

## Lithuanian Memes in M. K. Čiurlionis Music, Paintings and Texts

In our age of interdisciplinary thought perspectives of different fields enable us to enrich our own disciplines, by applying values, outlook and approach specific to allegedly unrelated research. One of such possible positions relates to the concepts of ecosystems and genetics. Of course, it is done by applying certain models of higher abstraction, and perspective of more distant field functions more as a framework or environment, where ideas are planted and developed.

One of extraordinary examples of applying certain biological models to the analysis of cultural phenomena was pioneered by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his works “The Selfish Gene” (1976), “The God Delusion” (2006) etc. Besides supporting gene-centered view of evolution, author introduces the term of meme, which refers to cultural symbols.

The parallel between genes and cultural symbols was first mentioned by biologist Alfred Emerson during private discussions in 1956<sup>1</sup>. Expanding on this idea and similar research of other geneticists, as well as sociologists, Richard Dawkins coins it into a term, which would be similar to the concept of gene. “We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation. “Mimeme” comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like “gene”. I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to meme. If it is any consolation, it could alternatively be thought of as being related to “memory”, or to the French word *même*.”<sup>2</sup>

Memes are cultural symbols, which behave in a similar way as gene in biology – they spread from person to person within a culture and might represent idea, behavior, style, or other cultural phenomena. Examples of memes provided by Richard Dawkins included fashion, technology of building arches, and melodies among others<sup>3</sup>.

Concept of meme might be as well compared to the concept of archetype, however its distinct feature is the behaviour similar to gene in biology. They go through processes of variation, mutation, competition and inheritance, they may as well become extinct. They spread through behaviour of their “hosts”, when an observer of potential meme replicates it. The fact, that cultural entities are not always copied perfectly, allows the processes of change, transformation and/or birth of new memes.

Dawkins’ meme became a unit with potential significance in explaining human behavior and cultural evolution. At the end of 20th century, this idea expanded and spread into the fields of sociology and cultural anthropology, even trying to establish a field of memetics, as a distinct cultural information transfer theory.



**Example 1.** Early example of funny cat picture, so called “lolcat” style internet meme, postcard by Harry Whittier Frees (1905).

Despite criticism, the term and the idea of meme became a popular subject in various contexts and interpretations. In example, the most popular use of this concept relates to the so called “internet memes” – pictures, videos, phrases and similar (usually short) entities, which spread via email, social networks and online communities in a “word of mouth” manner (Example 1). Common description for internet memes is, that they have “gone viral”. Usually internet meme brings a lot of (usually short lived) attention to the creator of meme, therefore it has become a tool in public relations and advertising.

Internet memes illustrate important feature of meme – transmission. It propagates itself, it is being observed and then imitated. The concept of meme can be applied as well in the field of music research. Meme as a particular cultural unit can be discovered as a musical motive, composing principle or aesthetical idea – which all are replicated and transmitted, as well as transformed over time on the basis of means, comparable to the transmission of genes. In such case, in example, both the main theme of Ludwig van Beethoven’s symphony and the whole work itself can be considered as memes.

<sup>1</sup> Scott, John. *Social Theory: Central Issues in Sociology*. London, SAGE Publications, 2006, p. 118.

<sup>2</sup> Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 192.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 352.

To further our investigation how memes are defining particular culture it is worth mentioning the work of Polish and Norwegian author Nina Witoszek “Norwegian Nature Mythologies” (1998). She explores the Norwegian narratives in mythology and nature symbols, including perspectives on memes, which have also survived in the mentality of contemporary Norwegians<sup>4</sup>. The author explores existing and extinct memes of nature, religion, rituals, mythological memes of wandering, suicide etc. Nina Witoszek treats meme more as a social memory unit. At the end of the study, author presents a summary of her understanding of a meme in social and cultural context. Nina Witoszek as well describes features, which are specific, according to her, to ethnic or national memes. Briefly, such memes:

- a) are typical for various cultural spheres and contexts;
- b) have roots in the folk culture;
- c) are relevant for the society (both in positive and negative ways);
- d) they arrange the cultural memory of the society and thus create categories of understanding of the new challenge and relevant response.

Finally, national memes become cultural mechanisms for evaluating cultural artifacts and, in a way, transfer the destiny of the certain people (nation)<sup>5</sup>.

Exploration of Lithuanian memes is noted in the article by sociologist Eugenija Krukauskienė “The search and expression of memes in national culture”<sup>6</sup>. Article as well draws on the results of several sociological surveys conducted in years 1993–1995 and 2008–2009. Article emphasizes on analysing 3 major memes, which, according to the research, can be attributed to Lithuanians:

- 1) meme of freedom,
- 2) meme of nature and nature mythology,
- 3) meme of religiousness.

Meme of freedom is expressed and traced mainly through the evaluation of historical events, historical figures, as well as defining the freedom as value itself. The memes of nature and nature mythology are traced in the choice of preferred literary works, they are as well closely related to the meme of religiousness. It is often individualized and expressed in diffused religiousness forms, rather than connected to the church.

Eugenija Krukauskienė also mentions, that academic youth, interviewed in 2008–2009 often indicate musical works, which also relate to the same memes, such as song “Laisvė” (“Freedom”) performed by E. Masytė, arias from national opera by V. Klova “Pilėnai”, songs by A. Mamontovas, works of various authors connected with the sea and nature.<sup>7</sup>

If we consider three memes described by Eugenija Krukauskienė as the most typical national memes, which can be assigned to Lithuanians, they ought to be found in a much wider cultural context. They not only connect to the roots of Lithuanian folk culture, are still living in the results of recent surveys, but also clearly connect to the works of famous XIX–XX century Lithuanian painter and composer Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis. Symbols in his music, paintings and texts are usually described as something typical for a Lithuanian, with distinct cultural features of country and region. These features can be identified as memes and traced during the development of Lithuanian musical culture in various forms up to XIX century.

The distinct feature of M. K. Čiurlionis creative oeuvre is the expression of the same symbols in various artistic forms, including music, paintings and texts (letters). Themes and character of all creative work of M. K. Čiurlionis can be identified as belonging to one of above-mentioned Lithuanian memes.

The most explicit expression of particular meme is defined by the names of most works. Paintings – Sonatas – also their character and symbolism very much relate to the memes of nature and nature mythology (“Sonata of the Sun”, “Sonata of the Spring”, “Sonata of the Serpent”, “Sonata of the Sea” and many others), they also very much relate and sometimes overcross with meme of religiousness (cycle “Creation of the World”), demonstrating a distinct Lithuanian mythological traditions merger with catholic traditions. Symbols of this merge, as well as expression of individual religiousness are present in the cycle “The Zodiac”, “Angel”, “Serenity”, “Offering” etc. The expression and theme of freedom is expressed in the atmospheric perspective of paintings “Rex”, triptychs “Raigardas”, “The Prince’s Journey”, “Sonata of the Stars” etc.

<sup>4</sup> Witoszek, Nina. *Norvegai: gamtos mitologijos*. Vilnius: Versus aureus, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

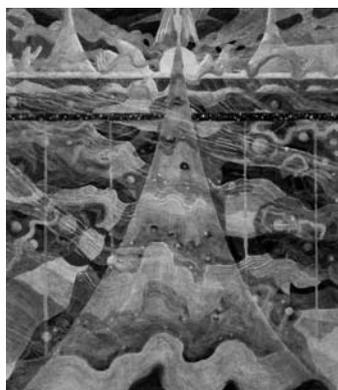
<sup>6</sup> Krukauskienė, Eugenija. Memų paieška ir raiška tautos kultūroje. *Filosofija. Sociologija*. 2011, Nr. 4. Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, 2011, p. 476–482.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 481.

Naming and musical language of major M. K. Čiurlionis musical works – symphonic poems “In the Forest” and “The Sea” also explicitly relate to the meme of nature in both, and overcrosses the memes of religiousness and freedom in the latter.

Further development and expression of consolidated memes might have been implemented in M. K. Čiurlionis unrealized works – symphonic poems “Creation of the World” and “Dies Irae”, “Lithuanian Pastoral” symphony. He also has envisioned an opera “Jūratė”, based on archaic Lithuanian myth, which also would have connected his explorations in diverse artistic fields. In example, M. K. Čiurlionis letters often include symbols, which very directly relate to either nature, mythology and religion, and have a strong sense of personal and creative freedom.

As a talented, interdisciplinary artist, as well as public figure, Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis absorbed, strengthened and transmitted Lithuanian memes through cultural movement and the beginning of XX century. His interpretation of symbols has influenced numerous musicians and painters up until now. So far the application of concept of meme does not have strong traditions in musicology or art research. However, exploring the major Lithuanian memes, their spread and transformation over different periods of dense Lithuanian professional cultural life could prove a missing link in deciphering all-encompassing national cultural gene code, expressed in seemingly unrelated art forms and styles. Almost certainly M. K. Čiurlionis played an important role to sustain, replicate and transmit the most important Lithuanian cultural entities.



**Example 2.** *Sonata of the Stars.*  
*Allegro* (1908)



**Example 3.** *Fairy Tale of Kings* (1909)



**Example 4.** *Offering* (1909)

☞ see p. 181

## Literature

1. Scott, John. *Social Theory: Central Issues in Sociology*. London, SAGE Publications, 2006.
2. Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press, 1989.
3. Witoszek, Nina. *Norvegai: gamtos mitologijos*. Vilnius: Versus aureus, 2006.
4. Krukauskienė, Eugenija. Memų paieška ir raiška tautos kultūroje. *Filosofija. Sociologija*. 2011. Nr. 4. Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, 2011, p. 476–482.
5. Čiurlionis, Mikalojus Konstantinas. *Laiškai Sofijai* (sud. V. Landsbergis). Vilnius: Vaga, 1973.
6. Landsbergis, Vytautas. *Visas Čiurlionis*. Vilnius: Versus aureus, 2008.

## Santrauka

### Lietuviški memai M. K. Čiurlionio muzikoje, dailėje ir tekstuose

Terminas *memas* (jį sugalvojo Richardas Dawkinsas 1976 m.) šiandien dažnai vartojamas kultūros tyrinėjimuose, taip pat interneto fenomenams įvardyti. Pats žodis *memas* skamba panašiai kaip *genas*, jo kilmė susijusi su graikų kalbos žodžiu *mimēma* – tai, kas imituojama. Memas yra kultūros ar elgesio sistema, perduodama imitacijos ar kitu negenetiniu būdu vieno asmens kitam kaip kultūrinis genas.

Kai kurie memai gali būti įvardyti kaip būdingi tam tikroms kultūroms. Jų svarba yra užkoduota mentalitete, taip pat literatūroje ir mene.

M. K. Čiurlionio muzikos, dailės ir tekstų simboliai dažnai yra apibrėžiami kaip labai būdingi lietuviui, su tam tikrais šalies ir regiono ypatumais. Pasitelkę memą, M. K. Čiurlionio kūryboje galime sekti simbolius, įvaizdžius ir tropus. Simbolių tapatumas, išreikštas skirtingomis meno formomis, siejamas su pasikartojančiais elementais, kuriuos galima įvardyti kaip memus, būdingus Lietuvos kultūrai ir mentalitetui. Šiuo atveju memetinis požiūris interpretuojant M. K. Čiurlionio darbus kultūriniame kontekste ne tik atveria mums plačius tyrinėjimo kelius, bet ir praplečia M. K. Čiurlionio tarpdiscipliniškumo sampratą.