creators shows. Thus, the compositional and performative means of taking up and "personifying" textual patterns of vernacular musical expression – and the question how such an aspirational visibility labour shapes media objects, their reception, and subsequent producerly behaviour – deserve the utmost attention. Despite the denatured forms of authorship in referential creative processes on YouTube, the ideal of individual prestige is very much alive – with various ramifications: within the rationalising medium of YouTube, which is built on the numerical commensurability of contributions and thus favours economic formations based on their exchange value, a field of tension opens up between invisibility and visibility, anonymity and authorial voice, non-hierarchical and institutionalised contributions. As the following chapters will show, an understanding of these seemingly conflicting positions and modes of authorship – and, most importantly, the performance thereof – is essential for a comprehensive examination of the situatedness, the performative dimensions, and the material concretions of the vernacular(s) of musical re-composition beyond binary conceptions of "amateur" vs. "professional" content.

2.2 Distributed Control and Immaterial Labour: Reflections on the Concept of Produsage

Since the term already appeared in the previous chapter, a concretisation of the conceptual background of the notion of "networked individualism" is overdue at this point: Coined by sociologist Barry Wellman in 2000 and further developed with his colleague Lee Rainie in 2012,[25] it functions as the conceptual centrepiece of Wellman's thesis of a networked society that is characterised by the shift from traditional binding social arrangements to loosely-knit social relations brought about by the advent of information and communications technologies (ICT). According to Barry Wellman and Lee Rainie, the widespread connectivity afforded by ICT – by the Internet in particular – leads to both broader and more fragmented social relations and audiences. With regard to

25 See Barry Wellman, "Physical Place and Cyber Place: The Rise of Networked Individualism," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 25, no. 2 (June 2001): 227–52, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.00309; Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman, *Networked: The New Social Operating System* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021).

the Internet and social networks, they emphasise the asynchronous yet participatory character of usage, thereby noting the succor provided by networked formations such as online communities. In this context, they outline the dimensions of online participation, describing a user type they call "the participator":

These engaged users include users who compose blogs, upload pictures and videos online, create avatars, and contribute substantial content to social network sites such as Facebook. […] They critique, rank, and rate everything from books to movies to news personalities. They advocate for political and social causes through their social network profiles and group affiliations. They explain their work or worldly insights in their blogs. They mash up existing media into video parodies, and they chronicle their travels through picture albums on photo-sharing sites. They provide tips and news nuggets about their hobbies or their passions. And they do much more.[26]

The notion of networked social formations – including the aforementioned ramifications regarding online participation – serves as a vantage point for the manifold conceptualisations of new modes of cultural production, consumption, and distribution. While Wellman's and Rainie's user typology categorises the active participator as "the vanguard of networked individuals online,"[27] Axel Bruns' theory of "produsage" assumes a fundamentally hybrid role of the user, stating that "[w]hether […] participants act more as users (utilizing existing resources) or more as producers (adding new information) varies over time and across tasks; overall, they take on a hybrid user/producer role which inextricably interweaves both forms of participation, and thereby become *produsers*."[28] Different from Wellman's and Rainie's overarching sociological approach, Bruns' concept of produsage concretely aims at describing the fluid, often unrecognisable production value chains of networked collaboration and co-creation, thereby rejecting the dichotomy between media consumption and their production. According to Bruns, produsage takes place within a "*continuum* stretching evenly from active content creation by lead users through various levels of more or less constructive and productive engagement with existing content by other contributors, and on to the mere use of content by users who perhaps do not even consider themselves as members of the com-

26 Rainie and Wellman, *Networked*, 79.

27 Ibid.

28 Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and Beyond*, 21.

munity."[29] Besides forms of active participation aimed at the optimisation or development of media content, more "banal" participative acts – e.g. by way of read/write activity such as giving a thumbs up or tagging content – are thus integral contributions to the collaborative development of content. Produsedcontent can take the shape of "products" but, due to ongoing user contribution, is "inherently incomplete, always evolving, modular, networked, and never finished."[30] Bruns names open-source software communities, spaces of palimpsestic knowledge production such as Wikipedia, and social media sites for distributed creativity – most notably YouTube and Flickr – as prime examples for environments characterised by user-led content creation. Moreover, he takes up the notion of media convergence,[31] describing its cultural impact on "those media organizations which have served as the producers and distributors of cultural content throughout the mass media age," claiming that it "robs them of their position at the privileged end of the production value chain, and reduces them to the level of all other participants in the network."[32] Of course, such a postulation is highly problematic, as it largely neglects the effects of networked control, the influence of media companies, and the digital economy in general. While Bruns states the possibility of exploitation of produsedartefacts, for example through hosting services like YouTube, which

29 Ibid., 18.

30 Ibid., 22.

31 Bruns thereby draws on Henry Jenkins' theory of media convergence: In his 2006 book "Convergence Culture," Jenkins outlines how, particularly in digital media, old and new media forms converge, rendering many media-specific delivery channels and technologies obsolete while affording pre-existing media to "persist as layers within an ever more complicated information and entertainment stratum" while "their functions and status are shifted by the introduction of new technologies." More than a mere technological shift, media convergence – accompanied by the communication options of the Internet and the emergence of new media literacies – affords a networked approach to consumption that includes participatory, vernacular engagement with artefacts of cultural production. Jenkins thus describes the ways in which media convergence, and the vernacular creativity and participation it entails, is strategically embraced by media corporations with economic and behaviouristic intent – on the other hand, he notes the agency of grassroots creativity in terms of altering the responsivity of media corporations to consumers' tastes and interests. See Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

32 Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life*, 30.

"harbour" and potentially exploit user-generated content,[33] problematisations of the fundamental institutional agencies and power relations introduced by platforms and applications within the Web 2.0 infrastructure stay underdeveloped in favour of a romanticised view on hive mind creativity and communal knowledge production.

First, in order to make the notion of produsage applicable with regard to a critically informed examination of forms and formats of vernacular musical (re-)composition, the invisible – yet very real – effects of distributed control within networked structures need to be considered. Overall, Bruns' implicit notion of networks which belong to no one in particular and are free to all users on equal terms is oversimplified and leads him to an overly affirmative conclusion. It is true, of course, that no one can own the network itself and exert absolute control over user-led co-creative processes. However, in a networked society, the organisational model of heterarchical or rhizomatic relations has become the new governing logic. No contribution exists outside of the network – in fact, it is the network's inclusive expansiveness that has not only individuating, but strong de-individuating effects, as Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker state.[34] For Galloway and Thacker, the concept of "Empire," described by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, paradigmatically outlines the forms and effects of networked power that we also encounter in Internet-mediated interaction. "Empire" describes a principle of sovereignty beyond the power of nation states; a global form of networked power which knows no "outside," which "does not annex or destroy the other powers it faces but on the contrary opens itself to them, including them in the network."[35] Galloway and Thacker draw on this concept, which Hardt and Negri originally developed to describe the de-differentiating and de-centralising effects of globalised capitalism, to draw a picture of rhizomatic relations within infrastructures of networked individualism as "a new management style, a new physics of organization that is as real as pyramidal hierarchy, corporate bureaucracy, representative democracy, sovereign fiat, or any other principle of social and political control."[36] In interactive and collaborative networked formations, it is first and foremost the

33 Ibid., 32.

34 Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 39.

35 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, 166.

36 Galloway and Thacker, *The Exploit*, 29.

totality of individuated (self-)expressions by users that helps perpetuate networked control. Contributions within processes of distributed creativity are categorised into different circulating formats and genres, entailing the ever-expanding interlinking and stratification of various types of content, users, and communities. In social media, these processes are facilitated by algorithmic curation on the respective platform, which, as an intermediary within the "network of networks" (also known as the Internet), provides the infrastructure users interact within. In the words of Galloway and Thacker, "processes of individuation are always accompanied by processes of deindividuation, for each individuation is always encompassed by the 'mass' and aggregate quality of networks as a whole, everything broken down into stable, generic nodes and discrete, quantifiable edges."[37] Ultimately, every aesthetic practice in networked environments is accompanied by processes of signalisation (tags, titles, thumbnails, video descriptions, etc.) which, in Deleuzian terms, form "bare repetitions" that *arbitrarily* "envelope" or "disguise" incommensurable aesthetic difference. The aesthetic difference or singularity of a single contribution is preceded by these processes of signalisation, which, given the platform's algorithmic agency, are necessary to enable widespread connectability; a contribution thus "forms itself by disguising itself […] and, in forming itself, constitutes the bare repetition within which it becomes enveloped."[38] Similarly, Galloway and Thacker state that

> [i]ndividuation in the control society is less about the production of the one from the many, and more about the production of the many through the one. In the classical model, it is the hive that individuates the drone. Here, however, every drone always already facilitates the existence of multiple coexisting hives. It is a question not of being individuated as a "subject" but instead of being individuated as a node integrated into one or more networks.[39]

Processes of signalisation, which are necessary to enable any connectability at all, are captured and served back to the produser as bare repetitions. In a system of commensurability and equivalence, they form the disguises that necessarily pre-exist aesthetic singularities and are inscribed into reflexive feedback loops. Hence, in the sphere of networked individualism, distributed control is

37 Galloway and Thacker, *The Exploit*, 39.

38 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 24.

39 Galloway and Thacker, *The Exploit*, 60.

facilitated and perpetuated by users who symbolically position themselves via practices of signalisation, entailing complex folds and ongoing re-configurations of processes of individuation and de-individuation, difference and indifference, invention and stasis, aesthetic singularity and hive mind creativity.

Secondly, against the backdrop of commercial platforms, as intermediaries that are situated within the digital economy at large, the status of networked co-creativity as a form of cultural production is in need of some re-evaluation. Within networked online environments, the creation of both economic and cultural value is hardly gatekept anymore, extending from the realm of professionalised cultural production to the unlimited number of produsers who, knowingly or unknowingly, add to existing value chains or even become the source thereof. Jean Burgess concludes from this shift in cultural production that "[f]irst, the everyday is now ubiquitously part of the production logics of the 'creative industries' […]. Second, […] cultural production (that is, the creation and dissemination of cultural artefacts) is now increasingly part of the logics of everyday life, as in blogging or photosharing."[40] The increased entanglement and hybridisation of formations of subjectivation and entrepreneurial activity as well as consumption and production is continuously accelerated in the networked condition. Along the lines of Andreas Reckwitz' conceptualisation of the postmodern "hybrid subject," one can detect labour, intimacy, and media consumption as fundamental means of self-expression and self-constitution in post-Fordist societies, embedded in and, at the same time, superimposed by networked communication. The result is a regime of aesthetic individualism, under which "[t]he acknowledgement of one's individual style has its limits where no sovereign work on a distinctive aesthetics of the self can be identified: lack of style appears as an indication for the self's lack of individuality."[41] Practices of consumption and vernacular creativity in the curated sphere of social media, as means of inscribing oneself as an expressive subject, are thus subject to a certain performative pressure. From a musical perspective, these practices encompass generations of music and video playlists, musical creations such as remixes, mashups, cover versions, parodic music videos, or musical and music-related performances based on self-representation and self-display. Although only few users actually can – or want to – generate an income through their uploads, processes of subjectivation and self-entrepreneurial activity cannot be disentangled; rather, vernacular read/write

40 Jean Burgess, "Hearing Ordinary Voices," 204.

41 Reckwitz, *Das hybride Subjekt*, 565 (my translation).

activity in networked environments of produsage can overall be conceptualised as a form of labour: Communicative and creative activities, including those beyond high-skilled or specialised work, belong to the complex of postindustrial productive subjectivity and, as Maurizio Lazzarato argues, constitute a "virtuality" – that is, an undetermined potential for producing "cultural content" which then can become "realised" by capitalist processes of valorisation and accumulation.[42] By coining the term "immaterial labour," Lazzarato aims at making describable and traceable the new forms of cultural, informational, and affective production that are integrated as "virtualities" within processes of social communication. His notion of immaterial labour includes "a series of activities that are not normally recognized as 'work' – in other words, the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion."[43] Particularly against the backdrop of the economic informatisation and the participatory logic of our networked society, an increased importance of informational and cultural content of commodities can be detected.[44] The resulting processes of valorisation transcend the divide "between conception and execution, between labor and creativity, between author and audience,"[45] thus rendering communicative processes directly productive, thereby seamlessly integrating the resulting ideological products into everyday communication. Consequentially, theorists from a post-workerist background – such as Maurizio Lazzarato or Antonio Negri – accentuate the historically new importance of "non-tangible commodities" by conceptualising new forms and processes of "immaterial labour" based on the idea of an all-encompassing social factory.[46]

With regard to the sphere of vernacular creativity in social media, a triple productive function of the YouTube user can be determined. The first two of these functions have been developed by Lazzarato under the impression of a supposed producer/consumer dichotomy regarding cultural production and consumption at large: First, there is the function of the addressee which informs cultural contributions (and thereby arguably constitutes their produc-

42 Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," 135.

43 Ibid., 132.

44 See Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 280.

45 Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," 133.

46 For the concept of non-tangible commodities, see Guido Borio, Francesca Pozzi, and Gigi Roggero, *Futuro anteriore: Dai "Quaderni rossi" ai movimenti globali: ricchezze e limiti dell'operaismo italiano* (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2002), 126.

tion process in the first place).[47] Secondly, Lazzarato notes a productive public sphere which, by means of reception, "gives the product 'a place in life' (in other words, integrates it into social communication) and allows it to live and evolve."[48] To these two functions a third one needs to be added, since the role of the Internet user – particularly in social media contexts – is increasingly hybrid, resulting in processes of produsage that defy traditional binaries of consumption and production. Vernacular media texts are co-created and afford their re-composition – consequentially, as Axel Bruns notes, the "product" is always evolving and unfinished. The third productive function of the user, then, goes beyond the mere integration of cultural artefacts into social communication – it is the producerly activity of the user themself, resulting in continuous iteration and modularisation of cultural content. The produsage of this content constitutes the affective cultural production the platform serves back to its users. However, vernacular re-composition as a form of everyday produsage on YouTube does not automatically generate economic value for each contributor; rather, the vast majority of activities and contributions remains unwaged. Thus, in the context of conceptualising the forms of immaterial labour that constitute musical produsage, ethical issues arise concerning unwaged vernacular re-composition. In the following paragraphs, the relation between a "gift logic" and forms of "aspirational labour" – that is, activities in pursuit of a wished-for deferred financial compensation (which might never be provided by anyone) – shall be sketched.

In her book "Network Culture," Tiziana Terranova describes free labour as a constitutive feature of today's digital economies. Historically, she sees the precondition for forms of free labour in the "end of the factory" in overdeveloped countries – which, from a post-workerist perspective, coincides with the rise of the *social* factory, its new forms of active consumption, and, most crucially, the "real subsumption" of everyday communication. For Terranova, "[f]ree labour is the moment where […] knowledgeable consumption of cul-

47 It needs to be added that, from the perspective of the contributor, the addressee most often exists in the form of an "imagined audience." Participants in social networks are particularly dependent on this mental conceptualisation due to aspects of disembodiment, anonymity, and invisibility. See Eden Litt and Eszter Hargittai, "The Imagined Audience on Social Network Sites," *Social Media + Society* 2, no. 1 (January–March 2016), https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116633482.

48 Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," 144.

ture is translated into excess productive activities."[49] Within the early, commercially largely non-territorialised sphere of the world wide web, virtual communities were dependent on a gift culture driven by free collaboration and cooperation. An example would be hacker culture which, as Manuel Castells notes, is informed by the ideal of free and community-oriented contribution – e.g. to software development – and communal autonomy in the face of Internet-situated corporate activities and territorialisations which threaten free expression, innovation, or the users' privacy.[50] The logic of the gift can also be found in less technologically skilled online communities who create a sense of belonging through participation and the sharing of own interests, thoughts, and creations in mailing lists, online boards, and, these days, on algorithmically curated social media platforms. While Terranova acknowledges the still existing ideal of a "labour of love" in such communities, she relativises postulations of new modes of unalienated cultural production by pointing to the embeddedness of online gift culture within today's digital economy at large. Following her argument, the "excess activity" of networked free labour is a fundamental source of value creation in today's digital economy at large, as it fundamentally constitutes an "area of experimentation with value and free cultural/affective labour."[51] The forms of free labour she describes include "specific forms of production (web design, multimedia production, digital services and so on)" and "forms of labour we do not immediately recognize as such: chat, reallife stories, mailing lists, amateur newsletters and so on."[52] These forms of free networked labour are not necessarily exploited or directly produced by capitalism in order to meet or increase economic demands; however, they are preconditioned by the de-specialisation and de-limitation of cultural production, which is further fostered by the curating impact of *commercial* platforms functioning as intermediaries. Against this backdrop, Terranova conceives of the resulting "cultural flows as originating within a field which is always and already capitalism."[53]

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49 Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age*, (Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2004), 78.

50 Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 41–52.

51 Terranova, *Network Culture*, 79.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid., 80.

In the context of vernacular musical aesthetics, the "harvesting" of musical produsage by media corporations, music labels, and commercial artists will only be thematised as an aside in this study, as the focus will be on the communicative processes and musical outcomes of produsage itself, which is per definition multidirectional, modular, and openly collaborative, and thus cannot be ultimately channelled from the outside. The user's *own* potential aspiration to valorise their creative outcome not only in terms of cultural and social capital, but in monetary terms, entails subsequent entrepreneurial strategies regarding their self-rationalisation and self-representation as composers, performers, broadcasters, and communicators. According to Brooke Erin Duffy, "[a]spirational labourers pursue productive activities that hold the promise of social and economic capital; yet the reward system for these aspirants is highly uneven."[54] As core features of aspirational labour in the digital sphere, she identifies the performance of authenticity and "realness," the building of affective relationships, and strategies of self-branding.[55] Thus, aspects of affective labour are central to the self-entrepreneurial activity of the aspirational contributor. Particularly the creation of spaces of affinity and connectedness grant the individual a signifying role as a YouTube personality and make them a point of reference or even authority in terms of social communication and creative collaboration, entailing the ongoing development of online communities. The resulting communal environments foster social communication, which, as Lazzarato notes, becomes "directly productive because in a certain way it 'produces' production."[56] In the context of vernacular musical produsage, the impact of aspirational strategies of self-optimisation, self-branding, and professionalisation on the circulation of aesthetic objects, forms, and practices – which in turn remediate vernacular creativity – is central to the analysis of musical formats and channel concepts on YouTube. Moreover, the material concretions of vernacular re-composition need to be evaluated against the backdrop of affective labour aimed at the constitution of communities. This includes, to put it more concretely, the role of the YouTuber as a "music communicator" with regard to the integration of musical expression and knowledge into communal communication as well

54 Brooke Erin Duffy, "The Romance of Work: Gender and Aspiration Labour in the Digital Culture Industries," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (July 2016): 441, https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877915572186.

55 Ibid., 447.

56 Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," 142.

as their communicative repertoires of "producing production" (or rather: producing produsage), for example by encouraging musical contributions and re-compositions through participatory formats or challenges.

All in all, Axel Bruns' concept of produsage gainfully conveys an idea of the fundamentally intercreative, modular, and open-ended character of vernacular (re-)composition within the communicative sphere of YouTube. Nevertheless, the aforesketched re-conceptualisation, which includes the notion of produsage-as-labour as well as a problematisation of the de-individuating effects of distributed control within networks, goes beyond an affirmative view on produsage, relativising postulations of autonomous and equipotential cultural expression and production. With regard to vernacular musical aesthetics, any performance of a vernacular is preconditioned and remediated by the curating impact of the hosting platform, which fosters participation, introduces commensurability, and thus enables or even suggests strategies of self-rationalisation and (self-)expression driven by a communal ethos of sharing that is potentially accompanied by individual economic aspirations. It is against this backdrop that the aesthetic objects and circulating formats of vernacular re-composition on YouTube can be traced and interpreted, allowing for a comprehensive picture regarding the impact of institutional, communal, and individual framings and intermediations on performances and significations of (a) YouTube-specific musical vernacular(s). Furthermore, with respect to the productivity of communicative processes in themselves, the analysis of material concretions in this study is informed by the hypothesis that the performance of a musical vernacular on YouTube is always constituted in a modular way, potentially spanning several contributions and, more importantly, going beyond the mere re-composition of audiovisual material, as the compositional process is accompanied, shaped, or even catalysed by the communicative and affective labour of individuals aimed at constituting networked formations of communality, knowledge, and subjectivity, which enable vernacular co-creation in the first place.

2.3 A First Approach to YouTube-Situated Vernacular Aesthetics

In order to concretise the possible meanings of "vernacular" with regard to musical re-composition on YouTube, a brief look at the term's most common usages in the fields of linguistics, arts, and culture is due: The adjective "vernacular," which etymologically derived from the Latin *vernaculus* ("domestic,