CHAPTER NINE

CAN MEMES PLAY GAMES?

MEMETICS AND THE PROBLEM OF SPACE

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Introduction

Richard Dawkins mentions in his book *The Selfish Gene* the possibility of the existence of a gene-like unit of imitation which he calls "meme" (from the French même = same) that can be "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in a gene pool, memes propagate themselves from brain to brain through imitation" (Dawkins 1989: 192). The meme is a memory item or a portion of information stored in the human brain able to develop cultural networks though replication (to use a scientific term)[1] or through mimesis (to use a more cultural term). Dawkins coins a cultural theory along the lines drawn by genetics, a discipline deeply entrenched in the hard sciences. Memetics became interesting because it represented an approach that is evolutionary and not static in its structure. Though not entirely successful as a scientific discipline (the *Journal of Memetics* ceased after seven years' activity, in 2005), philosophers and pop-science writers like Susan Blackmore, Richard Dawkins, and Daniel Dennett, continue to develop the gene-meme analogy.

1. Memetics and Semiotics

Though, for some, the question whether memetics was really needed in the landscape of humanities might remain moot, the attraction it exercises is probably understandable to everybody. Above that, Blackmore's attempts to track down a meme-gene co-evolution ("successful memes begin to dictate which genes are most successful;" Blackmore 1999: 99) are particularly fascinating and promising. When defining the place memetics occupies in the landscape of the humanities, it is useful to mention

semiotics, to which it resembles, perhaps, most. Semiotics theorizes about *signs* by describing their communicative function within cultural – or even, as does biosemiotics – biological systems. Meaning can be found here in *constellations* but never in the signs themselves. Strictly speaking, semioticians are only interested in how signs are transmitted (they speak of modalities) and take into account the codes that are used for such a transmission. Interestingly, as an heir of formalism and structuralism, semiotics has to fight against the temptation of "horizontalization," that is the treatment of signs within diachronical systems that lack vertical, historical depth. One of the consequences is that semiotics, like any structuralist discipline, has difficulties dealing scientifically with the phenomenon of *evolution*. Russian Formalism, one of the precursors of semiotics, confronted this problem very early on but solved it by combining dyachronical and synchronical axes of the structuralist system. Already in 1927, Yuri Tynianov and Roman Jakobson forced themselves, in the article "On Literary Evolution" to theorize the dynamic, "evolutionary" aspect of structures (Tynianov and R. Jakobson 1971). A system, they found, is first of all a system of functions and interrelationships whose composition can change but whose "differentiation" remains stable. A certain literature, for example, is horizontally related to other literatures or to other social phenomena, each of which represents a system. However, on a "vertical" level, literatures and cultural systems do not evolve at the same pace because they all contain different material. An equally "vertical" phenomenon is the "creative intention of the author" which Tynianov and Jakobson decide to call "orientation." The problem is that *evolution* is dependent on such concrete "historical" material and a formal science like formalism, structuralism or semiotics needs to take this into consideration.

Any science or philosophy (unless perhaps it is as abstract as Berkeley's who declared that signs are immaterial, mind-dependent phenomena and that matter does simply not exist), has to face this paradox. The signs or any other element it wants to integrate into the formal grid of its system are – at least in a metaphorical way of speaking – endowed with a life force of their own, they are "living" and can alter their course in a way that cannot be controlled by the overall abstract system. Memetics based an entire theory of signs on the discipline of genetics because genes determine vertical transmissions: "If genes determine which transmissions are vertical in traditional gene-based selection, then memes must determine which transmissions are vertical in meme-based selection" (David Hull 2000: 57).

The problem that we recognize in memetic approaches can be

formulated like this: While semiotics tends towards undue synchronization, genetics tends towards undue diachronization. The evolution of genes denotes the *descent*, that is, the inheritance or filiations along an axis of vertical genealogical development and reduces evolution to linear causalities.[2] A combination of vertical and horizontal approaches seems to be even more necessary than it was at the time of the St. Petersburg formalists. However, whether memetics can offer such an alternative is, as I will show, very questionable.

This is certainly the reason why, also, in semiotics, genetics-oriented approaches *do* exist. At the moment semioticians are interested, for example, not just in style as a formal structure but style-*emergence*, they find useful theoretical resources in the discipline of genetic engineering. The architects John S. Gero and Lan Ding, for example, concentrate on style emergence as a process able to make explicit those features which were formerly only implicit. As architects, Gero and Ding want their method also to be able to *produce* designs quickly and on a genetic basis. By dividing design into meme-like semantic units (Gothic, for example, is divided into "dynamic line," "emphasis on spire," "structural framework using stone…" etc.) that are determined by a certain syntax, these architects manage to control the emergence of new styles along an purely evolutionary model. Interestingly, they never mention the word "meme." (Peter Simons reminds us – in his contribution to the present book – that 19th century philosophers were "inspired by evolutionary ideas" when coining the terms 'emergent' and 'emergence.') Some memeticists advertise the dynamic character of signs as a novelty, as does Maurice Bloch when writing: "The problem which anthropologists immediately recognize with memes lies … with a specific aspect of the theory: the notion that culture is ultimately made of distinguishable units which have 'a life of their own'" (Bloch 2000: 193). I would hold that the memetic project is not so new at all: Tynianov and Jakobson mated proto-formalism with ideas of "evolution" and "orientation" and memetics mated semiotics with genetics. The only essential difference lies in the switch from the formalist *metaphorical* level to a *reality* level meant to embrace the real interaction of memes. While early formalists contended with reflections on a dynamic grid in which signs are constantly animated by the tension between horizontal and vertical aspects of culture, in memetics the sign itself could become genuinely dynamic. This "invention" is impressive; but it should never be exploited without drawing particular attention to the paradox it conceals. The "living" signs (which *are signs* only beause they exist within a system) run constantly against the system, that is, they cannot be constantly controlled by that system. In other words, they are

(dead) signs and (living) memes at the same time.

As it stands, memetics seems to be tempted rather to cancel this paradox because its consideration within the context of "biological" approaches can only create uneasiness. One way to cancel this paradox is to declare, in a relativistic way, that any difference between horizontal and vertical transmissions, between signs and memes, is inexistant. Here is what Scott Atran writes about an exchange he had with David Hull:

> In fact, as David Hull points out (personal communication), the memetics distinction between vertical and horizontal transmission makes little sense in the case of ideas. In gene-based biological evolution, "vertical" is defined as the way genes go. Genes usually go the way organisms go. A mother passes on half of her genes to her children. In "horizontal" transmission, a virus might pick up a gene and transfer it to a non-family member.[3]

Still, I would hold that memetics attempts to explain *vertical* cultural evolution; it is inspired by genetics more than by virology, and even though the "virus" makes sense as a model for cultural transmission, it is not plausible why a virus should be classified as a "horizontal" transmitter as opposed to the "vertical" genetic transmitter. Furthermore, Hull writes:

> Nearly everyone who discusses memetic transmission claims that it can be both vertical and horizontal. If parents teach their offspring something, that is vertical. Any memetic transmission that differs from this genealogical direction is horizontal (ibid).

If we accept such relativist arguments, memetics definitely loses a part of its interest, as the horizontal part could be fully covered by semiotics. When parents teach their children something, does this information have "a life of its own"? If it does, it shows that a "genetic" process of selection or alteration has replaced the semiotic process of simple transmission. Horizontal transmission is only interesting if the sign gets *really* transmitted; any alteration makes it vertical and indicates a shift from semiotics to memetics.

2. Semiotics and Genetics

The problems that this new science is facing have deeper roots, many of which can be traced to genetics. The first thing that comes to mind when thinking of the mating of semiotics with a theoretically underdeveloped discipline like genetics is that in this discipline rationality seems to be

covered under a mass of data. As a matter of fact, in genetics, the number of genes is simply so overwhelmingly great that, at present, genetics is happy to draw a map of the human genome but remains unable to grasp a system *of any sort*. So, why did these life force hungry semioticians – whom we now call memeticists – choose genetics? Why did they not choose biology, as it existed in its pre-genetic phase, as a fertile partner? Biology actually fell back, as I have shown elsewhere (Botz-Bornstein 2006a), *through its engagement with bio-genetics*, to the state of empiricism and has abandoned a large part of the rationalism that was typical for traditional biological approaches.

The next thing that strikes one as extremely problematic about memes is that these objective elements are not seen as developing within a cultural space but in a space of "evolution" or "selection" that is defined very abstractly. The problem is already well known in genetics which led the geneticist Sydney Brenner to urge his colleagues to "stop talking about substantive and essentialized entities that used to be called genes" and to talk instead of developments that take place "in time as well as in a complex, multileveled environment" (Quoted from Rabinov 2005: 103). Dawkins affirms that "the environment of a gene consists largely of other genes, each of which is itself being selected for its ability to cooperate with *its* environment of other genes" (Dawkins 1989: 39) and Kate Distin insists that memes are "determined more by the environment (memetic, genetic and physical) than by their own content" (Distin 2005: 205). The problem is that "environment" is here a very limited and abstract notion that has nothing to do with a "real" cultural place. Brenner's suggestion can be clearly understood as a proposal to retrieve the "narrative" character of nature that transmits information about nature not in terms of classification but which engages in questions of space in the form of habitat and relation. The path of molecular biology, which memetics follows, reduces the spatial aspect of nature to "nothing." There are neither bodies nor selves but sequences of encoded genetic information residing at the "most undistinguished spot at the periphery of evolution," as Mark Sagoff expressed it (Sagoff 2005: 68).

All this also has much to do with what Francisco Gil-White characterizes, in his contribution to the present book, as memetics' overemphasis of the meme's "content" and its neglect of the context (established by other memes) in which every meme is imbedded. However, would, on the other hand, a horizontal consideration of a memetic network not reduce memetics to semiotics? In the worst case, this can lead to the conclusion that in memetics, similar to what has happened in virtual reality, "information lost its body"[4] (Katherine Hayles) and identity is confirmed

by means of "repeated genetic sampling" (Wolmark 2002: 81). Susan
Oyama formulates a similar criticism when noting that "Dennett speaks of
'invasion of human brains by culture,' and even of 'interacting
meme-infested brains' (not people!). (…) Actually, he defines the notion
of a person by such memetic invasion and manipulation" (Oyama 2000:
196).[5]

3. "Imitation" in Culture

Instead of suggesting endless shifts between horizontal semiotics and
vertical memetics (whose combination will always remain unsatisfactory),
I want to point to another alternative: aesthetics. First of all, because
memetics neglects the spatial aspect of culture it is also bound to neglect
its aesthetic aspect. In the following I will show how the omission of the
aesthetic aspect in gene-inspired humanities like memetics has led to
misunderstandings about human culture itself. The quasi omission of
aesthetics is particularly problematic with regard to the memetic key
concept, *imitation*, a concept through which memetics attempts to explain
the evolution of culture (which advances through a process of memetic
replication).[6] It is necessary to refer to the original sense of mimesis,
which should always be seen as being linked to the spatial activity of play.

3.1. Memetics and Aesthetics

One of the foremost occupations of aesthetics is the analysis of style.
Though, in principle, Dennett, Dawkins, and Blackmore claim to do
nothing other than explain "why some ideas and styles flourish while other
perish,"[7] they never make an effort to establish the concept of "style" even
on a basic level. Blackmore's *The Meme Machine* reads for the largest part
more like Desmond Morris' *Animal Watching* (the only book on animal
culture I have read) than like a book about human culture, let alone about
cultural style. We learn about wild birds which, in 1921, adopted the skill
of opening milk bottles and somehow managed to spread this "meme" to
birds all over England (46) but we do not learn, for example, how and why
is the transmission of cultural *styles* (I do not mean bits of information
about styles but styles as integral configurations of memetic motifs) from
one epoch to another possible. Dawkins gives detailed accounts of the
transmission of song patterns among birds on a certain island (Dawkins
1989: 189-190). Likewise, the spreading of rumors, stories, Beethoven's
'ta ta ta taa' motif, etc. are evoked in an extremely materialistic fashion
while the *stylistic* or *aesthetic* content of a meme never seems to have

aroused the memeticist's slightest interest. By "aesthetic content" I do not actually mean some explosive "genetic" power present in a meme that could be contrasted with a neutral receptive environment. Such a phenomenon represents rather the limited "meme content" that Gil-White criticizes as reductive and which I characterize as "materialistic."

However, my criticism exceeds that of Gil-White, as well as that of Atran, who shows that memes cannot be reduced to information and spread much more through inference than through mere imitation. In my view, memes have an aesthetic content which denotes a quality that emerges through a playful, though tension charged, contact of a meme with the cultural place within which it functions. "Context" is an inappropriate word because it is still limited to human attention, and also inference (to use Atran's word) takes place on a direct line between the subject and the meme.

Distin declares that "a meme's content may (…) be a fairly arbitrary factor in determining its success: its fortune in the struggle for survival will always be relative to context." The most important thing is that a meme "gain[s] and retain[s] the attention of human minds" (Distin 2005: 67). I discover in Distin's strategy an extremely interesting, even revolutionary approach in the humanities which deserves to be analyzed more closely. I have said above that memetics decides to neglect the aesthetic content of the meme by reducing it to an effect of a formalized, abstract act of imitation; this alone can be considered as fairly normal because abstract methods are common in the humanities since Russian formalism. What is for the first time willfully neglected is any possibility of an "inter-memal" play of culture. Here memetics clearly overruns the limits that structuralism and semiotics still used to respect. One of the main "tricks" of the meme-like vision of the world is to elude the hermeneutic problem of the particular and the universal by declaring that the *particular* meme *does* contain a self-sufficient, "selfish" power but that there is no necessity to display and consider this power within a *universal* grid of synchronic and diachronic forces. The successful meme will simply be the one which has been "selected" through a process of evolution (which, in itself, is an entirely abstract idea). Dawkins describes exactly this state of affairs when he mentions at the end of *The Selfish Gene*, after having insisted over and again that the gene is selfish, that "selfish is only a figure of speech" (196). Yes, the gene is selfish… but not in itself (the level of abstraction of the whole theory becomes clear through this formulation), it *appears* as selfish only because it functions within a selective environment that fosters only the replication of the fittest elements. Through this trick, memetics manages to pretend that it is

constantly confronting its "selfish meme" with a cultural universal which is, in reality, only *a theoretical abstraction of a cultural universal*, entirely dependent on the theory of the selfish meme itself.

The reader will ask what is *my* picture of what memes are doing. To put it most graphically: in "real culture" memes do not only fight against each other, they also form configurations, which enables them to create certain styles, some of which survive and some of which perish. This idea of "cultural evolution" is different from the Darwinist one. First of all, by "real culture" I mean a dynamic and concrete world that cannot be thought outside the tension produced by historical (vertical) and contemporary (horizontal) conditions. In other words, cultural evolution takes place in a *space* where aesthetic motives and configurations are constantly produced and reproduced *in real time*. Henry Plotkin writes, that "if one maintains the accepted definition of imitation (…) then what memetics becomes is a kind of one-dimensional account to culture. It leaves out of the science the complex cognitive mechanisms that are responsible for what the social scientists see as the interesting and complicated features…" (Plotkin 2000: 76). The important point that I want to add to this critique is that the cognitive mechanisms that enable the evolution of culture are also dependent on the processing of *aesthetic* constellations.

3.2. Mimesis and Memetics

It necessary to explain more clearly what is meant by "aesthetic." Of course, I mean beauty or the stylistic force with which "memes" impose themselves on our mind while they are playing in the real world. To say, as memeticists do, that the surviving memes have simply been easier to retain by human brains is insufficient and indeed implausible. The root of the whole problem seems to be a misunderstanding about the term mimesis.

First of all, mimesis not copying. Though Distin makes efforts to refine the idea of replication by defining it as the production of a "constant pattern of behavior" necessitating a subjective "representation of the pattern itself" (Distin 129) and though Dan Sperber rejects the idea of replication of memes in order to replace it with a more mutation-oriented concept of reproduction (Sperber 1996: 102),[8] Blackmore, Dennett, and Dawkins stick to the idea of evolution through replication and imitation. Though this has been criticized by various authors (who are mainly sociologists and psychologists),[9] nobody seems to have tackled the obvious lack of an aesthetic input in this concept of imitation. This point needs to be established more precisely, be it only because the word meme has been derived from the Greek mimesis. Mimesis means "artistic

imitation" and explicitly avoids the idea of copying. Instead it concentrates on imitation in the sense of artistic re-presentation. Hans-Georg Gadamer has much insisted on the aesthetic character of mimesis as a classical theory of art which, for him, has an affinity with play: "The classical theory of art which bases all art on the idea of mimesis, imitation, has obviously started from play, which, in the form of dancing, is the presentation of the divine" (Gadamer 1975: 102). In culture, elements – and indeed many memes – are imitated in a playful way, that is, they are figuratively enacted and receive their new (aesthetic) meaning only through this figuration.

Gadamer concludes that (cultural) reality itself must have a playful character. The "wild" imitation of memes as described by memetics, on the other hand, makes no effort to represent such a playful memetic activity that could lead towards aesthetic configurations. For memetics, culture is a purposeful (even if the "purpose" remains unconscious) development of evolution that can even be depicted – according to Dennett – as an "algorithmic process" (Dennett 1995: 48-60). However, how could it ever acquire the playful quality through which culture produces the phenomena of beauty and style? This question does not seem to enter the minds of memeticists. Dawkins dabbles with most fundamental aesthetic criteria leaving it even open if "great" should be opposed to "viral." Memetics is no aesthetics.

I will give some more concrete examples and elucidate how style "creates itself" in a gamelike and also "unconscious" fashion. It will become clear why it is useless to describe cultural and stylistic development in terms of an "evolution" in a Darwinist sense. As a matter of fact, artists or architects never "want" to create an historical style but in the end they sometimes happen to do so.[10] In architecture, for example, Le Corbusier and F. Lloyd Wright could testify within their own lifetimes that the anti-style that they had created had become a style. By refusing the term style, modern architecture actually created a new style, which would later be called "the style of modern architecture." There is nothing unusual in this: certain forms which used not to be style can easily and at almost any time *become* style. Throughout modernity style has actually been explained on the basis of a dialectics between creativity and official acceptance. However, the question arises if there is not hidden within the notion of style a certain surplus. Nietzsche made the fundamental distinction between a dead style and a living one, the first one being a historical sign and the second one a style which communicates living contents ("Stil der mitteilt und Stil der nur Zeichen ist;" Nietzsche 1923: 38). Within this scheme, the communication of life is opposed to the dead communication of historical

signs. Nietzsche obviously believed that style can be linked to life: he believed that its communication does not need to pass, in the form of historical style, through history.

Frederic Jameson once noted that "great modern writers have all been defined by the invention or production of rather unique styles. (...) However different from each other, all of them are comparable in this: each is quite unmistakable [and] once one is learned, it is not likely [that one style will be] confused with something else" (Jameson 1988: 15). What Jameson means is that the strength of the writers' style is produced through a historical process, which transforms actual artistic expressions into historical style. Jean Cocteau made this point very clear by saying that what we should look for is not "a style" but simply "style." "*A* style" does not simply signify the historical, formal aspect of a thing, in contrast to "style" which evokes a creative, living aesthetic expression. On the contrary, "style," though opposed to history, is constantly nourished by history and maintains what we could call an allegorical communication with it. Present, creative style (as opposed to official, historical style) that we might meet in present, contemporary works of art needs (though it is in many points explicitly contradicting history) a certain amount of historical recognition, in advance. Can memetics take into account this "living style" that flows out of an aesthetic play of memes with memes?

It is also worthwhile pointing out that memetic efforts with regard to architectural style were already made in the 19th century when Gottfried Semper established his "materialist aesthetics." Interestingly, when trying to tackle the phenomenon of style and stylistic evolution Semper ran into the same problems as contemporary memetics. First Semper points to the historical notion of style: "Egyptian style, Arab style, etc, (...) this part of stylistics is often the subject of art history and ethnology" (Semper 1884: 271).[11] There is, however, another notion of style, the one that we use when saying: "a work has no style" (ibid). Semper's mischievous originality consists in reducing also this last mentioned meaning of style to pure rationality. He does so by tracing back all statements about stylistic quality to an appropriate coordination of material and function and declares that a work has "no style" "when the material has been treated in a fashion that suits its nature" (ibid.).

Semper's systematic and materialistic "Stillehre" reduces art to a mechanical product consisting of raw material and technique or, perhaps, even Dennett-like algorithms, when Semper declares: "The work of art is the result or, to use a mathematical expression, a function of any number of agencies or forces which are the variable coefficients of its incarnation" (267). Style as a functional coefficient is supposed to be clearly and directly

determined by factors like climate, usefulness, political and religious influence, etc. Consequently, once we are aware of the functional dependence of style, the *production* of style is supposed to follow only purely functional principles. In other words, we are supposed to no longer hide the reasonable motivations underlying the production of style.

Egon Friedell characterizes Semper's "rational" concept of style as a symbolism of religious, social and political systems:

> The famous architect and teacher Gottfried Semper postulated that the style of every building is determined through historical associations. A courthouse was supposed to be reminiscent of a Doges Palace, a theater of a Roman arena, the barracks of a medieval fortification. (…) Because of the (false) association of Middle Ages with cities, a town hall had to be gothic, and – because of an equally false association of antiquity with the parliamentarian constitution – a parliament had to be ancient. A mayor's office had to be baroque… (Friedell 1931: 360-61).

Finally, this style cannot be reduced any further as it is anterior and essential to any reasonableness. The process of aesthetic mediation through play, on the other hand, can be depicted neither by a materialist discipline like Semperian stylistics nor by memetics. Of course, through their "selfish" aspect memes *almost* attain an aesthetic character of self-presentation, as writes Blackmore: memes "will not act for the benefit of the species, for the benefit of the individual, for the benefit of genes, or indeed for the benefit of anything but themselves. That is what it means to be a replicator" (Blackmore 1999: 31). However, if memes do only work "to get themselves copied," it remains impossible to explain the self-creation of new cultural *styles* (and not just new constellations of memes).

To introduce the idea of an aesthetic game into a discussion on Darwinism is certainly like squaring a circle. Though games are not necessarily *against* evolution (games *can* evolve) they need to be "without purpose" if they are supposed to evolve *as games*. The whole Western system of aesthetics is based on this principle. "The aesthetic" and "the playful" are, in the Western tradition, seen as "disinterested" phenomena. On the whole, aesthetic beauty needs to be approached with a mental attitude that is able to grasp the object's value without regard to vital and practical interests. From an aesthetic point of view, positive emotions – be they moral, psychological or simply "physically pleasurable" – are *not* decisive for the acceptance of an aesthetically attractive meme. What is decisive is the aesthetic mode of being through which the meme is presented within a certain cultural play. And this is how something like

"style" arises.

Blackmore's vision of the "meme machine" might be called gamelike but it remains a mechanical game that has no chance of gaining any aesthetic value. Its driving force is an abstract idea of selection, replication and evolution. Even Distin's gallant declaration, uttered in the conclusion of her book, that we should also try to read memes "in terms of intellect and consciousness, desires and hope, beliefs and emotions" (206) is certainly not meant to establish memetics as an aesthetic discipline.

4. Memetics and Lifestyle

Before looking at some concrete examples of how cultural styles can be "played" in order to evolve their style, I will present the thoughts of another philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein. First of all, Wittgenstein acts, just like contemporary memeticists, against that kind of subjectivism that was so particularly well established in European subjectivism of the 17th and the 18th centuries, a subjectivism through which the 'I' manages to assert itself over an entire world of the non-I. Leibniz, Hume, Kant, and many others subordinated the object to the knowing subject. On the basis of their subjectivist philosophy, the Self, as well as the space in which the individual is embedded, could be defined as "subjective."

Memeticists are also critical of these procedures. For Dennett "an independent mind is a myth" and Blackmore formulates the human "self" as not more than an organism helping memes to replicate because she suspects that a large part of our lives is lived as a lie (240). However, while memeticists decide to describe "real" life as a formal play of memetic selection, excluding all other subjective means of defining life ("there is no conscious designer"), Wittgenstein uses the expression of *Lebensform* (form of life) to refer to a "form" whose positive character escapes definition.

For Wittgenstein, a certain "unsayable" or "non-materializable" quantity (which he tries to define in the *Zettel* and in the *Philosophical Investigations*) accompanies our speaking and thinking (see Botz-Bornstein 2003a and 2003b). This pre-linguistic form of thinking can be classified as neither conscious nor unconscious but it develops out of an "unsayable experience." Various German philosophers developed this Wittgensteinian notion into a more aesthetic notion of lifestyle (Lebensstil).[12] For Wittgenstein, philosophy is, in general, "a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence (*Verstand*) by means of language" (Wittgenstein 1997: 109). He explains this by alluding to all kinds of experiences: experiences from everyday life, aesthetic experiences,

especially those related to music and, above all, the experiences of speaking and of thinking. His point is that any "reasonableness" of speech is never produced by thinking whilst speaking. There is no control of speech itself, but it seems rather that speech, with its internal (not only linguistic) reasonableness, develops all on its own: "(One is not usually half-astonished) to hear oneself say something; (and doesn't follow one's own talk with attention); for one ordinarily talks voluntarily, not involuntarily" (Wittgenstein 1989: 92). The same is true for the act of reading: "Here I should like to say: 'The words that I utter *come* in a special way.' That is, they do not come as they would if I were for example making them up (*ersänne*). – They come of themselves (*von selbst*)" (*PU*: 165). The "special way" in which the words come cannot be traced back to any *causality* but they must simply be accepted as a *Lebensform*.

All this means that there are no entities like "representations" as such, but all there is, is a general language game. Representation comes about *through a play of representations* and Wittgenstein can only mock at the idea that representations (Vorstellungen) can be "materialized" when asking: "How does one compare representations?" (*PU*: 376). Wittgenstein's idea of consciousness is rather that of something ungraspable (he speaks of an "ungraspable dream") which accompanies our speaking and our entire existence. All this means that – and this is important for our discussion of memetics – what is more important than the detection of a material "psychic content" of "resemblances," etc. is the experience in the way it is made. More important than objectified memes is the *Lebensform* within which these memes are imbedded.

A work of art, for example, is not a subjective expression but a *Lebensform*: "In order to be clear about aesthetic words you have to describe *Lebensformen*" (Wittgenstein 1966: 11). The *Lebensform* is based on a not yet materialized experience (that can also be the experience of a group of people, a state, or a nation). It can never be "split up" into different, uncoordinated language games but is held together by a quantity of pure experience present at the base of their *Lebensform*.

Some have tried to explain Wittgenstein's *Lebensform* as a general form of social coherence among individuals, with roots that go deeper and are more absolute than the idea of a simple consensus:

> The members of a certain community (*Gemeinschaft*) normally act, with regard to a certain rule, in the same way. According to Wittgenstein, this is *not* due to a social consensus. It is not the correspondence of our opinions or interpretations of a certain rule, which make us act alike, but the fact that we share the same *Lebensform* (Soldati 1989: 90).

One has also said that the *Lebensform* is a sort of *Weltanschauung*.[13] All this comes close to our preceding evaluations of memes because, like memeticists, Wittgenstein affirms that certain forms of life, certain lifestyles exist not because of some "magical power" that can be traced back to a human consciousness effectuating things like creativity, consensus, rules, etc. On the contrary, a form of life can exist independently of such conscious choices. The reason why they exist, however, is explained in different ways by both parties: While memeticists attribute them to the competitive struggle between memes, Wittgenstein (like Gadamer) sees them as aesthetic cultural configurations and in the formation of lifestyles (as a matter of fact, both Gadamer and Wittgenstein call these configurations "games," *Spiele*).

5. More about Cultural Games

I am not saying that the evolutive struggle of memes that memeticists evoke does not exist, but it cannot explain the formation of cultural patterns. Why do these patterns exist? Because a certain group of people has accepted the same memes. Why did they accept them? Because they were exposed to them more often than to others, they found them convenient… This explanation remains insufficient. There must be something *in the style or in the cultural game* that is attractive; the attractive trait which brings about the constellation, the driving force which helps to develop the whole pattern cannot be contained only in the single units called memes. The style of a cultural pattern crystallizes itself in an aesthetic way; it has not been contained in the form of a stylistic DNA code in one of the game's elements. It *did not even exist* before the cultural game started.

The idea that something which did not exist beforehand came into existence just though play is certainly the most difficult one to swallow for any materialists, and not only Darwinists. Still I am convinced that in culture, development and "evolution" proceed that way. I will make a last effort and explain how I imagine that these strange entities called memes move (evolve?) from one cultural sphere to another. As I have shown in a completely different context, "imitation" in culture can produce results that were not contained in the culture's "original genes" (Cf. Botz-Bornstein 2007). The phenomenon of cultural imitation has been much discussed with regard to the absorption of French culture into 17th century Russia. It has fascinated modern theorists from Nicolas Trubetzkoy to Yuri Lotman. Trubetzkoy claims that it is impossible "for

any nation to assimilate *in toto* a culture created by another nation […] so that the creator of the culture and its borrower merge into a single cultural entity" (Trubetzkoy 1991: 36) and concludes that materializing sociology pursues a false course when trying to crystallize static cultural entities. Lotman makes the same point some forty years later by using methods of semiotics: "[In Russia] the tendency develops to find within the imported world-view a higher content which can be separated from the actual national culture of the imported texts. The idea takes hold that 'over there' these ideas were realized in an 'untrue,' confused or distorted, form and that 'here,' in the heart of the receiving culture they will find their true, 'natural' heartland."[14]

These schemes cannot be sufficiently explained by using the four memetic stances of "memework" (I coin this term in parallel with Freud's dreamwork) which are assimilation, retention, expression, and transmission (cf. Heylighen [no year]), because what is transmitted to Russia is finally "more French" than the original. The memes play here a self-sufficient, aesthetic game whose materialistic survival in terms of evolution remains undefined but which is obviously able to develop a dynamics of its own.

The parallel with Freud's dreamwork actually works quite well because Freud, too, was confronted with claims that his method neglects aesthetics. Like memeticists who try to explain culture as the result of memework, Freud attempted to explain dreams as a result of dreamwork. For Freud, dream research was to be used as a technical means of discovering essential facts concerning the development of neuroses, mental diseases, and other phenomena diverging from "normal" mental life[15] and aesthetic considerations had never been at the center of these elaborations. Freud himself was aware of this: "The psychoanalyst is only rarely motivated to undertake aesthetic examinations, not even when aesthetics is not restricted to the doctrine of beauty but defined as the doctrine of sentimental qualities" (Freud GW XII: 292).[16] However, there is another way of seeing dreams. In film studies it has been demonstrated that dreams can be (aesthetically) fascinating not only because their linguistic or structural elements can be traced back to elements which exist in reality. In films, the language of dream is an object of interest as just "another language," in the same way as one can be fascinated by language from another culture without having a particularly linguistic interest in it.

Conclusion

To those who think that the example of 17th century Russia is far fetched I

can say that it is not. Especially today, we encounter many such paradoxical constellations of cultural reproduction whose dynamic transgresses the logic of imitation. Only recently Edith Halberstam has shown that "postmodern culture" abounds with "inverted dominating narratives" represented by "sequels that precede prequels, actor presidents, films that precede novelizations, infomercials, docudramas…" (Halberstam 1995: 4). Memetics, as a typical example for the naturalization of culture, will have difficulties explaining such phenomena because it reduces cultural events to cultural information (which *can* only be imitated) and dynamizes these elements only subsequently by inscribing them into a Darwinian system of evolutionary selection. Genes cannot create style and memetics should not foist a model of genetic transmission on that of culture.

Notes Chapter 9

1. Replication signifies the production of perfect copies. See Francisco Gil-White's article in this volume.

2. Cf. Deleuze and Guattari 1980: 238-39. See Keith Ansell Pearson: "This is to posit evolutionism as linearism. It thus becomes necessary to think of a reality that is specific to 'becoming'" (1997: 187).

3. Scott Atran: "The trouble with memes: inference versus imitation in cultural creation" in *Human Nature* 12:4, 351-381, 2001. Quoted from a pdf downloaded from the CNRS-Institut-Nicod website, page 6.

4. Katherine Hayles quoted from Jenny Wolmark: "Staying with the Body" in Hollinger and Gordon 2002: 78.

5. Susan Oyama refers to Dennett's *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* pages 341 and 367.

6. On the relationship between imitation and replication see Gil-White, xx.

7. For the "aesthetic" side of memetics see Dennett 1990 (although the main part of this article is also continued in *Darwin's Dangerous Idea.*

8. Quoted from Distin, 102. Henry Plotkin criticizes that "in Blackmore's work the notion of imitation has been expanded beyond the point of meaning." Plotkin 1993: 768-91. Quoted from Distin: 101.

9. See Aunger's conclusion to *Darwinizing Culture* in which he summarizes this criticism (205).

10. In have explained these matters in detail in Botz-Bornstein 2006b.

11. All translations from Semper are mine.

12. Erich Rothacker tried to trace back scientific discussions to *weltanschauliche* discussions or to references based on considerations of a *Lebensstil.* Especially in *Logik und Systematik der Geisteswissenschaften* and *Geschichtsphilosophie*, Rothacker defines the *Lebensstil* as "man's 'Totalantwort' to his condition" (55ff). It has been recognized that Rothacker was, in this project, guided by Wittgenstein's idea of *Lebensform*, an influence he indicates himself (*Zur Genealogie des menschlichen Bewußtseins*, 173, and *Gedanken über Martin Heidegger*, 29). Rothacker revises Wittgenstein's concept of *Lebensform* as a kind of "human condition" which turns out to be not very different from the "animal condition," because man, like the animal, "does not notice, when captured in temporary *Stimmungen,* those things which do not appear important for him" (*Philosophische Anthropologie*, 87).

13. German *Philosophische Anthropologie* is mainly represented by the sociologists and philosophers Max Scheler and Helmuth Plessner, whose work has been continued by Arnold Gehlen and Erich Rothacker, who developed their thoughts into an "Allgemeine vergleichende Menschheitslehre" (General Comparative Science of Mankinds). Central to the work of *Philosophical Anthropology* is the idea of "culture as *Lebensstil,*" which represents a major perspective, especially for Rothacker, who opposed this notion to the more biologically oriented explanations of civilization provided by Gehlen.

14. Lotman 1970: 147. See also Lotman 1985: 70: "The image of European life was reduplicated in a ritualized playacting of European life. Everyday behavior became a set of signs for everyday behavior. The semiotization of everyday life, the degree to which it was consciously perceived as a sign, increased sharply. Daily life acquired the characteristics of a theatre." A similar pattern of "creative imitation" can be observed in Japan. Nativist stances like SUZUKI Daisetsu's who holds that Buddhism received in Japan the most exquisite outfit and is thus more "real" than Buddhism as it existed in its homeland, are widespread in Japanese literature reaching from *nihonjinron* writings to serious philosophy.

15. In his *Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse* (*General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*), Freud presents the study of dreams as an explicit introduction to the *Neurosenlehre*.

16. I explain this in the introduction to Botz-Bornstein 2007.

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