The Institutional Fan-Made Paratext: the Case of the Van Der Memes

Paola Brembilla

paola.brembilla3@unibo.it

Università di Bologna

Abstract

This paper discusses the case of the *Van Der Memes*, Internet memes based on close-ups of actor James Van Der Beek emoting feelings which*,* born as user-generated content (UGC), end up working as marketing tools for a rebranding campaign of the actor.

Framing the case study into the complexity of contemporary mediascape, a digital environment where corporate branding strategies progress alongside remix culture, the analysis will unfold along two main directions: on the one hand, we will see how the same content undertakes constant reworks and repurposes, as the duration and circulation of the media objects involved gets inevitably altered. On the other, we shall see how the case of the *Van Der Memes* calls into question the conflict between bottom/up and top/down productions, as it exemplifies a profitable relation between the notoriously unruly world of UGC and the institutional environment of television industry.

1. Internet Memes: From Replication Through Copies to Production of Meaning

A meme is a concept, an idea, an object that travels virally from person to person. According to Richard Dawkins [1976], who describes how rumours, catch-phrases, melodies, fashion trends replicate through a population, a meme is a cultural version of the human gene: it self-creates, it carries a replicable code and it is therefore able to produce endless copies of itself. Nevertheless, the case study sets itself in a scenario where memes detach from this definition grounded in self-creation and replication through copies, demanding instead an approach that takes into consideration the complexity of contemporary mediascape, which allows unprecedent relations and interactions.

In the digital mediascape, the concept of replicability is in fact necessarily combined with the idea o f *constant updating*, which means that contents, like open-source softwares, are open for implementation, extension and renewing by both producers and users [Manovich 2010]. Accordingly, these contents tend to acquire a modular structure, which means that they 'may be parceled out and replicated in different recreational or entertainment contexts, thus allowing fragmentation, displacement and diversification of use' [Innocenti-Pescatore 2013]. As a

consequence, in the light of contemporary participatory culture and spreadable media model, the replication of the same material needs to be associated with practices of reuse, rework and remix that do not simply lead to the creation of *derivative works*, but above all to *discoursive productions* involving the active participation and work of different agents. That is why Henry Jenkins [2009], talking about Internet memes, takes up the definition of Richard Dawkins in order to adjust the idea of direct self-replication, arguing that a meme can no longer be defined as an object that perpetually self-replicate without any alteration. The phenomenon is rather about dynamic processes of appropriation, rework and repurpose of the original text by a wide variety of users. Jenkins therefore emphasizes the role of the users, rather than the singular objects or texts, stressing the shift from the mechanic creation of copies to the active creation of meaning. These ideas do not, obviously, rule out the commercial role of memes. Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, in their extensive study on Internet memes, argue that 'marketing strategies from the late nineteenth century can be described retrospectively in terms of selling memes to consumers' [2007, 210]. Here memes are therefore intended as those catchy and compelling promotional tools that are made to replicate and propagate, carrying with them a well defined media agenda. In order to be successful, these promotional messages need to be subsequently incorporated by the targeted consumers. Still, at this point, the authors stress the idea of memes becoming *social* phenomena, rather than just *commercial* one, emphasising their relational aspects and social configurations [2007, 207-208].

However, this is not the only possible pattern for reworked material, since the new social meanings created by the users can actually turn back into a renewed profitable brand for the industry. As Jenkins, Li, Krauskopf and Green argue: 'Spreadability may help to expand and intensify consumer awareness of a new and emerging brand or transform their perceptions of an existing brand, re-affirming its central place in their lives' [2013, 7]. Memes based on public figures[1], seems to best exemplify this bond between UGC and media industries. These phenomena share a pattern where users appropriate parts of pre-esisting texts in order to rework and distribute them again under new shapes, thus creating and spreading new *social meanings*. What makes this kind of memes peculiar is that media industries can appropriate these new meanings back, ultimately creating *commercial values*.

The *Van Der Memes* case is one of the most evident and emblematic of the last few years, standing out as an example of both *constant updating* and profitable coexistence of remix and corporate culture.

2. From the *Van Der Memes* to the *Van Der Brand*

It all starts with *The Crying Dawson*, an animated GIF that has circulated over the Internet since roughly 2007-2008. It was made from a clip aired by The WB on 2000, during episode 23 from

season 3 of *Dawson's Creek*: a close-up on the leading character, Dawson (played by James Van Der Beek), crying after a break-up. The GIF becomes a meme that spreads virally over the Internet and rapidly gains the status of cult. Interestingly, *The Crying Dawson* spreads many years after the official ending of the series, when fans extract the clip and create a sort of new paratext that, mainly because of technology and media culture, would have been practically unfeasible at the time.

The close-up on James Van Der Beek, taken out of its original context, undertakes a transformation that has to do more with adaptation than replication: when fans turn screenshots and frames from the TV series into *reaction faces* – which can be usually used on online discussion threads in order to portray a specific emotion, just like emoticon – the image of the actor becomes a vacant signifier, a customizable template ready for new practices of appropriation, repurpose and creation of meaning. So the extracted element does fit into a new context, fostering a reactivation and a conversion of the primary text (*Dawson's Creek*) from cultural *commodity* to cultural *resource*, as users participate in the production and sharing of new meanings [Jenkins-Li-Krauskopf-Green 2013]. These practices reposition what more than ten years before was a mass content, turning it into memes that spread across affinity spaces[2] and niche markets through personal ties, recomendations and clusters of friendship [Jenkins-Li-Krauskopf-Green 2013, 33]. In fact, these operations prove particularly effective among people who share a common knowledge of the primary text, who can understand cross-references and enjoy inside jokes on the figure of Dawson Leery/James Van Der Beek.

As the *Crying Dawson* spreads, giving even birth to "spin-offs" such as the *1990s Problems*[3], it is clear that a revival appealing on memory and irony can be profitable for the industry as well. In 2010 James Van Der Beek takes advantage of this renewed popularity and collaborates with the website *Funny or Die* to create *Vandermemes.com*. The site gathers a new series of *reaction faces* created by the actor specifically for the venture and, as the Van Der Beek states in the presentation video[4], people can now copy and past their favorite GIF in order to express their own "Van Der Feelings". *Vandermemes.com* also collects some videos that James Van Der Beek shot for *Funny or Die*, namely a website where web stars and well-known actors post comedy clips. Through those gags, James Van Der Beek promotes and boosts the parodical image of himself he launched with the *Van Der Memes*.

This image gets consolidated in 2012, when broadcast network ABC airs its new series *Don't Trust the B---- in Apartment 23* (*Apt23*). The show features James Van Der Beek playing a skewed version of himself: in order to reboot his image and make people forget "the Beek from the Creek", his character ventures into a rebranding campaign of himself, which ultimately results into a parodical version of reality. As James Van Der Beek states in an interview to *The Hollywood Reporter*: 'The people who created *Apartment 23* saw the *Funny Or Die* videos and said, «This is

perfect; we want him on the show doing this kind of comedy […]» Now they're creating this whole character that has my basic résumé on it but the rest is completely made up' [Goldberg 2013].[5]

At this point, James Van Der Beek has already reached a level of stardom where he is more famous for being himself, rather than for being Dawson in *Dawson's Creek*, which made him popular in the first place. Starting from *The Crying Dawson*, he launches a rebranding campaign of his image: just like the memes, the rebranding relies on parody and self-deprecation, combining it to the possibilities of circulation offered by the Web. The meme therefore shifts its role: from a fan-made "paratext" of *Dawson's Creek* that spreads over the Internet as a vacant signifier, it turns first into a marketing tool for James Van Der Beek, and second for the series *Apt23*, which incorporates the new image of the actor as content. As we have seen, media industries not only aggregate multiple platforms, they also aggregate different pieces of content. Talking about paratexts in this cross-collateralised mediascape, John Thronton Caldwell argues in fact that they 'inevitably do double-duty. Thus, in addition to their standard role as value-added marketing materials, large swathes of any conglomerate's niches also now use paratexts as primary forms of on-screen content as well' [2011, 180-181]. In this case, a user-made paratext get sappropriated and capitalised by the industry, which stabilises its meaning through the creation of what becomes the 'extended commercial environment' [Grainge 2008, 11] of the *Van Der Brand*.

3. Conclusions: the Two Lives of the Meme

The circulation of the *Crying Dawson* memes, and then the incorporation into what has become the *Van Der Brand*, has altered the duration, circulation and overall meaning of the media objects involved. First of all, we have noticed a reactivation of the primary text, made possible by some peculiarities of contemporary digital environment (constant updating, modular content, spreadable media model) that inevitably bring together the two forces of bottom/up remix culture and top/down corporate strategies. Born as a delayed user-generated paratext of *Dawson's Creek*, the *Crying Dawson* ends up reactivating and stretching the popularity of the original series through affinity spaces that appeal to shared knowledge (hence inside jokes), memory and nostalgia. This becomes the starting point for a promotional campaign led by the actor himself, who turns the user-made object into something different: a ready-to-use tool for consumers. The industry therefore directly acts on the "unruly" in order to its own rules of circulation: *Jamesvandermemes.com* stands in fact as a meeting ground between industry and users, enclosing their practices into institutional boundaries. So what we have here is a peculiar case of rework and adaptation, a phenomenon of revival that does not simply represents a repetition/resurrection, but above all a rework/refunctionalisation of pre-existing material in order to create new meanings and values.

As for the original meme, it now seems to live two lives: on the one hand, the "institutionalisation"

of the fan-made object has turned *The Crying Dawson* into a marketable brand. But on the other, as we can see from a cursory search on the internet, the GIF has mantained its main role of vacant signifier that keeps on thrive and spread independently from the industry campaign. This shift highlights the intrisic resilience of products reflecting the needs of a media scenario that finds its basis on both remix culture and corporate policies, two conditions that are not mutually exclusive.

References

Caldwell, John T., *Corporate and Worker Ephemera: the Industrial Promotional Surround, Paratexts and Worker Blowback*, in P. Grainge (ed), *Ephemeral Media. Transitory Film Culture From Television to YouTube*, London: Palgrave/McMillan, 2011, pp. 175-194.

Dawkins, Richard, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976.

Gee, James, *Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling*, London: Routledge, 2004

Grainge, Paul, *Brand Hollywood. Selling Entertainment in a Global Media Age*, London: Routledge, 2008.

Goldberg, Leslie (2011), *James Van Der Beek: 'No Dawson-Con This Year'*, URL http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/james-van-der-beek-no-209528 [visited 14/1/2014].

Henry Jenkins (2009), *If It Doesn't Spread, It's Dead (Part One)*, URL <http://henryjenkins.org/2009/02/if_it_doesnt_spread_its_dead_p.html> [visited 14/1/2014].

Innocenti, Veronica, and Guglielmo Pescatore. (2013), *Information Architecture in Contemporary Television Series*, URL <http://journalofia.org/volume4/issue2/05-pescatore/> [visited 14/1/2014].

Jenkins, Henry and Xiaochang Li, Ana Domb Krauskopf, Joshua Green (2013), *If It Doesn't Spread, It's Dead. Creating Value in a Spreadable Marketplace*, URL <http://convergenceculture.org/research/Spreadability_doublesidedprint_final_063009.pdf> [visited 14/1/2014].

Knobel, Michele and Colin Lankshear, *Online Memes, Affinities and Cultural Production*, in

Michele Knobel e Colin Lankshear (eds), *A New Literacies Sampler*, New York: Peter Lang, 2007.

Manovich, Lev, *Software Culture*, Milano: Olivares, 2010.

Consulted Websites

www.jamesvandermemes.com

www.funnyordie.com

www.knowyourmeme.com

www.quickmeme.com

www.youtube.com

[1] It is the case, for instance, of celebrities such as Terry Crews of Chuck Norris, who gained a renewed popularity thanks to user-generated Internet memes born from their works on films and television.

[2] James Gee defines "affinity spaces" as 'Specially designed spaces (physical and virtual) constructed to resource people [who are] tied together [...] by a shared interest or endeavor' [2004, 9].

[3] Archived on the website *QuickMeme.com*, the *1990s-Problems* rely on nostalgic feelings as they contextualize the *Crying Dawson* back to the times the clip was aired – even though, to be precise, they refer to the late 90s while *Dawson's Creek* dates to the early 2000s. Still, they broaden the basic affinity spaces of the meme (*Dawson's Creek*'s viewers and fans), incorporating those who have grown up during and feel nostalgic about a particular d   e   c   a   d   e   . URL <http://www.quickmeme.com/1990s-Problems/> [visited 14/1/2014]

[4] The presentation video can be found at URL <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLHAoYtxrt8> [visited 14/1/2014]

[5] The pilot of TV series *Don't Trust the B—- in Apartment 23* was uploaded on ABC.com achieving a good amout of viewing, a result that convinced ABC to air it on prime time TV. In that context, ratings rapidly dropped until the series got cancelled at the beginning of season 2. One of the reasons of this unsuccess, is that on broadcast television, Nielsen ratings *de facto* decide for the future of a show. However, their sample represents a mass audience that does not take into consideration subsegments and niches such as clusters and affinities spaces on the Internet. That is why a show or, more in general, an audiovisual product could work online in terms of viewing and circulation, but not on the air. Anyway, this is actualy a very interesting case that would deserve an more in depth analysis and discussion.