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,

native, indigenous; pertaining to home-born slaves"[57]), commonly refers to "a language or dialect native to a region or country rather than a literary, cultured, or foreign language."[58] This minimal definition already suggests the idea of a vernacular as a commonplace, a "home-born," and often non-standardised way of expressing oneself and has been introduced into several discourses in the humanities since the 1960s. Prime examples are categorisations of non-academicised forms of architecture that are integral to and reflect on local cultural traditions and practices ("vernacular architecture"), or of "ordinary" photographs which, in contrast to fine-art photography, are taken on private or everyday occasions and rarely exhibited ("vernacular photography").[59] Without going into detail here, it is apparent that these concepts share an emphasis on the "nativeness" and "commonness" of the described cultural practices. This, of course, poses conceptual challenges in terms of the impact of institutional and non-institutional agencies on the iteration and (re-)appropriation of vernacular expression. Particularly against the backdrop of globalised mass culture, the question arises how vernacular cultural practices evolve and where the boundaries of the notion of "the vernacular" can be drawn. In her 1960 article "Vernacular Culture," anthropologist Margarete Lantis offers some observations that still prove to be fruitful today with regard to conceptualisations of vernacular expression and creativity in a networked society. According to Lantis, purposeful communal congregations for culturally significant "situation-events" can be constituted by people from the most different backgrounds in terms of their dialect, local nativity, or cultural influence. In adherence to the "culture of the show," these participants modify their behaviour, guided by cultural components that enable a *situational* vernacular culture which is not bound to one specific place or region.[60] These components can be, for instance, shared values and goals, artefacts, common

57 *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. "vernacular," accessed March 30, 2023, https://www.etymonline.com/word/vernacular#etymonline_v_4734.

58 *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "vernacular," accessed March 30, 2023, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vernacular.

59 See Amos Rapoport, *House Form and Culture* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969). See *Geoffrey Batchen, Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 56–80.

60 Lantis names trade fairs and agricultural exhibits as examples. See Margarete Lantis, "Vernacular Culture," *American Anthropologist* 62, no. 2 (April 1960): 203, https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1960.62.2.02a00020.

knowledge, systems of relationship (and social identification) as well as communicative cues and manners of speech.[61] As such temporary communities are often composed of strangers, the resulting communicative, behavioural, and aesthetic characteristics of vernacular culture are "no longer traditional localisms solely, but seem to be an amalgam of appropriately selected parts of the new mass culture and a selection from the provincial."[62] Transferred to the context of de-localised – and largely disembodied and anonymised – communication and creation in networked online environments, Lantis' findings prove to be useful as an introduction to a more concrete conceptualisation of music-centred vernacular creativity on YouTube: The non-binding and fragmented social arrangements characteristic of the networked condition entail highly situational and temporary communal formations which are in need of shared symbolic functions that enable social identification and communal self-understanding. In the context of networked creativity, these symbolic functions are realised by way of aesthetic practices which convey and remediate vernacular expression and creativity. For one, these practices result in media objects which are re-composed by users who, as nomadic data gatherers, are bound to act selectively and with an exploring attitude within the "tissue of quotations" the web offers them – within the realm of referential re-composition, traditional localisms thus lose their socially binding function. Moreover, creative practices are accompanied by strategies of affective labour aimed at constituting communal formations and suggesting further communal co-creation (that is: produsage). It is against this backdrop that a vernacular of YouTube-specific re-composition can be grasped as a discursive formation in the Foucauldian sense. It does not exist as an unmoving concept, rather it is conditioned by "the space in which various objects emerge and are continuously transformed."[63] Within this space, the totality of musical and audiologovisual articulations – or "enunciations" – of a vernacular constitute a system of dispersion. According to Foucault, such a system becomes describable when, "between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations)."[64] In the following, on the basis of the

61 See ibid., 206.

62 Ibid., 203.

63 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 32.

64 Ibid., 38.

aforesketched reflections on textuality, authorship, networked distribution, and produsage-as-labour, the circulating and materially or ideationally repeatable themes, aesthetic objects, figurations, and concepts of YouTube-specific musical produsage – including their manifold interrelations – are thus to be understood as constituents of the productive conditions of possibility regarding discursive formations of a YouTube-situated music-centred vernacular.

As a result of the introduction, expansion, and algorithmic curation of easily accessible communicative sites of networked participation that are characterised by perpetual read/write activity, the realm of cultural production has become de-specialised, encompassing creative practices of productive subjectivity that have shifted from supposedly "passive" media consumption and early media fandom to highly visible and widely dispersed processes of produsage. In this context of ubiquitous cultural productivity, an increased entanglement of the logics of cultural production and everyday life can be noted. It is under this impression that Jean Burgess derived her concept of vernacular creativity, which she describes as "both an ideal and a heuristic device to describe and illuminate creative practices that emerge from highly particular and non-elite social contexts and communicative conventions."[65] Networked vernacular creativity cannot be understood as "authentic" culture as opposed to the hyperreality of mass media, as media consumption, and the literacies deriving from it, impact and integrate everyday experience and social reality at large. Hence, Burgess rather sees vernacular creativity as a "productive articulation of consumer practices and knowledges […] with older popular traditions and communicative practices (storytelling, family photography, scrapbooking, collecting)."[66] In this understanding, vernacular creative expression is characterised by an "ordinariness" built on competencies and conventions which the individual acquires through everyday experience – unsurprisingly, as noted by Burgess, experience gained through mass media consumption plays a major role in this context.[67] With respect to audiologovisual media texts in social media contexts, vernacular produsage thus builds on textual patterns which, in terms of their further iteration, do not require skills or knowledge beyond the literacies gained from their consumption. Of course, although the possibility for anyone to become a media produser is a

65 Burgess, "Hearing Ordinary Voices," 206.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid., 209.

precondition for Internet-situated vernacular creativity, the acquirement of additional "cultural capital" – for instance the skills and knowledge attained through years of musical education – can influence the personal compositional process with circulating media objects and formats of vernacular expression, as my examples are going to show. Not least because of this, I propose to imagine vernacular creative expression as a discursive performance. In order to focus on the performance necessary to invoke a vernacular – that is, to render audiologovisual figurations readable as common and "ordinary" everyday expression, one needs to consider the relational field in which enunciations of a musical vernacular, which is always *situational*, can occur and suggest further re-composition. The co-created and iterated media texts in networked communities emerge from a textual web that is producerly not only in terms of the gaps it offers for further creative re-composition, but also in terms of the shared discursive competencies it is built on. With respect to the consumption of television and its discursive and textual potentials for open readings by viewers, John Fiske notes that a main characteristic of a producerly media text is its reliance "on discursive competencies that the viewer already possesses."[68] In participatory social media environments, the aspect of textual productivity becomes more literal, as users create and re-appropriate media objects and add materially to an ever-expanding nexus of references. It is against the backdrop of such producerly behaviour that the question arises how musical practices on YouTube afford – and build on – shared discursive competencies and how the enunciative field is constituted in which the performance of a YouTube-specific musical vernacular becomes readable.

In order to invoke a vernacular in creative practices within the symbolic realm of social media interaction, users take up site-specific communicative artefacts, cues, objects, and topics that remediate vernacular creativity, thereby pointing to and reflecting on the "home-born" qualities, that is, the qualities that constitute and inform our experience of a particular communicative environment. As a result, across the web of individual contributions, vernacular discourse, which "serves to define and reflect a community's definition of itself,"[69] is shaped (and permanently re-shaped). An elaboration of (a) YouTube-specific musical vernacular(s) needs to be focussed on the

68 John Fiske, *Television Culture*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2010), 95.

69 Lisa Flores, "Vernacular Discourse," in *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*, eds. Stephen W. Littlejohn and Karen A. Foss (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2009), 997.

forms, objects, and topics which signal "home-born" qualities ascribable to a YouTube-situated media experience – and the musical and performative means of invoking a YouTube-specific vernacular and suggesting further producerly behaviour. My analyses take concrete vernacular aesthetic objects as a vantage point. For instance, computational objects of our online experience can become aestheticised in the artistic process, the result of which might be an experiential rendering of our online experience, thereby exposing and deconstructing computational surface effects and affording their recurrent re-composition by establishing creative relay based on generic conventions and easily accessible tools such as free plug-ins or editing software. By way of taking supposedly banal media objects which signal a certain everydayness, these creative practices afford communicative connectability. One example for a popular compositional practice engaged with computational surface effects is the audiovisual composition with MIDI signals – e.g., in the so-called "Black MIDI" community which playfully engages with the visual representation, sonic qualities, and quantitative limits of MIDI signals. Furthermore, this book will examine the Internet-mediated microgenre of "vaporwave," in which pre-existing musical and visual objects – mostly late-capitalist "cultural detritus" from the 1980s and 1990s, such as muzak, synth pop, company logos, or early web design aesthetics – are remixed and modified by use of automated software filters and plug-ins. This use of sonic and visual interface effects is aimed at a pointedly artificial retro-futuristic rendering of the re-appropriated media objects in awareness and hyper-affirmation of an all-encompassing cyber-capitalist simulacrum, resulting in the evocation of a certain eerie nostalgia in the recipient. As these examples suggest, it is the symbolic fetish of computational surface effects which, based on their digital nativity and their commonness, creates aesthetic familiarity – which allows for potential effects of de-familiarisation that unfold a certain discursive potential. Moreover, the (re-)composition of/with these surface effects holds the potential to meta-referentially imply "a statement about an object-level, namely on (aspects of) the medium/system referred to."[70] Such a meta-reference, as defined by Werner Wolf, can elicit a "meta-awareness" in the recipient. In the context of compositional practices which aim at a "common"

70 Werner Wolf, "Metareference across Media: The Concept, Its Transmedial Potentials and Problems, Main Forms and Functions," in *Metareference across Media: Theory and Case Studies*, ed. Werner Wolf (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 31.

– and communal – expression by temporarily re-appropriating, and re-functionalising banal computational and Internet-born aesthetic objects, this awareness could, for instance, pertain to the computational subsurface that underlies the smooth user-friendly interfaces users are presented with – or to the simulacric character of computational procedures or digital culture as such.

Besides aesthetic everyday objects from the realm of computational procedures, vernacular creativity can also be remediated by media forms and formats with a pre-digital cultural significance (or, one could say that, vice versa, these forms are remediated by vernacular creativity) – music video-like contributions on YouTube being a prime example for this. The platform functions as both an archive, rendering audiovisual figurations easily attainable for any user, and as a stage – or, rather, a "permanent exhibition" – that grants visibility to individual contributions. With respect to the (co-)creation of music videos on the platform, remixes, mashups, or parodies of music videos are ever-increasing, suggesting further contributions and blurring the boundaries of music video. Within the networked sphere, music video-like re-composition becomes a vehicle for communal self-reference of various kinds. The array of contributions range from DIY music video parodies over playful – and often quite bizarre – musical re-dubs of pre-existing video material to fan videos productively engaging with the narrative structure of TV shows, movies, or entire media universes by selecting and combining visual and musical layers. Due to their community-oriented communicative incentive, these practices seem to be naturally accompanied by meta-reference to existing media forms and formats. More concretely, contributions might – both implicitly and explicitly – refer to conventional audio-visual relations and narrative structures in order to highlight and develop the shared repertoires of fannish knowledge and the producerly text surrounding pre-existing forms of audiovisual media, thereby artistically pointing out their "amateur ethos" or deliberately deconstructing aspects of industrialised music video production.

The everyday media experience which remediates vernacular creativity is however not bound to the level of pre-existing media objects. It is informed by the incentive of "broadcasting yourself," of (self-)capturing and self-reference – and by the collapse of the border between the everyday and logics of media production. The affordance of uploading one's everyday experience to YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, etc. from any place at any time has led to a never-ending stream of (self-)captures that serve the purpose of aestheticising everyday experience. By rendering these media objects available, they become artefacts of

ordinary media consumption on the platform, thereby not only suggesting further everyday captures by other users, but potentially becoming material for user-generated remixes and mashups. In other words, the vernacular aesthetics of captures of the self and the everyday become imbricated within a networked environment characterised by producerly activity. In practices of vernacular re-composition, audiovisual objects and patterns of everyday aestheticisation are re-appropriated and re-contextualised in a musically adaptive way and turned into compositional material for musical renderings of our online experience. Due to their profanity and banality – and, most importantly, their meta-reference to the ethos of "broadcasting yourself" – these media objects are paradigmatic for the discursive performance of vernacular re-composition on YouTube, as the analyses of musicalising approaches to found audiovisual media objects are going to show.

Of course, meta-reference is an overarching principle not only of vernacular re-composition, but of *all* combinatorial and re-contextualising approaches to media objects in the digital condition. The reason for this lies in the former domestication of the aesthetic objects that are deliberately re-contextualised and re-functionalised in communally oriented compositional processes. These objects continuously re-form in the process of what Lev Manovich calls "transcoding," referring to the mutual influence of the symbolic "computer layer" and the "culture layer" as an effect of human-computer interfaces:

> [T]he computer layer and the culture layer influence each other. To use another concept from new media, we can say that they are being composited together. The result of this composite is a new computer culture – a blend of human and computer meanings, of traditional ways in which human culture modeled the world and the computer's own means of representing it.[71]

YouTube, as an environment of networked interaction and an archive oversaturated with media objects, affords the means to share, participate, and become visible, entailing the remediation of vernacular creativity – for instance through the interplay of conventional media forms and the aesthetic surface effects of the surrounding computational infrastructure. It cannot be overstated in this context that the vernacular expression and ethos of YouTube-situated musical re-composition becomes readable – and meaningful – only in relation to its networked environment. Robert Glenn Howard elaborates

71 Manovich, *Language of New Media*, 46.

on this aspect by going back to the early years of the world wide web, which, until the mid-1990s, was a largely non-territorialised sphere without many institutional websites, let alone Web 2.0 platforms or applications that would foster or curate user-led content creation. Howard notes that, for this very reason, a discursive vernacular web could not exist: only the emergence of an institutional presence in the web conditioned the meaningfulness of a vernacular ethos which, only now, could dialectically emerge as a distinctive formation.[72] Throughout different publications, Howard develops his notion of a "dialectical vernacular," thereby pointing to the shift towards professionalised website creation in the 1990s that began to mark institutional online presence:

> [C]orporations, government, universities, and other powerful institutions hired teams of computer engineers to create […] an institutional presence online. Because these institutional Websites were the product of teams of professional builders, they exhibited more complicated features. While hobbyists and amateurs still put up sites, these sites appeared as vernacular because they exhibited features that rendered them clearly distinct.[73]

Beyond that, Jean Burgess reflects on the normalisation of graphical user interfaces which, on the one hand, provided usability for even the least technologically skilled user, but, on the other, conflicted with the hacker ideal of full visibility and control, as subcutaneous computational layers became increasingly disguised.[74] What meant usability and transparency for less technologically proficient users and paved the way for the contemporary participatory web, was seen as a de-autonomising obfuscation of underlying computational operations by others. To sum up: due to institutional presence in the world wide web, a vernacular could dialectically emerge. The increased workability or "user-friendliness" in professionalised, often commercial, network locations – such as today's social media platforms and applications – helped interlink users worldwide and encourage user-led creation, thus enabling the current de-specialised sphere of quantitatively unlimited participation. A networked

72 See Howard, "Toward a Theory of the World Wide Web Vernacular," 325.

73 Robert Glenn Howard, "The Vernacular Web of Participatory Media," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25, no. 8 (October 2008): 500, https://doi.org/10.1080/15295030802468065.

74 See Jean Burgess, "Vernacular Creativity and New Media" (PhD thesis, Queensland University of Technology, 2007), 108.

vernacular thus can only "gain an alternate authority by participating in its own subordination" to institutional network locations that curate and interlink user-generated content and foster participation by offering and simplifying the tools needed for participatory creative practices.[75] Regarding the analytical approach to vernacular musical practices situated on YouTube, the main focus lies on the (immaterial) materiality of re-composed audiologovisual aesthetic objects, as they meta-referentially point to their own shifts in terms of their function, production logic, and cultural significance, which occured as a result of the rise of media convergence and networked participation. These shifts pertain, for instance, to computational aesthetic objects, to vernacular forms and patterns of everyday aestheticisation, and to historical forms of media once largely characterised by a pre-digital "read-only" condition, as they all serve as compositional material for experiential renderings of our everyday media experience. Produsers seize on this variety of cultural materials in a vernacular register to assert, self-consciously, their difference from more institutionalised formats of cultural production, even as they rely on those larger institutional frameworks to find, produce, share, and re-make media objects.

Circulating musical formats and figurations on YouTube are accompanied, shaped, or even catalysed by the affective and aspirational labour of networked individuals who aim to create "personified" content and impose themselves on producerly text. Of particular interest in this context is the self-entrepreneurial activity of YouTube personalities – and those who aspire to become one – that is accompanied by strategies of algorithmic anticipation and self-optimisation. The self-representation of these "music YouTubers," who embody the participatory ideal of the platform, is bound to a concise channel concept and, consequentially, to a non-musical repertoire of self-reference and self-display. This repertoire of non-musical communication is aimed at creating spaces of intimacy, affinity, and communality and marks the persona of the YouTuber as a point of reference for their (fannish) community and beyond. In a way, the affective labour of creating personified music-centred content is based on a platform-specific, non-musical vernacular of authentic self-representation. In the context of this study, these repertoires of communication and self-representation are of interest whenever they become directly productive with regard to YouTube-situated vernacular musical re-composition within and across specific communities; in other words, whenever they co-constitute the field of enunciation in which a YouTube-specific vernacular

75 Howard, "The Vernacular Web," 497.

– invoked referentially through the musical re-composition of circulating and materially repeatable themes and media objects – can emerge and become readable.

It is my hope that the hereby offered observations and hypotheses can serve as gainful theoretical underpinnings for the following concrete analyses of compositional practices, forms, and formats. For now, with regard to the previous chapters, the still somewhat loose threads can be tied up as follows: In a networked sphere characterised by the logic of produsage, cultural content can be understood as highly dispersed and modular – contrasting the idea of fixed "products," it spans multiple contributions and dissolves the categories of user and producer. Thus, forms and formats of referential re-composition on YouTube – and in networked contexts in general – add to the always evolving producerly media text that is open to continual re-iteration, re-contextualisation, and re-signification. Platform-specific practices of re-composition are permeated and constituted by the immaterial symbolic sphere of computational procedures, resulting not only in processual artistic navigations of the material and affective dimensions of aesthetic media objects, but, more fundamentally, in referential approaches towards the "tissue of quotations" the re-composed media objects are embedded in. In order to avoid semiotic overabundance and afford aesthetic and discursive connectability, contributors position themselves (meta-)referentially through the selective re-contextualisation and re-combination of media objects. The musical aesthetics of YouTube-situated vernacular re-composition are the result of such a performative approach: here, the media objects serve as compositional material for productive articulations of competencies and (musical and non-musical) conventions that are regarded as commonplace on the platform. More concretely, these articulations are built on media literacies, aesthetic experiences, and compositional as well as discursive competencies which are gained through everyday media consumption or produsage. However, a platform-specific vernacularity can only be meaningfully asserted – or "enunciated" – in contrast to institutionalised formations and network locations. Hence, YouTube-situated vernacular musical aesthetics are in need of eliciting a "meta-awareness" of the sphere of networked individualism they are imbricated in – a sphere which is afforded, shaped, and controlled by institutional and algorithmic agencies as well as characterised by affective produsage-as-labour.