme about Descartes, Nietzsche or Van Gogh is not only an intelligent joke, but also a testimonial of how the great ideas of these characters that have transcended their space and time are reinterpreted. We invite you to rethink the meme, to question it, to approach it critically, but above all, to continue creating and spreading it.

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