

Jana Pecnikova  and **Jozefa Pevcikova** 

Matej Bel University, Banská Bystrica, Slovakia; Constantine the Philosopher University, Nitra, Slovakia

jana.pecnikova@umb.sk

Humour without Pathos of Internet Memes in the Context of Online Visual Communication

Abstract: In this article we focus on internet memes that have become an important genre of online communication, as internet users have created a new visual language: not only in form, but also in meaning (often very satiric). Internet memes relate to the Web 2.0 phenomenon, where users can access hundreds of meme templates, images, or short videos, and can assign them a specific meaning. The aim of this article is to theoretically define the “memetic visual language” with specific background, forms, and rules for creating and decoding it. In the empirical part of paper, we present a selection of examples put forward by the Slovak project *ZOMRI*, meant to demonstrate without pathos, but with humour, the power of internet memes to depict the personality of Slovak president Zuzana Caputova.

Keywords: *internet meme; visual communication; online communication; visual language; virtual space; Zomri.*



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Introduction

In everyday life, there is a continuous interpersonal communication. By communication, we mean passing on, conveying items of information (but also values, attitudes, and feelings), as well as connecting them and creating context. Communication is a transmission of information through the decoding of signals, using character systems. In communication, it is not enough to send signals, messages, or characters, it is equally important to receive and decode them, while at the same time providing feedback. When we consider the humour-oriented communication, the recipient and sender of a message can face obstacles in the comprehension of its meaning. The meaning is oftentimes influenced by the current situation and the cultural background.

Communication is mainly associated with speech or language – this is a communication through words. However, people can communicate in different ways. Nowadays, communication through visual images is becoming increasingly predominant. Images have the advantage that people usually understand them, even if they do not speak the same language. In the age of mass media, and, consequently, of mass communication, this type of communication is preferred. According to specialized research, up to 80% of the information from the environment is perceived by the eye. The information that the brain captures through the eyes is also best remembered (Supskova 7). Communication that is focused on sight and, thus, disseminates information through visual means, is called visual communication.

Visual communication can evoke many feelings, such as laughter, but also anger. That is why in our article we will reflect on political satire which is not offensive, but is aimed at the highest constitutional tier in a democratic system: the president. It evinces humour, with no pathos, begging the question of whether the interpretation of it requires higher meme literacy. The aim of the article is to define the "memetic visual language" with focus on theory, forms, and rules for creating and decoding it. And in a brief case study, we focus on an example of political satire from the Slovak environment, targeted at the Slovak and female president of the republic.

On visual communication

Visual communication presents information through images that include characters, symbols, typography, colours, illustrations, graphics, drawings. The visualization of the idea through images is essential, so that the recipient should understand the idea alluded to in this way. (Williams–Newton 159) In visual communication, meaning is represented (illustrated) by a system of similar signs and can be analysed through methods of semiotics (see Sturken, Cartwright and Doubravova).

Images or symbols are included among signs. For a proper communication of signs, their meaning must be known. When representing images, the fact that one image does not need to have only one meaning must be considered. According to Doubravova, the correct interpretation of images depends on how many meanings an image can be associated with

and how one can recognize these meanings. The ability to understand and use images while thinking, learning, and expressing oneself through images is called visual literacy. In this regard, Barnard argues that people are increasingly under the influence of visual materials and are increasingly dependent on them.

It is the twenty-first century that has brought about dominance of the world of images that has never been seen before in history, and it forms the beginning of a new, visually based civilization. Western culture has been dominated by the visual media, instead of spoken and written information and knowledge. We live in a culture that is increasingly permeated by images with different goals and intended effects. After the oral and verbal era comes the visual age, in which the image is a disseminator of messages, and experiences, along with emotions and artistic-aesthetic values. The recipient can capture the image, decrypt it, and then interpret it.

As a result of rapid technological progress, and spread of mass media and globalization, new demands are emerging and people should acquire four key literacies: information, communication, multicultural and visual. Visual literacy as a concept originated in the middle of the twentieth century. According to Supsakova, visual literacy is a learned ability to interpret visual messages and create such messages, and is similar to reading and writing printed texts.

A person who is visually literate can receive and create visual information because they control the process of broadcasting and processing content in the form of images. An image (or a visual in general) communicates with people, and the content is, in many cases, more important than its form. Many are also convinced that images depict a certain fact. However, this human observation is also subjective: what people see in the pictures depends on what they expect to see in them. Although there are universal symbols or visuals that have an international character (e.g. pictograms, traffic signs), visual literacy also has cultural specificities. These differences affect the effectiveness of an individual's visual perception and sometimes the visual information may be misread and misunderstood.

We would like to point out that visual thinking is also important in visual literacy. This is a much more specific process, which, according to Aiello and Parry, takes place in three stages: perception (the images we see), imagination (the images we imagine, connect, and/or internally transform in our minds independent of immediate perception), representation (the images that we mediate externally – images that we sketch, draw, paint or shape). Visual thinking supports the search for patterns, motifs and their interconnection, visual reasoning (analogies and visual induction), visual synthesis and visual language.

Visual language often follows the universal structure of representation, and, thus, 'anger' will be expressed by sharp, expressive, and vigorous lines, symbols. On the contrary, 'joy' is represented by delicate, round, and thin lines, symbols, colours. If the images are represented by a semiotically intelligible visual language, it is likely that not only members of the same culture will understand the language of the images, but members of other cultures will, too.

Internet memes as a genre of visual communication

As an academic concept, the meme first appeared in 1976, in the work of Richard Dawkins, where it was defined as “a unit of cultural transmission,” in connection with Darwin’s theory of cultural evolution. Memes were defined as “small units of culture that are spread from person to person by copying or imitation” (Shifman 9). In addition to the acceleration of communication, technology has also brought about the development of internet memes, which, in line with the original meaning, have created a new layer in the cultural evolution of mankind. For the purposes of this article, we will use the term *meme* from now on, while maintaining the meaning of this word in its narrow definition of *internet meme* – a phenomenon characteristic for Web 2.0.

Shifman states that memes diffuse from person to person, but shape and reflect general social mindsets. They are often based on pieces of pop culture which are intertextually linked to other parts of culture and the mass media. However, authors are not just professionals; memes blur boundaries because they can be created by anyone and can also be easily disseminated through various communication channels in socio-cultural environments. We agree with Denisova that internet memes have become (post)modern folklore, in which shared norms and values are constructed through cultural artifacts such as photoshopped images or urban legends.

Memes did not originate with the internet, which is why, even nowadays, we can see the so-called old memes, which have a pre-internet character: often, it was only the local meme with limited manifestations (e. g. the “Kilroy was here” meme). An internet meme is based on a visual side that, for example, resembles a photography. It looks as if it captures an event, emotion, or a scene on the spot. It is about attracting attention, but also about conveying content. According to Shifman, “the internet meme is defined as a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance which were created with awareness of each other, and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via internet by many users” (*Memes in Digital Culture* 41).

Six characteristics are important for memes: positivity (and humour), provocation of high-arousal emotions, participation, packaging, prestige, and positioning. Memes can focus on local topics when they use and illustrate topics that are currently relevant in society, but many memes have become “agents of globalization” when, thanks to the use of a universal language of signs and text in English as lingua franca, they have become understandable globally. They are often based on humorous content that becomes “a sphere of shared cultural knowledge that allows us to convey complex ideas within a short phrase or image” (Shifman 173).

In the process of decoding or understanding the way internet memes are used as a means of communication, two aspects have to be taken into consideration: the significance of Web 2.0 and its users, and the semiotics of internet memes.

The phenomenon of Web 2.0 has emerged at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as technological progress and globalization made internet connection more generally available, and the need of communication allowed mass social media to spread.

This shift in global communication and technology culture represented an important shift in understanding the potential of internet usage. The environment of what was later labelled as Web 1.0, typically designed and used to transfer information in one direction – from the information producer to the internet user/recipient – has changed to an online environment based on same-level content creators sharing information publicly among each other: the so-called Web 2.0.

[It] is a collection of open-source, interactive and user-controlled online applications expanding the experiences, knowledge, and market power of the users as participants in business and social processes. Web 2.0 applications support the creation of informal users' networks facilitating the flow of ideas and knowledge by allowing the efficient generation, dissemination, sharing and editing/refining of informational content (Constantinides-Fountain 232).

This virtual space, in which every piece of media and data became shareable, adjustable, and spreadable, has put strong emphasis on visual communication, and, thus, allowed the development and spread of memetic content. This practice has become a part of what Jenkins described as participatory culture, in which cultural texts are perceived and interpreted actively: meanings of these texts are selected, extracted, or re-created on the basis of perceiver's personal preference. Under these terms, internet memes can be understood as "remixed and iterated messages which are rapidly spread by members of participatory digital culture" (Wiggins 51). Or, when the whole mode of communication is taken into consideration, Milner suggests that "memetic media are a lingua franca for digitally mediated participation, a common tongue allowing geographically dispersed participants to connect and share" (*The World Made Meme* 5).

According to the above-mentioned statements, the process of creation and distribution of memes can be understood as a visual language – thus, as a specific semantic code conveying information. Milner described image macros as "a staple memetic image subgenre, mostly crafting their point by overlaying a quip on a single still image. [...] Many image macros facilitate expression by reappropriating a collectively "predetermined" visual subject" (*The World Made Meme* 8).

Image macros can be understood as carriers of two separate messages – the graphic execution and the written text – which create a new, usually humorous meaning when combined. It is necessary to consider the specific way these two signifiers are used: the visual segment of a meme is usually the one that remains unchanged in its various reiterations. It is the "predetermined" element, the carrier of such a meaning that has been assigned to it, preserved, and is used in a specific communicative situation on the basis of the mutual consent of the members of a memetic digital culture.

The textual element of the meme, when attached, adjusts the message of the visual (and, thus, of the meme) to a specific situation or life experience. Memes do not usually aim to convey a factual information, but as noted by Shifman, they are more closely tied to certain emotions, social mindsets, urban (or modern) myths such as the sense of social

victory or failure (e. g. the “Success kid” meme template), stereotypical human behaviour (the “Scumbag Steve”), collective everyday experience (the “Wheels on a Shopping Cart be like”) and others. Hence, as memes reflect on general aspects of human existence, and are usually not culture-specific, they are able to transgress cultural differences and spread globally, creating a language of popular commentaries on shared life experience.

In case of stock character macros, the “predetermined” element is represented by a specific person, animal or an object which is attributed with a specific characteristic, personality trait or behavioural mode. For example, the “Scumbag Steve” macro would always carry a narrative about a person behaving unfairly and only minding their own profit. The “Socially Awkward Penguin” would be used to describe one’s social behaviour which differs from standard norms or evokes the feeling of shame or cringe for not being able to react to social stimuli appropriately.

In connection to these “genres” of online communication, Milner defines two elementary modes connected with memetic communication: low-context readability and high-context readability.

Memes with low-context readability show two essential characteristics. First, they do not require creators and recipients with high “meme literacy”, which means that meme users are allowed to read a given meme as a single cultural unit, in which the communicated information is more important than the manner in which it is coded. Second, memes with low-context readability tend to show a lower digital “life span” and remix potential.

Memes with high-context readability, on the other hand, rely heavily upon the reader’s ability to decode memes – profound knowledge of meme “grammar and vocabulary” is required from creators, and expected from meme recipients. Furthermore, the meaning of this type of memes consists of several layers of meanings – including references to previous memes, origins of a meme template or expansions of intertextual relationship between the visual and the textual element.

As implied above, in opposition to the global functionality of meme communication, there also appears to be a local aspect to popular memetic communication, which we aim to examine further, in the analysis of the Slovak satirical meme project *Zomri*.

Slovak project ZOMRI as a phenomenon of glocal meme communication

The Slovak project ZOMRI can be considered a prototypical representative of participative digital culture. This satirical meme project was created in June 2016 and nowadays has its own Facebook and Instagram pages as well as a web domain. It is operated by several anonymous administrators who create original content for social media, and publish content sent to them by *Zomri* fans.

The majority of its content is made up of memes of various genres, predominantly image macros, with a heavy emphasis on satire, irony, mockery of prominent public figures, celebrities or public events, and trolling. “However, after a gradual shift to political and social affairs, the page has become prominent in public and political discourse, a development that itself is widely discussed in the public sphere” (Vicenova-Trottier 151).

As Vicenova and Trottier imply, *Zomri* has gradually turned from an exclusively entertainment-oriented project to one that transgresses the boundaries of popular culture and participates in civic issues; that includes several occasions when it supplemented the role of an informative news medium. An example was mentioned by Stuharik, a journalist focusing on local and world media, after *Zomri* was the first medium to provide information about football hooligans from rival teams fighting each other in the streets of Bratislava on 10 July 2019.

Struharik quotes one of the *Zomri* administrators who claimed that they basically turned the public into a relatively functional newsroom. Due to the emotional investment and active participation of internet users who sent photos and videos to administrators, *Zomri* was able to create twenty posts with exclusive visual material documenting the incident, and was later referenced in news flashes published by other media.

As the aforementioned shows, the social and medial status of *Zomri*, currently with more than 340 000 followers on either of its social media accounts, has gradually changed from an entertainment page to one that, through its content (memes or otherwise) provides socio-political and cultural commentary on actual events.

In the following section, we analyse several internet memes created or shared by *Zomri* in the period from 2018-2022. Analysed memes were chosen to illustrate *Zomri*'s approach towards public figure and politician, Slovak president Zuzana Caputova, in various modes of memetic communication.

Mememes including a political figure

It can be argued that the majority of political memes made by *Zomri* can be safely defined as political satire – they are designed in a humorous way and pass judgement on the presented issue – with focus on the personality and the weaknesses of individual politicians. It is, therefore, noteworthy, that the current Slovak president, Zuzana Caputova, has not been exposed to this approach yet. On the contrary, several memes created by *Zomri*, while still eliciting laughter, tend to depict her in a manner that fortifies her positive image in public.

In Fig. 1, Caputova's face is photoshopped into an image of Xena, the main character from the American television series *Xena: Warrior Princess* (Tapert, 1995–2001), who lived in a fictional ancient-medieval world inhabited by beings from various classical mythologies.



Fig.1 Slovak president Zuzana Caputova as Xena, the warrior princess¹

This is an example of an image macro with a low-context readability. Caputova is here compared to a popular fictional character, the focus of the meme being more person-oriented than event- or occasion-oriented, and can be thus interpreted both in the narrow context of this specific cultural unit, and in the wider sense of pop cultural reading.

The narrower interpretation does not require higher meme literacy (here, knowledge of the source material the meme refers to), and is based on direct comparison of Caputova to an easily distinguishable strong female character of noble descent, which highlights Caputova's socio-political status of an empowered woman and a leader of the nation.

The interpretation within a wider intertextual field, on the other hand, allows readers with higher meme literacy to decode socio-cultural meanings based on a pop cultural reading of the content of the TV show. This manner of reading then reveals: the similarity of facial features between Caputova and Lucy Lawless, the actress who portrayed Xena; the status of Xena, who travelled the world and fought stronger opponents many times alone, creating a metaphor for Caputova's rise to popularity during election debates, when she had to face more favoured male opponents; the reinforcement of Caputova's positive public image as a protector or, even, a saviour of the country, through textual elements of the meme stating: "bore a she-hero", which is an excerpt from the Czech translation of the show's narrated intro. The original English version goes as follows: "In a time of ancient gods, warlords, and king // A land in turmoil cried out for a hero // She was Xena, a mighty princess forged in the heat of battle // The power, the passion, the danger // Her courage will change the world."

¹ Source: Zomri, 8 December 2020, shared from the meme page *Chskym chscim*, <https://sk-sk.facebook.com/zomriofficial/posts/2842350782710833/>, accessed 7 June 2023.



While the first analysed iteration of the Slovak president focuses more on her as a public person and refers to her political development, attitudes, and beliefs, the second one (Fig. 2) references a specific event and Caputova's appearance.

Fig.2 Caputova as Lara Croft, the main character of the *Tomb Raider* video game series²

This meme requires a higher meme literacy. The more direct, situational interpretation may fail in this case, if the recipient of the meme is not familiar with Caputova's professional past and the *Tomb Raider* video game series (1996–

2018), which are centred around the fictional character of young treasure hunter Lara Croft. Each of the adventure games focuses on Lara's search for a legendary treasure or artifact all around the world, but most notably in exotic environments such as the jungle, the tundra, where Lara, usually in utility attire with camouflage elements, is forced to overcome various environmental and logical obstacles to reach her goal.

The *Zomri* meme, as staged in this case, mixes two distinct visual elements: an edited photograph of Caputova in camouflage clothes, which was taken during her official meeting with commanders of Slovakia's armed forces on 27 August 2019, and the text written in the official font from the *Tomb Raider* franchise with the addition "and the Pezinok dump" below it.

In this case, a high-literate recipient is required to decode various layers of the meme: the socio-cultural context (Caputova's meeting), the pop cultural context (the video game franchise) and the knowledge of Caputova's professional past – that she had worked as a lawyer and her most famous case was her proving the illegality of a dump in the Slovak town of Pezinok, which led to the accused entrepreneur being ordered to remove it. Hence, three layers of unrelated meanings are combined into one meme, which is both event-specific and refers to a wider context.

² Source: Zomri, 28 August 2019.

<https://www.facebook.com/zomriofficial/photos/a.1831445523801369/2421442801468302/?type=3>, accessed 7 June 2023.

In case of both memes, the global-to-local approach can be detected. Their creators used pop cultural texts known globally to convey information and invoke emotion based on local life experience. So, although foreign recipients of these memes may not be aware of the exact meaning, the memes have the potential to hint at the general tone of the coded information (here: highlighting the image of a strong, independent, yet protective woman).

Conclusions

Even though visual communication has always been an inseparable part of human culture, the recent advent of modern technologies, of technological and cultural concepts have significantly changed our visual perception and the ability to interpret graphic materials. And, despite the rapid development of this digital culture, internet memes have further, and not less significantly, changed our ability to communicate through visual signs.

We can confirm that internet memes, as a genre of online communication, have allowed internet users to create a new visual language: one that is concise in its form, but multi-layered in meaning. Internet users, as participants in both the creation and maintenance of the Web 2.0 phenomenon, are able to access global databases including hundreds of meme templates, stock images, photoshopped images or short videos, pick one to their liking, and assign a specific meaning to it, connected to their life experience.

This visualised experience can be further spread, shared and reiterated in two ways – globally or locally – and in two modes: low-contextual and high-contextual. In each case, the memetic visual language behaves as a regular manner of communication. It has its ‘grammar’ (specific rules for creating and decoding each meme template and genre) that can be used in its unchanged form or adjusted to the needs of locally oriented expression; it can be adequately used to communicate skills of both the meme producer and the meme recipient (as a plainer, narrowly coded low-contextual meme, or as a multi-meaning, high-contextual meme with a wider field of intertextual connections).

In all cases, however, the aim of the memetic communication remains to convey specific information, mainly emotion-coded, in such a way that elicits laughter or amusement in general. And memes do this extremely well.

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ORCID

Jana Pecnikova  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6596-5685>

Jozefa Pevcikova  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7311-7205>

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Notes on Contributor(s)

Jana Pecnikova, PhD is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Arts of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Department of Romance Studies. Her professional activities and research deal with the following topics: interculturality and intercultural communication; cultural and active citizenship in the EU; French language and culture; cultural and linguistic identity; and cultural landscape.

Jozefa Pevcikova is a doctoral student of aesthetics in the Institute of Literary and Artistic Communication at the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra. Her research focuses on pop culture in general, fandom and fan activities, intertextuality and media studies. Her dissertation thesis aims to map and analyse influence of H. P. Lovecraft and Cthulhu Mythos on pop culture. The research, based on intertextual theory and media studies, is to be concluded in 2023.

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