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Semiotics of virality

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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To Paolo Fabbri, semiotician (1939-2020), Jan Blommaert, linguist (1961-2021), and Omar Palermo, youtuber (1979-2021), who had different views on memes.

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1. Metaphor of contagion (and contagion of the metaphor)

- 1 Virality is a long-standing notion within Western social sciences, addressed in different ways and under specific lexicalizations by various seminal authors. Sociologist Gabriel Tarde (1890) uses the notion of contagion to convey how social forms are being generated thanks to the interaction between the modality of invention (which is typical of people of genius) and that of imitation (typical of the masses). Psychologist James Mark Baldwin (1894) defines imitation as a fundamental step in the “natural history of consciousness” of the individual, being the result of the principle of adaptation to the environment. Anthropologist Gustave Le Bon (1895) uses the concepts of contagion and suggestion to explain the apparently irrational actions of crowds. Writer Elias Canetti (1960) describes the dynamics of social contagion by resorting to the notion of discharge (*Entladung*), the culmination of the tension towards a common goal, thanks to which the crowd becomes the mass and feels a moment of delusional happiness, since

the accomplished deletion of the differences between individuals is superficial and transitory. The most successful model of sociocultural dynamics rooted in the metaphor of contagion is attributable to biologist Richard Dawkins, whose hypothesis has systematically penetrated the collective imaginary, generating a sort of short circuit, the “contagion of the metaphor” (Volli 2017).

- 2 Dawkins imagines the cultural homologue of the genes of the biological world: memes, minimal units of transmission of cultural information, capable of leaping from one head to another thanks to a process of replication subject to the laws of natural selection identified by Darwin. In the intentions of its creator, the neologism meme, first presented in the final chapter of the 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* (entitled “Memes. The New Replicators”), has connections with the ancient Greek root for “memory” and alludes to the isotopy of repetition also by assonating with the French *même* (same). According to Dawkins (1976, p. 206) “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”. The author suggests memes would replicate like viruses: “When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme’s propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell” (*ivi*, p. 207). It is no coincidence that Dawkins, a prominent activist of rationalist atheism, would later come to regard any concept somewhat related to religion as “viruses of the mind”.
- 3 Geneticist Luigi Cavalli-Sforza (1971) had already begun to work on the possible parallel between cultural and natural dynamics, that is, on the “similarities and differences between sociocultural and biological evolution”. Furthermore, the viral metaphor had already been used by writer William S. Burroughs, who in the novel *The Ticket that Exploded* (1962) had proposed the idea of language as an alien virus (“language is a virus (from outer space)”), made eventually visible only thanks to the mediation of writing. Later in the 1980s, the use of the term earworm has spread to define “a tune or part of a song that repeats in one’s mind”. As a matter of fact, this biological metaphor seems to be a recurring trope in the description of cultural phenomena; writer Susan Sontag will hurl herself on several occasions against its abuses and the risks connected to it, with specific reference to the discourse of disease (1978, 1989).
- 4 Memetics will be born from the Dawkinsian sketch of a cultural evolutionist theory grafted onto the metaphor of contagion. This sort of discipline, or at least hypothesis, will be supported by sparse but prominent figures within the cognitive sciences such as Douglas Hofstadter and Daniel C. Dennett, and carried on to this day mainly by psychologist Susan Blackmore. As noted by many, whereas memetics is a fascinating and yet unverifiable theory¹, memes themselves have in turn become a meme of enormous success. In 1996 cognitive science scholar Dan Sperber published *La Contagion des idées*, in which he proposed an “epidemiology of beliefs”, always set in the context of a Darwinian-evolutionary approach, based not on the cultural selection embraced by memetics but on attraction (Fr. *attraction*), a logic of contagion strongly characterized by factors of a psychological nature linked to the circles of social influence.
- 5 From the mid-90s the notion of meme starts being used, mainly in the field of cognitive and computational sciences, to describe the dynamics of “virtual communities” (this

expression may have entered popular parlance via Rheingold 1988; see also Heylighen 1996), with specific focus on the possibility of producing perfect copies, disseminating them quickly and storing them; so that the term Internet meme ends up designating Internet phenomena, so-called viral media fragments whose diffusion is pervasive, somewhat exponential and apparently uncontrollable. Among the first phenomena described as memes in the late 1990s we find e-mail chain letters, computer virus hoaxes (such as the *Goodtimes* from 1994), funny websites (*Mr. T Ate My Balls*, 1996; *Emotion Eric*, 1998; *Hampster Dance*, 1998), weird pictures (*Dancing baby*, 1996) and catchphrases (broken English *All your base are belong to us*, 1998).²

- 6 Wikipedia first reports the link between the Dawkinsian meme and the Internet in 2001³: “popular themes, catchphrases, images, viral videos, and jokes”⁴ are memes according to folk taxonomy and in a metaphorical sense, since they are deliberately altered by human creativity; however, it is possible to study them in the light of the categories elaborated by memetics (such as copy-fidelity, fecundity, longevity). Sociologist Limor Shifman (2009), who will become one of the leading authorities in the field, for instance, proposes the idea of a “web memetics” employing quantitative, statistical methodology to analyze the diffusion and variations of an Internet joke. A similar approach is also carried out by computational social science, which applies research methods borrowed from the hard sciences to the study of socio-cultural phenomena (a state-of-the-art contribution is Valensise *et al.* 2021). Asked about the unpredictable success of the neologism coined by him outside its original domain, Dawkins said that the Internet had definitively appropriated and “hijacked” the concept (Solon 2013).
- 7 In 2018, Facebook’s AI fully metabolizes the mainstream format of the Internet meme, as it automatically recognizes the so-called image macros—the most standard pre-structured format diffused since 2007 (a central picture with double caption, top-bottom text)—among its ontologies, precisely labelled as “meme” (Matsakis 2018; see fig. 1).

Figure 1



The semiotized template of the *Advice dog*, among the first examples of image macro (2007).

2. Virality of marketing

- 8 The idea that a given content may spread spontaneously and massively, thanks just to word of mouth, is every advertiser's dream, which is why "viral" has become one of the most abused buzzwords in contemporary marketing. The chronology of this lexical success overlaps with "Internet meme".
- 9 Once conceived of as a form of "unconventional marketing", so-called viral marketing is today the most common way of promoting a content on digital platforms or, at least, is the path it is hoped a content will take on digital platforms. Not only has it become fashionable to provoke the virality of contents (a payoff, product, brand etc.), but it has become mandatory. As summarized by media scholar Henry Jenkins (2009): "If it doesn't spread, it's dead". In other words, spreading "like wildfire" should not be conceived of as just one among the many possible outcomes of the circulation of a successful content, but rather its destiny.
- 10 The term "viral marketing" most likely appeared at the end of the 1980s (Kirby & Marsden 2007, p. 89) and in the mid-1990s was used by the most advanced analysts in the field (Rayport 1996, Rushkoff 1996, Jurvetson & Draper 1997), so that in 1998 it was named "buzzword of the year" (Tchong 1998). Despite employing a biological and mechanistic metaphor such as that of contagion (reminiscent of old theories such as the "hypodermic needle" or the "hidden persuaders"; see, respectively, Lasswell 1927 and Packard 1957), before the social media era as we know it (based on models established by platforms such as Friendster, MySpace and LinkedIn around 2003), the

guiding principle of viral marketing was that of peer circles and trusted contacts: a “network-enhanced word of mouth [...] more powerful than third-party advertising because it conveys an implied endorsement from a friend” (Jurvetson 2000).

- 11 From a sociological point of view, this is a clear reformulation of the theory of gatekeepers or opinion leaders (whom today we would simply call influencers, with emphasis on their perlocutive efficacy), within a two-step or multi-step flow of communication (Lazarsfeld *et al.* 1944). The content is not effective per se, but inasmuch as it is “recommended” by a competent or authoritative subject, onto whom some kind of trust or passion investment is projected. In a study carried out in 2005 which became a solid reference point in the context of quantitative social sciences, Damon Centola and Michael Macy (2007) show how information is generally spread by “simple contagion”, that is, due to a single contact with the source (as with diseases, the authors point out), while social behavior follows “complex contagion”, as it necessitates “multiple sources of activation [...] to trigger adoption”.
- 12 In 2000, the two most noble forerunners of all the existing guides allegedly disclosing a kind of “formula of virality” are published: the manifesto *Unleashing the Ideavirus* by marketing guru Seth Godin (originally distributed in the innovative form of an e-book downloadable free of charge)⁵ and *The Tipping Point* by brilliant essayist Malcolm Gladwell. In 2013, marketing expert Jonah Berger publishes *Contagious*, among the most successful texts in this field. Berger explains that the metaphor of virality is effective but imperfect, that recurrences can be identified but that it is difficult to make predictions, that the characteristics of the content are fundamental but context is decisive too, and he identifies six principles that would facilitate viral spread. In our terms, “social currency” is connected to the dynamics of social desirability (social proof), that is, users tend to act according to their own axiological context (shared set of values). “Triggers” exploit or create a context that is “welcoming” for the content in a logical-rational perspective (in a system everything has to make sense). “Emotion” is explicitly thematized in the rhetoric with which many contents are commonly presented online (a trivial but representative example: “This video will restore your faith in humanity”). “Public” emphasizes the importance of making the content easily and intuitively accessible to potentially everybody. “Practical value” underlines the asset of being a necessary good that should characterize a successful content. “Stories” recalls the importance of details and customization, besides obviously—and here is another key buzzword of digital marketing—storytelling.
- 13 Also in 2013, three other key books proposing a serious, non-reductionist approach to so-called online virality appear: *Can Jokes Bring Down Governments?* by Metahaven (a collective of designers led by Vinca Kruk and Daniel van der Velden); *Spreadable Media* by Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green; and *Memes in Digital Culture* by Limor Shifman.⁶ All three books focus on the relationship between communication on the social media, so-called virality of content, Internet memes as a form of playful bricolage (within remix culture) and political discourse.

3. Marketing of virality

- 14 Companies, brands, publishing groups and public figures—which in a semiotic perspective can all be conceived of as discourses (to put it simply: an object and the words we use to define it)—try to exploit the dynamics or even just the formats of

virality. The final result, felicitous or infelicitous (a pragmatist would say), depends on the specific degree of competence mastered by the creator of the content, so that it can be mediocre, positive, extraordinary or a complete failure.

- 15 On the one hand, for instance, in 2014 Italian prime ice cream company Algida managed to use to its advantage the systematic sabotage perpetrated since 2011 against its Facebook page by a crowd of users clamoring for the return of Winner Taco, a popular snack from the 90s (employing memetic catchphrases such as *Ridateci il Winner Taco* or *È meglio il Winner Taco*, “Give us back the Winner Taco”, “Winner Taco is better”): surprisingly, relying on a massive, involuntary 3-year campaign, Algida eventually put the snack back on the market, with great profit. On the other hand, also in 2014, US comedian Bill Cosby invited his fans via Twitter to turn a smiling photo of him into a meme, resulting in an avalanche of pictures whose captions sarcastically addressed the sex scandals he was suspected of having been involved in for years, in a textbook example of how things can backfire. These two cases represent the possible opposite outcomes of attempts to make something that is supposed to happen organically, bottom-up, grassroots into something branded, top-down, constructed on purpose to spread online by provoking and exploiting digital word of mouth.
- 16 Memes have pervaded every sphere of discourse; any discourse is now transformable into memes and marketing has been far from immune to this process. “Meme marketing” is definitely a phenomenon to be reckoned with (Enge *et al.* 2015, pp. 415-418) and the “meme market” itself is being monitored by players such as media company BuzzFeed⁷, founded in 2006 with the programmatic aim of becoming the reference for viral contents, and magazine “Meme Insider” (parody of “Business Insider”), born as a group on Reddit in 2016 with the aim of studying “The Leading Internet Trends”.⁸ For media scholar Evgeny Morozov (2013, p. 157), if Adorno and Horkheimer “were writing their seminal book *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) today, they would surely need to revise its most famous chapter, replacing the *culture industry* with the *meme industry*”.

4. Contagion as meaning-making mechanism

- 17 In accordance with its long-standing interest in the notion of efficacy (let us think of Claude Lévi-Strauss⁹ on the one hand, and for textual dynamics on the other, semiotics, almost certainly in the wake of trend-setter thinker Edgar Morin (1986), has been fascinated for a while by the idea of contagion, by its symbolism (Manetti 2003, 2004) and the role “informal communication” is believed to play in the dissemination of contents, beliefs and values (Livolsi & Volli 2005). Semiotics has tried to integrate not the theory itself but at least the “charm” of the Dawkinsian meme within its own “ecological” perspective (Volli 2003, pp. 219-221; 2007, pp. 259-274; 2013; Bouissac 2001; Fomin 2019), in a similar way to that in which the semiotics of culture is rooted in Yury Lotman’s notion of semiosphere (the cultural homologue of Vernadskij’s biosphere). It is no coincidence that among the most strenuous opponents of the meme, seen as a sort of weakened double of the sign (deprived of its vital component of mediation and translation), we find the biosemioticians of the Tartu school (Kull 2000, 2019).¹⁰
- 18 Eric Landowski (2001, 2004) proposes the notion of “intersomatic contagion” (*intersomatique contagieux*) within his program of mapping the complex and ambiguous dynamics of meaning and interactions which constitute the social fabric. At the center

of his model, we find the phenomenological body, responsible for a form of contact which is the foundation of relationality and, therefore, of the generation of meaning. Whereas for Algirdas Greimas the “aesthetic grasp” (*saisie esthétique*) is a fracture of the ordinary that is given in the form of the junction between the Subject and the Object of value, for Landowski, instead, it is one of the two ordinary modes of everyday experience: it is an immediate and effective practice, which generates a contagious effect of reaching out towards the other and of adjustment according to the other (Fr. *ajustement*, a term and image that have more of an affinity with the Sperberian *attraction*). This model is opposed by a lifestyle—a term (*style de vie*) that Landowski employs to reformulate Ludwig Wittgenstein’s “form of life” (*Lebensform*)—based on a systematic use of interaction prone to manipulation and programming.¹¹

5. From contagion to online virality

- 19 Semiotics eventually starts dealing with contagion online, on the Internet, much later than linguistics, sociology, media, literary and pedagogical studies. From a qualitative point of view, this virality is nothing new for the discipline (as we will see); rather, what is new is the quantitative scope of this type of phenomena and also, more in general, the measure in which digital tools have ensured the facilitated creation, modification and dissemination of contents, even by users who are not expert in new technologies.
- 20 Gabriele Marino (2014) takes the case of the *Harlem Shake* flash-mobs and YouTube videos as a starting point to propose a first attempt at a typology focused on the opposition between viral and meme, further clarified and expanded in subsequent contributions.¹² Paolo Peverini deals with virality as part of unconventional marketing (2009, 2014a) and with reference to the issue of Web reputation (2014b, 2016). Sara Cannizzaro (2016) semiotizes the notion of meme taking as a reference Lotman’s semiotics of culture, biosemiotics and the philosophy of sign of Charles S. Peirce.¹³ A similar approach, albeit based on different reference points, is proposed by Marcel Danesi (2019) and Bradley E. Wiggins (2019). Alessandro Lolli (2017) considers memes as contemporary myths, taking Roland Barthes and Furio Jesi as the main references.¹⁴
- 21 Semiotics has tried to project its own sensibility, gaze and grids onto virality as a phenomenon, making it possible to clarify some aspects of this discursive field: namely, making distinctions and pointing out relations at a theoretical, taxonomical and formal/linguistic level. What semiotics asks in relation to virality—a difficult subject matter to master due to its extremely ephemeral nature—is what the average Internet user wonders when, typically, something stupid becomes suddenly and globally famous. In one sentence: *Why do we love stupid?*¹⁵ Why do we do certain (often stupid, yes) things online? Why do we waste so much time getting so invested in these (often stupid) things?¹⁶ Why are certain (often stupid) things so successful? Are we able, on the one hand, to find patterns and, on the other, to make clear-cut distinctions within such a heterogeneous set of (often stupid) phenomena? Can we highlight the peculiarities that (despite their being stupid) make them so efficacious and understand their mechanisms of production and diffusion?

6. Viral and meme: Virality of the token and virality of the type

- 22 Scholars and professionals in the field of communication would almost certainly agree that the contemporary media scenario is dominated by what we nebulously define as social media. Likewise, they would almost certainly agree that the dominating form of communication across these platforms is what we nebulously define as virality. Not only is a content successful today if everyone talks about it everywhere and at the same time; but we all talk everywhere and at the same time, in the same way, more or less about the same things: we talk about virality and we *talk virality*. To the extent that we constantly feel ourselves at risk of being overwhelmed and, in turn, being *talked by virality*. The umpteenth vehicle for the metaphor of contagion, virality is, however, a heuristically ineffective umbrella term: we apply this label to things that happen to “go viral”, “spread like wildfire”, in an “uncontrolled fashion”, “breaking the tipping point” etc. But do they spread just like the virus of the biological realm, turning users into passive subjects? And does the fact that we may label a given phenomenon as “viral” tell us anything about its nature, its position as a piece of culture and its mechanisms of signification? Are “viral phenomena” all viral in the same way? Does a “formula of virality” actually exist?
- 23 First of all, we have to point out that we are dealing with two different forms of virality, which may be complementary but nevertheless need to be kept theoretically separated: the first one entails a piece of media content spreading pervasively and the other entails the practice of creating other contents from a first one understood as the model or prototype. In the latter case we have a token that establishes a type from which other tokens are created by means of replication and modification¹⁷; this is what happens with memes, which we may conceive, with a pun, as a form of “complex virality” (as opposed to “simple virality”). As suggested by Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013), we may articulate the opposition between an old and a new model of content use: the first one, called stickiness, defines when many people in one place are enjoying a given content (as in the case of a successful article or website) and the latter, called spreadability, applies when one content is placed almost literally everywhere for everybody to peruse with ease (as in the case of a viral picture or video or of a series of memes with the same base).¹⁸ What we call virality as a whole, including both types described above, owes as much to the replicability as to the customization allowed by digital technologies; it is not merely an issue of copying a given content, but rather of adapting, appropriating and properly translating a given content according to need.
- 24 Virals can generate memes and memes certainly are means to “viralize” a given content, to extend its “viral lifecycle”, but not all viral content is memetic and not all memes go viral. The first “photo” ever taken of a black hole (M87, renamed Powehi), released by the US National Science Foundation on April 10, 2019 and shared by thousands of people online, is viral (it monopolizes the public sphere of discourse), but it is not a meme; it becomes a meme when users begin to appropriate it by modifying it and the picture starts circulating also in the form of these modified renditions. A two-horizontal-panel picture where a friend of mine has put first my intrigued facial expression and below that a horrified one with the respective captions “Reading Genette” and “Reading Benveniste” is technically a meme (like most memes it is based on the idea of comparison) but it is quite unlikely to go viral (see fig. 2). Content, viral

or not, becomes a meme when its Expression Forms (in the glossematic sense) become the blueprint with which to create other occurrences of the same type, substantiating the Content Forms themselves. The virality of the meme, which we may define “in the second degree” according to Gérard Genette (1982), is a non-replicative, rather generative virality which establishes its own local micro-genres.¹⁹

Figure 2



Meme portraying the author, created by a friend of his and addressing an alleged preference for Genette rather than Benveniste (2019).

7. Mistake and formula: Semantics and syntax of virality

- 25 Semiotics has a rich, long-standing tradition of tools for analyzing phenomena such as memes: from the notion of *bricolage* by Lévi-Strauss (solutions to emerging problems stem from recycling pieces of old semiotic material) to that of dialogism by Mikhail Bakhtin (texts talk to each other), from Julia Kristeva’s intertextuality (the subject of the semanalysis is the relationship between texts rather than between subjects [intersubjectivity]) to Genette’s transtextuality (where hypertextuality, namely the dimension of texts deriving from other texts by means of direct transformation or imitation, is set). If semiotics considers everything that can be analyzed as a text, culture is nothing more than a system of texts: texts that intertwine, recall, quote, modify, parody, recreate, chase one another. As a matter of fact, memes are nothing new to the eye of the semiotician. “Neofolkloric practices” (Jakobson & Bogatyrev 1929)²⁰ or “replica practices” (Dusi and Spaziant 2006) of this kind have crossed the history of cultures, providing a structural form of generation and regeneration: let us

think of collaborative art (the Surrealists' *cadavre exquis*), anonymous (graffiti) or anonymized art (pop art, Banksy), political mottos (from the motivational poster *Keep calm and carry on* to the #hashtags spread by politicians on social networks), parody (from Aristophanes to culture jamming and subvertising), popular religious iconography (how many different versions can we count of the Sacred Heart of Jesus?). If semiotics, with its grids and interrelated, rigorous and yet elastic metalanguage can help clarify phenomena within the galaxy covered by the umbrella term "virality", we can definitely start from the foundations: the possibility of breaking down every semiotic phenomenon, according to the classic proposal of Charles W. Morris (1938), in the three dimensions of semantics (content), syntax (structure) and pragmatics (use).

- 26 With regard to the semantic dimension memes present, at a figurative level, a striking element or *punctum*, as Roland Barthes (1980) would say, something which in a very broad sense we may define as a mistake: a strange, incongruous, exaggerated or, as Shifman (2013) puts it, a "whimsical" component. Just like the comedians specialized in imitations or the cartoonists specialized in caricatures, the memetic selection, too, focuses on the peculiarity that catches the eye. The mistake can be literal, of grammatical nature, to the extent that the text becomes broken English (as is the case with the sentence *All your base are belong to us* at the prehistory of memes or the whole language of Lolcats, Lolspeak)²¹, nonsensical or gibberish (as with IKEA making a parody of Trump's most famous tweet "covfefe").²² The mistake can also be behavioral: the so-called *Pepper Spray Cop* pepper-spraying a bunch of harmless Occupy Wall Street protesters speaks no English, not even broken English, but the language of overreaction, so that the cop's body gets pasted onto the most diverse peaceful scenarios (where his behavior emerges as even more inexcusable). The mistake as the striking element activates the user's engagement; more than often it constitutes the comic mechanism at the base of the meme, and represents a kind of hook for possible polarizations, according to opposite axiologies: I may laugh at the cop because I despise his overreaction, or because I find it funny that he actually covered the seated and probably already beaten protesters in pepper spray.
- 27 With regard to the syntactic dimension, at a level that we may define as plastic-enunciative, memes present a modular structure, consisting of stable and customizable elements, which tickle the users' agency, inviting them to appropriate the content in a similar way to how it was created in the first place; the characteristics found at the textual level reflect the production processes that generated them: memes, like modern Frankenstein monsters, show the sutures by which they have been assembled and offer them to users as access points to their appropriation and personalization.²³ Semiotics has reflected a lot on the link between the text that is "chopped to pieces" (in the sense of being built in blocks and being dismembered too), so that it can circulate easily and freely, and its success. Umberto Eco (1977, 1994) noted how the great foundational texts of a given culture, more than often having been created within an oral culture (and thus being anonymous), are repetitive, heterogeneous, incoherent and circulate mainly in the form of citations, extracts and remakes (often unfaithful)²⁴; their success is proportional to their "ricketiness" (It. *sghangherabilità*). Literary semiotician and painter Jacques Geninasca (1992, 1997) has dealt with texts featuring modular structures, that is, organized according to "serial syntagms"; those of triadic nature seem to be especially powerful, as the alternation of three elements stands as the most economic perceptive device capable of conveying the idea of difference and, thus,

rhythm. Image macros with full-page image and double caption respond precisely to this criterion of segmentation and memes in general seem to owe their recognized communicative efficacy to the ability of capturing a whole passionate state, situation or narration in a very essential configuration.²⁵ Digital communication expert Josh Constine (2009, 2013) defines memes based on a formula as “symbiotic”, because they require a host user, topic or context to “parasitize” in order to semiotically work. Microsoft researcher Sean Rintel (2013) talks of “templatability”.

8. Radicals of viral intervention: A pragmatic typology

- 28 With all due respect to structuralist integralism, the text in itself is not enough: the recognition of the semantic and the syntactic dimensions cannot suffice for our purposes. It is also necessary to understand, on the one hand, how the text reaches its possible interpreters and who they are and, on the other hand, what they concretely do with it. That is, it is necessary to take into consideration the pragmatic dimension. Theodor W. Adorno (1941) had already identified two factors for the success of a pop music song: the standard (the recurring, crystallized structure) and the plugging (the promotional system that would push it in what today we would call heavy rotation). In 2013, besides Jonah Berger (content is important, but context counts too), Jonathan Perelman, vice president of BuzzFeed at the time, pointed this out too with a motto that would obsess content creators for decades: “Content is king, distribution is queen” (Skinner 2013). The role of circles and social nodes is fundamental: not even the most perfect content is sufficient by itself to “go viral” (even the greatest grassroots meme ever, the *Harlem Shake*, needed to be boosted by what today we call influencers; see Ashton 2013).
- 29 What do users do with contents to make them go viral and what do they do with contents that are offered to them as such? By going back to the proposal of literary scholar Northrop Frye (1957), it is possible to speak of three “radicals” (basic modes of presentation), which in our case would be: sharing, remixing, remaking.
- 30 We have what, paraphrasing Barthes (1953), we would call “virality degree zero”²⁶, coinciding with the simple use and, therefore, simple sharing of a given content as it is, ready-made; this is the case with a photo or video that we define viral and, considering entire classes of textual forms, emoticons, emojis, 4chan’s Rage Comics and any other sign or media fragment crystallized and integrated into our digital alphabet to comment on something, express an opinion, a state of mind etc.²⁷
- 31 We have textual remixes, where virality takes the form of appropriation via personalization and the intervention upon the text concerns only some aspects or levels (only some elements of the formula can and have to be changed in order to make sense). The format of the mainstream meme that has dominated the panorama since its appearance in 2007 is the so-called image macro (in which the editable part, for the purposes of general resemantization, is the double caption). Since 2017, a new format has emerged, which we may call “label memes”, where the mechanism of appropriation concerns all the possible functions (Actantial Roles, in Greimassian terms) a given figure may embody in a given representation or scene, thanks to the application of a simple linguistic label. We can list many successful memes of this kind (e.g. *Bart hits Homer with a chair*, *Is this a pigeon?*, *Woman yelling at a cat*, *The trumpet boy* etc.), but the *Distracted Boyfriend*—where a guy turns to look at a girl while his girlfriend glares at him

(see fig. 3)—has proved to be a particularly powerful format: in order to make the picture signify it suffices to pertinently apply a linguistic label onto the Actant that is subjected to temptation (the Boyfriend), the Actant sanctioning him with a disgusted look (the Girlfriend) and the Actant embodying temptation (the Other Girl). The first viral version of this stock image, diffused in August 2017, featured “the Youth” being blamed by “Capitalism” as it was being distracted by “Socialism”. I could put “Myself” as the Boyfriend being distracted by “Meme semiotics” to the detriment of “Music semiotics”.

- 32 There are also what we may call “meme icons”, public figures subjected to a process of sampling (we are always in the territory of textual remixes) so that their face is cut & pasted onto other figures and in the most variable contexts (a popular “card” of this kind in the West is North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un).
- 33 The catchphrase *Keep calm and carry on*, briefly distributed in the UK in the form of *ante litteram* motivational posters just before the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, is the Ur-meme par excellence; it became a snowclone, as linguists would say, a formula that can be resemantized *ad libitum* as *Keep calm and “X”*, where the variable stands for any possible element to which the user wants to draw attention (see fig. 4). The extreme outcomes of memes understood as their very formula are automatic generators, which make it possible for a given discursive style to speak per se, passing from the paradigmatic dimension to the syntagmatic one thanks to the automatic selection of elements stored in a database and organized according to a pre-formatted structure (a good example is the “Automatic Donald Trump” that “Makes Donald Tweet Again”).²⁸

Figure 3



The semiotized template of the *Distracted boyfriend* (2017).

Figure 4



The semiotized template of *Keep calm and "X"* (1939-2007).

- 34 This three-term typology should also be understood as a potential chronology, so we would logically proceed from the viral content simply shared as such to its remix and then to the last form: textual remakes, which Shifman defines as “mimetic memes” and which are based on the re-creation of the formula inferable from the content that serves as model. These memes require the re-enactment of the formula in “real life”, which is why digital researcher David Banks (2011) defined them as “performative”; typical examples are Internet fads such as flash mobs (*Harlem Shake, Gangnam Style*) and challenges (*Sellotape, Ice bucket challenge*).

9. Virality as phatic communication

- 35 Observed in the light of the classic model of communication proposed by Roman Jakobson (1960), memes seem to focus on the phatic function which addresses the correct functioning of the channel and the relational process implied in the communication circuit (“Can you hear me?”, “Yes, yes”). This is due to the importance of memes, just like any other “jargon” or “lingo”, for group identity and community building; memes draw around themselves what sociolinguistics and pragmatics have defined as “communities of practices”, as they are based on shared “stylistic practices” rather than on specific themes or values (as in traditional opinion groups or political movements) or elements of a sociodemographic nature (such as communities understood in a strictly diatopical sense). Memes seem to outline a communicational scenario aimed at a “non-linear perlocution” (Blommaert 2014) and centered upon “new forms of online conviviality” (Varis and Blommaert 2014): they are things we do

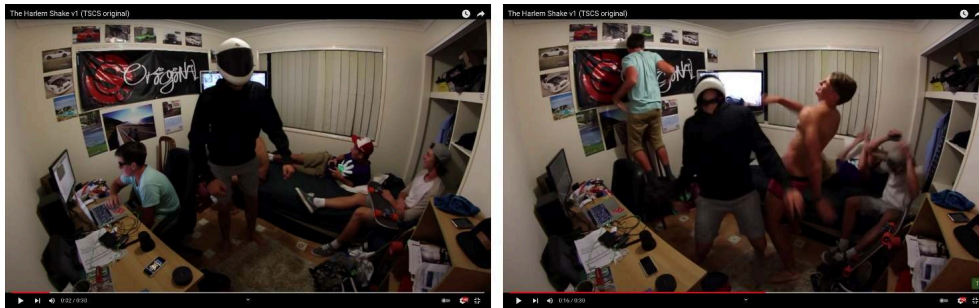
and say to stay together idiosyncratically, talking about oneself and one's semiosphere with the excuse of talking about what is happening all around.²⁹

- 36 When we do not understand a meme—a true 2.0 message in a bottle of which we generally ignore the empirical author and original context of production—just as when we do not understand any other text, we may assume that it comes from a community or culture of which we are not part and whose language we do not speak; memes imply shared knowledge, in an encyclopedic sense, and require a specific literacy (Lankshear & Knobel 2003, 2007). More precisely, we can identify memes that are based on factual knowledge of the world; we would call them referential (we must know who Kim Jong-un is in order to laugh at his memes) and iconic (we have to visually recognize his figure, his face). And we can identify memes that are essentially based on the recognition of their textual features at a pragmatic level, namely, of their half-empty structure which it is possible to fill and re-signify *ad libitum*; we would call these allegorical and structural (like the label memes). The former memes have a rhematic function (they say something about something else that is implicitly granted as known, so that they require external context), the latter thematic (they build their own discursive context by themselves).
- 37 The semiotic gaze helps us debunk a persistent false myth, that has recurred since the age of positivism: there is no such a thing as a “formula of virality”, there is no mandatory sequence of elements that would ensure the (viral) success of a given content; rather, virality itself is given through formulaic structures, so that the formula is configured as a semiotic meta-viral device.

10. Memes as the “meta-” dimension of virality

- 38 Memes are part of the virality circuit because they thematize virality, putting it in quotation marks. The protest campaign against the preventive killing of the gorilla Harambee, inside whose enclosure at the Cincinnati Zoo a child had fallen, is the viral component. The counter-campaign *Dicks out for Harambee*, mocking the strength and pervasiveness of the original, as if nothing could ever be more important than Harambee, the American hero par excellence, is the meme (perhaps the most popular of 2016 in Western countries). Memes are not about a given content or topic, they are actually their very parody, thus addressing our obsession with them; the *Batman slapping Robin* meme testifies this dynamics in an almost didactical way (the meme “slaps” the uncritical repetition of the viral). In this self-reflective and meta-discursive way, the *Harlem Shake* plays a pivotal sociosemiotic role, sociosemiotics being the semiotic inquiry on how society represents itself by means of cultural tokens. Probably the greatest grassroots memetic phenomenon to date (as we have already said), the *Harlem Shake* proposes a *mise en abyme* of every viral phenomenon: first we see a solitary dancing subject anonymized by a mask or helmet; after a jump cut, with the moving images synchronized with the frenzy of the electronic beat (in animation and film this technique is called “mickeymousing”), we see all the other subjects in the scene dancing, “infected” by the prime mover who has served as the Trickster of the *Dickbauchtanzer* of the old tradition. *Harlem Shake* is virality unpacked, talking about its own formula as a “contagious” form of communication, centered on the rule of living the same experience in a personalized fashion (see fig. 5).

Figure 5



The “lone dancer” (left) and the contagious collective dance (right) after the jump cut in *The Harlem Shake* v2, Feb. 3, 2013, <https://youtu.be/W52rnrwG9p0> (this being the second video to diffuse the phenomenon after the original one by Filthy Frank/Pink Guy [which, however, did *not* feature the two-moment structure that catalyzed the idiosyncraticity of the videos]).

- 39 Viral practices being formulaic and adaptive (as we have seen), memes have become a sort of meta-macro-regime of discourse, a perfect palimpsest for any discourse besides and beyond its original playful (humorous, ironic, parodic, satirical, nonsensical) nature. Memes have literally de-generated (they have jumped off the track as a macro-genre) and been re-semantized, becoming serious matter, by mediating political communication and representing the main model for spreading not only funny pictures of kittens, but also a great deal of discursive phenomena that have been identified with the umbrella term “post-truth” (Lorusso 2018). Misinformation, fake news, hate speech, conspiracy theories, pseudoscience, etc.—all these discourses need viral communication (an element that strikes and polarizes, which would be customizable, spreadable via circles of engaged contacts etc.) in order to work. Studying memes, despite their dispersive and ephemeral nature, means studying these phenomena and the mechanisms behind them like in a sandbox, where they appear more controllable and modellable.
- 40 We can also identify the opposite semiotic movement, a sort of de-semantization of the discourses circulating online, so that we can say that not only have memes become serious, but serious things have been made memes. In this regard, Massimo Leone (2017) talks of an “aesthetic drift”, a way of producing textuality in which everything becomes playful by means of disrupting the valence (the value of values) and pragmatics overcomes semantics. In other words, the participatory gesture ends up counting more than its supposed meaning; “post-irony” (still an underdefined and underinvestigated concept) may serve as a provisional label to identify this challenging “semantic blur”.³⁰
- 41 Yesterday’s myths, de-naturalized by Roland Barthes, have been replaced by today’s memes³¹, and the job of analyzing them is what the digital semioticians of tomorrow should do.³² There is, however, a fundamental difference, something new: the semiotician who would like to de-naturalize the opaque textual and political ideologies of the “onlife” (to quote philosopher Luciano Floridi)—i.e. virality maliciously proposed as something transparent, linear, mechanical, self-evident, inevitable—would find a formidable ally in the very texts they put under the magnifying glass. Memes, today, the parody of virality, seem to fit what Michel de Certeau (1980) would call “practices of everyday resistance”, as they welcome the invitation already issued by Barthes (1968, p. 174, my trans.) at the end of his last essay dedicated to commercial communication: “The real possible response to advertising would consist neither in rejecting nor in

ignoring it, but in appropriating it, falsifying it, combining the units that at first glance seem to naturally compose it in a new form”.

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NOTES

1. Despite claiming that some memes are “actually realized physically [...] as a structure in the nervous systems of individual men” (ivi, p. 207), Dawkins remains inconclusive as regards their metaphorical or ontological nature.
2. For the visual companion to all Internet phenomena here mentioned, please refer to Know Your Meme, the research center and Wiki resource established in 2007 (<https://knowyourmeme.com>).
3. <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Meme&oldid=266249>.
4. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Internet_phenomena.
5. <https://web.archive.org/web/20001019085932/http://www.ideavirus.com/>.
6. Still today, Shifman’s book is the best introduction to the study of memes for the English-speaking reader. It is also a good point to take stock of the situation of a small group of scholars working closely, including Ryan Milner, Jean Burgess and Whitney Phillips (see also <https://culturedigitally.org/festival-of-memeology>, 2015).
7. <https://www.buzzfeed.com>.
8. <https://memeinsider.com>.
9. Some English translations use “efficiency” instead of “efficacy” for Lévi-Strauss’ French *efficacité symbolique*.
10. Since Dawkins talks about things such as the “irrational meme” (which is irrationality) and the “rational meme” (which is rationality), the Dawkinsian meme would correspond not so much to the sign, but more precisely to the notion of “cultural unity”, internal to a given “encyclopedia”, as proposed by Eco (1984).
11. Philosopher Tony D. Sampson (2012) takes up Tarde’s contagion theory in a proposal that seems comparable to Landowski’s for at least two reasons: the basic hypothesis according to which contagion would be a structural—not an exceptional—modality through which societies define and construct their own internal relations; the use of the English term “assemblage” (gathering, reunion), which can be linked to the *ajustement* used by the French semiotician.
12. English-speaking readers may find the first formulation of this approach in Marino (2015).
13. Here, I prefer the term “semiotized” over the alternative “semioticized”.
14. The work of Lolli is a non-semiotic, non-scientific and non-academic book, but it is still a key reference both for understanding meme practices and for its huge influence on the reception of memes as a cultural topic of discussion in Italy. Other useful references for a meme bibliography of prominent semiotic interest—while not actually being semiotic references *per se*—are: Nagle (2017), among the most influential—and criticized—sources for a political reading of memes (in an anti-Alt-Right key); Lovink (2019, pp. 119-137), who has actually been talking about web memetics at least since 2007 (*Zero Comments. Blogging and Critical Internet Culture*), claims that memes “are merely cultural bi-products of the app ecosystem”, resumes Reddit’s 2016 mantra “The Left Can’t Meme” and proposes a Situationist hijacking rooted in the Benjaminian notion of “dialectic image” (see also Berardi 2018 in this lineage); Tanni (2020), the most up to date source reconstructing the link between memes and (avant-garde) artistic practices (see Clusterduck 2021 for a “Warburgian” example of activist aesthetics). A fundamental resource for the theoretical elaboration of memes is the collective The Philosopher’s Meme, led by Seong Young-Her, launched in 2015 (see <http://thephilosophersmeme.com>).
15. Nostalgia Critic, *Why Do We Love Stupid?*, <https://youtu.be/GiI90IL2m3U>, Dec. 17, 2016.
16. The reference is respectively to Kenneth Goldsmith (2016) and Maurizio Ferraris (2015).
17. Shifman (2013, p. 58) distinguishes between “founder-based memes” and “egalitarian memes”, namely between *auteur* memes generated from some kind of original and memes whose originator is impossible to identify (many variations of the same type occur synchronically). In Eco’s terms (1975), the latter case (the virality of the type rather than of the single token) seems

to testify a kind of passage from the mode of sign production called ostension to that of invention, thus implying a hypercodification (a particular rule is elevated to a general rule).

18. In the case of image macro: with the same picture and different captions.

19. In an interesting—and involuntary—terminological convergence with Greimassian semiotics, Internet scholar Jonathan Zittrain (2008) uses the term “generativity” to address the potential inexhaustibility of content creation online.

20. Digital media scholar Jean Burgess (2007) talks of “vernacular creativity”.

21. For “funny cats” and their language on the Internet, see Thibault & Marino (2018).

22. The tweet (“Despite the constant negative press covfefe”) was published on May 30, 2017; see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Covfefe>.

23. Some authors have stressed how enunciation must not be understood as a mere logical instance presupposed by the enunciated, but rather as an action that leaves perceptible traces, or “imprints” (Fontanille, Basso).

24. Patrick Davison (2012) stresses the importance of anonymity (the “anonymity meme”) as a factor that, setting them beyond any possible copyright infringement, facilitates the dissemination of memes.

25. Auxiliary bishop Richard Umbers (2017), from the archdiocese of Sydney, uses memes on his social media accounts (as a means to speak to the youngest portion of his audience) and compares them, due to their synthetic qualities, to the parables in the Gospels.

26. Barthes coined the expression “le degré zéro de l’écriture” in an article first published in the August 1947 issue of the magazine “Combat”.

27. As already pointed out, most memes are ephemeral. On the contrary some memes, Aby Warburg would say, are persistent.

28. <https://filiph.github.io/markov>.

29. The importance of the phatic component on social media (on Facebook, in particular) is pointed out and typologized also by Marrone (2017).

30. A historic case: in 2015, thousands of users online from all around the world wanted to pay homage to A(y)lan Kurdi, a child washed ashore in Turkey as a refugee from Syria on September 2; most pictures created with this solemn goal actually presented involuntary memetic traits. A more recent instance, as meaningful as the preceding one: the fear of the outbreak of a Third World War, due to the escalating tension between Trump/US and Kim Jong-un/North Korea was being welcomed in early January 2020 by hashtags such as #WW3 and themed videos on the social network for youngsters TikTok. As a matter of fact, TikTok as a whole—being a new, musically oriented rendition of the logic of supershort videos patented by Vine (2013-2017)—seems to integrally follow a memetic logic. The new Coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic is also being accompanied, in 2020-2021, by a true galaxy of memes.

31. Media historian Peppino Ortoleva (2019) would probably ascribe them to the category of “low intensity myths”.

32. Future digital semioticians will be required to renovate the assets of their analytical techniques; in this respect, the work of Lev Manovich and his Cultural Analytics Lab would provide a good term of comparison and point of departure.

ABSTRACTS

The aim of this article is to provide an outline of the semiotics of virality in its different cultural ramifications: from the notion of contagion employed in 19th-century social sciences to contemporary Internet memes on social media, passing through the viral marketing of the 1990s. Semioticians will find a possible guide to understanding memes and non-semioticians will find a possible guide to shedding light on objects of study such as memes in a new way, thanks to the semiotic gaze. Virality is understood in the framework of appropriative hypertextuality, discussed with regard to its semantic, syntactic and pragmatic components and conceived, via memes, as the main meta-macro-discursive framework in communication to date. Great care is devoted to the mapping of the most recent bibliography and to the philology and archeology of online sources.

L'objectif de cet article est de donner un aperçu de la sémiotique de la viralité dans ses différentes ramifications culturelles : de la notion de contagion employée dans les sciences sociales du XIX^e siècle aux mêmes contemporains d'Internet sur les médias sociaux, en passant par le marketing viral des années 1990. Les sémioticiens y trouveront un guide possible pour comprendre les mèmes et les non-sémioticiens un guide possible pour éclairer d'une manière renouvelée des objets d'études tels que les mèmes, à travers la perspective sémiotique. La viralité est étudiée dans le cadre de l'hypertextualité appropriative, discutée quant à ses composantes sémantiques, syntaxiques et pragmatiques et conçue, via les mèmes, comme le principal cadre méta-macro-discursif en communication à ce jour. Un grand soin est apporté à la cartographie de la bibliographie la plus récente et à la philologie et l'archéologie des sources en ligne.

INDEX

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