

and formats of Internet-based vernacular re-composition, which are developing rapidly on YouTube since about five years, needs to be pointed out: it is the “meme-ification” of the viral metaphor of the meme itself. Such a “meta-meme” evokes a meta-awareness of a logic of mechanistic virality, which it hyper-affirms and simulates by generating quasi-fetishistic interrelations between circulating remix concepts and objects, thereby playfully constituting a communication environment of materially repeatable artefacts which seemingly take on a life on their own.⁵⁷ Building on the prototypical structural logic and formulaicity of *visual* Internet memes, I am going to outline how community-oriented musical contributions constitute and perpetuate remix concepts based on concise short forms and materially repeatable templates that provide audio-visual anchorage and heighten imitation-suggestibility to a point where playful vernacular engagement with multimodal figurations turns into meta-memetic game-like processes of re-composing and spreading “meme music.”

4.2 “Meme Music”? Meta-Memetic Play as Epitome of Viral Spread

In order to provide a first idea of what a concept of “meme music” could encompass, a second look at the aspect of play is due. More concretely, I want to take the aspect of rules into consideration, as there are differences to be noted across the whole spectrum of vernacular practices of iteration on YouTube and beyond. First, some commonalities need to be pointed out: Any chain of iterative remix brings about an oscillating motion which lets self-renewing structures of play emerge and develop. Moreover, all forms of conceptual remix are built on *implicit* rules or conventions, based on the imitative media text that is performed. This text can be described as a “mimotext,” following a notion by Gérard Genette, who points out that a text “can be imitated only indirectly, by practicing its style in another text.”⁵⁸ Thus, contributions are never direct imitations, that is, reproductions of other digital units, but are based on generalisations of specific stylistic and thematic features of one, or multiple, detected concepts, which are no texts in themselves, but imitable “corpora” or “genres.”

57 Limor Shifman hinted at the meta-referentiality of memes by detecting a “hypermemetic logic” of visual Internet memes, stating that memetic contributions “spread the notion of participatory culture itself: a culture based on the active spread and re-creation of content by users.” Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 89.

58 Genette, *Palimpsests*, 84.

These generalisations constitute what Gérard Genette calls a “matrix of imitation” or a “network of mimetisms,” which, by informing and constituting “models of competence,” enable (inter-)subjective creations, detections and valuations of mimotexts aimed at performing the generalised idiolect attributed to a remix concept.⁵⁹ Whether a concrete multimodal arrangement of a contribution follows the implicit rules attributable to a certain remix concept – that is, whether it “successfully” imitates its generalisable stylistic and thematic features – is thus a matter of intersubjectively determined “imitative competence” and, to revert to Derrida’s useful notion, an issue of iterability. Since about 2016, many concise musical remix concepts have emerged on YouTube, aiming at high imitation-suggestibility and affording the emergence of narrower “models of competence” against the backdrop of the playful and self-referential re-enactment of the logic of “the meme” itself, as a metaphor for mechanistic viral spread.⁶⁰ On a formal level, this is achieved by way of 1) concise short forms, 2) materially repeatable templates (e.g., concrete audio, video, or text that is taken up in subsequent remixes), and 3) formulaic multimodal arrangements. The interplay of these three aspects introduces features similar to what Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, in the context of game design theory, have identified as “operational rules” and “constitutive [sic!] rules.” According to Salen and Zimmerman, operational rules are “the guidelines players require in order to play [a game]”; constitutive rules, on the other hand, “are the underlying formal structures that exist ‘below the surface’ of the rules presented to players.”⁶¹ Following Gadamer’s reflections on play, these rules are not necessary in order to prompt playful activities; they rather introduce more formalised forms of play which could be defined as games (in the understanding of “game” as a subset of “play”). Although the exemplified forms of musical meta-memetic remix in this chapter lack certain features usually attributed to games – for instance an element of conflict or a quantifiable goal or outcome,⁶² the chains of conceptual remix based on templates and formulaic short forms often unfold a game-like character, as they introduce concise operational and constitutive features.

59 Ibid., 83.

60 Hence, the exemplified musical contributions in this chapter should be conceived of as “meta-memetic” formations.

61 Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), chapter 12, page 4.

62 See *ibid.*, chapter 7, page 11.

Preparatory Reflections on “Image Macros”

At this point, a preparatory analysis of so-called “image macros,” the most popular format for *visual* meta-memetic remix, seems beneficial, as it helps introduce the concepts needed to identify and make describable the formulaic multimodal arrangements of *musical* meta-memetic remix, which would not exist without its visual predecessors. An image macro consists of an image with added captions. Central to its creation and imitation are multimodal arrangements based on templates in the form of concrete images and captions which provide for internal coherence. By now, an endless array of popular image macro series has emerged, all building on their own prototypical visual and linguistic motives as well as on syntactic conventions and formulas, which provide for their cohesion. This can be exemplified by the “Not Sure If” and “Millennial Falcon” image macros: The many remixes of the so-called “Not Sure If” image macro attain their formulaicity through their captions, which are always following the syntax “Not sure if X or Y,” in combination with an image of Philip J. Fry, the main character of the animated science fiction sitcom *Futurama*, squinting his eyes in an exaggerated manner. The combination of Fry’s facial expression with the syntactic rigour of the caption – which functions as both an operational guideline as well as a constitutive structure – affords the contributor’s expression of uncertainty regarding virtually any kind of differentiation. The coherence of the “Millennial Falcon” on the other hand results from its pragmatic rigour rather than from a syntactic formula, as it represents situations and issues generally associated with being a “millennial.” The falcon is employed as a symbolic carrier for self-referential everyday observations which are informed by a certain self-perception and point of view, thereby letting those recipients who possess knowledge of the unit’s coding – or: its constitutive “rule” – anticipate its stance and pragmatic ethos ahead of reading the caption.

In order to provide for the communal negation of meaning by way of spreading and creating image macros, the exclusion of possible signifieds of the used images is crucial. This “anchorage,” as Roland Barthes calls it,⁶³ takes place by help of written language: In the case of the “Not Sure If” image macro, the syntagma “Not sure if...,” which suggests a state of uncertainty,

63 See Roland Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image,” in *Image Music Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 38–41.

provides for the necessary orientation, or rather affirmation, regarding the interpretation of Fry's facial expression.

Figure 12: A derivative of the "Not Sure If" image macro. "Not sure if sarcastic – or serious," Meme Generator, accessed March 30, 2023, <https://memegenerator.net/instance/62188816>.

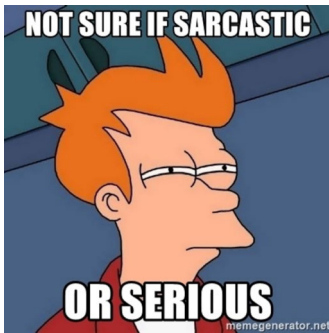


Figure 13: A derivative of the "Millennial Falcon" image macro. "Millennial Falcon," Know Your Meme, accessed March 30, 2023, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/millennial-falcon>.



The concrete cause for the uncertainty is specified in every respective derivative of the image macro. As much as the caption is anchoring the image in this example, it also contains a reverse, albeit non-denominative, anchoring, as Fry's rather skeptical expression further differentiates the emotional stance with which the message is conveyed. With regard to the "Millennial Falcon" image macro, the relationship between text and image is more complicated: Since the idea of using a picture of a falcon derived from a pun on the name of a starship from Star Wars ("Millennium Falcon"), the rhetoric of the image by itself offers no connection whatsoever to the respective caption. Thus, in this case, it is only the paratextual element of its title, further concretised by the content of the caption, which suggests a link between the image and the pragmatic ethos of the image macro. At the same time, all the other potential signifieds of the falcon image are being excluded as the image becomes symbolically loaded through mere pragmatic use. This coding of the image, however, can only be fully grasped against the background of its reading as a hypertextual element. Hence, while linguistic messages might anchor the

images of each respective digital unit, there also exists a superordinate form of anchorage: every hypertextual element of a meta-memetic digital unit refers to a larger corpus of shared narratives, stances, humour, or stylistic features which they can be attributed to. Even if they were to be extracted from their multimodal arrangements, the image of the falcon or the syntax of the “Not sure if...” image macro would function as signifiers of generalisable stylistic and thematic features, or, to put it differently, of a detectable idiolect and pragmatic ethos accompanying their deployment within the hypertextual structure(s) they are embedded in. The playful and pleasurable development of these figurations is prompted and stabilised through operational and constitutive features which, in the form of concrete materially repeatable templates and formulaic multimodal interrelations, suggest and mediate the ongoing imitative encounters and the contagious spread of uncontrollable affective surplus effects.

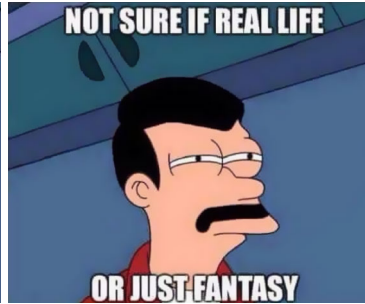
However, there are no fixed anchorages, as the subjectively informed re-combinations and re-contextualisations of linguistic and visual constituents entail continual alterations and branchings of the formulaic constructions they are grounded and framed in. Due to “semiotic excess,” resulting from the high polysemous potential of language-bound multimodal constructions, the producerly text of image macros affords the “loose ends that escape its own control” and lets “its meanings exceed its own power to discipline them.”⁶⁴ Thus, contributions in the image macro format are paradigmatic for the never-ending creative development and differentiation of meta-memetic variation patterns, as their immanent transtextuality allows for manifold references and re-significations by way of language and images. In numerous derivatives of the “Not Sure If” image macro, for instance, the image of Fry’s on-and-off girlfriend Leela is used instead of Fry. For recipients familiar with the series *Futurama* and the originary template – that is, the image of Fry – this substitution adds several potential twists: Besides commenting the “Fry version” on a meta level, the image of Leela can be used to concretely thematise her relationship to Fry or, more generally, as a signifier for “Not Sure If” image macros from a specifically female perspective (see Figure 14). In another example, the caption “Not sure if real life or just fantasy” playfully references the Queen song “Bohemian Rhapsody” (“Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy? [...]”). Consequentially, Fry is transformed into a Freddy Mercury look-alike (see Figure 15).

64 Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 104.

Figure 14: A derivative of the “Not Sure If” image macro with the image of Leela. “Skeptical Leela,” *livememe.com*, accessed March 30, 2023, <https://e.lvme.me/7byj6v5>.



Figure 15: A derivative of the “Not Sure If” image macro with a Queen reference. @annaix, “Haha Lustig,” *Pinterest*, November 11, 2018, <https://br.pinterest.com/pin/661184789021439135/>.



These examples underscore the fundamental socio-cultural codification of contributions. Code, as defined by Umberto Eco, underlies any communication process, establishing “a system of probability within an original disorder.” Moreover, elements of disorder are introduced and set in “dialectical tension with the order that supports them [...]”⁶⁵ Here, the multimodal arrangement as well as the syntactic and pragmatic features of the “Not Sure If” image macro constitute a system of probability. Pop-cultural references, conveyed by way of textual and visual variation, add another layer of codification, as they require a certain inside knowledge. At the same time, they function as disrupting elements that introduce information – in Eco’s terms, they become the message that “challenges the code” which has been established by the operational and constitutive features (for example those attributed to “Not Sure If” image macros).⁶⁶

Furthermore, components of different image macros with already established and recognisable syntactic or pragmatic conventions are often grafted upon each other. In the example below, the syntax associated with the “Not Sure If” template(s) is combined with the pragmatic approach of the “Philosoraptor,” which has become established as a symbolic carrier for quirky thematisations of metaphysical and paradoxical issues. Beside the “Millennial Falcon”

65 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 58.

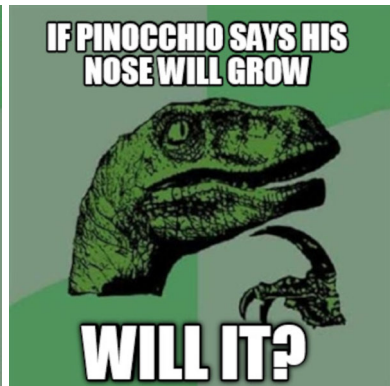
66 See *ibid.*

and the “Philosoraptor,” various other image macros with their own (self-)observational or archetypical approaches, represented by characteristic animals (or sometimes humans) as symbolic carriers, have emerged, which led to the emergence of the overarching category of “Advice Animal” image macros on the most influential online forums and websites dedicated to documenting and theorising phenomena of Internet culture, such as knowyourmeme.com.⁶⁷

Figure 16: The caption of the “Not Sure If” image macro grafted upon the template of the “Philosoraptor” image macro. “Philosoraptor,” [imgflip](https://imgflip.com/i/7cbqa4), accessed March 30, 2023, <https://imgflip.com/i/7cbqa4>.



Figure 17: A derivative of the “Philosoraptor” image macro. “If Pinocchio says his nose will grow, will it?,” Meme Creator, accessed March 30, 2023, <https://www.memecreator.org/meme/if-pinocchio-says-his-nose-will-grow-will-ito>.



As these elaborations on image macros exemplify, the multimodal and transtextual configurations of language-bound meta-memetic contributions are designed primarily to prompt further “producerly” behaviour, as their visual, syntactic, and pragmatic logics invite inner differentiations, graftings, and references on the visual and linguistic level. Thus, on the one hand, every meta-memetic unit can be conceptualised as a complex which suggests the disentanglement and re-contextualisation of its constituents. On the other hand, it can be subsumed under larger, multifaceted umbrellas of

⁶⁷ See “Advice Animals,” Know Your Meme, accessed 30 March 2023, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/advice-animals>.

(sub-)genres, shared design patterns and templates, or textual interrelations and framings. Hence, the operational and constitutive features of these units are by no means conceivable as fixed rules but rather as conventions which form the meta-referential focal point for a contribution by offering guidelines and structures that, on the one hand, stabilise chains of imitation, and, on the other, can be constantly re-defined, playfully altered, or hybridised. The creation of a single meta-memetic unit is fundamentally self-referential in that it necessarily derives from reflections on the digital unit's embedding *within* as well as its imbrications *with* chains of iteration and re-contextualisation. Thus, the resulting contribution is a manifestation of the subjective recognition and reading of (an) overarching "meme(s)" – that is, a group of media texts that suggest their "as-if mechanistic" viral spread, realised by way of conceptual remix based on concise multimodal small/short forms, formulaic arrangements, and concrete audio-/logo-/visual templates. While templates and paratextual elements such as titles (e.g. "Not Sure If," "Philosoraptor") and classifications (e.g. "Advice Animals") can neither conceptually enclose nor locate "the meme," they are co-constituents of matrixes of imitation, as they represent necessary (re-)territorialisations of preceding and subsequent imitative processes. Being both the results *and* potential catalysers of differential chains, they help shape and render detectable the conventions and conceptual framings for further creative contributions and can thus be considered an integral part of the "meta-memetic game."

Every upload or sharing of a meta-memetic unit is an act of self-constitution in dependency of communal symbolic-discursive configurations. While language-based chains potentially enable (meta-)discourse on social, political, and everyday topics, other meta-memetic figurations might be lacking such a connotative potential. Nevertheless, forms of meta-memetic relay which are not primarily based on linguistic means are highly performative acts as well, as the contributors continually redesign themselves as distinct creative selves through the production of differences based on operational and constitutive features that serve as a fluid "ruleset" for further iterations. Regardless of the formats and forms of meta-memetic relay, the models of competence emerging from – and resulting in – the multitude of interrelations and deliberate re-contextualisations of circulating audiologovisual patterns provide the main stimulus to meta-memetic co-creation: the promise to take part in a game-like process with its own inclusive and exclusive mechanisms. In order to approach contributions which foreground musical material and create operational and/or constitutive conventions with regard to its relation to visual

and linguistic layers, the preceding reflections are crucial, as they help define the location and function of musical constituents within multimodal arrangements of music-centred meta-memetic co-creation. Furthermore, they afford the tools to define preconditions for meta-memetic relay of musical artefacts which functions independently from additional visual framings or references to visual figurations.

"Meme Music" and Musical Anchorage

A YouTube search for the term "meme music" results in an overwhelming number of suggested videos. The recent spread of the term – its virality, so to say – is clearly linked to its inflationary use as a label for widely recognised musical pieces and patterns. In the video "Evolution of Meme Music (1500 AD – 2018)," which was viewed more than 16 million times, @Vinheteiro plays main themes from musical hits, ranging from "Greensleeves" to "Despacito" by Luis Fonsi (ft. Daddy Yankee).⁶⁸ Here, the term "meme music" certainly comes in handy in terms of increasing the viral appearance – and thus the viral potential – of @Vinheteiro's content. However, the utility of this indifferently used notion must be questioned as it offers no gain of knowledge beyond existing musical terms. Rather, it seems to build on the Dawkinian understanding of memes as units of (often non-deliberate) "cultural transmission." Following Dawkins' meme theory, any extensively iterated musical and music-related form and idea could consequentially become defined as a meme: famous musical pieces (and their main themes) of any musical genre – but also single motifs, rhythmic patterns, cadences, modulations, the sonata form, methods of notation, playing techniques... As could be seen in the previous reflections, Internet-situated meta-memetic co-creation can be understood as a form of vernacular conceptual remix based on short forms, materially repeatable templates, and formulaic multimodal figurations. Thus, strictly speaking, a pre-existing popular musical piece in itself cannot be classified as a meme, unless it becomes recognised as a component of meta-memetic conceptual remix, wherein the idea of mechanistic viral spread is playfully re-enacted in a deliberate, (self-)referential manner. Chains of interrelated meta-memetic contributions often rely on the anchoring function of pre-existing musical material within concise multimodal short forms, as the following examples show:

68 @Vinheteiro, "Evolution of Meme Music (1500 AD – 2018)," May 14, 2018, YouTube video, 8:12, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a2b_uhenj7Q.

The song “Sound of Silence” by Simon & Garfunkel serves as a popular template for meta-memetic relay on YouTube and other social media platforms. In many audiovisual mashups, the song is used as a commentary to videos which take an unexpected unlucky turn or show a confrontation with harsh reality. Although the remix concept, like most concepts based on video format, lacks the rigid syntactic formulaicity of many image macros, the first line of the song’s lyrics (“Hello darkness my old friend, I’ve come to talk to you again [...]”) and the picture, which turns black-and-white when the dramatic shift in the video occurs, unfold a connotation which lends a certain pragmatic rigour that can be detected as constitutive to the multimodal construction of the unit. This remix concept allows for the use of diverse video material, ranging from “fail videos” of trampoline accidents to moments of embarrassment during a Trump press conference (see Figures 18 and 19).⁶⁹

Figure 18: A man is falling off his trampoline – “Sound of Silence” chimes in. Stills from @Cris4389’s video “Hello Darkness My Old Friend Meme | #1 Compilation” (2018).



Figure 19: As realisation and disbelief become visible, the picture turns black-and-white and “Sound of Silence” starts playing. Still from @SonsyToast882’s video “Hello darkness my old friend” (2016).



Other remix concepts are based on audiovisual mashup without linguistic elements and thus are entirely grounded on the synergies between the audio and the visuals. For the so-called “Shooting Stars meme,” an instrumental snippet from the song “Shooting Stars” by Bag Raiders is used to accompany video footage of people falling. The song has been used in many contributions

69 See @Cris4389, “Hello Darkness My Old Friend Meme | #1 Compilation,” October 1, 2018, YouTube video, 10:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9QzD8vNz8M8>; @SonsyToast882, “Hello darkness my old friend,” July 5, 2016, YouTube video, 5:25, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yxvJKZMafh8>

since 2015; however, it was not until 2017 that a concise audiovisual mimotext emerged which spawned further conceptual remixes: The video “Fat man does amazing dive – Shooting Stars” by @All Ski Casino shows a man who jumps from a bridge and dives headfirst into the water.⁷⁰ In mid-air, the falling motion of the man is looped and set against cosmic and aquatic sceneries to make it look as though he is floating in outer space and diving with dolphins. The video editing goes hand in hand with the function of the music: As the fall is perpetuated and situated, the characteristic instrumental segment starts.

Figure 20: Synth lead, bass part, and chords of the instrumental segment from “Shooting Stars” by Bag Raiders (my transcription).

The continual repetition of the distinct one-bar motif and the prominent use of submediant and mediant chords circumvent a strong tonality and directionality and co-create the synergetic pulling effect between the musical and the visual level, suggesting infiniteness (see Figure 20). By suspending the man's movement in time and space, the audiovisual configuration intensifies and almost celebrates the awkward moment of his jump. The many conceptual remixes following this initial contribution took up its multimodal arrangement consisting of footage of people falling, atmospheric, infinity-evoking video backgrounds and the floating instrumental part from “Shooting Stars.” As both examples show, the music can take on semantic qualities beyond its mere use as a “theme tune,” either on its own or in synergy with visual elements, thereby highlighting, commenting or even (co-)constituting the unit's

70 @All Ski Casino, “Fat man does amazing dive – Shooting Stars,” January 23, 2017, YouTube video, 0:30, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cbKmm_xAEro.

object of desire. This is often achieved by creating bizarre juxtapositions that perpetuate contagious moments of *schadenfreude* and awkwardness, which serve as affective stimuli for further imitative encounters.

Fragile Cases of Musical Meta-Memetic Relay

The performance of a meta-memetic mimotext is dependent on (inter-)subjective generalisations of constitutive structures such as overarching stylistic, connotative and pragmatic features regarding the use of audiologovisual texts and their interrelations within concise short forms. In other words, each contribution is based on a model of competence which informs the arrangement and interlinking of the generalised features attributed to the performed meme. Moreover, a “competent” conceptual remix often requires previous knowledge of the remixed constituents. In interplay with generalisable generic features, this shared knowledge co-constitutes the underlying system of probability for further remix. While the lack of knowledge about the Simon & Garfunkel song might not affect the recipient’s understanding of the “Sound of Silence meme,” there are partial aspects to established multimodal arrangements which, despite having emancipated themselves from previous contexts, leave traces that create issues of iterability regardless of whether they are supposed to be tracked or not.⁷¹ The music video for the song “7th Element” by Ukrainian singer Vitas is a good example for this: this rather bizarre video has been used as a source for many imitations and referential contributions, due to Vitas’ appearance and gestures as well as to the repetitive lyrics and a distinctive tongue-rolling passage in the chorus which resembles the call of a high-pitched turkey.⁷² In the YouTube video “Cat singing with an angelic voice,” snippets from the voice track of the chorus are dubbed over the mouth movements of a cat.⁷³ The video spawned further conceptual remixes based on

71 Derrida’s term of dissemination (*dissémination*) underscores this irreducible manifoldness of processual meaning-making: in continuation of his idea of *différance*, Derrida argues that signifieds are never subsumed to fixed signifiers but rather situated within open processes of ongoing differentiation and production, displacement, and effacement of meaning. See Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

72 @VITAS, “Vitas – The 7th Element,” August 27, 2018, YouTube video, 4:09, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=989-7xsRLR4>.

73 @AN Cis, “Cat singing with an angelic voice!![Original Video],” December 19, 2017, YouTube video, 0:39, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XiLVrfgl8lg>.

a constitutive formula which could be described as “cat + voice track by Vitas.” This simple juxtaposition seems to make for a self-explanatory remix concept at first glance. However, the resulting models of competence are entirely based on the producers’ previous knowledge of the used audiovisual constituents and their imbrications and correspondence with other digital remixes and mashups. While some recipients perceived the video as a reference to the viral music video by Vitas and created their own cat videos with dubs of Vitas’ singing voice, recipients without knowledge of the used song would detect other, more general formulas, e.g. “cat + funny voice track” or “cat + singing,” in awareness of the many voice-over cat videos on social media platforms. As the video comments to “Cat singing with an angelic voice” show, many viewers even confused Vitas’ voice with the real voice of the cat. This bears witness to potential issues of iterability regarding even the least complex figurations.

Due to its lack of narration, connotation, and stance, the “Vitas + cat meme” can be conceived of as a fragile case of meta-memetic relay. Although it leaves almost no (or too many?) gaps for the re-appropriation and development of the multimodal arrangement, numerous conceptual remixes have emerged on different social media platforms. It seems as if the minimal requirements were met: the humorous juxtaposition of the cat’s appearance and movements with the audio sample contains the necessary moment of readability and connectability that turns the use of the sample into a constituent of a generalisable mimotext. The iterability of their multimodal construction and their extra-musical communicative dimension distinguish meta-memetic remixes from pre-existent musical pieces, which cannot constitute memes by themselves. Yet, some songs are widely credited with a meme status across online communities merely due to their viral spread, “Africa” by Toto arguably being the most famous example: Since 2010, uncountable cover versions, remixes, and parodies of “Africa” have been uploaded to YouTube, many of them garnering millions of views and becoming viral hits in their own right. Being a pop-cultural phenomenon and point of reference, the song has been covered by amateur choirs, metal bands, and rubber chickens, parodied by influential YouTubers, cited by television shows; even a permanent sound installation in the Namib Desert has been set up, powered by solar batteries which allow the song to be played non-stop. The ongoing diffusion of Toto’s “Africa” within and across the producerly sphere of social media paradigmatically highlights the centrality of massively circulating communicative artefacts to processes of long-lasting creative relay. The recognition value of the used musical material can serve as a template for audiologovisual and musical concepts, ensuring a

contribution's viral spread. Most commonly, the musical material of "Africa" is used for covers and arrangements of the song, covering the whole spectrum from "conventional" to "spectacular" contributions. Although these contributions can exist without any deliberate engagement in a concise formulaic "ruleset," they are similarly made visible by their adherence to a widely circulating artefact, thereby implicitly referring to the overall stream of "Africa"-related content. Still, many of these performances and remixes do not have a generalisable overarching concept in common, let alone a concise multimodal construction that would suggest further iterations. Thus, the question arises if, and how, these formations can be located within chains of meta-memetic relay. In this context, Limor Shifman's definition of a meme as a "group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance" which are produced "with awareness of each other" and "circulated, imitated and/or transformed via the Internet by many users" may serve as a conceptual reference point.⁷⁴ On this basis, Shifman postulates so-called "founder-based" practices, which always refer to a single (often viral) "founder unit," and "egalitarian" practices, which "seem to have evolved [...] without a clear founding text" and are primarily based on formulaic methods.⁷⁵ By offering this conceptual differentiation, Shifman wants to broaden her conception in order to include certain chains of imitation that result from viral "founder units," such as participatory games and challenges – or parodies, re-stagings and re-appropriations of viral videos or viral songs like Toto's "Africa." Following this rationale, any widely used digital source could theoretically become conceptualised as a "founding unit" for playful remix and mashup practices in awareness of an artefact's viral spread, which would consequentially result in an unspecified "founder-based meme" encompassing all units based on the imitation and remix of this artefact. Despite this conceptual blurriness, founder-based viral re-composition suggests a self-referential and playful engagement in that it, both implicitly or explicitly, refers to a concrete unit's embedding *within* as well as its imbrications *with* chains of ongoing re-contextualisation and iteration. "Africa" remixes and mashups that lack operational and structural guidelines for multimodal composing as well as conventions in terms of narration, connotation, and stance – which usually entails the absence of sufficient musical anchorage – can at best be conceived of as borderline cases of meta-memetic relay. Nevertheless, the

74 Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 7–8.

75 Ibid., 58.

streams of “Africa”-related “viral musicking” only exist due to the producers’ awareness of the “memetic potential” of the song and the overall “memescape” of multimodal musical remix based on this concrete musical artefact.

Of course, beyond less formulaic forms of re-composing concrete viral artefacts, most music-centred meta-memetic contributions capitalise on the virality of pre-existing musical pieces, for instance by humorously referencing, re-contextualising, or re-signifying latent aspects or material elements of a musical composition within their respective multimodal remix concept. So far, tailor-made “original” music for formulaic remix concepts remains a rarity. This is arguably due to the recognition value of pre-existing (popular) music, which increases the connotative potential and the unit’s spreadability at the same time. Beyond being defined by its multimodality, self-referentiality, and communally shared and developed models of competence, the creation of a meta-memetic unit requires the re-appropriation and re-contextualisation of pre-existing audiovisual patterns. Since the “meta-memetic game” is fundamentally fuelled by continuous communal iteration, the idea of “original music” appears secondary to the idea of creative relay. However, with the emergence of so-called “replacement remixes,” new conceptual framings have allowed for creative relay to unfold around the continual alteration of musical material – or even spawned entirely new compositions guided by meta-memetic remix concepts:

“Meme Music” as Vernacular Conceptualism

Since 2016, “replacement remixes” have been spreading on YouTube and SoundCloud. In this format, the occurrence of concrete recurring elements of a video trigger their replacement by other elements. In early remixes, utterances of certain words in a video were replaced by overdubs or even short video clips.⁷⁶ With the establishment of this practice in 2016, the triggered events were not restricted to mere replacements of video or audio segments anymore, but also included alterations, such as changes to the playback speed

76 A remix of the intro from the video puzzle game “Hotel Mario” with the self-explaining formulaic title “Hotel Mario (Common nouns in intro replaced with big explosions)” was the first replacement remix uploaded to YouTube. See @Groudono199, “Hotel Mario (Common nouns in intro replaced with big explosions),” May 27, 2007, YouTube video, 0:57, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-Q4uxq3010>.

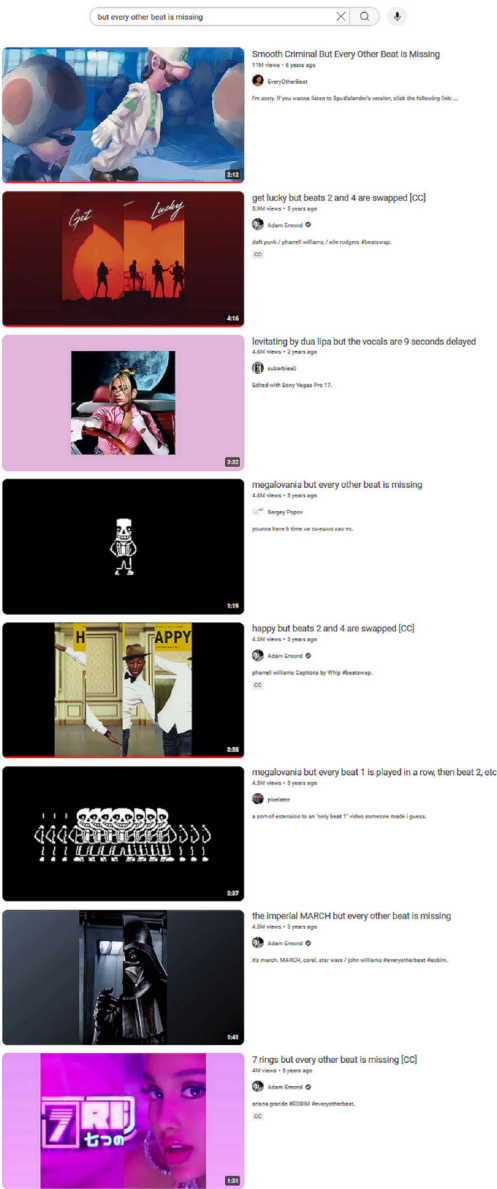
of the video or an increasingly pixelated image.⁷⁷ The first applications of these replacement formulas to musical pieces appeared in the context of the ongoing Internet trend of playfully referencing the song “All Star” by Smash Mouth, which, similar to Toto’s “Africa,” has evolved into an iconic point of reference for never-ending streams of online remixes, covers and parodies. In a 2017 replacement remix of “All Star” with the title “All Star but they don’t stop coming pitch corrected,” the line “and they don’t stop coming” triggers a loop of the vocal track which continues for the rest of the piece while being altered in pitch in order to match the harmonies of the instrumental track.⁷⁸ In contrast to such a song-specific approach, certain operational formulas emerged which appear so concise and universal in their syntactic rigour that they afford and suggest their application to almost any musical material. Among the most established formulas, there are, for instance: “...but it gets faster,” “...but every other beat is missing,” and “...but beats 2 and 4 are swapped.”

These continually developing and branching formulas have emancipated themselves from concrete musical contexts by establishing overarching compositional concepts, thus turning the titles of the respective contributions – or rather: their syntaxes – into generalisable and thus easily detectable templates. Through their application, the re-composition of musical source material appears to become subsumed under a predetermined scheme. Alienated from both the creator and the recipient, the resulting restructurings of musical parameters, forms, and patterns give rise to unpredictable sonic and musical events, which often do not seem to be pre-occupied by any intention. The fragile topographies of meaning of these processes, which even remixes that are completely devoid of any subjective directive or intervention allow for, appear secondary to their conceptual rigour. Certain parallels to conceptual art and musical conceptualism suggest themselves in view of the notable overlaps with conceptualist pieces from established artists and composers.

77 With more than 38 million views, the video “Shrek but every time he takes a STEP it gets 5 % faster” is one of the most popular replacement remixes. @MrMemenea, “Shrek but every time he takes a STEP it gets 5 % faster,” June 6, 2017, YouTube video, 9:33, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLtBGCX8Gik>.

78 @This Is That Guy, “All Star but they don’t stop coming pitch corrected,” October 31, 2017, YouTube video, 3:21, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eT3BFzSD6YY>.

Figure 21: YouTube search for the remix formula “but every other beat is missing,” sorted by view count.



The piece “Alphabetized Winterreise” (2013) by Erik Carlson may serve as an example. Here, Carlson re-arranges the words (plus the respective underlying piano segments) from Franz Schubert’s *Winterreise* in alphabetical order.⁷⁹ His work could be regarded as a remix in notated form and thus as the analogue equivalent to the remix formula “...but every word is in alphabetical order,” which has spawned conceptual remixes on YouTube since 2017.⁸⁰

Figure 22: The first twelve bars of Erik Carlson’s “Alphabetized Winterreise” (2013).

Alphabetized Winterreise

Franz Schubert / Erik Carlson

(suggestion for performance:
two singers alternate measures)

A

ab ab ab A-bend-rot ach ach Ach ach Ach ach Ach Ach Ach Ach all'

5

al-lei-ne al-lei-ne al-len al-len al-les al-les al-les

8

all-hier als als als als als als Als Als als als als al-ten Al-ter Am am am

79 See Erik Carlson and Franz Schubert, *Alphabetized Winterreise*, n.p., 2013, accessed March 30, 2023, <https://midnightsledding.com/carlson/AlphaWinter.pdf>.

80 It is impossible to retrospectively determine if Carlson's piece served as a direct inspiration or if the remix concept emerged independently from it.

Since 2016, format-specific networks of mimetisms, initially limited to event-based manipulations of audio files, have expanded, affording more open conceptual framings. Contributions like “All Star but it’s Schoenberg’s Fourth String Quartet” or “All Star but it’s a Bach chorale following the conventions of the Common Practice Period” leave the strictly conceptualist realm by requiring developed compositional skill and imagination from the creator.⁸¹ While the first example extracts the vocal track from the original Smash Mouth song and shifts its pitches to make them correspond with the *Hauptstimme* of the first movement of Schoenberg’s String Quartet No. 4 (op.37), the latter is a reharmonisation of Smash Mouth’s original vocal melody, following the voice-leading conventions established by Johann Sebastian Bach. Both units can be subsumed under an umbrella of approaches that are aimed at almost combinatorial mashups of musical pieces, forms, idioms, harmonic progressions and compositional techniques. From this umbrella, many contributions have brought forth circulating templates: In 2019, the formula “...but it’s Giant Steps” became popular within online jazz communities and beyond as both an insider joke and a vehicle for connectability and viral success. The contributions, which are usually based on the chord progressions of “Giant Steps” by John Coltrane, feature a great variety of compositional depth and skill, ranging from audio manipulations, backed by Coltrane’s original recording, to elaborate self-recorded band arrangements. Many resulting pieces add a new melody and arrangement to pre-existing chord progressions, similar to contrafactual jazz re-compositions. These “remix contrafacts” are primarily catalysed by the communicative incentive of playfully connecting with other producers who are aware of the creative relay surrounding the deployment of a concrete meta-memetic formula. In the arrangement “Katy Perrys ‘Giant Steps’ but it’s John Coltranes ‘Roar’ but it’s smooth jazz,” Simon Fransman lets the famous changes of “Giant Steps” replace – and thereby point to – the rather scarce harmonic motion of Katy Perry’s “Roar.”⁸² At the end of the chorus, this juxtaposition unfolds its full potential, as Perry’s repetitive vocal

81 @Dan Garmon, “All Star but it’s Schoenberg’s Fourth String Quartet,” March 25, 2017, YouTube video, 1:22, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NRfk9uZEG8>. @–, “All Star but it’s a Bach chorale following the conventions of the Common Practice Period,” January 1, 2017, YouTube video, 1:10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ey5Gltze-BY>.

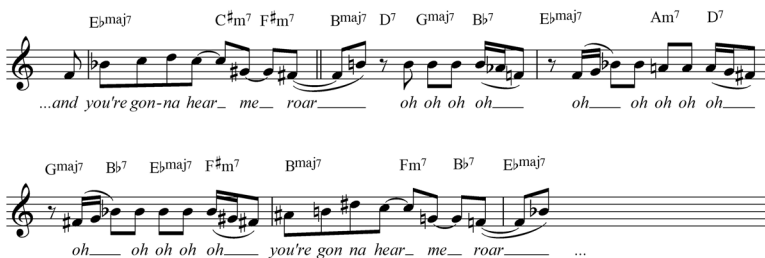
82 @Simon Fransman, “Katy Perrys ‘Giant Steps’ but it’s John Coltranes ‘Roar’ but it’s smooth jazz,” January 17, 2019, YouTube video, 1:28, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oWilNuiVm6o>.

motif, originally intended as an animating musical gesture (“o-o-oh oh oh oh o-o-oh...”), is pitch-shifted and forced to follow Coltrane’s substitution cycle through three tonal centres (see Figures 23 and 24). The resulting grotesque melodic movement, accompanied by Fransman with a smooth jazz feel, is a good example for the unlikely and counter-intuitive musical events music-centred meta-memetic concepts can initiate. However, while no overarching remix formula is pre-occupied by any specific subjective intention, the creator is able to anticipate and appropriate the resulting musical event by way of compositional decisions, which include the pre-selection of the remixed musical material, thereby co-developing models of competence regarding the re-contextualisation of musical material via circulating meta-memetic templates.

Figure 23: Original melody and chords from Katy Perry’s “Roar” (my transcription).



Figure 24: Katy Perry’s pitch-shifted voice singing over Coltrane changes in Simon Fransman’s video “Katy Perrys ‘Giant Steps’ but it’s John Coltranes ‘Roar’ but it’s smooth jazz” (my transcription).



Towards a Fluid Musical Memescape

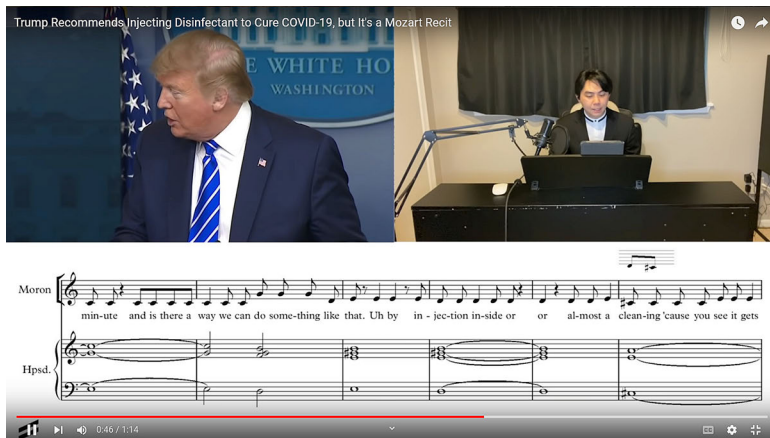
The previous examples shall not hide the fact that continuous playful graftings have entailed a fluid musical memescape which can pose a challenge in terms of conceptual traceability. Depending on the discursive framing, mere hypertextual reference to certain audiologovisual elements, in awareness of the chains of meta-memetic relay they are associated with, can suffice to reach an including potential and spawn further playful contributions. The symbolic load of audiologovisual patterns, attained through ongoing communal re-iteration and graftings, enables the generation of a “meta-memetic potentiality.” It is built on sedimentations of conceptual framings and pragmatic logics which are only implied and thus have to be traced by the recipient. Hence, within the field of playful hypertextual layerings, concise reference systems that describe and dictate the compositional process – such as the paratext of “replacement remixes” – have merely become a territorialising *option*. Fluid re-appropriations and re-iterations of musical or audiovisual configurations evolve as discursive formations within online communities. For instance, in music “meme communities” like the Facebook group “The Shitposts of Jazz to Come,”⁸³ remixes of “Giant Steps” have seen a surge in popularity, enabling the communal development of shared conventions and models of competence and, consequentially, catalysing the spread of a broad variety of “Giant Step” remixes on YouTube beyond concise operational and constitutive features. Beyond the large number of mashups that are more or less strictly following established remix formulas, there exist versions of Giant Steps played by in-game sounds, in 19 equal temperament, at absurd tempi, or a remix of Giant Steps entirely built on a C major triad.⁸⁴ “Giant Steps”-related content expanded to the point that even the mention or a playful nod to “Giant Steps” on jazz-related social media channels by now invokes a “meta-memetic potentiality.” These hypertextual practices have branched out to the point that even

83 “The Shitposts of Jazz to Come – Live at Carnegie Hall,” Facebook page, accessed March 30, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/ShitpostsofjazztoCome>.

84 See @jasperiscool, “Giant Steps in Minecraft,” November 21, 2018, YouTube video, 1:58, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nh5lA4_Jwtw; @Leonard Budd, “Giant Steps 19 Equal Temperament,” July 28, 2017, YouTube video, 1:17, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VoaMilJxjVg>; @Dave Pollack, “GIANT STEPS at 40 BPM (yes, 40),” September 17, 2020, YouTube video, 6:48, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uCQMoWPdgu4>; @NormalPerson, “Giant Steps in C,” April 17, 2021, YouTube video, 4:43, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BdvWxf2TQTU>.

individual compositions without any reference to virally circulating musical artefacts can still be detected as meta-memetic approaches. For instance, in the video “Trump Recommends Injecting Disinfectant to Cure COVID-19, but It’s a Mozart Recit,” classical musician Jesse Leong musicalises the infamous Trump press briefing, wherein he suggested the injection of disinfectant to cure COVID-19, by re-interpreting it as a recitative with harpsichord accompaniment, thereby building on Trump’s speech rhythm and melodic and harmonic features of Mozart recitatives (see Figure 25).⁸⁵ The composition is an example how the hypertextual uptake of operational guidelines and constitutive structures of meta-memetic contributions – for instance, the formulation of a replacement remix formula in the title of the video – serves as a means of playfully and hyper-affirmatively re-enacting the memetic logic of mechanistic viral spread while sharing a unique musical approach as well as humorous and political stances and observations.

Figure 25: Still from Jesse Leong’s video “Trump Recommends Injecting Disinfectant to Cure COVID-19, but It’s a Mozart Recit” (2020).



85 @Jesse Leong, “Trump Recommends Injecting Disinfectant to Cure COVID-19, but It’s a Mozart Recit,” April 25, 2020, YouTube Video, 1:14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILdSUNES9ZA>. In an answer to a comment on the video regarding Mozart’s influence on his musical composition, Leong explains that he “did have Figaro open for inspiration, but [...] kinda thumbed through a lot and just glanced.” See @gwynbleidd, 2020, comment on @Jesse Leong, “Trump Recommends Injecting Disinfectant.”

Beyond any underlying extra-musical communicative incentive, contributors perform their meta-memetic literacy by showing their awareness of the pre-existing chains of creation and shared models of competence between conceptually or materially interrelated remixes. The implicit meta-reference to a larger corpus of shared narratives, stances, humour, or stylistic features further enables communal self-affirmation: the feeling of “being in on the joke” is arguably the fundamental inclusive – and exclusive! – element to meta-memetic relay. Communal formations based on shared humour, values, self-concepts, or musical taste and experience thereby represent superordinate forms of anchorage in and of themselves, affording the emergence of close interrelations and even dialogical engagement within musical processes of creative relay without any clear formulaic basis. The thereby resulting issues of iterability amount to a heightened productivity, as the requirements of a producerly text, which escapes its own control, are met to a special degree. Furthermore, the uncontrollable graftings and hypertextual layerings lay bare the minimum requirement for connectability: an (inter-)subjectively “imagined meme,” both blurring and perpetuating operational and constitutive features and thus functioning as a fundamental crystallisation point for constant overlaps and updates throughout processes of ongoing creative relay.

In light of the previous reflections on meta-memetic approaches to musical material, there seem to be two fundamental tendencies regarding the (conceptual) remix of “meme music.” On the one hand, there are audiologovisual remix concepts which are based on synergetic relations between visual and musical elements. Here, the music takes on connotative and semantic qualities in interrelation with the visual layer, co-creating the generalisable stylistic and pragmatic features of the respectively performed meme. In purely musical meta-memetic remixes, on the other hand, the alteration of the musical material itself is the object of fascination. Subsumed to circulating remix concepts, re-compositions of musical source material as well as original compositions playfully engage with operational and constitutive features – with varying degrees of subjective freedom – with the aim of catalysing new, often bizarre and surprising musical events, as could be seen with regard to the evolution of remix concepts since the emergence of “replacement remixes” in 2016. In general, the accumulating hypertextual layerings enable a progressively fluid musical “memescape” which evades rigorous conceptual framings. Here, the generation of “meta-memetic potentiality” in meta-awareness of existing multimodal arrangements by way of playful graftings – or mere reference to existing audiologovisual elements associated with meta-

memetic relay – serves as an object of desire in itself, thereby perpetuating the irreducible dissemination of meaning. A (re-)definition of the term “meme music” thus should encompass the aforementioned tendencies and practices while accentuating the crucial differences to naturalising notions of “cultural transmission”: 1) there are no collectively recognisable “affective units” but undeterminable desire events that spread via half-hypnotic imitative encounters; 2) meta-memetic remix is based on *deliberate* magnetisations of other users as part of a self-stabilising game-like process focussed on spreading the logic of participation itself by playfully and self-referentially re-enacting the idea of dealing with “virulent” and “replicating” figurations. All in all, “meme music” is the pinnacled musical example for producerly meta-awareness of an all-encompassing imperative of circulation in social media, which situates contributions within a domain of permanent rationalisation and lends them their visibility. Within meta-memetic remix concepts, musical vernacular expression becomes remediated by – and often condensed to – a producerly engagement with generalisable operational and constitutive features, aimed at perpetuating a hyper-affirmative game-like process that represents the epitome of “viral” spread itself.

