H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Eliot Borenstein. *Meanwhile, in Russia...: Russian Internet Memes and Viral Video (Russian Shorts).* London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. xii + 146 pp. $61.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-350-18153-3.

Reviewed by August Brereton (University of Wisconsin-Madison)

Published on H-Sci-Med-Tech (July, 2022)

Commissioned by Penelope K. Hardy (University of Wisconsin-La Crosse)

Internet memes provide certain obvious advantages as a tool for cultural analysis. For one, they are the digestible end product of an ongoing joke, which leaves plentiful room for explanation and scholarly interpretation. More importantly, perhaps, memes encapsulate sentiments of cultural significance—to become viral, they must resonate with a wide audience. In ***Meanwhile, in Russia*** , Eliot Borenstein plays the role of translator and interpreter, introducing and unpacking Russian memes for a Western audience. However, his exploration of memes and their meanings does not stop at the boundaries of cyberspace. According to Borenstein, Russian memes as representations of Russian cultural and political "reality" (however fictionalized that might be) meander through a "larger informational ecosystem" that has a very real effect on the offline world (p. 5). In ***Meanwhile, in Russia***, Borenstein explores how these nuggets of viral content build upon Russian self-identity as well as construct a Western conception of Russianness.

Borenstein's abstract approach to methodology treats memes as art to be interpreted, and avoids empirical data that might demonstrate quantitative evidence of a meme's societal importance. Using memes found readily through search engines and word of mouth, Borenstein aims to highlight the connection between accessibility and cultural impact. Joining contemporaries in the digital humanities, Borenstein employs Big Data for his project. While his methodology may paint with a broader brush than other digital humanities tools such as Google Trends, Borenstein argues that whatever mechanism search engines use for the ordering of memes remains irrelevant to his study. He is only concerned with memes that are readily available. In Borenstein's framework, analysis on the role of Big Data in the distribution of internet memes would be relevant, as it provides important context for the formation of Russian identity and global representation. Therefore, this lack of analysis remains a weak point.

More prevalent in Borenstein's study than the role of technology is the role of history. The tumul-

tuous history of the Soviet Union and its collapse becomes the backdrop for the cultural importance of Russian memes. Borenstein argues that late socialism prepped a memetic landscape, where "catchy, humorous and subversive pieces of information … practically begged to be shared and adapted" (p. 19). In congruence with post-Soviet reexaminations of Russian history and identity, the Internet provided a space where new understandings could be disseminated quickly in this familiar way. Russian memes were used not only to reimagine historical Russian identity but also to satirize (and simultaneously crystalize) elements of contemporary Russian culture. In one notable example of how memes can encapsulate a national mood, Borenstein highlights Zhdun, a blobbish creature whose patient "waiting" posture resonates across political lines. The popularity of Zhdun in not only Russia but also Ukraine and Belarus suggests to Borenstein a post-Soviet feeling of liminality—"the patient expectation of something else" (p. 57).

Some memes Borenstein discusses reach beyond the post-Soviet world, exploring Russia's positionality in an international context. The "What do you think of that, Elon Musk?" meme, for instance, takes images of "post-Soviet life hacks," or the unusual repurposing of everyday items to meet common needs, and challenges the billionaire to cast judgment on these makeshift solutions (p. 71). As Borenstein writes, these memes not only express a peculiar mix of self-deprecation (a sense of Russian "backwardness") and pride (a sense of Russian ingenuity) but also "acknowledge (and even invoke) the foreign gaze while also laughing at it, at the same time as mocking the hypothetical Russian subject that keeps assuming it is being looked at" (p. 74). Elon Musk memes are one of many formats Borenstein describes that seem simple at face value but communicate a complicated sense of Russian identity and positionality with the rest of the world.

Borenstein also discusses the topic of positionality with regard to Western consumption and interpretation of Russian memes. He argues that Russian viral content has shaped perceptions of post-Soviet Russia in the West as a "wacky land of angry drunks, shoddy workmanship, antiquated technology, and out of control drivers … a Disneyland of dysfunction" (p. 77). One culprit responsible for such perceptions is the ever-popular genre of Russian "dashcam" videos (amusing or bizarre roadside events recorded on dashboard cameras in automobiles). Borenstein argues that this kind of viral content, when consumed by Westerners, strengthens stereotypes about Russian dysfunction. Unusual events which are understood by a Russian audience to be content curated for shock value and laughs, are taken by Westerners as representative of everyday life.

Touching on a myriad of topics from Putinism to twerking to COVID-19, Borenstein provides an important contribution to our understanding of contemporary Russian culture through the analysis of internet memes. By addressing viral content, Borenstein is able to introduce a counternarrative of Russian identity that complicates the restrictive, nationalist, top-down image painted by the Putin-era media. Simultaneously, he demonstrates the global influence of memes in the communication of national identity and culture. Short, witty, and provocative, ***Meanwhile, in Russia*** provides a unique glimpse at the delightful world of Russian internet culture and can be enjoyed by general readers and specialists alike.

Citation: August Brereton. Review of Borenstein, Eliot. *Meanwhile, in Russia...: Russian Internet Memes and Viral Video (Russian Shorts).* H-Sci-Med-Tech, H-Net Reviews. July, 2022.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58025