

Kyle Parry, **A Theory of Assembly: From Museums to Memes**, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023, 331 pp., \$30.00 (paperback).

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What happens to a cultural form once it moves to a new medium? Is a given medium prone to deploy specific cultural forms, and is this combination set in stone or open to historical and geographic variance? These are recurring questions in media studies by authors like Marshall McLuhan (1964), Raymond Williams (1974/1990), Bolter and Grusin (1999), and Lev Manovich (2002). The book under review here, Kyle Parry's **A Theory of Assembly: From Museums to Memes**, published early this year with the University of Minnesota Press, firmly situates itself in this line of inquiry.

As the book's title indicates, Parry argues for assembly as the cultural form dominant in our digital era. Here, a possible misinterpretation needs to be cleared out of the way. Parry does not argue that assembly happens exclusively within the realm of the digital, to the contrary. Throughout the book he stresses that assembly is a cultural form or expressive strategy (both terms are used interchangeably) that predates the digital; this means that assembly is at once an old cultural form but one that nevertheless has found increasing relevance and pertinence in a culture that is thoroughly shaped by digital technologies.

But what does Parry mean by assembly? Here it is worth quoting from the introduction, because the quote shows at once the productivity of, and the problems with, the notion of assembly:

Assembly places expressive relationships front and center. To assemble is to convene, collate, and compile. It is to organize, arrange, and configure. An assembly is *any combination of expressive elements that maintains and seizes on the appearance of selection and arrangement*. To undertake or participate in assembly is to *contribute to the constitution, configuration, or use of an assembly at any scale*. (p. 3; emphasis in original)

Two aspects are important here. First, to assemble means the creation of relationships, which in turn can be reduced to two practices: the selection of elements, and their arrangement or positionality. Second, assembly is not something relegated to a single scale but can be done "at any scale" (p. 3), meaning that it can recombine at the level of words, images, objects, people, or networks (and any combination thereof). If this sounds abstract and all-encompassing, that is precisely because the concept is intended to be so. A simple example of assembly included in the book is an Instagram post by the artist Guanyu Xu, juxtaposing a picture of a window with the letters BLM taped on them, and a picture of a lamp post with the message "Back the



Blue,” accompanied by the text “my neighbourhood, the same block #blacklivesmatter” (p. 53). Another example, operating at a much larger scale, is the way millions of Internet users participated in, reiterated, and reconfigured the Pepe the Frog meme.

Throughout the book, Parry juxtaposes assembly to two other expressive strategies that have received far more scholarly attention: narrative and representation (or mimesis). But sustained attention to the conceptual differences with narrative and representation is never systematically developed. As a result, there are several instances where the book mentions a trait of assemblage that is just as easily applicable to narrative or to representation. Take for example the previous quote. It was one of the crucial insights of the structuralist analysis of narrative that it involved components that had to be selected and arranged in particular combinations (through syntagmatic chains and paradigmatic substitutions); similarly, analyses of representation have a keen eye for the selection and arrangement of elements and how these affect the meaning of the work (think of discussions on perspective in art history, or *mise-en-scène*, and framing in formalist film analyses). In short, the notion of assembly is defined at such a high level of abstraction that, despite the repeated claim that it is a *specific* cultural form, it is able to encompass everything, and hence is in danger of losing its analytical purchase.

Parry is aware of these criticisms and preempts them at many places in the book. But the justification of the uniqueness and specificity of assembly as a cultural form is not always persuasive. Why remix is not a good alternative for assembly (pp. 87–89) is convincingly argued; the comparison with collage, montage, assemblage, and database (pp. 99–100) is less so. At other times, the refocus of the analysis of cultural artefacts through the concept of assembly does conceptual work but does not bring anything substantially new to the table:

[Using narrative or representation] would mean continually misreading a vast array of cultural instances through dominant lenses that aren't quite appropriate, seeing an attempt to rework an existing narrative when there is really an attempt to form a novel and restorative constellation, or seeing an effort to challenge dominant representations when there is really a risky effort to combine what hasn't yet been combined. (p. 259)

In quotes like these, it is hard to see in what ways “reworking an existing narrative” is something other than creating a “novel constellation,” or how “challenging a dominant representation” does not involve a recombination of previously uncombined elements. Assembly certainly does specific conceptual work here, and reconfigures our scholarly attention and observations, but whether it yields substantially different interpretations and appreciations is not always clear, at least at the level of abstract theorization.

Ultimately, however, the strength and richness of this book does not lie in its defense of assembly vis-à-vis narrative and representation but in the analyses of wildly divergent cultural phenomena. The breadth and scope covered in this book is truly impressive, spanning not only different fields like popular culture or the arts but also various decades (from the noughties to the current moment), thus avoiding an excessive focus on the new and the contemporary. I suspect that readers of this journal will be foremostly drawn to the chapters on meme culture and on various mediatic and artistic artefacts on Katrina (chapters 3 and 4 respectively). But art critics have plenty to riff on too, with chapters on assembly art and museums (chapter 2), and a chapter on

structural and collective forms of violence in which activist works of art play a prominent role (chapter 5). Works of literature and pieces of art criticism have an occasional appearance, too, giving Parry's book a wide reach across disciplines like media studies, art history, literary studies, and cultural analysis.

It is when Parry brings assembly to bare on concrete cultural phenomena (rather than in general, abstract terms), that the concept starts to shine. Take for example his analysis of memes. Parry refers to Richard Dawkins' coining of the term (p. 136), where a meme refers to units of culture that reproduce themselves through the social, in analogy to the way genes reproduce themselves. But this definition misses out on a whole bunch of aspects of meme culture, which assembly helps to bring to the fore. In Parry's hands, a meme becomes a mediatic assembly, composed from elements that are taken from elsewhere. Crucial to the meme, however, is that its cultural form is open for everybody to join in, and open for everybody to modulate the meme—the reason why Parry calls it “a form of a form” (p. 146). In fact, a meme is infinitely malleable as long as its user group maintains a certain degree of intragroup referentiality (which is why out-group users are often bewildered by a particular meme, since they lack the previous history and referentiality). Because a meme is a *distributed* assembly, it can also scale up quickly, from a few in-crowd users in an obscure corner of the Internet to millions of users across the entire Web. Parry summarizes succinctly:

Memes are a shared, hyperdistributed, and hyperparticipatory practice that undergoes constant revision and reconfiguration through new additions and new performances. In a networked world, “meme” is no longer just a noun. It's also a verb. A meme isn't “anything that goes viral.” A meme is an assembly. To meme isn't to represent or even (quite) to remix. To meme is to reassemble. (p. 161)

It is moments like these, when assemblage is used in concrete analysis rather than theorized as an abstract generality, that this book makes its sharpest contribution to the field. In the conclusion, Parry writes, “The idea of reading assembly across not just art, but all manner of media, whether fine or vulgar, whether hard-won or quick, can induce a feeling of conceptual vertigo (or perhaps, for some, just skepticism)” (p. 259). This review does not hide that, for me, there were indeed moments of skepticism, but there were also moments of conceptual insights and intellectual excitement. And because the book asks such important and enduring questions about the relationship between cultural form and media culture, it merits attention and critical engagement.

References

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