

Archi-memes

Description

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Is a Gothic arch a meme? According to John James, historian of the Gothic, â??A meme is like a catchy tune, a new fashion in clothes or a way of building an arch. When an architect hears about a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students, and if it catches on it will, like a gene, propagate itself by spreading from brain to brainâ?• (4).

We commonly think of this diffusion of ideas as imitation. After all, *meme* is a shortened form of *mimeme*, meaning â??that which is imitatedâ?• (OED). But the meme idea suggests that memes are â??living structuresâ?• (4) that take advantage of the environment they are in to propagate themselves (like a gene).

As evidence for the pernicious autonomy of the meme, James notes how they can go unchecked and unchallenged. With brains as their mere hosts, a meme can be â??invasive and concealed, parasitic and often limitingâ?• (4).

Jamesâ??s area of study is really Gothic architecture, and the book in which he invoked the meme was published in 1989, the decade following that in which Richard Dawkins posited the idea of the meme â?? when the meme-meme started to take hold.

For James a meme comes across as a preconception or a misconception that makes sense amongst a group of historians (in his case). The meme fits within their frame of reference, but James thinks we need to wrest memes from their autonomy, subject them to scrutiny, and adjust them.

One such meme in the world of Gothic scholarship is that *innovation spreads out from the largest and greatest workshops to local practice*; or that *architectural innovation grows over time from something simple to more complicated*. I would note that in turn these propositions appear to be *biological* memes, or at least common organic metaphors of growth, development and improvement. James seeks in his book to dispute and dispell these and other memes.



Info-memes

What is a meme? The meme idea has its origins in the concept of information. Where information is delivered overtly as sequential patterns in some kind of code â?? spoken and written language being the most obvious examples. So the usual meme vehicles include media that involve text and words, such as books, libraries, databases, and social media exchanges. Importantly, in this constellation of vehicles, meme theorists give a place to human beings, or to put us on a level as one carrier amongst many â?? biological machines, or simply â??brains.â?•

But memes can be material and visible other than through text. Architectural theorist Paul-Alan Johnson placed the meme as one of the vehicles through which people theorise architecture, and he references both James and Dawkins. Johnson also emphasises the visual.

According to Johnson, â??if architects or students cruise books, journals, or actual buildings in search of design ideas or elements that appeal to them, they are looking to appropriate visual memes, atoms of visual currency that they might exploit from within the theme of the targeted work or architect, or within their own themes. Visual memes spread rapidly once they achieve currency status, and in this way become the fashion or mode among a collaborative groupâ?• (341). He stresses that a meme tends to be â??a single, maybe trivial, ideaâ?• (341), though there are exceptions.

So a way of building an arch could be a meme, suggesting a process that could be described, and so can an arch itself be a meme, or at least it can carry a meme, i.e. exist as a meme vehicle.

Some artists, designers, architects, and engineers think of textual production as just one category amongst a panoply of potential meme carriers. Architectural theorist Chris Abel approves of the meme, arguing that technologies, including buildings, are carriers of memes: â??all buildings and other artifacts are embodied technical memes of one kind or anotherâ?• (156).

Meme ecologies

Drawing on Manuel de Landaâ??s (and Deleuze and Guattariâ??s) concept of *assemblages*, Abel also argues that â??no technical meme exists on its own, but always belongs to some larger combination or seriesâ?• (162).

Abel doesnâ??t write about arches, but provides the compelling case for the device of the wheel with spokes radiating from an axial, the spoked wheel, as a technical meme. At first blush this simple device sounds like a unitary idea, isolated, perhaps obsolete, and now unremarkable. But the spoked wheel has persisted, grown and developed throughout history and fits within large assemblages of other technical memes, such as land vehicles, roads, suburban developments, consumer products and even houses.

Anarchi-meme

The spoked wheel tech-meme also crosses over from one domain to another: â??the more diverse technical assemblages spoked wheels were used in, then the more the meme was â??loosened,â?? as it were, from its original assemblage, ready to spring over and be used in yet another assemblageâ?• (165). So spoked wheels appear in various forms in clocks, production lines, carousels, and jet engines.

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So if we are permitted the neologism, *archi-meme*, then the meme does have currency in architectural discourse. I also like Jamesâ??s idea that the meme is â??invasive and concealed, parasitic and often limiting,â?• that speaks to the meme as anarchic, against the state and rule, an *anarchi-meme*. See post Derrida for standups for a note on arche-writing and The opposite of architecture on *anarchitecture* .

References

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Notes

- First image is of restoration stonework in the basement of York Minster. The second is St. Gilesâ?? Church in Cheadle, Staffordshire, England designed by Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin.
- I attended an inspiring lecture on Chartres by John James back in the 1980s in Sydney. He has a website www.johnjames.com.au, which also includes a list of Gothic memes. In the latter he says: â??Without further examples, I hope the point has been made that scholarship need not be about the truth, nor about any passion to search. Instead, once the meme has taken hold and spread plague-like through a community, infected scholarship can easily change from exploring the frontier to defending the bailiwick.â?•

Category

1. Nature

Tags

1. Gothic
2. meme

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