Jonas Wolf
Re-Composing YouTube

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Re-Composing YouTube

Vernacular Musical Aesthetics in the Digital Age

[transcript]

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1 Introduction

Whenever one delves into the world of user-generated content on YouTube, one is surrounded by a multitude of performative expressions of authenticity, proximity, self-irony, banality, profanity, and vulgarity. From the platform's very early days of "broadcasting yourself" to its current oversaturated and commercially territorialised condition, they have shaped the audiovisual and communicative repertoires of vernacular content creation, which continually develop throughout processes of widespread imitation and remix. In the context of networked musicking, mutual remediations between pre-existing musical forms and conventions, on the one hand, and networked cultural practices of self-expression and communal self-affirmation, on the other, let emerge a wide array of multimodal musical figurations, including fan-made music videos, musical aestheticisations of pre-circulating content, and musical self-performances. Similar to other areas of vernacular content, musical practices of user-led, participatory, and combinatorial play with found, remixed, and manipulated media objects bear witness to an overall tendency towards a particularly high-volume circulation of lo-fi aesthetics, re-appropriations of cultural detritus, and bizarre juxtapositions. I have always been fascinated by these accelerated and open-ended forms of creative relay on YouTube, which at times can unfold a strange hypnotic potential, letting you chime in with the algorithmically curated stream of interconnected videos, until you snap back to reality in the middle of a rubber chicken rendition of Toto's Africa, wondering how you got there and why you are watching it at 3 a.m. My initial, probably very common, amazement finally inspired a more substantial inquiry, which over time formed into this book. Naturally, over the course of my research, several questions emerged: (How) does the very logic of ongoing imitative and referential composition and mashup afford the necessary re-domesticating effect in a networked environment where traditional localisms, due to non-binding and fragmented social arrangements,

provide less connectability? Does the prevalent strangeness of low-threshold musicking represent "YouTubiness" itself, as a symptom for the unhinged and often enigmatic symbolic play and expansion the platform affords? Proceeding from an idea of vernacular re-composition as a musical practice of commonality which necessarily, at least implicitly, refers to the status of "being online," my research project faces certain challenges regarding the conceptualisation of "home-grown" musical aesthetics on the platform: For one, many aesthetic patterns and communicative modes of performing everydayness and commonality – e.g., through self-vulgarisation and tactical dilettantism – have become an established part of repertoires of self-branding and self-celebrification. What to do with pre-existing conceptual divides between amateurs and professionals – or cultural production and (fannish) reception – in the face of the entangled practices of bottom-up cultural making, which are fuelled and shaped by countless anonymous as well as self-entrepreneurial individuals through multidirectional and simultaneous imitative encounters? How do incentives of individual prestige and claims to authorship transpire in co-creative practices that are based on a communally shared skepticism towards conventional notions of originality, virtuosity, and professionalism? How to approach the referentiality of these practices, which often seem to be ironic and affirmative at the same time?

In its multifunctionality as a video archive, a communicative environment, and a stage for aspirational self-representation, YouTube provides a rich and multifaceted environment for examining the aesthetic qualities of Internet-mediated and media-reflective vernacular re-composition beyond established binary oppositions pertaining to cultural production and reception. Since its registration as a website in 2005 and its purchase by Google in 2006, the platform has quickly risen to the status of a "total" digital archive. Despite the continual introduction and optimisation of functionalities that, for instance, categorise content on the main page or interlink videos via algorithmic recommendations, its curation of display is not centralised. As early as in 2009, Robert Gehl argued that YouTube requires agents "to gather and classify objects, and […] to reassemble them 'into facts about the world.'"[1] In networked

1 Robert Gehl, "YouTube as Archive: Who Will Curate this Digital Wunderkammer?," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 12, no. 1 (January 2009): 46, https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877908098854. In other words, processes of reassembly create narratives "post hoc from ordered, taxonomically organized objects," which, in the case of YouTube, "are often separated from their original uses." See ibid.

content creation, the taxonomical organisation and classification of media objects – via titles, descriptions, tags, and comments – as well as their meaningful re-appropriation go hand in hand, curating display on the platform and fuelling the co-development of media texts and communal narratives via uploads, sharing, paratextual significations, tagging, and referential contributions such as media mashups, parodies, and communicative formats engaged with vernacular practices of meaning-making.[2] Traditional binaries between "everyday users" and "professional media creators," with concise role distributions regarding their "curatorial work" on the platform, do not account for YouTube's participatory culture. Rather, social networks have opened up a field of cultural collaboration and co-/re-production – ranging from free, gift-oriented labour to aspirational formats and channel concepts aimed at self-celebrification – which is shaped by the ongoing (re-)classification and re-assembly of cultural content by diverse agents. In this context, Jean Burgess, aptly argues that the logics of cultural production have become integrated into the logics of everyday life, as she illustrates with examples of Internet-mediated practices, ranging from digital storytelling to photo sharing via Flickr.[3] This study sets a focus on vernacular *musical* re-composition, the aesthetic paradigms of which shall be examined in awareness of our networked condition with its entangled and hybridised processes of subjectivation and entrepreneurial activity as well as consumption and production. Like any form of collaboratively developed content in social media, community-oriented musical contributions – and their user-led classifications – are situated within a field of "produsage." This portmanteau by Axel Bruns, composed of the words "production" and "usage," accounts for the hybrid user/producer roles and the fundamentally incomplete and relayed cultural production

2 Contrary to this assessment, Gehl improperly describes the curatorial agency of ordinary users as limited to uploads and classifications of cultural content. In doing so, he aims to accentuate the influence of media entrepreneurs and large companies regarding the reassembly and organised exhibition of media objects on the platform. Thereby, he overlooks the vast field of vernacular creativity on the platform, which has taken shape since YouTube's early days and, from today's perspective, often informs the corporate harvesting of popular media objects and video formats in the first place.

3 See Jean Burgess, "Hearing Ordinary Voices: Cultural Studies, Vernacular Creativity and Digital Storytelling," *Continuum* 20, no. 2 (June 2006): 201–214, https://doi.org/10.1080/10304310600641737.

in networked spaces of distributed creativity and knowledge.[4] Against this conceptual backdrop, I aim at examining the musical and multimodal composition – and compositing – of audiovisual media objects on YouTube and the practices of classification, re-signification, self-display, communication, and collaboration that inform the emergence and development of platform-specific musical, screenic, and performative repertoires.

In her enlightening doctoral thesis, Paula Harper examines the trajectories of stabilisation regarding conventions of viral musicking in social media, charting "a cartography of chaos to control, a heterogeneous digital landscape funneled into predictable channels and pathways etched ever more firmly and deeply across the 2010s."[5] Similar to Harper's reflections, temporalities of cumulative imitative encounters, curatorial developments, algorithmic diffusion, and speculative behaviour are of high importance for my study; my main interest, however, are not historical trajectories of viral participation, which Harper regards as an extension of musical behaviour. Rather, my analyses are informed by their focus on musical content as a form of – and a remediating agent for – vernacular enunciation. I am starting from the hypothesis that practices of musical re-composition realise symbolic functions that enable temporary social arrangements in networked environments beyond traditional localisms. The hereby conveyed and continually developing commonplace competencies that afford further musical produsage result from the mutual remediation of musical concepts and patterns of non-musical vernacular discourse. Vernacular re-composition can thus be grasped as a system of dispersion, constituted by the totality of circulating and materially repeatable or ideationally iterable themes, aesthetic objects, figurations, and concepts of YouTube-situated musical produsage. Against the backdrop of the contemporary ecosystem constituted by YouTube and other social media platforms, I want to examine how communal niche-mediations, which inform musical conventions and "issue vernaculars," relate to an overall "platform vernacular" that provides the communally and technologically mediated communicative tools and genres produsers rely on.

With regard to the co-development of repertoires of musical re-composition and self-display, I want to oppose oversimplified notions of mechanistic

4 See Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and Beyond: From Production to Produsage* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

5 Paula Harper, "Unmute This: Circulation, Sociality, and Sound in Viral Media" (PhD thesis, Columbia University, 2019), 2–3, https://doi.org/10.7916/d8-6rte-j311.

virality. It is my aim to apply concepts of contagion beyond naturalising depictions of "passive" users as hosts for "active" media viruses. To the contrary, my examination of processes of iterative, referential, and playful re-composition shall account for human agencies. At the same time, a thorough and comparative look at existing conceptualisations of virality and contagion – not only those exclusively pertaining to digital culture – helps avoid the "affirmative trap" of celebrating online participation as a democratic act *tout court* that is entirely based on the active engagement of autonomous individuals. Leaning on Gabriel Tarde's micro-sociology, I want to map networked sociality as a relational field of multidirectional and simultaneous imitative encounters which are triggered by affective stimuli. In this context, I proceed from a notion of "hypnotic" social power which neither results from nor entails the total domination of a mindless crowd by other human agents. Rather, processes of re-composition and musical interaction are understood as ramifications of the passing on of uncontainable affective surplus effects that catalyse imitative behaviour. Utopian postulates of liberatory potentials regarding creative exchange and produsage in social networks shall furthermore be contrasted by aspects of algorithmic agency: Feedback loops between human-led and algorithmic content curation – and human anticipations of the latter – let emerge dynamic systems of representation and commensurability that inform processes of signalisation (via tags, titles, thumbnails, video descriptions, etc.). Aesthetic differences of single contributions are necessarily preceded by these processes, as they enable widespread connectability and visibility. Thus, I want to conduct my analyses of musical contributions in awareness of these symbolic self-positionings by produsers, which entail fields of tension between individuation and de-individuation, difference and indifference, invention and stasis, aesthetic singularity and hive mind creativity.

Both aspects of contagious imitative encounters and algorithmic agency are linked to the circulation of content – after all, in order to become inscribed into a generalisable repertoire that spreads via algorithmic diffusion as well as repetitive imitative and referential activity, compositional forms, formats, and concepts need to circulate in sufficient volume. In order to attain visibility, contributors – particularly those with a certain upload frequency – rely on media of rationalisation and direct feedback mechanisms which inform content creation and reception on the platform. In this context, the doubly constituted interpellation of produsers as both subjected as well as free and responsible subjects shall be sketched. Particularly aspirational forms of re-composition and self-display on the platform are in need of thorough examination in

this regard, as they are necessarily accompanied by algorithmic anticipation and strategies of self-optimisation. Since my analysis is centred on aesthetic phenomena, my investigation of the platform's socio-technical infrastructure – which comprises intertwined algorithmic and human agencies – remains limited to the extent that it helps illuminate the different ways in which circulating forms and formats of musical composition and communication are anticipated, adapted, re-appropriated, referenced, and shared by human actors.[6] In this context, I want to draw on notions of immaterial and affective labour, as developed by post-workerist theorists in view of the extensive transformation of social relations and activities into sources for capitalist valorisation since the 1960s.[7] Particularly in view of self-entrepreneurial activity on YouTube, I aim to illuminate strategies of self-optimisation and self-representation by aspirational subjects in regard to their musical and communicative

6 Although it falls outside the scope of my study, I consider the following research into the algorithmic mediation of cultural practices within the field of critical algorithm studies a gainful addition to my analyses: See Ned Rossiter and Soenke Zehle, "The Aesthetics of Algorithmic Experience," in *The Routledge Companion to Art and Politics*, ed. Randy Martin (New York: Routledge, 2015), 214–221; Robert Seyfert and Jonathan Roberge, eds., *Algorithmic Cultures: Essays on Meaning, Performance and New Technologies* (London: Routledge: 2016); Michele Willson, "Algorithms (and the) Everyday," *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 1 (2017): 137–150, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1200645.

7 Post-workerist theory is deeply influenced by the intellectual heritage of Italian operaismo of the 1960s and 1970s, as the uptake of Mario Tronti's notions of the "social factory" shows. As Tronti states in his 1962 article "La fabbrica e la società," in high-developed capitalism, "the social relation becomes a moment of the relation of production," while "the whole of society becomes an articulation of production" (page 26). In other words, everyday creativity and communication, as productive activities, are always subject to commodification and capital accumulation and reproduce the relations of production. Of course, Marx already conceptualised the gradual transformation of social relations and activities into sources for capitalist valorisation by introducing the notion of "real subsumption" of labour. However, Tronti reflects specifically on the post-Fordist expansion of capitalist social relations beyond the industrial sphere of manual labour, thereby anticipating the paradigm shift that would occur in the following decades with the ever-increasing flows of information introduced by new ICT. See Mario Tronti, Workers and Capital, trans. David Broder (London and New York: Verso, 2019). With regard to the post-workerist framework of immaterial labour, see Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," in Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics, eds. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, trans. Paul Colilli and Ed Emery (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

performance as composers and entertainers. Hereby, my main focus will be on the effects of affective labour on the emergence and development of concrete musical forms and formats of vernacular re-composition and, more generally, on the very environment of social communication and creative collaboration in which vernacular re-composition is taking place. Of course, affective labour, aimed at the generation of proximity, authenticity, and a sense of belonging, is a constitutive feature of networked vernacular (self-)expression in general – according to Michael Hardt, it "is itself and directly the constitution of communities and collective subjectivities."[8] Thus, vernacular musical activity, which by definition is community-oriented, is situated within a sphere of affective labour which ranges from free to economically aspirational forms of musicking and music-related communication. Both of these forms constitute the affective cultural production the platform serves back to its users as content. While free labour remains unwaged and can be driven by a community-oriented "gift logic," aspirational labour is carried out in pursuit of a financial compensation, for example through YouTube's monetisation program. However, Tiziana Terranova notes that both forms of labour constitute important forces "within the reproduction of the labor force in late capitalism as a whole" – a thought I am going to expand on.[9]

By way of example, "Re-Composing YouTube" is going to outline the aesthetic patterns and signalisations of commonality and authenticity – linked to low-budget production, transparency, self-vulgarisation, profanity, or tactical dilettantism – that have turned vernacular enunciation into an integral part of music-related channel concepts and self-performances that aspire for economic success and individual prestige. In this context, theorists like Graeme Turner note a surge in modes of self-celebrification in the 21st century. What differentiates "DIY celebrities" in social media from traditional forms and discourses of celebrity is the affirmation and celebration of their "ordinariness" with regard to their self-representation and their general ethos of content creation.[10] What is more, different from conventional forms of celebrity, these

8 Michael Hardt, "Affective Labour," *boundary 2* 26, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 89–100.

9 See Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," *Social Text* 18, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 36 https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-18-2_63-33.

10 Turner thus postulates a "demotic turn" in today's media landscape, particularly in television and the Internet. See Graeme Turner, *Ordinary People and the Media: The Demotic Turn* (New York: SAGE Publishing, 2009).

practices of self-celebrification are based on the fostering of intimate and interactive relationships with their audience. According to Theresa Senft, these practices destabilise "ideologies of publicity by emphasizing responsiveness to, rather than distancing from, one's community."[11] Indeed, in contrast to a conventional status of mainstream celebrity that is based on spatial distance to the audience, temporal scarcity of appearances, and extraordinary performances, aspirational social media users turn themselves into objects of consumption-oriented demands by generating and capitalising on authenticating sensual stimuli, for instance by way of exposing and thematising themselves and their everyday life in confessional vlogging formats, live streams, or Q&A videos. This phenomenon, which Senft calls "micro-celebrity,"[12] can be explained with the affordances of networked co-creation: due to institutional presence in the world wide web, users were granted access to a sphere of quantitatively unlimited participation, in which they could engage in user-led content creation – suddenly, one's own visibility could be increased considerably without traditional media gatekeepers. It is important to note in this context, however, that not only aspirational content creation but *any* form of community-oriented produsage only exists in subordination to institutional network locations such as YouTube, which afford user-led creation and, consequentially, the emergence of a wide array of Internet-mediated vernacular competencies in the first place. According to Robert Glenn Howard, "web vernaculars" could only emerge within the "Web 2.0," which fostered the emerging field of produsage and conditioned the meaningfulness of a vernacular ethos which, only now, could emerge as a distinctive formation in dialectical relation to the institutionalised Internet.[13] Against the backdrop of this conceptualisation of a "dialectical vernacular," all forms of musical re-composition that are characterised by an "ordinariness" built on competencies and conventions acquired through everyday online experience, need to be understood as discursive musical performances of platform-mediated vernaculars. Different from locally situated forms of vernacular creativity, attributions of "ordinariness" and non-

11 Theresa M. Senft, *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 116.

12 See ibid. See also Alice E. Marwick, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

13 See, for example, Robert Glenn Howard, "Toward a Theory of the World Wide Web Vernacular: The Case for Pet Cloning," *Journal for Folklore Research* 42, no. 3 (September 2005): 323–360, https://doi.org/10.1353/jfr.2005.0028.

institutionality on YouTube are not invoked through "unmappable" practices of the everyday but rather in awareness of the commensurability of circulating forms of re-composition and self-expression. This does not only pertain to strategic forms of self-celebrification; rather, produsage as such is situated in a sphere of generality and representation fuelled by the interplay of algorithmic procedures with anticipatory and speculative musical contributions by produsers.

In a first step of my analysis, I want to approach community-oriented compositional practices on YouTube in relation to their aesthetic objects of fascination. By placing foci on computational objects, found audiovisual media, and music video-like figurations, my analysis in chapter 3 aims at adumbrating the different types of audiologovisual remediation on the platform by identifying and defining compositional trajectories of vernacular musical engagement with the cultural, historical, and medial layers of said aesthetic objects.[14]

Proceeding from my findings in this chapter, my further analysis in chapter 4 focusses on processes of circulation and imitation and the vernacular forms of re-composition they render visible and recognisable. In awareness of pre-existing theories of contagion and virality, this chapter inquires how multimodal forms of vernacular re-composition afford the affective stimuli and imitation-suggestibility that result in contagious overspills across the whole platform and beyond. In this context, by introducing my own conceptualisations of remixable concepts and "meme music," I aim to shed light on the relations between platform-specific compositional forms and ongoing imitative encounters on the platform. Furthermore, my illumination of the playful and combinatorial ways in which conceptual and (im)material dimensions of aesthetic media objects are navigated and traversed seeks to account for the entanglements and ongoing branchings of compositional phenomena that are afforded by the fundamental digital principles of modularity and variability.

Chapter 5 deals with the sphere of self-entrepreneurial re-composition and its various effects on the repertoires of vernacular re-composition and processes of communal engagement and interaction. Here, musical performances

14 The term "audiologovisual" was proposed by Michel Chion in order to highlight the centrality of speech and written text in film, television, and music videos. I use the term in its broadest definition, namely in the context of multimodal figurations where "the word […] acquires an original form of existence that is not solely limited to the sound or to the image." See Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 167.

of the self are examinated with regard to their situatedness within the overall field of musical produsage, particularly with regard to their influence on musical musical, screenic, and discursive patterns of convention, their aim at generating or reinforcing a sense of transparency and communal belonging, and their function as a point of reference and communal orientation. I further argue that not only singular musical performances but the overall conception and constitution of music-related channels, which includes strategies of self-representation, collaboration, evaluation, and content curation, represents an integral part of the overall affective labour of aspirational content creators. This discussion introduces an expanded notion of composition which, against the backdrop of material and social modularities, encompasses the compositing of entire YouTube channels, thereby shedding light on the interrelations between communicative strategies of self-celebrification, concise channel concepts, and musical ways of re-signifying and personifying pre-existing vernacular forms. The third sub-chapter thematises the dynamics between online communities and musical micro-celebrities fostered through communal exchange and participatory formats of vernacular musicking. Hereby, I want to avoid oversimplified notions of one-directional magnetisations from "influencers" to their (fannish) "audiences" in order to highlight the multidirectional and multisocial contagions that constitute and shape the field of networked sociality and co-creativity. At the same time, notions of interactivity shall be problematised by outlining the relations between "role-setting" and "role-following" subjects, on the one hand, and focussing on the hypnotic potentials embedded in the network relation itself.

The analysis chapters in this book build on and enrich each other in a cumulative manner: Chapter 3 provides an overview of – and detailed insights into – different types of YouTube-situated musical produsage, which my extensive discussion of imitative and iterative processes in chapter 4 relies on. Likewise, the following examination of aspirational and speculative practices of self-performance and communicative labour – and their influence on communal interaction and creative relay – is informed by my findings from chapters 3 and 4. In a final step, chapter 6 aims at an overall problematisation of issues of aesthetic and discursive difference and selectivity, which arise in the networked condition and pertain to all the aforementioned categories and phenomena of vernacular re-composition. Here, in view of the oversaturated and ever-expanding web of references on YouTube and beyond, I want to reflect on the phenomenon of post-irony, which I conceive of as a vernacular competence of situational conduct and self-expression in the face of blurred refer-

ential codes. Furthermore, in awareness of YouTube's specific regimes of visibility and attention, I aim to delineate potentials of temporary aesthetic evasion and subversion regarding ubiquitous effects and practices of objectified co-creation and consumption.

My overall argument proceeds in awareness of the multiple fields of tension characteristic for vernacular cultural production in the YouTube era. By placing the analysed objects of vernacular musical enunciation in relation to the systems of knowledge and discourse that produce them, I aim to make these tensions describable beyond binary oppositions between amateurs and professionals, "ordinary users" and media celebrities, "influencers" and audiences, creation and consumption, affirmation and negation, and individuation and de-individuation. Hereby, the close examination of my objects of analysis, which I read as off-centred and multimodal texts of creative relay, is informed by a wide array of disciplines and schools of study such as semiotics, deconstruction, post-structuralism, critical theory, literary theory, and media studies. The sound-focussed approach of my project is afforded through musicological methods, including analyses of style, genre, reception aesthetics, and music-related discourse within contemporary digital environments of social media, technical devices, and co-creative behaviour. Against the backdrop of the networked condition and the iterative, speculative, and communicative practices it affords and suggests, my analyses and reflections are thereby guided by the following questions: 1) How can networked vernacular musical aesthetics be defined? 2) What are common compositional, performative, and discursive means of evoking a vernacular aesthetic? 3) How is vernacular musical creativity (re-)mediated within YouTube's socio-technical infrastructure and what are relevant discursive formations, communicative conventions, and forms of self-governance in this context?

I am aware that specific demographic populations might articulate vernacular re-composition differently depending on their imagined communities and distinct positions in the social field. As vernacular musical contributions in the networked sphere are based on remediations of historically grown and socially situated cultural products and practices, they attract online audiences from different socio-economic, ethnic, and gender groups. Thus, it is my hypothesis that, for instance, audiences from non-Anglo and non-European cultural matrices are differently attuned to certain musical and communicative conventions, which results in different affective pulls and media texts with their own processes of encoding and decoding. In awareness of these complex entanglements of online and offline culture, I acknowledge that the analysed

vernacular musical practices do not represent a universal dataset for theorising practices of YouTube-situated vernacular re-composition *tout court*.

However, my study is focussed on the notion of produsage that is inextricably linked to today's digital economy, which emerged and develops in dependency of the ubiquitous economic informatisation in overdeveloped countries.[15] In her elaborations on free and aspirational labour in digital networks, Tiziana Terranova diagnoses an internal "capture" of social and cultural knowledge through the repeated address of users as active consumers *and* producers of meaningful commodities and social connections. Arguably, everyday online creativity develops faster and in higher volume wherever there are cultural industries that encourage and reward processes of experimenting with free affective labour. However, Terranova argues that capital does not incorporate the free labour of produsers "from the outside," but rather describes incorporation as "a more immanent process of channeling collective labor (even as cultural labor) into monetary flows."[16] Particularly the promise of a deferred compensation – through the generation of ad revenue, affiliate marketing, or even sponsorship deals – turns free gift-oriented labour into aspirational, yet-to-be-waged labour. It is this entwinement of everyday creativity and commercialised cultural production that fosters high-volume produsage on YouTube, rendering participatory trends visible and, at the same time, increasing the need to articulate a vernacular in dialectical relation to institutionalised network locations and commodified cultural practices.

Depending on cultural and local factors, the digital realm I am researching is still gatekept in terms of access to certain hardware and software, as well as

15 In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri describe the "succession of economic paradigms since the Middle Ages in three distinct moments, each defined by the dominant sector of the economy: a first paradigm in which agriculture and the extraction of raw materials dominated the economy, a second in which industry and the manufacture of durable goods occupied the privileged position, and a third and current paradigm in which providing services and manipulating information are at the heart of economic production. […] Economic *modernization* involves the passage from the first paradigm to the second, from the dominance of agriculture to that of industry. Modernization means industrialization. We might call the passage from the second paradigm to the third, from the domination of industry to that of services and information, a process of *economic postmodernization*, or better, *informatization*." See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 280.

16 Terranova, "Free Labor," 38–39.

to established networks like those found in media entertainment or journalism. Unsurprisingly, as statistics suggest, the seemingly contradictory foldings of community-oriented musicking and individualistic visibility labour, which I aim to foreground, are most developed in the United States. While, for instance, India is the country with the largest YouTube audience by far, followed by the US, Indonesia, and Brazil,[17] the divide between cultural producers and audiences seems to be more pronounced here: of the 50 most-subscribed channels on YouTube, 17 channels are located in India – however, all of these channels belong to big entertainment companies and music labels.[18] Overall, with the exception of a few self-entrepreneurial YouTubers from South and Central America, the most-subscribed non-brand channels are predominantly located in the US.[19] The total view and subscription count per country leaves a similar impression, as channels from the United States have garnered roughly twice as many views and subscriptions as Indian channels, who rank second in this statistic.[20] There is reason to suspect that, on a global scale, produsage on the platform – and beyond – is heavily impacted or even catalysed by the affective labour of popular US-based and anglophone DIY celebrities. Moreover, as these channels are watched in many parts of the world, certain taste niches and literacies of reading and iterating Internet-reflexive signalisations of commonality, proximity, and authenticity develop transnationally to a certain degree. In this context, my study reflects on the fact that massively spreading phenomena of musical produsage often represent a certain normative whiteness, which can result in co-creative practices relying on appropriations of cultural practices or self-representations by marginalised groups. As Paula Harper points out, these appropriations may be "deployed to (profitable) celebration as novel by privileged mainstream practitioners" or "draw their affective power and meaning-making potential from histories of oppression and

17 See Laura Ceci, "Leading countries based on YouTube audience size as of January 2023," Statista, February 6, 2023, https://www.statista.com/statistics/280685/number-of-monthly-unique-youtube-users.

18 See "Top 50 Subscribed YouTube Channels (Sorted by Subscriber Count)," Social Blade, accessed March 30, 2023, https://socialblade.com/youtube/top/50/mostsubscribed.

19 See Shelly Walsh, "The 30 Most-Subscribed YouTube Individuals," Search Engine Journal, January 2, 2023, https://www.searchenginejournal.com/social-media/who-has-the-most-subscribers-on-youtube/#close.

20 See Murphy Temple, "YouTube's Top 25 Countries Ranked by Total Viewership & Subscribers," ChannelMeter, March 1, 2019, https://channelmeter.wordpress.com/2019/03/01/youtubes-top-countries/.

racist, sexist violence."[21] Thus, I aim to conduct my analyses of highly visible – and thus "canonic" – vernacular practices of re-composition in awareness of the aforesketched restrictions and algorithmically perpetuated biases, which tend to benefit certain privileged groups based on factors such as social class, race, and gender.

In comparison to more rigid and streamlined curations of vernacular musical creativity on other platforms, YouTube's functionality as a video archive and a stage for self-display and communal exchange affords the emergence of a wide array of communally oriented musical forms and formats, ranging from five-second clips to 30-minute videos and including disembodied media remixes as well as dance performances and video essays. Compared to primarily mobile-based social media platforms like TikTok or Instagram, YouTube does not target one specific technology or type of media user. Moreover, in contrast to "shop window curation" that catalyses never-ending streams of interconnected videos due to its higher promise of personal visibility and prestige, the platform is more reliant on the active use of the search function – and on pre-existing offline communities that selectively pass on niche-mediated contributions. However, at the same time, mechanisms of networked aesthetic individualism – and self-commodification – are perpetuated through generalisable repertoires and strategies of self-representation and self-optimisation. Due to its less rigid pre-formatting and curational impact, YouTube downright invites a differentiated examination of a wide array of figurations and aesthetic qualities characteristic of Internet-mediated creative relay. In this context, with a particular focus on human agency, my research offers a critical examination of the symbolic self-positionings and formations of subjectivation that occur on YouTube in relation to its socio-technical infrastructure. Thereby, it gainfully adds to discourse on networked creativity in the fields of media and cultural studies, particularly with regard to conceptualisations of vernacularity, authenticity, amateurishness, and professionalism – and their relations and contradictions – in the face of entangled cultural practices between bottom-up cultural making and affective labour. Hereby, I want to take my own notion of produsage-as-labour as a vantage point in order to account for processes of free gift-oriented labour and aspirational self-optimisation that emerge in a sphere of networked control and commensurability. Primarily, however, beyond creating value for these non-musical fields of discourse, my conceptual framework is directed at

21 Harper, "Unmute This," 30–31.

filling a gap in a largely ocularcentric domain of study by providing a deeper understanding of *musical* processes of communal re-composition within dynamic networks of affect and (meta-)reference, produced by multidirectional co-creation, communication, and re-contextualisation via musical means. My analyses are focussed on aesthetic operations and their aspects of interplay between compositional techniques, musical references, sonic modifications, bodily performances, and the use of language. In awareness of the networked condition and its ramifications for co-creative processes of affiliation and belonging, my methodological and analytical approach is aimed at mapping out the formal, imitative, affective, functional, and (non-)institutional qualities of vernacular re-composition. It is my hope that, against the backdrop of my aforesketched critical framework, "Re-Composing YouTube" avoids the all-too-familiar trap of descriptive and affirmative approaches and, instead, provides a concise theory that accounts for musical phenomena and their relation to systems of knowledge and discourse within our time's total digital archive: a theory of vernacular composition for and with YouTube.

2 Towards a Conceptual Framework of Vernacular Re-Composition

The following literature review aims to establish a conceptual framework through the introduction of already-available relevant research and the identification of gaps that need to be filled by way of analysis and further discussion. In a first overview, collaborative media re-composition shall be examined against the backdrop of theorisations of the cultural practice of remix and textual co-production in general, thereby providing a deeper understanding of the open-endedness and the different positions and modes of authorship arising from networked and referential co-creativity. Secondly, concepts of networked individualism and produsage are set in relation to critical notions of immaterial labour and distributed control in digital networks in order to foreground potential alienating and de-individuating effects of online participation and co-creativity. Finally, informed by the claims, evidences, and discussions from the first two sub-chapters, notions of vernacular culture and creativity from both pre-digital and digital contexts guide a first approach to conceptualising YouTube-mediated vernacular aesthetics. Hereby, aspects of materiality, meta-referentiality, and performativity shall be introduced and discussed in relation to the sociality and textuality of platform-situated practices of re-composition and the technical infrastructure they are embedded in.

2.1 Media Texts and Authors of Referential Re-Composition on YouTube: An Overview

Not only since "Web 2.0" became a term of everyday parlance, academic research concerned with the cultural phenomenon of user-generated co-creation of audiovisual media is continually adding to the wide array of conceptual-

isations regarding aspects of digitised and networked production, distribution, and reception of cultural artefacts. In terms of the resulting terminology, most striking are the seemingly related and overlapping postulations of a "Sampling Culture," "Read/Write Culture," "Remix Culture," or "Bastard Culture," to name just a few.[1] These conceptualisations share an emphasis on practices of remix, bricolage, montage, or mashup, which the authors identify as principal methods of Internet-specific vernacular (co-)creativity. Building on notions of remix and mashup and applying them to the media environment provided and curated by YouTube, this chapter serves as an introduction into the concepts and the terminology that will be central to the examination of vernacular musical co-creation, thereby sketching the ways in which they are related to other concepts of referentiality and providing the theoretical underpinning with regard to issues of participation and authorship that arise in this context.

In his theses on remix culture, Felix Stalder outlines the preconditions for the wide spread of referential practices, arguing that an everyday culture of remix – a cultural technique he perceives as a continuation of modern montage – can only emerge in a networked society that is saturated with media objects to the point of rendering them accessible to a broad public.[2] More concretely, according to Stalder,

> [m]ontage and referential processes can only become widespread methods if, in a given society, cultural objects become available in three different respects. The first is economic and organizational: they must be affordable and easily accessible. […] The second is cultural: working with cultural objects – which always create deviations from the source in unpredictable ways – must not be treated as taboo or illegal, but rather as an everyday activity without any special preconditions. […] The third is material: it must be possible to use the material and to change it.[3]

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1 See Eduardo Navas, *Remix Theory: The Aesthetics of Sampling* (Vienna: Springer, 2012); Lawrence Lessig, *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008); Felix Stalder, "Neun Thesen zur Remix-Kultur," iRights.info, June 2009, https://irights.info/wp-content/uploads/fileadmin/texte/material/Stalder_Remixing.pdf; Mirko Tobias Schäfer, *Bastard Culture!: How User Participation Transforms Cultural Production* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011).

2 Stalder, "Neun Thesen," 2.

3 Felix Stalder, *The Digital Condition*, trans. Valentine A. Pakis (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 61.

The pre-digital possibilities of recording and mechanically reproducing audiovisual media objects – and their spread in analogue mass media – made them accessible, yet their materiality limited the means as well as the spread of remixing. From dada montage and musique concrète over pop art and situationist interventions to early dub music and disco remixes, historical practices of re-arranging and altering "found media objects" were mainly exclusively situated in the specialised domains of (avantgarde) art and the cultural industries – save for a few exceptions. For instance, in a practice known as "vidding," fans have engaged for decades with the combination of video footage and music from mass media sources – usually television broadcasts or film productions – in order to playfully re-create and alter the narrative dimensions of the source texts. Early vidders in the 1970s created montages by recording, selecting, cutting, and recombining televised material using VHS machines. Vidding is a prime example for community-oriented fan practices based on textual productivity – a factor which has been highlighted as a distinguishing mark of media fandom by the likes of John Fiske and Henry Jenkins.[4] However, against the background of today's digital condition, co-creative and collaborative media remixes are not an exceptional activity of tight-knit fan communities anymore, but rather a ubiquitous practice encouraged by the expansion and (supposed) equality of communicative sites and actions, turning any media consumer into a potential producer. Due to the lowered technological threshold in terms of new digitised ways of recording, storing, processing, and reproducing audiovisual media since the 1980s, the accessibilities and possibilities of transforming media objects shifted dramatically. Simultaneously, the popularisation of the Internet offered the basic sociotechnical infrastructure needed for wide-spread global participation and co-creation. However, in the early days following the evolution of the world wide web into a widely recognised and used public network – or, rather, a "network of networks," the upload, sharing, and co-creation of digital files was still taking place in a largely non-territorialised sphere that was difficult to navigate without previous knowledge. Hence, it was the curating impact of online boards, media hubs, and early social media platforms which, as intermediaries, facilitated and fostered user participation, as media scholar Tarleton Gillespie summarises:

4 See John Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 30–49; Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

> These services were meant to "solve" some of the challenges of navigating the open web. They substantially simplified the tools needed for posting, distributing, sharing, commenting; they linked users to a larger, even global audience; and they did so at an appealing price. They also had acute network effects: if you want to share and participate, you want to do so where there are people to share and participate with.[5]

With regard to video content, YouTube, founded in 2005 and acquired by Google in 2006, became the central platform to curate, interlink, and encourage user participation. As one of many emergent websites that focussed on aspects of sharing and networking, the launch of YouTube falls into the time of an overall diagnosis of a "Web 2.0" – a term which denotes the new networked and participatory condition of the world wide web, enabled by the emergence of sites and applications focussed on user-led creativity and sharing.[6] As YouTube, as a platform, mainly affords the storage, taxonomic organisation, and dispersion of video content, contributors to its stream of audiovisual content necessarily interact with and depend upon other platforms, applications, and technologies. For one, content spreads across social networks through cross-promotion or adaptations of and references to popular forms and formats that emerged on other platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, etc. Secondly, and more importantly, contributions rely on mobile and computing devices and software for digital image manipulation as well as audio and video recording and editing. Different from mobile-oriented platforms like TikTok and Instagram with their built-in editing tools and filters, co-creativity on YouTube is more strongly shaped through desktop computing technologies and applications. However, since the 2010s, the use of mobile devices, particularly with regard to short self-captures and everyday observations, has massively increased and continues to pre-format and inspire practices of musical co-creativity and collaboration on the platform. In order to make describable aesthetic figurations against the backdrop of ongoing processes of remediation, my analyses take into account the ways in which YouTube-situated practices of re-composition are afforded and affected by the

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5 Tarleton Gillespie, Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions that Shape Social Media (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 15.

6 Tim O'Reilly, "What Is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software," O'Reilly, September 30, 2005, https://www.oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html.

functionalities of digital devices, (low- and no-budget) editing and recording tools, production software, and scorewriters.

Instant access to freely circulating media objects as well as the material affordances of digital recording devices and editing software facilitate media environments that are characterised by ongoing communal negotiations of meaning. Via repetitive and imitative activity, difference is introduced on the grounds of a shared repertoire of cultural references. Regarding aspects of historicity, Felix Stalder draws a direct line from networked referential practices to earlier forms of remix, as both, in his perception, do not distance themselves from the past but "refer explicitly to precursors and to existing material," thereby constituting "both one's own position and the context and cultural tradition that is being carried on in one's own work."[7] However, while it might be true that media remixes in the digital condition usually render pre-existing material recognisable, the awareness of the historicity of the reiterated or appropriated material can become secondary or even irrelevant. This can be elaborated against the backdrop of a concept by Georgina Born which helps imagine (musical) re-composition in digital environments: in view of digital music distribution and its effects on musical re-creation, Born developed the idea of creative relay, stating that "[d]istributed across space, time and persons, music can become an object of recurrent decomposition, composition and re-composition by a series of creative agents."[8] Her concept implies the multilinear fashion in which media objects spread and become continually re-composed. In processes of relayed creativity, there exists no precondition for the uptake of pre-existing material apart from the fact that it should be accessible and available as a digital file. Chains of associative and imitative re-creation in networked digital environments are potentially clouding the original historical context of pre-existing audiovisual material, which becomes part of an ongoing performative re-contextualisation and re-imagination without beginning and end. While Eduardo Navas, in this context,

7 Stalder, *The Digital Condition*, 60.

8 Georgina Born, "On Musical Mediation: Ontology, Technology and Creativity," *twentieth century music* 2, no. 1 (March 2005): 26, https://doi.org/10.1017/S147857220500023X . In a similar fashion, Peter Jaszi's concept of "serial collaboration" describes "works resulting from successive elaborations of an idea or a text by a series of creative workers, occurring perhaps over years or decades." See Peter Jaszi, "On The Author Effect: Contemporary Copyright and Collective Creativity," in *The Construction of Authorship: Textual Appropriation in Law and Literature*, eds. Martha Woodmansee and Peter Jaszi (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 40.

postulates a new form of remix, namely the "regenerative remix" which "takes places when Remix becomes embedded materially in culture in non-linear and ahistorical fashion,"[9] Thomas Wilke highlights the prominent *mashup* character of Internet-situated transformations to media objects, pointing to the multiple heterogeneous sources in referential re-compositions – especially in audiovisual media environments like YouTube – which are performatively recombined and convey meaning only in the form of associative montage. Here, the term of mashup is not only used to concretise the heterogeneity and simultaneity of pre-existing material in referential practices, but also to denote the fundamental shift from historical forms of remix which lies in the performativity of continual re-contextualisation and re-combination of media objects – and their less privileged status as discursive objects: "Media objects are not exclusively steering the discourse anymore but become a constituent of the discourse's productive conditions of possibility. The radical shift lies in the realisation of a possibility, the continuation of which leads to an extensive pluralisation."[10] In this understanding, mashup becomes more than a subcategory of remix: it rather serves as a historically "neutral" metaphor for the primacy of combinatorial and re-contextualising approaches to media objects in a digital condition characterised by an uncontrollable and unenclosed nexus of references. An externalised and transparent "tissue of quotations," it encourages users to create "texts that exist entirely of pointers to other texts that are already on the Web."[11] Due to semiotic overabundance, co-creative approaches focussed on selecting, re-combining, and re-arranging are necessary to make up for the lack of fixed causal or temporal linkings – and to enable connectability within an environment of networked creativity. According to Andreas Reckwitz, the "computer subject," which navigates the hypertext and the unenclosed symbolic sphere of the Internet, is thus necessarily elective, experimental, and aesthetically imaginative; its practices are characterised by an exploring attitude.[12] With regard to communally oriented (musical) (co-)creation, YouTube does not only provide the means to share, participate,

9 Navas, *Remix Theory*, 73.

10 Thomas Wilke, "Kombiniere! Variiere! Transformiere! Mashups als performative Diskursobjekte in populären Medienkulturen," in *Mashups. Neue Praktiken und Ästhetiken in populären Medienkulturen*, eds. Florian Mundhenke, Fernando Ramos Arenas, and Thomas Wilke (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2015), 37 (my translation).

11 Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 127.

12 See Andreas Reckwitz, *Das hybride Subjekt: Eine Theorie der Subjektkulturen von der bürgerlichen Moderne zur Postmoderne* (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2006), 577–580.

and become visible. Due to the platform's archival function – although it rather resembles a barely framed "jumbled attic" than an archive, as Simon Reynolds notes[13] – it is itself oversaturated with media objects and thus "naturally" suggests and perpetuates performative combinatorial approaches to pre-existing audiovisual figurations.

Of course, these referential creative processes are not limited to mashup techniques, as the term – in its common, non-metaphorical usage – only denotes technologically enabled re-appropriations and re-combinations of multiple pre-existing audio and video files. Rather, they also include audiologovisual textual production beyond the montage and manipulation of digital media. For instance, YouTube-specific re-arrangements, cover versions, and parodic uptakes of musical pieces, videos, or video formats can exist without the re-appropriation of concrete found (musical) media objects; yet, they are situated within a transtextual fabric which they performatively engage with by way of multimodal reference such as allusion or imitation. In this context, aspects of interplay between visuals, musical reference, bodily performance, and the use of language are central to my analytical approach towards audiologovisual figurations, as they point to a shared repertoire of formal and performative elements attributed to musical and music-related forms, formats, and genres that circulate on the platform. Any digital unit situated within communally oriented processes of meaning-making is affected by the intersubjective recognition and reading of overarching and circulating multimodal text(s). Gérard Genette's idea of an imitative text, or "mimotext," which he derived with regard to the field of literature, might be useful in this context: As Genette points out, a text "can be imitated only indirectly, by practicing its style in another text."[14] Hence, referential creative processes – regardless of whether they are media mashups or not – are never based on direct imitation, that is, on the reproduction of another unit; rather, they rely on generalisations of specific stylistic and thematic features. As my analyses are going to highlight, the iteration and (inter-)subjective recognition of communally established musical forms and formats lets emerge shared "models of competence" which afford the successful performance of the generalised "idiolect(s)" attributed to certain (micro-)genres and remixable concepts of vernacular musical re-composition.

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13 Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2011), 62.

14 Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 84.

Overall, iterative musical practices in social media are stimulated by a "read/write" condition that blurs the boundaries between producers and consumers. A perpetual read/write activity is enabled by the "many-to-many" communication channels in social media, the underlying hierarchies of which, especially those pertaining to the curation and control of data, are concealed in favour of an empowerment of each single user to actively contribute. Lawrence Lessig coined the term "Read/Write culture" (or RW culture) to conceptually set apart participatory Internet culture from 20th century "Read Only culture" (or RO culture) of traditional mass media, which are characterised by professionalised creative production with an authoritative source as well as far-reaching material and legal restrictions that prevent the emergence of widespread performative textual productivity on the part of consumers. His example of the early blogosphere gives an impression how read/write activity in the world wide web was harnessed and fostered by new tools: while Lessig likened early blogs to "public diaries," as people were "posting their thoughts into an apparently empty void," the read/write character became enhanced through the implementation of possibilites to comment and, more importantly, to interlink and render the content traceable by way of tags and ranking systems.[15] Similarly, on YouTube, contributors mark their video upload with tags – i.e. short descriptions and keywords – that afford orientation for users by enabling and optimising the browsing experience built on algorithmic recommendations and the use of the search bar. Moreover, recipients can symbolically position themselves with respect to a contribution by writing a comment or giving a thumbs up or down. As tools which help measure significance, increase visibility, and, indirectly, foster further participation and collaboration, they are integral to the overall textual web of read/write activity which they are situated in and to which they are giving shape.

To sum up, YouTube-situated vernacular (co-)production – as an everyday practice characterised by relayed creativity – includes technologically enabled montage and alterings of media sources, audiologovisual referential devices, and symbolic positionings which help mark and rank contributions. Within the perpetual streams of read/write activity, the boundaries between production, consumption, and distribution dissolve as cultural production becomes de-specialised and, in view of the quantity of cultural producers, unlimited. Against the background of this participatory condition, the old question of authorship arises – and cannot be easily dealt with. On the one hand, Roland

15 Lessig, *Remix*, 59–60.

Barthes' postulation of text as "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" seems fully realised in processes of creative relay,[16] leaving the reader – or rather: "reader-writer" – "without history, biography, psychology," thereby letting them become "someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted."[17] However, a radical reception aesthetics does not dissolve the idea of the author altogether, especially in media environments which are driven by capitalist enterprise and consequentially accompanied by the strategic propagation of a fantasy of participation ("broadcast yourself") aimed at increased creative productivity on the platform. Felix Stalder, in the context of remix culture, postulates the necessity of becoming an author – albeit a deprivileged one – in order to be able to constitute oneself in a networked society.[18] As any upload is bound to a user profile, technically, there is an authorial mark to every contribution. Yet, specifically in disembodied referential practices, the contributor can hardly impose themself on the media text as a "final signified" that would limit it.[19] Hence, the text is never closed; rather, its readability and openness are the main preconditions for its "producerly" character, as John Fiske calls it: "[The producerly text] has loose ends to escape its control, its meanings exceed its own power to discipline them, its gaps are wide enough for whole new texts to be produced in them – it is, in a very real sense, beyond its own control."[20] Thus, the temporality of the ever-expanding textual web differs from processes of cultural production within RO cultures, as the resulting texts can never be closed by any authorial voice. Notwithstanding this fact, the incentive of self-inscription as a creative subject still drives individual contributions. This can go two ways: within referential processes characterised by generic symbolic play, contributors may acknowledge and even self-referentially thematise the off-centred character of the media text which "knows itself as text" and, consequentially, their inability to limit it;[21] alternatively, they can aspirationally follow an idea of impactful self-inscription, of creating content that is "one's own" and "makes a difference." Here, the wish for recognition of and response to one's

16 Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image Music Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 146.

17 Ibid., 148.

18 Stalder, "9 Thesen," 26.

19 See Barthes, "Death of the Author," 147.

20 John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2010), 104.

21 See Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in *Image Music Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 157.

personal contribution is emphasised. However, as Jodie Dean argues with respect to communication within our current media environments, the dynamics introduced by the storage and perpetual accumulation of massive amounts of data can render single contributions and producers invisible. Especially under conditions "wherein everyone is presumed to be a producer as well as a consumer of content, messages get lost. They become mere contributions to the circulation of images, opinions, and information, to the billions of nuggets of […] affect trying to catch and hold attention […]."[22] Transferred to the context of iterative creative practices in particular, Dean's postulation hints at the potential of individual contributions to increase the circulation of overarching mimotext while leaving no personal authorial trace of relevance with respect to the readability of the multimodal re-composition – this is particularly the case in creative relay with a high volume of contributions.

Yet, the "prestige of the individual," which Barthes identifies as "the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology," is advertised and aspired within infrastructures of networked individualism – attaching "the greatest of importance to the 'person' of the author."[23] Consequentially, repertoires of self-representation, self-reference, self-branding, and bodily self-display have emerged, as strategical devices that mark "personified" content and promise increased visibility by letting contributors impose themselves on the media texts they are actually co-producing. The potentially resulting "social media clout" paves the way for the user type of the self-entrepreneurial YouTube personality, who embodies the symbolic capital of the institution YouTube, thereby becoming recognised as the source of the meanings of which they actually are an effect. Through this misrecognition of "the relations of production and the relations deriving from them,"[24] as Louis Althusser described it, the "YouTube celebrity" appears as a point of reference within the endless stream of contributions on the platform. While Felix Stalder's assessment of "deprivileged authorship" reflects a certain tendency in networked practices of open-ended referential co-creation, differences in authorial privilege persist in social media, as the range from invisible contributors to influential content

22 Jodie Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 24.

23 Barthes, "Death of the Author," 143.

24 Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, ed. Louis Althusser, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 183.

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,

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 metareference, 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.

3 Contextualising and Categorising Media Objects of Musical Produsage

This chapter illuminates YouTube-situated practices of vernacular re-composition by focussing on their material concretions and circulating media objects. The division into three sub-chapters serves its aim to adumbrate the different types of audiologovisual remediation on the platform. By placing concrete objects of analysis against the backdrop of their media environments, and further distinguishing them from similar pre-digital and digital media objects and practices, the chapter provides a differentiated view on different categories of YouTube-situated vernacular musical produsage, which further discussions in this book – on circulation and imitation, self-celebrification and communal interaction, and issues of difference and selectivity – rely on and add to.

The following analyses of music video-like contributions on the platform start from the assumption that, in a digital sphere of media convergence and produsage, music video cannot be primarily conceived of as an auteurial promotional vehicle anymore. As a remediating agent for vernacular discourse and communal self-narration, it potentially follows a participatory logic and becomes hybridised in different ways. Fannish videos, music video parodies, and re-dubs serve as examples for the various kinds of communal self-reference and vernacular ethos conveyed through music video-like produsage. In this context, communally developed audio-visual (re-)configurations are examined in relation to conventions of commercial music video production.

The sub-chapter on musicalisations of audiovisual *objets trouvés*, on the other hand, takes the affordances of YouTube as an archive for countless data captures – e.g., captures of the self, celebrities, animals, or everyday observations – as a vantage point for the analysis of iterative and co-creative practices of musical aestheticisation that have emerged around these media objects. Their ongoing re-appropriation and re-contextualisation encompasses a wide range of approaches, from object-adaptive practices of musical listening to

calculable manufacturings of pleasurable musical material by way of audio file manipulation. Distinctive concepts and formats of musicalisation are examined in view of their underlying compositional ideas and the affective stimuli they pass on. As musicalisations of found objects on YouTube contributes to the normalisation and perpetuation of pleasurable musical engagement with pre-recorded realia, issues of "indexploitation," surveillance, and ridicule shall be problematised in this context.

Computational surface and interface effects represent a third category of media objects that inform vernacular re-composition in the YouTube era. As signs, signals, and surfaces effected by computational interfaces represent banalities of networked interaction, their re-imagination, representation, and re-production in co-creative musical practices affords communicative connectability and invokes a certain vernacular ethos. The analysed implicitly or explicitly interface-centric practices are characterised by aesthetic approaches concerned with audiovisual patterns, concrete representations and re-compositions of graphical user interfaces, or computationally attained flaws and failures. As a result, computational surface and interface effects are re-domesticated within practices of musical produsage on the platform, unfolding their very own meta-referential potentialities.

In general, within largely disembodied and increasingly globalised online communities, communal cohesion and self-narration evolve largely based on the implicit and explicit meta-reflection on the status of "being online," the remediated digital and pre-digital cultural objects, and the (simulacric) cultural memory and compositional repertoire shaped through ongoing produsage. Thus, the aspect of meta-referentiality, which is indispensable for my overall argumentation, will accompany and, at times, guide the following categorisations of media objects of fascination and the practices of re-composition evolving around them.

3.1 Meta-Discursive Music Video

The shift from music video's domestication on music television – following the launch of MTV in 1981 – towards its digital production and distribution has caused an ongoing discussion about what today, in digital environments characterised by accelerated and ubiquitous processes of media convergence, actually *defines* a music video. The reason for the confusion lies in the ramifications of music video's emancipation from its once seemingly "natural" media

environment of music television. Obviously, the fundamental quality of music video remains intact in the age of digital distribution: "[a]ny music video operates by visually remediating music (recasting a preexisting song visually), but also by musically remediating the image (structuring the image according to musical logic)."[1] Moreover, one could say that the remediating effect of music videos on *other* media has not changed, as they still adopt and juxtapose various sources, as Carol Vernallis points out with regard to appropriations of – or allusions to – aesthetic objects from various media such as film and commercials.[2] Mathias Bonde Korsgaard argues that, historically, "the music video aesthetic was itself formed on the basis of remediating other medial expressions, and, in turn, the aesthetics of music video have arguably been fused back into these medial expressions from which it originated."[3] On a large historical scale, these processes of remediation between music video and other (audiovisual) media can usually be imagined as reciprocal; however, while, for instance, the mutual impact of audio-visual remediation in music video and cinema could historically be traced and exemplified, today's media convergence brings about an entanglement of media that makes it difficult to draw the lines between individual media, since media-specific delivery channels and technologies have become largely obsolete. This is also the case with regard to new forms of interactive music videos, which have emerged in awareness of what Paul Hearsum called a "24-hour *multiple* functionality (to listen, to watch, to select, to read, to add comments, and to participate)" compared to MTV's "*dual* functionality (to listen and to watch)."[4] In the interactive video for Bob Dylan's song "Like a Rolling Stone," which promoted the release of Bob Dylan's complete CD Box set in 2013, the user can flip through 16 differently themed "TV channels," each representing a program (shopping, cooking, news, sports, reality TV, etc.) that

1 Andrew Goodwin, *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music, Television and Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 509.

2 Carol Vernallis, "Music Video's Second Aesthetic?," in *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics*, eds. John Richardson, Claudia Gorbman, and Carol Vernallis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 459.

3 Mathias Bonde Korsgaard, *Music Video after MTV: Audiovisual Studies, New Media, and Popular Music* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 144.

4 Paula Hearsum and Ian Inglis, "The Emancipation of Music Video: YouTube and the Cultural Politics of Supply and Demand," in *The Oxford Handbook for New Audiovisual Aesthetics*, eds. John Richardson, Claudia Gorbman, and Carol Vernallis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 491.

showcases a different character lip-syncing Dylan's song.[5] The video is only one example for the hybrid manner in which media evolve within a convergent media landscape. Other artists spawn fan contributions, for example by deliberately integrating animating choreographies in their music video performances, thereby encouraging the widespread creation and circulation of fan imitations in social media. Psy's rider dance in his music video for "Gangnam Style" (2012), which prompted a stream of imitations all over the world, is arguably one of the most well-known examples.

Generally, such tendencies towards interactivity and participation can be seen as both appropriations of functions associated with new digital media as well as reconfigurations of the forms, formats, and functions of music video. Entire "music video albums" as well as gamified music videos with non-linear narratives bear witness to a new-found temporal malleability and discontinuity of "post-televisual" music videos,[6] as Vernallis points out: "[…] music videos no longer have to fit the short lengths of pop songs, or present them without interruption […]: we may be able to say only that a music video is a relation of sound and image we recognize as such."[7] Her very broad definition of music video is not only informed by new corporate adaptions of principles of digital and social media, but also – and, in the context of this chapter, more importantly – by the dissolution of the dichotomy between production and consumption in the context of vernacular audiovisual (re-)composition in social media. The boundaries of music video have become blurred in the digital sphere, as the medium is decoupled from its former delivery channels and, in a media ecology characterised by convergence and participation, cannot be exclusively defined by its conventional function as an auteurial promotional vehicle (for an artist, a song, an album, or for a film which features the artist's music) anymore. Entangled within an environment of networked consumption, vernacular music video composition follows a participatory logic and becomes involved in processes of media hybridisation. Any audiovisual artefact, following its upload to a video platform like YouTube, becomes easily attainable modular material for user-generated music video-like creations – or for

5 Bob Dylan, "Like a Rolling Stone," November 2013, interactive music video, https://eko.com/v/like-a-rolling-stone?autoplay=true.

6 For this term, see Korsgaard, *Music Video after MTV*, 17.

7 Carol Vernallis, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 27.

remixes, mashups, and re-enactments of pre-existing music videos. Remediated by the digital principles of modularity and variability, music video is thus embedded in an environment of continual re-appropriation and re-iteration and, consequentially, expands its own textual affordances. Of course, music video has always potentially served as a "producerly text," insofar as it, due to its inconsistencies, its references to other media texts, and its often enigmatic character, encourages creative readings and productive engagement with the offered audiovisual texts – an example for this would be concomitant meta-narratives of stardom that develop or shift according to the interrelations of artistic production, medial (self-)representation, and fan discourse. However, enabled by the quantity and accessibility of audiovisual material on video platforms as well as the affordability and suitability of video editing software for beginners, producerly behaviour towards music video now visibly manifests and circulates in new forms and formats of audio-visual remediation, drawing large audiences and encouraging further contributions. Regardless of whether we potentially define any form of reciprocal remediation of music and images as a music video or resort to describing new emergent hybrid configurations as "music video-like" or "post-music video,"[8] a drastic quality shift can be noted which is brought about by the entry of music video as a media artefact into the domain of Internet-mediated vernacular content creation: while any conventional music video is fundamentally embedded in cross-media reference and processes of remediation – and thus entangled in a transtextual and transmedial fabric – and exclusively "devotes itself to referring to other images, other narratives" without necessarily taking account of its implicit self-referentiality,[9] vernacular re-appropriations of music video-related audiovisual figurations are characterised by the users' awareness of their derivativity as well as of the surrounding framework of networked consumption they are situated within and thus potentially elicit a high medium-awareness in the recipient. Especially mashup techniques can be conceived of as a performative practice which, by way of hybridisation, can generate an awareness of the involved technologically and culturally significant medial systems. According to art and media theorist Pamela Scorzin,

> "mashup" in its modern sense of a recent media phenomenon, a resampling of previously existing medial or artistic material, can currently be consid-

8 See Korsgaard, *Music Video after MTV*, 173–196.

9 Angela McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 17.

> ered the most popular source of metaization in contemporary culture; consider, for instance, a digital media file containing text and/ or graphic, audio or video elements as well as animations, thus recombining, recoding, restructuring and modifying pre-existing digital material in order to create a derivative and hybrid new work.[10]

"Metaisation" is a term coined by Werner Wolf to denote transmedial processes of "usually non-accidental self-reference produced by signs or sign configurations which are (felt to be) located on a logically higher level, a 'meta-level,' within an artefact or performance." The resulting meta-reference is described by Wolf as a form of "self-reference, which can extend from this artefact to the entire system of the media, forms or implies a statement about an object-level, namely on (aspects of) the medium/system referred to. Where metareference is properly understood, an at least minimal corresponding 'meta-awareness' is elicited in the recipient."[11] As Henry Jenkins states with regard to the evolution of media in an environment of media convergence, "once a medium establishes itself as satisfying some core human demand, it continues to function within the larger system of communication options."[12] YouTube's communication options, afforded by the platform's "multiple functionality," encourage a discursive engagement with the mediality, textuality, and materiality of music video itself. Mashups, parodic imitations and re-enactments of concrete or generic audiovisual material thus represent polytextual methods that subject music video – as well as the creator's stance – to communal discourse by way of meta-reference and self-reference. The following analyses focus on aspects of interplay between bodily performance, visuals, language and narrative, musical references, and sonic modifications in order to shed light on platform-specific forms, formats, and functions of vernacular music videos "in the second degree" and the discursive levels of their inherent metaisation.

Fan Videos as Communal (Meta-)Discourse and Self-Reference

Of course, the history of music video-like amateur creations does not begin with the emergence of online communities. In fact, it goes all the way back to

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10 Pamela C. Scorzin, "Metascenography: On the Metareferential Turn in Scenography," in *The Metareferential Turn in Contemporary Arts and Media*, ed. Werner Wolf (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 261.

11 Wolf, "Metareference across Media," 31.

12 Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 14.

media fandom of the 1970s. In a practice known as "vidding," fans engage with the combination of video footage and music from mass media sources, usually television broadcasts or film productions. As numerous studies underline, vidding community has, from its beginnings, been female-dominated. The role of gender in vidding has been extensively theorised in the field of fan studies. Usually, the practice of vidding is conceived of as a response to male-led professional media production, driven by the co-creation and passing on of desire events on the basis of communally established generic modifications to pre-existing narratives.[13] Whereas early vidders created montages by recording, selecting, cutting, and recombining televised material using VHS machines, nowadays video platforms and editing softwares provide the archival and technical means for vidding. Vidding is a narrative practice aimed at highlighting, developing, or subverting one or multiple source texts – usually from series or movies – by setting selected audiovisual segments to music. The outcome ranges from reverential homages that merely summarise certain moments or aspects of a storyline to deliberate re-contextualisations of images that tell alternative storylines or focus on the modification of relationships or character developments.

Although vidders often stress the differences of their practice to conventional music videos, their historical, medial, and aesthetic backgrounds are related, as Angelina Karpovich notes:

> Having emerged at roughly the same time, and sharing a similarly complex relationship with the media of film and television, music videos and fan videos have more in common than has previously been acknowledged […]. Fan videos are […] the result of their creators' cumulative media experience, in which aesthetic and conceptual influences from a variety of texts, genres and forms result in multi-layered texts that are steeped not only in the immediate context of the source media text, but in the very same audiovisual aesthetic that has also produced, among other forms, the music video.[14]

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13 See, for example, Katharina M. Freund, "'Veni, Vidi, Vids!' Audiences, Gender and Community in Fan Vidding," (PhD thesis, University of Wollongong, 2011), 2–3, https://doi.org/10.7916/d8-6rte-j311. Moreover, in her historical account of the development of vidding from the 1970s to the present, Francesca Coppa accentuates the queer and critical dimensions of vidding. See Francesca Coppa, *Vidding: A History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022).

14 Angelina Karpovich, "Reframing Fan Videos," in *Music, Sound and Multimedia: From the Live to the Virtual*, ed. Jamie Sexton (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 27.

Like in music videos, the images of fan videos – or simply: vids – are cut to a pre-selected song, resulting in deliberate synchronisms between music and video as well as in moments of non-synchronicity. However, whereas Michel Chion, with respect to music videos, observes a potential liberation of the image "from the linearity normally imposed by sound" and points to the usually broken or non-existing narrativity of music video's images, moments of non-synchronised "visual polyphony" in fan videos must be evaluated differently due to their essential narrative function. Unlike the imagery of music videos, in fan videos, the visual layer is fundamentally anchored by the chosen song and never decoupled from, or indifferent to, the overall audiologovisual textual work. For example, in the fan video "I hate you, I love you // Johnlock," @Johnlocked explores the relationship between the main characters Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John Watson from the British television series "Sherlock" by setting video segments from the series to the song "I hate you, I love you" by Gnash ft. Olivia O'Brien.[15] Synched to the opening piano chords and rhythmically accelerating over the course of the video, a prism of sequences showing John and Sherlock in confrontational, thoughtful, and affectionate moments are used to sketch a fictional relationship drama between the two. Throughout the video, Olivia O'Brien's voice is used to portray Sherlock's inner feelings towards John; Gnash, in return, sings "on behalf of" John. The absence of both singers in the fan video helps avoid the double address characteristic for music video, in which the "personality of the storyteller usually overwhelms characterization within the story," entailing a "conflation of the real/implied authorial voice."[16] According to Henry Jenkins, in fan videos "[t]he performer's personality must be effaced so that the singer may speak more effectively on behalf of the fictional character."[17] While the video is indifferent towards the singers' personalities, the music and the lyrics are highly empathetic in regard to the images. Beyond the musical expression of "its participation in the feeling of the scene," a fundamental quality for what Michel Chion calls "empathetic music,"[18] the singers add emotional value as quasi-narrator's voices, aiming at a semantic listening of the song. The lyrics are used to anchor the images and

15 @Johnlocked, "I hate you, I love you // Johnlock," November 26, 2016, YouTube video, 3:46, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tvx5s1dhbDE.

16 Goodwin, *Distraction Factory*, 76.

17 Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 235.

18 Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 8.

create a shift in the paradigmatic dimension of the narrative, in that the audiologovisual text of the video "takes character and settings and makes a non-temporal sense of them" beyond the syntagmatic narrative dimension of temporality, cause, and effect.[19] The concrete interplay of music, lyrics, and selected sequences in @Johnlocked's video represents Sherlock's and John's relation as a homoerotic relationship full of longing and heartbreak, irrevocably obstructed by John's marriage with Mary Watson. In the first chorus, for instance, Sherlock (through the voice of Olivia O'Brien), accompanied by images of them arguing and laughing together, confesses his complicated feelings towards John ("I hate you, I love you, I hate that I want you"). At the words "you want her, you need her and I'll never be her," scenes of Mary and John hugging and dancing in their wedding dress and suit are followed by a close-up shot of Sherlock's sad face, seemingly looking at them. After an answer by John (Gnash), telling him that "love and trust are gone" – probably due to Sherlock's egocentric behaviour throughout the series, the next chorus is sung as a duet and ends on a held piano chord over which Sherlock's original speech from the series resonates: "It's always you, John Watson, you keep me right." The video ends with the conclusive line from the chorus ("I'll never be her") and a scene of Sherlock leaving the wedding party of John and Mary.

The anchorage of the images through the lyrics guides the viewer through the signifieds of the video: The scene of Sherlock leaving the party, for instance, signifies his inner parting from the idea of a romantic relationship with John. However, contrary to conventional music videos, every sign in the video, as "the associative total of a concept and an image,"[20] is secondary to the mythical system it is caught within. According to Roland Barthes, "myth is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second-order semiological system."[21] On the one hand, the fan video by @Johnlocked builds on pre-existing fan theories about Sherlock's (and John's) homosexuality, fuelled by Sherlock's seeming lack of sexual desire for women and assumptions by other characters of the series – for example by their landlord Mrs. Hudson, who mistakes them for a couple (a regularly returning running gag throughout the series). On the other hand, the genre of vidding itself is characterised by generic modifications to the paradigmatic dimensions of narrative. For instance, the "slash" subgenre, which the video belongs to, focusses on creating

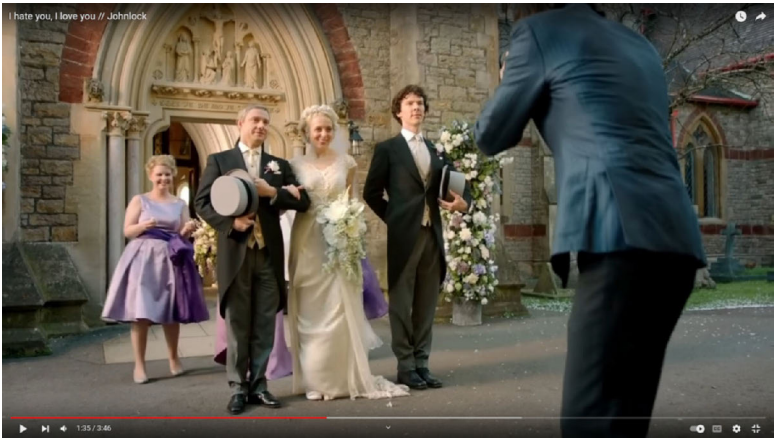
19 Fiske, *Television Culture*, 130.

20 Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Noonday Press, 1972), 113.

21 Ibid.

connotations of a homosexual bond between two usually heterosexual characters from a fictional media universe. Against this backdrop, the audiologovisual textual work of @Johnlocked's video becomes mythical, in that it forms a "*metalanguage*, […] a second language, *in which* one speaks about the first."[22] In mythical approaches to narratives, every sign within the linguistic system becomes a signifier of a "greater system which it builds and of which it is only a part."[23] These second-order signifiers that lend themselves to myth do not create meaning, as "the meaning is *already* complete,"[24] but function as *form*, as mythical signifiers emphasising the "cultural-ideological system that underlies the syntagmatic flow of the narrative," as John Fiske puts it.[25]

Figure 1: Sherlock as the fifth wheel, standing next to the newly-wed couple.



Still from @Johnlocked's video "I hate you, I love you // Johnlock" (2016).

The produced text in vidding practices is built on the symbolic potentiality of pre-existing texts from media productions and franchises and evolves transmedially as an open, off-centred structure based on participation and generic symbolic play. With his remark that text "only exists in the movement

22 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 114.
23 Ibid., 113.
24 Ibid., 116.
25 Fiske, *Television Culture*, 136.

of a discourse" and necessarily "knows itself as text,"[26] Barthes hints at the fundamental implicit meta-referentiality of textual reception-as-production. Today, the conflation of writing/production and reading/consumption *materially* manifests in manifold ways as a shared repertoire of fannish (meta-)texts and (sub-)genres, perpetuating the communal generation of producerly text, which "relies on discursive competencies that the viewer already possesses."[27] At times, the meta-discourse of fan videos even contains direct self-references to the vidding community: In the video "Us," @lim creates a homage to media fandom itself by setting images from 34 different series and movies to the song "Us" by Regina Spektor.[28] Containing lines like "we're living in a den of thieves, rummaging for answers in the pages […] and it's contagious," the lyrics represent the self-understanding of a creative community focussed on practices characterised by the re-contextualisation and de-centralisation of media texts, while hinting at the unavoidable copyright issues linked to remix culture.[29]

DIY Ethos and Aesthetics of Profanity

Beyond the remediation of music video aesthetics as a vehicle for meta-referential transmedial storytelling and communal self-reference, vernacular formats of music video-like composition are focussed on the medial texts and surrounding discourses of (commercial) music video production. Re-enactments of music video come to mind first, as they represent a long-standing approach to metaised music video from pre-digital times. For instance, Weird Al Yankovic's parodies of iconic songs and music videos such as "Eat It" (Michael Jackson – "Beat It"), "Smells Like Nirvana" (Nirvana – "Smells Like Teen Spirit"), or "Amish Paradise" (Coolio – "Gangsta's Paradise") have been broadcast by music television channels like MTV or VH1, propelling sales of his corresponding parody albums and earning him five Grammy awards between 1985 and 2019,

26 Barthes, Barthes, "From Work to Text," 157.

27 Fiske, *Television Culture*, 95.

28 @lim, "Us | Multifandom," June 2, 2007, YouTube video, 3:55, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_yxHKgQyGx0. As the title suggests, videos with references to several media sources are called "multifandom."

29 Moreover, the video symbolically refers to academic discourse about media fandom by including footage of a talk by Henry Jenkins at a conference of the "Converge Culture Consortium."

one for "Best Concept Music Video" for his 1989 parody video of Michael Jacksons "Bad" ("Fat"). Compared to this rather conventional embedding of music video parody within value chains, as a promotional vehicle for the artist and their output, YouTube affords the upload and circulation of do-it-yourself music video parodies largely unaffected from pre-digital industrial gatekeeping and economic constraints. Jon Lajoie's video "Show Me Your Genitals" is a good example for a parodic music video carried by a no-budget production and a corresponding DIY ethos. Lajoie started filming and uploading his own music videos in 2007, featuring himself embodying various characters. The video for "Show Me Your Genitals" only shows a graffitied wall, a car, and Lajoie in his role as "MC Vagina," wearing a baseball cap and a colourful vintage shirt tucked into his shorts. The video editing is characterised by automated effects like rudimentary and demonstratively amateurish text animations which highlight the song's lyrics. The backing track is reduced to a four-bar drum machine loop, consisting of elements one could find in a proper hip-hop beat: a syncopated bass drum, 16th notes on the hi-hat, a clap sound for the snare, and the use of triangle samples. The poor quality of the samples and the loop's redundancy, in combination with Lajoie's outward appearance, are the first perceptible constituents of the overall performance of failure that characterises the whole video. The de-familiarised visual and musical associations to song and video productions in the hip-hop genre provide the backdrop for the lyrics, which, in their blatant sexism, aim at rendering automatised and implicit misogynistic (and homophobic) tropes in rap lyrics explicit:

> […] I wanna see your bum, I don't care what you say,
> No, I don't have feelings 'cause feelings are gay,
> Something something in the month of May,
> Bitches love my penis 'cause it's really big […][30]

Throughout the song, MC Vagina stumbles through verses that include awkward rhymes or ignore the rhyme scheme altogether. His pointedly unskilful rap performance is accompanied by the scenery of the video: a graffitied wall and an old car without a crew or decorating women that would bolster up his musical or bodily performance. Clichéd symbols of masculinity, objectifying depictions of women from a male gaze, and conventions of self-staging in hip-

30 @Jon Lajoie, "Show Me Your Genitals," May 31, 2008, YouTube video, 2:50, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqXi8WmQ_WM.

hop videos become noticeable exactly through their absence or deformation. The result is a lack of credibility with regard to the lyrics, which is underlined by the song's awkward outro: "Ahh yeah, that's right, shake your… bums. I'm out of here… I gotta have sex… with a lot of girls."[31] The appearance, utterings, and demeanour of Lajoie's persona MC Vagina are staged as an "as-if-authentic" performance, serving as a vehicle for a parodic commentary that lets meta-narratives and phantasies of stardom collapse and, by way of exaggeration, points to interchangeable, and thus often uncontested, misogynistic tropes regarding the visual and semantic texts of hip-hop productions.

Figure 2: Still from Jon Lajoie's music video "Show Me Your Genitals" (2008).

When MC Vagina raps "it's not sexist 'cause I'm saying it in a song," the lyrics even point directly to the issue of automatisation and banalisation of sexism in an ironic manner.[32] Overall, Lajoie's video fits the characterisation of parody by Linda Hutcheon, who describes parody as a "bitextual synthesis," stating that, "[w]hile the act and form of parody are those of incorporation, its function is one of separation and contrast."[33] Conventional forms of

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, 2nd ed., (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 33–34.

audiologovisual figurations in rap videos, for example popular motifs of visual and linguistic anchorage, are contrasted by an overall aesthetic of failure and a semantic strategy of rendering genre-typical tropes noticeable by way of ironic hyper-affirmation. The result is an implicit meta-reference to generic music video production beyond the parodic uptake of a single video or a distinctive personal style, characterised by a stronger bitextual determination and a wider meta-referential scope than could be attained by methods of direct quotation and imitation. Before the emergence of online video hosting, a music video parody which functions as an implicit meta-text on overall conventions of music (video) production without referring to a concrete popular source text would have been deemed incongruous with industrial value chains optimised for pre-digital mass media. More importantly, however, what sets many DIY music videos apart from any industrial standard is the aim of achieving an "unruly" aesthetic. Lajoie's video serves as a good example in its demonstrative profanity, brought about by lo-fi means of production and a DIY ethos, an overall performance of failure, and a lack of recognisable quotations – entailing a potentially perceived lack of palatability as well as issues of readability and discursivity resulting from its consequential hyper-affirmative and ironic character. On YouTube, vernacular music video parodies have become established as a potentially spreadable – and therefore profitable – format, enabling Lajoie to start a popular YouTube channel featuring various no-budget parody videos, garnering over a million subscriptions.

Besides the spread of DIY music video parodies, the biggest change that comes with networked music video (co-)creation is the engagement with and continuous re-interpretation of *pre-existing* music videos with discursive and meta-referential implications. For instance, under the genre label "shred," re-dubs of music videos have emerged in the early years of YouTube and, since then, become the most popular form of music video-like produsage based on techniques of remix. The first video labelled as a "shred" was uploaded in 2008 by Santeri Ojala (or @StSanders),[34] who is also commonly regarded as the inventor of the genre. Shreds are characterised by the synchronisation of added audio to a muted pre-existent video clip of a musical (live) performance. In fact, the synchronisations in shreds are very literal, as usually mostly the visible events in the video are sonically re-interpreted. For example, in Ojala's video "Eddie Van Halen Shreds," a live guitar solo by Van Halen, meticulously

34 @StSanders, "Kiss Shreds," November 7, 2008, YouTube video, 4:09, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kw50J0UYTb8.

dubbed to seemingly fit his movements, turns into a grotesque display of dilettantism. The musical outcome clashes with the visual layer: Van Halen's repertoire of poses and playing techniques are juxtaposed with a musically nonsensical dub track that bears no resemblance to the original audio. Since the other band members' playing is only dubbed when they are actually on display, Van Halen's solo seems all the more out of place, as the effects of awkward pauses, pickup noises, and cacophonic playing, which are at odds with his bodily performance of musical (and masculine) virtuosity, become enhanced. Besides this approach of sonic reduction, a few sounds are also added beyond the visual layer to ironically comment on the musical performance, such as the added – rather reserved – applause from the audience after multiple segments of the failed solo. The video is a good example for the way in which incongruencies between audio and video are created to elicit a meta-awareness in the recipient, as it can be read as a meta-referential contribution countering the ubiquitous display of virtuosity, especially in guitar-related content on YouTube and beyond. In fact, most early shreds on YouTube focussed on ridiculing performances of famous persons "shredding" their guitars – hence the label "shred." In addition to blatantly nonsensical shreds, there is a widespread ethos of creating "convincingly bad" dubs which are so subtle they might lead the recipient to mistake the video for the original. This is often the case in shreds that closely imitate the original audio track and integrate only subtle rhythmic and melodic flaws.[35] Yet, by way of re-synchronising the audio with the visual layer, which results in a performance of failure, shred videos, no matter the concrete source text or approach to dubbing, always create a decodable audio-visual dissonance that potentially renders normalised and conventional performances and significations of virtuosity, musical expertise, stardom, and gender visible – if the recipient stumbles upon the cracks in the performance and produces their own critical subtext.

Notwithstanding these considerations, a much more concise form of shred has been realised by the transferral of shredding practices to com-

35 This is the case in @magetimusic's 9-minute (!) shred of Miles Davis' "So What." The video starts as a slightly sloppy rendition of the piece and gradually descends into a more and more uncoordinated musical situation, with bandmates cueing each other (and missing their cues), unrelated musical quotes in the solos – for example the theme from "Spiderman" – and the sonic appearance of strange keyboard patches around the six-minute mark which, in the absence of keyboards in the visual scenery, finally breaks any illusion. See @magetimusic, "Miles and Coltrane Shred," January 6, 2010, YouTube video, 9:23, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ZCz--kHbTs.

mercial music videos in the format of so-called "musicless music videos" (alternatively called "silent music videos" or "music videos without music"), which are characterised by the absence of the original music and the addition of synchronised audio dubs, using only "as-if-diegetic" sounds. Musicless music videos arguably bring about a more "limited reading," as the object and frame of reference can be easily inferred – and this is not solely afforded by the denotative paratext of the videos' titles: The absence of (non-diegetic) music strips the video of its main function as a tailor-made visual composition to a pre-existing song and, in doing so, consequentially elicits a high meta-awareness of formal aspects and patterns of conventional and automatised audio-vision in music video productions. It is safe to say that the re-interpretation and re-contextualisation of the visual layer by way of dubbing techniques bears more meta-referential gravity in musicless music videos compared to conventional shreds, as the music often is entirely missing and the recipient inevitably finds themself confronted with an unbridgeable gap between their aesthetic expectations towards commercial music videos and the concrete audiovisual outcome. The radical synchronisation of on-screen action and diegetic sounds creates an acoustic space full of aural codes that denote a live situation, laying the "visual polyphony" and broken narratives of the video bare and entailing a kind of "de-naturalisation" regarding the (non-)diegetic qualities of music and sound in original commercial music videos.

Figure 3: Mick Jagger and David Bowie dancing. Still from @Strack Azar's musicless music video of "Dancing in the Street" (2016).

@Strack Azar's shred of David Bowie's and Mick Jagger's video for their duet cover of "Dancing in the Street" is a good example for the de-familiarising effect of musicless music videos.[36] In the video, which was filmed at night, Bowie and Jagger can be seen dancing and singing in a warehouse, a staircase, and a street. Instead of the original audio track, an acoustic space of silence is introduced by the sound of clittering crickets, which, later in the video, are accompanied by owl calls and, as indicators of urban life, distant police sirens and gunshots. Sounds illustrating the bodily movements of the two singers, like stomping feet and the rustling of their clothes, add to the overall sonic diegesis. Musical passages from "Dancing in the Street" are only introduced by lip dubs following the melody and lyrics of the song synchronously to the lip movements of Bowie and Jagger, albeit in a comedic fashion: the soft and shaky singing, unsupported by an instrumental backing track and interspersed with voice cracks, creates a stark contrast to the expressive and exuberant dancing, which seems completely out of place now. By closely following the visual layer, @Strack Azar inverts the original audio-visual relation of the music video, highlighting the sudden discrepancies of quick cuts and unmediated video segments in relation to the now-diegetic audio, as they are stripped of their function as "visually polyphonic" elements due to the lack of an underlying song that would serve as a background for rhythmic and prismatic video editing. For example, a short segment of David Bowie jumping in slow motion causes a surprising interruption, as @Strack Azar's synchronisation strictly follows the image and disrupts the prior lip dub of Bowie's singing by accompanying his jump with a loud scream ("Dancing in Chic-aaaaaaaargh!"). Overall, the diegetisation by use of Foley and lip dubs in musicless music videos entails the dominance of the image over the audio layer, reducing the logic of music video to absurdity. In dissecting the conditions of audio-vision in commercial music video productions by way of re-functionalisation of the interplay between music, sound, and video, the shred subgenre inherently unfolds a transformational impact that goes beyond concrete source material and elicits a critical meta-awareness of the aesthetic object of music video – and its production – as such.

As the examples show, the "vernacular ethos" of YouTube-situated music video-like contributions may, on the one hand, arise from the place the videos are coming from, in that they are self-produced by individuals using easily

36 @Strack Azar, "Dancing in the Street // Silent Music Video," January 13, 2016, YouTube video, 3:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHkhIjGoDKc.

available technological means (often without any budget). Secondly, their content performatively invokes attributions of non-institutionality. In the case of music video-like fan vids, this results from 1) a discursive orientation towards networked spaces of affinity and 2) the remediation of vernacular creativity through forms and formats based on the narrative re-imagination and re-appropriation of popular media texts by way of generic audiologovisual metalanguage. Beyond the self-referred non-institutional stance of vidders, the music video parody by Jon Lajoie and @Strack Azar's musicless music video paradigmatically highlight the potentials of deconstructing aspects of industrialised music video production, including meta-narratives of stardom, clichéd verbal and bodily performances, or conventions of audio-vision in commercial music video productions. In summary, the vernacular of music video-like media composition is invoked performatively in contrast to institutionalised practices of commercial music video and multimedia production, opening up a field of produsage which does not cease to let new streams of contributions emerge.

3.2 Everyday (Self-)Capture and Re-Appropriation: Audiovisual *Objets Trouvés*

When Jonny Shire walked past a house wall on August 31, 2014, an air conditioner caught his ear. Unmistakably, the loud clicking noise indicated a defect, but it was not technical fascination but rather the resulting rhythmic patterns, which evoked entirely isolated and immediate musical associations, that made him decide to record and upload his discovery directly from his iPhone via the "YouTube Capture" app, adding the title "Broken air con that plays a jazz drum solo!!"[37] In a similar fashion, @Mr. King shares his musical experience of a squeaky door in a Chicago parking lot, even moderating the following "performance": "Okay, so this is awesome. This door is gonna do an impression of Miles Davis' 'Bitches Brew.' Stand by."[38] These captures of readymade sound objects are afforded by mobile phone cameras, letting Jonny Shire and @Mr. King – and millions of other users – imbricate their everyday experience in

37 @Jonny Shire, "Broken air con that plays a jazz drum solo!!," August 31, 2014, YouTube video, 1:05, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dmKTfro4g6Y.

38 @Mr. King, "Door Does Impression of Miles Davis," August 16, 2012, YouTube video, 0:33, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wwOipTXvNNo.

the data flow of video hosting platforms like YouTube from anywhere at any time. Their uploads are fascinating artefacts of what could be conceived of as a postmodern form of *flânerie*, where idle strolling and purposeless – yet cultivated – receptivity to one's surroundings meet the imperative of "broadcasting yourself," rendering the experience of sound objects available for the *electronic flâneur*, a user type first described by Mike Featherstone.[39] Of course, individual explorations and dwellings within and across ubiquitously aestheticised virtual worlds differ fundamentally from late modern *flânerie*, famously characterised by Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, as Featherstone notes with regard to the interactivity the hypertextual fabric of the Internet requires of online movement – as well as to the disruptive mobility it affords:

> The urban flâneur typically sauntered around, letting the impressions of the city soak into his subconscious. The electronic flâneur is capable of great mobility; his pace is not limited to the human body's capacity for locomotion – rather, with the electronic media of a networked world, instantaneous connections are possible which render physical spatial differences irrelevant.[40]

The *electronic flâneur* – or *flâneuse* – on YouTube chimes in with the algorithmically curated stream of interconnected videos, thereby idly moving from video to video, guided by no purpose but an immediate receptivity to the affective stimuli; they are, in Baudelaire's words, "a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, […] an 'I' with an insatiable appetite for the 'non-I' […]."[41] Upload, creation, and contemplation of everyday captures and sound objects are underlaid by the technological and cultural principles of modularity and variability, which at any time can turn the immersed, passive subject into a networked, interactive one. Private everyday observations are captured and uploaded as isolated modules of our online experience, the idle contemplation of which is embedded in an environment of creative relay that suggests their further remix and re-composition. Within the ongoing stream of contributions, musical readymades are taken up by other users and not only set in relation to each other,

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39 See Mike Featherstone, "The Flâneur, the City and Virtual Public Life," *Urban Studies* 35, no. 5/6 (May 1998): 909–925, https://doi.org/10.1080/0042098984619.

40 Ibid., 921.

41 Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne (New York: Phaidon Press, 1964), 9. The original essay appeared in the Parisian newspaper *Figaro* in 1863.

as in @Rez' digital *musique concrète* montage of several musical doors and the broken air conditioner, but also combined with pre-existing audio tracks, as can be heard and seen in zarbi10425's reinterpretation of Dave Brubeck's Take Five, "featuring broken air con, jazz door, glove box and a bin."[42]

Beyond the musicalisation of the occasional everyday capture, musical approaches to sonic *objets trouvés* on YouTube have branched into distinctive concepts and formats, even reaching into the specialised domains of conceptual art and professional composition: Conceptual artist Cory Arcangel, for instance, collects and cuts footage of "cute kittens" stepping on and pawing at piano keyboards, ordering the struck keys according to the score of Schönbergs "Drei Klavierstücke" op. 11, which results in musically rather broken and counter-intuitive collaborative kitten performances of these early atonal pieces.[43] With his conceptual video pieces, Arcangel draws on the phenomenon of uncountable cat videos in social media in a humorous way in order to literally enact the clichéd dismissive image that "atonal music sounds just like a cat stepping on piano keys." Quite different from Arcangel's concept, composer and arranger Alexander Liebermann turns found YouTube footage of animals and wildlife into material for his personal ear training, musically transcribing the voices and sounds of animals and re-uploading the source material with an accompanying score (see Figure 4). His ear training video featuring the chirping of Grey Butcherbirds and Pied Butcherbirds, which he found in videos on the channels @PittwaterEcowarriors and @PHOTONAUT,[44] even contains a performance by a soprano singing the score.[45] The video is a clear nod to the transcriptions of birdcalls by Olivier Messiaen, as Liebermann also states in the video description: "I focused on these two birds because one of my favorite composers, Olivier Messiaen, was deeply interested in their songs

42 @zarbi10425, "Take Five, but featuring broken air con, jazz door, glove box and a bin," February 17, 2021, YouTube video, 0:25, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WqpEQWRcQcw.

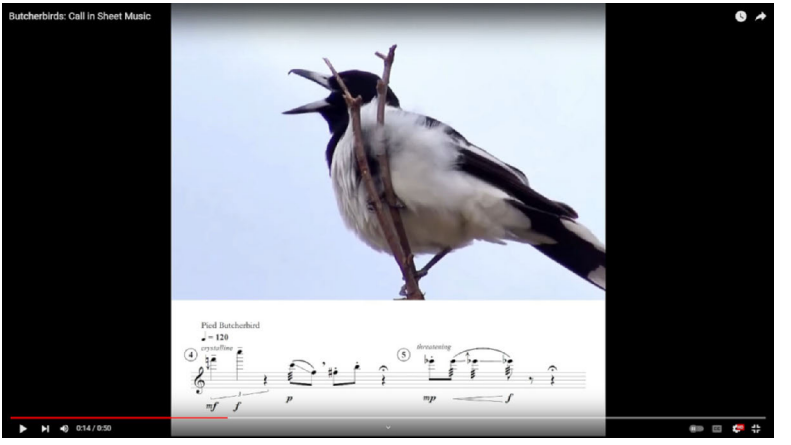
43 Cory Arcangel, "Cory Arcangel – Arnold Schoenberg, op. 11 – I – Cute Kittens," July 7, 2009, YouTube video, 4:20, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lF6IBWTDgnI.

44 See @PittwaterEcowarriors, "GREY BUTCHERBIRD SONGS," March 5, 2012, YouTube video, 3:58, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZlAb-ObjIH4; @PHOTONAUT, "Amazing Singing Performance by Four Pied Butcherbirds, Western Australia," April 1, 2016, YouTube video, 5:02, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wr46I3568Hk.

45 @Alexander Liebermann, "Butcherbirds: Call in Sheet Music," January 15, 2021, YouTube video, 0:50, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Br06bYP7dHE.

(Notably in the song of the Pied Butcherbird, whose call he used in his last work 'Éclairs sur l'au-delà')."[46]

Figure 4: Still from Alexander Liebermann's video "Butcherbirds: Call in Sheet Music" (2021).



However, most practices of capturing, observing, and reproducing sound objects via musical means focus on the instrumental accompaniment and re-contextualisation of pre-recorded speech patterns, with some clips becoming popular sources for repeated musical re-appropriation. One example for this is a blooper from the TV special "Goodnight Moon and Other Sleepytime Tales," which aired on HBO on December 11, 1999 and featured bedtime stories, lullabies, animations, and interviews with children. The clip features a little boy who stumbles over his words, ending up with a completely disjointed sentence:

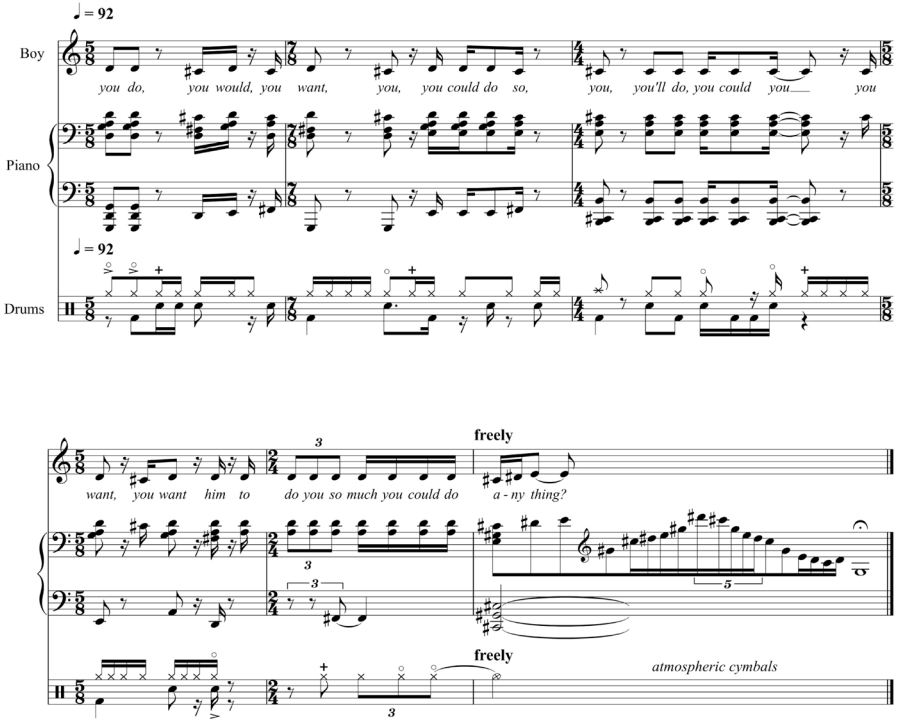
> Have you ever had a dream that, that you, um, you had, you'll t–, you would, you could, you do, you would, you want, you, you could do so, you, you'll do, you could you, you want, you want him to do you so much you could do anything?[47]

46 Ibid.

47 @mrblueangeldood, "Have you ever had a dream like this?," June 2, 2011, YouTube video, 0:21, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7RgN9ijwE4.

After its upload on YouTube in 2011, the clip "went viral" and soon became discovered as a sound object for remixes, musical transcriptions and instrumental accompaniments. In the instrumentalisation by Charles Cornell, for instance, the boy's voice is used as a quasi-melodic *sprechstimme*, harmonised and rhythmically supported by a backing track which carves out and contextualises the rhythmic intricacies of the boy's speech (see Figure 5).[48]

Figure 5: The last bars of Charles Cornell's musical take on the video "Have you ever had a dream like this?" My transcription; reduced to voice, piano, and drums.



48 @Charles Cornell, "Have You Ever Had A Dream," June 15, 2019, YouTube video, 0:24, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6bxGboVrYY.

From Musical Adaptation to "Indexploitation"

There are manifold distinctive approaches to the musical accompaniment of viral social media videos. For instance, on the channel of bassist Dywane Thomas Jr., professionally known as MonoNeon, the focus does not primarily lie on reharmonisation, as in Cornell's video, but on composing with instrumental *mimicry* of idiosyncratic human speech melodies and rhythms – usually within the grid of 12-tone equal temperament, sometimes microtonally, thereby bringing about the recognition of their musical qualities by mere instrumental, mostly monophonic, doublings.[49] Although – after the "exposition" of the musical material in its bare form – he proceeds to make use of loop techniques, background tracks, and overdubs, MonoNeon's approach is fascinatingly close to the compositional idea of "phonorealism," which was established by Austrian composer Peter Ablinger. Since 1997, Ablinger has conceptualised pieces and work cycles built on the reproduction of sound filtered through the tonal and temporal grids of semitones and up to 16 units per second, thereby realising "phonorealistic" images of concrete sound objects, which he compares with "photo-realist painting, or […] with techniques in the graphic arts that use grids to transform photos into prints."[50] Whereas Ablinger aims at a purely instrumental mimicry of a sound object which is *missing*, in YouTube-specific musicalisation practices the audio and video of human speech is normally *included* in the contribution. This changes the quality of the musicalised outcome, as, according to Diedrich Diederichsen, the artistic integration of recordings of reality inevitably leads to their involuntary communication which may evade, overlay, or even run against subjective artistic intentions.[51] While Ablinger is not concerned with "literal reproduction itself but precisely this border-zone between abstract musical structure and the sudden shift into recognition – the relationship between musical qualities and 'phonorealism' […]," [52] the causations of bodily presence effects – Diederichsen calls them "index effects" – of musicalised source

49 See, for example, @MonoNeon, "MonoNeon – 'baby talking on the phone,'" February 14, 2022, YouTube video, 1:35, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kxqbnpiPeYk.

50 Peter Ablinger, "Peter Ablinger – Quadraturen," website of Peter Ablinger, accessed March 30, 2023, https://ablinger.mur.at/docu11.html.

51 See Diedrich Diederichsen, *Körpertreffer: Zur Ästhetik der nachpopulären Künste* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2017), 10.

52 Peter Ablinger, "Quadraturen."

material on YouTube holds an invasive potential which does not allow for an oscillation between these two poles. Rather, musical elements and index effects are recognisable at the same time, creating an enjoyable hyper-illusion. The recognition and entertainment value of the viral source material is synergetically complemented by its musicalisation, shifting its experience and making it musically intriguing – or simply more pleasurable.

As pre-recorded speech segments entail a quality of uncontainable eventfulness in terms of audiovisual stimuli and the production of meaning, it is just a small step from using them as recognisable carriers with musical potential to strategically musicalising them with deliberate political, parodying, or ridiculing intent. Politically charged parody can, for instance, be found on the channel of @Cassetteboy, who has cultivated techniques of splicing pre-recorded speech segments of public figures and putting them to hip-hop beats in order to manipulate their utterings and make them "rap." For example, in the clip "Cassetteboy vs. Boris Johnson," Johnson can be heard rapping to the background track of MC Hammer's "U Can't Touch This":

> […] The planet now is burning,
> at a terrifying rate
> and I don't even turn up
> to the climate change debate
> […]
> Stop, stammer time! [footage of Boris Johnson stammering follows] […][53]

Here, the strategy of musicalisation supports the artist's intention of ridiculing a political person – and his political agenda – for entertainment purposes. Unlike the approaches of Cornell and MonoNeon, @Cassetteboy's contributions are not built on the detection, observation, and uncovering of *musical* qualities. Musicalisation is not a primary concern, but simply necessary to make the content entertaining and ensure its circulation.

Within a media environment built on principles of modularity and variabilty, *any* uploaded recording of speech – any sound file in general – becomes a potentially manipulable musical object. As I will exemplify in the following paragraphs, the aforementioned approaches to the musicalisation of speech patterns are entangled with practices of deliberate "indexploitation" – that is,

53 @cassetteboy, "Cassetteboy vs Boris Johnson," December 5, 2019, YouTube video, 2:13, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LI87PRgIKks.

of purposeful imitation and utilisation of index effects[54] – which do not make hold at the musical uptake of iconic content or performances of people of public interest but hold the potential of intruding the private lives of unwitting persons. A video by the Gregory Brothers may serve as an example in this context: Since 2009, the Gregory Brothers create auto-tuned remixes – or, as they call it, "songifications" – of newscasts and television interviews on their channel schmoyoho.[55] Their content creation is accompanied by the continuous scouting for "unintentional singers" that could be turned into entertaining and profitable content. In 2010, they created their biggest hit, after they "songified" a video of Alabama residents Antoine and Kelly Dodson being interviewed by a local television station. In the interview, Antoine, a black resident of a housing project in Huntsville, Alabama, comments on the attempted rape of his sister by an "intruder" who broke in through her bedroom window. Three days later, the Gregory Brothers released the "Bed Intruder Song" on YouTube, featuring segments of Antoine Dodson and his sister Kelly from the interview. In the video, Antoine, dressed in a tank top and a red durag, sings in an auto-tuned voice over a backing track while the Gregory Brothers appear as news anchors, singing and dancing to Dodson's performance. His utterances, like his imploration to "hide your kids, hide your wife," are pitch shifted and treated as musical phrases, their catchiness enhanced by vocal harmonisations and loops. The song turned Antoine Dodson into an Internet sensation over night; however, it was just the starting point for a media spectacle that unfolded around Dodson's appearance, his flamboyant demeanor, and his vernacular speech. Within an environment of hypermediation fuelled by further remixes and mainstream media attention, a subject became objectified and a real-life situation reduced to enjoyable aesthetic material. In smoothing out the recording with the help of auto-tune and the re-arrangement, cutting, and looping of speech segments, the Gregory Brothers created a distance between the recipients of the song and the underlying situation of the interview. What is more, the appearance of the brothers in the video functions as a marker of dominance and whiteness, as Alexandrina Agloro notes: "Just as minstrel acts were structured so that white audiences could maintain their own sense of superiority, The Gregory Brothers perform to their audience and juxtapose themselves in suits to contrast with Dodson's appearance in a tank top and hair wrap. Appearing as

54 See Diederichsen, *Körpertreffer*, 47–49.

55 @schmoyoho, YouTube channel, joined December 10, 2006, https://www.youtube.com/user/schmoyoho.

news anchors within the 'Bed Intruder Song' is an act of washing themselves white, constructing themselves as the unmarked category upon which Antoine Dodson's difference is constructed."[56] The ironic facial expressions and dance moves of the Gregory Brothers make it seem as if Antoine Dodson is singing for their entertainment, caricaturing him in a fashion characteristic of what Fidel Martinez referred to as "modern minstrel shows."[57] The "Bed Intruder Song" is not a singular case – in fact, musical "indexploitations" with racialised undertones are particularly popular among "songification" remixes on YouTube: Kimberly "Sweet" Brown, a woman who was interviewed after escaping a fire, and Charles Ramsey, who rescued three women who had been kidnapped and held captive for a decade, are just two more examples of persons who became objectified through communal musical engagement on YouTube. The numerous remixes and view counts – 71 million views for the most popular remix of Kimberly Brown, 36 million views in Ramsey's case – bear witness to the (white) audience's desire for musical aestheticisations of black persons' appearances and vernacular speech for entertainment purposes.[58]

Musical Aestheticisation and the Normalisation of Voyeuristic Entertainment

As Paula Harper points out in her dissertation "Unmute This: Circulation, Sociality, and Sound in Viral Media," musicalising techniques, as a fundamental part of participatory media, help normalise the act of not only "broadcasting yourself," but also those around you, witting or unwitting. Harper diagnoses Internet behaviours of public shaming and mockery, afforded and mediated by mobile phone cameras, turning the public and the private sphere

56 Alexandrina Agloro, "Contemporary Coon Songs and Neo-Minstrels: Auto-Tune the News, Antoine Dodson, and the 'Bed Intruder Song,'" *Gnovis Journal* 11, no. 2 (April 2011), https://gnovisjournal.georgetown.edu/journal/contemporary-coon-songs-and-neo-minstrels-auto-tune-the-news-antoine-dodson-and-the-bed-intruder-song/#.

57 See Fidel Martinez, "Are 'Hilarious Black Neighbor' Videos a Modern Minstrel Show?," *The Daily Dot*, May 9, 2013, https://www.dailydot.com/unclick/hilarious-black-neighbor-modern-minstrel/.

58 See @The Parody Factory, "Sweet Brown – Ain't Nobody Got Time for That (Autotune Remix)," April 14, 2012, YouTube video, 1:56, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bFEoMOopc7k; @schmoyoho, "Dead Giveaway!," May 8, 2013, YouTube video, 1:28, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZcRUoOp5P4.

"into sites for scrutiny, mockery, vernacular surveillance."[59] By capturing human speech and appearance and rendering it aesthetically consumable, vernacular musicalisation enables participatory musical engagement, encouraging practices of public surveillance and capture as a way of imbricating the data of everyday life in aestheticised forms and formats of creative relay. The underlying model of surveillance can thus not be described as part of a disciplinary panoptic regime, but rather as a type of "peer-to-peer surveillance" driven by the desire to take part in communally mediated practices focussed on capturing and aestheticising affectively stimulating index effects of everyday life.[60] In their entanglement with technological affordances and agencies, these practices can be viewed under the lense of what Kevin D. Haggerty and Richard V. Ericson conceptualised as a contemporary rhizomatic "surveillant assemblage," which consists of extended means of monitoring as well as institutional, private, and technological agents of surveillance and "operates by abstracting human bodies from their territorial settings and separating them into a series of discrete flows."[61] Although Haggerty and Ericson do not specifically expand on constellations of "peer-to-peer surveillance" in public spaces, they name the "voyeuristic entertainment value" of surveillance as a factor of quantitatively increased data-capturing of human bodies, in addition to desires "for order, control, discipline and profit."[62] The case of the "Crazy Meijer Lady" is paradigmatic for the dynamic interrelation between technologically afforded peer-to-peer surveillance, electronic flâneurism, and vernacular musicalisation: In January 2020, a video emerged on a private Facebook page, showing an altercation between a woman and customers and staff members of a Meijer store in New Haven, Michigan. The video starts with the woman, who is showing obvious signs of mental illness, talking to a man at the checkout, claiming she is "trying to help" him and urging him to "repent," her speech interspersed with confused biblical references and swearwords: "You do need my help, sir, can't you see that, you son of a bitch? […] You gotta ask Jesus Christ,

59 Paula Harper, "Unmute This," 122.

60 For the notion of peer-to-peer surveillance, see Jeremy Weissman, "P2P Surveillance in the Global Village," *Ethics and Information Technology* 21, no. 1 (March 2019): 29–47, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-018-9488-y.

61 Kevin D. Haggerty and Richard V. Ericson, "The Surveillant Assemblage," *The British Journal of Sociology* 51, no. 4 (December 2000): 606, https://doi.org/10.1080/00071310020015280.

62 Ibid., 616.

we're all sinners."[63] The situation escalates as the woman begins to shout at the man and, in the further course of the video, goes head-to-head with staff members and other customers, until she gets arrested. The original video prompted not only several re-uploads on YouTube, but also musical remixes, exploiting the vulgarity of the woman's speech as well as her vocal timbre. In his metal remix, @ehgore1978 musicalises her raw shouts with a metal backing track reminiscent of the "groove metal" style played by Pantera in the early 1990s. The passage "You motherfucking accuser! Accuser of the fucking brethren, you motherfucker!,"[64] for instance, becomes musically re-contextualised as a recurring shouted buildup, leading into new segments of the song. The musical re-arrangement and constant repetition of the woman's swearwords shift the listening orientation from the original rhetorical context – and from narrative meaning in general – towards genre-typical musical expectations regarding phrasing, timbre, and verbal expression.[65] In the days following the first remixes, a Facebook page and discussions on Reddit emerged, encouraging users to post new video material of the woman, operating as platforms for the upload of new sightings and remixes.[66] Accompanied and amplified by musicalising practices, the ensuing search for the woman focussed on capturing affectively charged audiovisual material which could become imbricated within an environment of hypermediation and musicalisation with the effect of further perpetuating the moment of ridicule by distancing and dehumanising means of aestheticisation.

"Affect Hopping" vs. Musical Receptivity

These cases of reduction of human (self-)display to manipulable data objects exemplify the normalisation of musical "indexploitation" in technologically accelerated practices of data capture and aestheticisations of the everyday. Of

63 @quack, "Example of Ephesians 4:29," January 20, 2020, YouTube video, 5:39, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fjSpocBPo2w.

64 @ehgore1978, "Crazy Religious Lady At Meijer Metal Song (Strong Language) – Scott McGinley," January 24, 2020, YouTube video, 2:46, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKJgQboNKRI.

65 Paula Harper calls musically re-functionalised vulgar speech patterns that shift from swear to sound "perverse Pierre Schaefferian 'sound object[s].'" See Harper, "Unmute This," 143.

66 See, for example, "Crazy Meijer Lady," Facebook page, accessed March 30, 2023, https://www.facebook.com/Crazy-Meijer-Lady-113668376850089.

course, beyond the data capture of human bodies, *any* uploaded content on the platform is subject to audiovisual modification, serving as potential affective cultural products within environments of community-driven vernacular musicking. Forms and formats become standardised and made commensurable by processes of capture, creative relay, algorithmic diffusion, and (para-)textual signalisation. Digital affordances of unlimited storage, modularity, and variability further reinforce the postmodern cultural logic of fragmentation and situational conduct. All in all, the technologically hyper-accelerated and ever-accumulating practices of aestheticisation of the everyday on YouTube are situated within, drawing from, and feeding into a vast data flow "marked by dynamic change (both in terms of videos and organization), a diversity of content […], and a […] quotidian frequency, or 'everydayness.'"[67] According to Hartmut Rosa, the resulting increase of "the number of episodes of experience per unit of time" consequentially lets a "compression of experience" occur.[68] With regard to modes of musical reception in networked archives like YouTube, Simon Reynolds states that "every gain in consumer-empowering convenience," such as instant limitless access to data, "has come at the cost of disempowering the power of art to dominate our attention, to induce a state of aesthetic surrender. […] [I]t makes us restless, erodes our ability to focus and be in the moment. We are always interrupting ourselves, disrupting the flow of experience."[69] Indeed, the proliferation of "songifications" seems to satisfy the desire of audiences in frenetic search for new sensations composed from and within the web of constantly accumulating audiovisual aesthetic objects, hopping from one affective stimulus to the next. Particularly the manipulations of audio files by way of auto-tuning, splicing, and looping affords a calculable manufacturing of pleasurable musical material and serve as reliable techniques of turning recorded realia into sonic capital.[70] Moreover, the recognition of realia as a potentially viral source for communal musicking extends into

67 Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2009), 6.

68 Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 124.

69 Reynolds, *Retromania*, 71–72.

70 The term of sonic capital is inspired by Holger Schulze, who theoretically underpins it by way of examining contemporary dispositives of digital media creation, sound design, and music. See Holger Schulze, "Das sonische Kapital. Sound in den digitalen Medien," *SPIEL. Neue Folge* 2017, no. 2 (January 2017): 13–30, https://doi.org/10.3726/spiel.2017.02.02.

the urban public space, including intrusive practices of peer-to-peer surveillance.

However, even the most critical assumptions about the production of musicalised aesthetic objects actually shed little light on the general potentialities of aesthetic experience linked to their consumption. Mark Featherstone counters overgeneralising notions of ubiquitous "affect-hopping," using the example of music television: "[T]heorists of the postmodern often talk of an ideal-type channel-hopping MTV (music television) viewer who flips through different images at such speed that she/he is unable to chain the signifiers together into a meaningful narrative, he/she merely enjoys the multiphrenic intensities and sensations of the surface of the images. Evidence of the extent of such practices […] is markedly lacking."[71] Featherstone instead even likens the intensities of postmodern (mass) media to the "capacity of the ever-changing urban landscape to summon up associations, resemblances and memories," which "feeds the curiosity of the stroller in the crowds"[72] – an observation that preceded and arguably informed his notion of the *electronic flâneur.* The user's disrupted mobility within the platform's hypertext as well as their aesthetic excitability for disconnected striking audiovisual stimulations can indeed entail a freely associative creative engagement with aesthetic objects that does not succumb to the supposed effect of an overall "compression of experience," but is dedicated to the sound object's *inherent* time and sonic eventfulness. In their very distinctive ways, the ear training scores by Alexander Liebermann, the reharmonisations by Charles Cornell, and the quasi-phonorealistic doublings by MonoNeon represent object-*adaptive* musicalisations and, as such, can be seen as – and serve as – observational "dwellings" instead of calculatedly manufactured disruptive affects. Here, similar to the immediate absorption of the fleeting impressions of modern city life by the *flâneur*, purposeless (musical) receptivity as well as adaptive and responsive approaches to sonic emergences of the source material guide the musicalisation of found sound objects and afford further attentive reception and musical produsage. By collapsing the role of the observer and the contributor into one, these practices result in experiential renderings of the produser's initial musical associations and observations which are often characterised by a curious responsiveness. However, just

71 Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2007), 5.

72 Ibid., 74.

as the eventfulness of indexical sound affords such a musically responsive approach, the mere presence – and involuntary communication – of their index effects tends to encourage their further remediation and re-appropriation on YouTube and other social media platforms. Hence, with regard to the musical uptake of human speech, even the most musically self-sufficient observations of speech patterns – especially viral ones – further contribute to the normalisation and perpetuation of pleasurable musical engagement with data-captured human (self-)display and are entangled with intrusive practices of musical "indexploitation" – including practices linked to public ridicule and peer-to-peer surveillance. Moreover, they provide the affective cultural production that the platform serves to its users as content. Against this backdrop, the mere use of samples of bodily presence effects can already be conceived of as an act of "expropriation," generating "involuntary labour that's been alienated from its original environment and put into service in a completely other context, creating profit and prestige for another."[73] Thus, beyond this inquiry into aspects of technological acceleration, techniques of musicalisation, and potentialities of affective stimulation by audiovisual aesthetic objects, a further examination of vernacular practices of musicalisation against the backdrop of trajectories of circulation, iteration, and aspirational labour is indispensable.

3.3 Composing with Computational Surface and Interface Effects

As vernacular banalities of networked interaction and relationality, the signs, signals, and surfaces effected by computational interfaces concretely shape the aesthetic objects and figurations of communal (re-)composition on YouTube. Not only does the interface design of social media platforms have a strong curating impact by introducing regimes of algorithmically mediated visibility, but it also obfuscates the performativity of the underlying computational operations happening at a medial sub-surface via user-friendly surfaces. However, in Internet-mediated creative relay, this obfuscation becomes implicitly thematised time and time again, as audiovisual patterns of computational "interface aesthetics" are constantly re-imagined, represented, and reproduced as elements of vernacular expression. The following chapter aims at disentangling the various vernacular practices on YouTube that musically engage with the virtualities of symbolic human-computer interaction, thereby examining

73 Reynolds, *Retromania*, 314.

the ways they represent and meta-referentially bring to the centre the interface effects which fundamentally shape our online experience "from the edges."

In order to facilitate adequate descriptions of the aesthetic and material properties of digital surfaces and interfaces, the following examination of musical composition with – and through – these vernacular banalities of computational surface structures is in need of some conceptual underpinning, specifically regarding the ways in which new media objects are created, composited, and, most importantly, represented and rendered "tangible." Lev Manovich's description of processes of "transcoding" as an effect of human-computer interfaces is noteworthy against the background of the formation of aesthetic objects of vernacular Internet culture:

> "[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."[74]

The cause-and-effect relation between humans and computer interfaces is situated within a symbolic realm of computation, as an "externalised imagination wherein events happen in effect, but not actually," as media scholar Margaret Morse notes.[75] Alexander Galloway similarly hints at the fundamentally fetishistic logic of such an externalised imagination by writing that "[t]he world no longer indicates to us what it is. We indicate ourselves to it, and in doing so the world materializes in our image."[76] His diagnosis of information aesthetics as a "neo-symbolism in which the monochromatic multiplicity of symbols has engulfed all else"[77] equates the symbolic realm of computation with a hyperreal space which, following Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum, is characterised by the simulation of images and surfaces which do not refer to an "outside." This symbolic recursivity is accompanied by a logic of "spatial montage" linked to the users' interactive movement through – and experience of – the hypertext, opposed to a cinematic experience of montage as modular

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

75 Margaret Morse, *Virtualities: Television, Media Art, and Cyberculture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 180.

76 Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012), 13.

77 Ibid., 85.

events occurring in time.[78] The naturalised interactive "cyberview" of being able to open multiple frames side by side on the computer screen is consequently also expressed via fragmented graphical software interfaces – a prime example are split-screens in video chat programs, which paradigmatically represent the networked condition.[79] Moreover, one could say that, on a macro level, social media platforms are spatial montages in themselves – YouTube, in its archival function, being a striking example for this. Through YouTube's curation and spatial presentation of historically (and culturally) most diverse video content, both the past and present become instantly accessible and are presented simultaneously, as Simon Reynolds notes: "The crucial point about the journeys through time that YouTube and the Internet in general enable is that people are not really going *backwards* at all. They are going *sideways*, moving laterally within an archival plane of space-time [...] The Internet places the remote past and the exotic present side by side. Equally accessible, they become the same thing: far, yet near, old yet now."[80]

In general, graphical computer interfaces realise a presentation of the intangible as tangible, fulfilling in its symbolic fetishism the Debordian notion of the spectacle as a replacement of "the real world [...] by a selection of images which are projected above it, yet which at the same time succeed in making themselves regarded as the epitome of reality."[81] Thereby, the spatial montage of graphical interfaces encompasses a representational turn towards what Reynolds calls the "archival plane of space-time." Indeed, with regard to vernacular composition on YouTube which engages with the aesthetic properties

78 See Manovich, *Language of New Media*, 269–273.

79 The cultural paradigm of "windowing" has also remediated our cinematic experience of multi-screens, as Jim Bizzocchi notes: "An audience that is capable of switching among the multiple screens of the computer desktop's standard Graphic User Interface, or the more rapid oscillation between the control and display frames of a video game, is certainly on the way to parsing a controlled and well-crafted multi-framed cinematic narrative." Jim Bizzocchi, "The Fragmented Frame: The Poetics of the Split-Screen," paper presented at the conference *Media in Transition 6 – Stone and Papyrus, Storage and Transmission, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, April 24–26, 2009*, http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/legacy/mit6/papers/Bizzocchi.pdf.

80 Reynolds, Retromania, 85

81 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (Canberra: Hobgoblin Press, 2002), 12.

and effects of computer interfaces, the awareness of computer-mediated spatio-temporalisation and (a)historicity is an accompanying factor that deserves attention in the examples to come. In her phenomenological approach towards digital surface effects, Ashley Scarlett proposes a conceptualisation of digital materiality that includes the aesthetic capacities of digital objects and their ramifications regarding knowledge formations and productions of meaning by users. While acknowledging that the computational "submedial can never be known as such" and its attempted "exposure merely transforms the submedial into a surface effect,"[82] Scarlett considers the situated aesthetic experience and semiotic examination of these surface effects as a way of making digital materiality "accessible through aesthetic analysis."[83] Her approach offers a vantage point from which the shifting discursive and creative practices of vernacular composition can be conceived of not only as indicators of the affordances and constraints of code, but also as integral modes of symbolic interaction and knowledge production aimed at eliciting meta-awareness of the simulative sphere of computation they are situated in.

Media-Reflective Cyber View and "Cyber Listening"

As the following examples are going to show, vernacular aesthetics that point to the computational subsurface do not have to be exclusively or primarily screenic but may discursively invoke and (re-)produce surface effects by musical and sonic means as well. As an Internet-mediated musical microgenre, "vaporwave" could be seen as paradigmatic for such a media-reflective audiovisual aesthetic. Vaporwave is one of many labels that formed in the context of emerging reflective musical approaches to nostalgia and collective popular memory since the late 2000s – other genre labels include hypnagogic pop, chillwave, or glo-fi, to name just a few. Arguably, all these microgenres represent specified offshoots from the broad musical trend of hauntology, which developed in the UK during the 2000s. As the name already suggests, hauntological music draws on Jacques Derrida's concept of Hauntology. In his book "Spectres de Marx," Derrida lays out his concept of a present – or rather "non-present" – which is continuously haunted by linguistic and ideal

82 Ashley Scarlett, "Interpreting an Improper Materialism: On Aesthesis, Synesthesia and the Digital," *Digital Culture & Society* 1, no. 1 (September 2015): 113, https://doi.org/10.14361/dcs-2015-0108.

83 Ibid., 117.

constructs from the past, thereby questioning the finiteness of history as such. Derrida's thought, derived with respect to the "haunted" history of political and philosophical Marxism can be transferred to any context, as the spectralising linguistic or ideal traces pre-form any human-made concept before it even comes into being – including concepts concerned with interpreting our past. At the same time, every interpretation must be regarded as performative, as it "transforms the very thing it interprets."[84] Inspired by this Derridean concept, hauntological music seeks to reanimate past musical periods through a present-day lens. The trend is focussed on the use of analogue media and recording devices from the 1960s and 1970s, thereby drawing on samples from a vast spectrum of authentic sound sources from the past. This array of musically disparate outcomes prompted the emergence of several microgenres with quite specific musical and sonic approaches to cultural memory, vaporwave arguably being the first one to emerge and stay entirely situated within the fabric of digitally mediated vernacular co-creation. The label's formation, further negotiation and circulation on internet boards like Last.fm or Reddit in the early 2010s secured a wide online audience – and further inevitable offshoots. Like its musical precursors, vaporwave builds on the "re-appropriation of the cultural detritus of a media-saturated capitalist social order"[85] by remixing 1980s and 1990s corporate mood music, including elevator music, lounge jazz, or synth pop. It thereby relies entirely on samples, often entire pieces, which are slowed down, looped, pitch-shifted or otherwise manipulated. Despite the pioneering effort and influence of artists like James Ferraro and Daniel Lopatin, vaporwave is characterised by a pointedly communal spirit with respect to individual creation, which does not aim at attaining stylistic distinction. YouTube serves as an ever-expanding archive for the curation and diffusion of vaporwave playlists and 24/7 vaporwave radio channels based on exhibiting musical and visual "vaporwave aesthetics."[86]

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84 See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 63.

85 Adam Trainer, "From Hypnagogia to Distroid: Postironic Musical Renderings of Personal Memory," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Virtuality*, ed. Sheila Whiteley and Shara Rambarran (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 414.

86 Video titles and descriptions often feature the word "a e s t h e t i c," which serves as a recognisable signal for other insiders. Ross Cole aptly describes its distinctive character spacing as a "metonym for ambient emptiness." See Ross Cole, "Vaporwave Aesthetics: Internet Nostalgia and the Utopian Impulse," *ASAP/Journal* 5, no. 2 (May 2020): 301, https://doi.org/10.1353/asa.2020.0008.

Figure 6: Cover of the album "Floral Shoppe" by Macintosh Plus (released digitally on Bandcamp in 2011).[87] *Macintosh Plus, Floral Shoppe, Beer on the Rug BOTR009, 2011, digital album, https://vektroid.bandcamp.com/album/floral-shoppe.*

The composition of vaporwave tracks has emerged as an exclusively Internet-situated vernacular practice due to low-threshold and quasi-formulaic digital means of creation: besides slowing down the entire track, the "vaporwave sound" is attained by simple additions of surreal reverb effects, subtle pitch shifts, or high and low pass filters, which can be added via free plug-ins in digital audio workstations – or, even easier, by using a free app like

87 The album's second track, "リサフランク420 / 現代のコンピュ," widely popularised the microgenre on YouTube and is often considered a blueprint for the vaporwave sound. See @ChocolateGinger, "MACINTOSH PLUS – 420 / |(reupload)," May 11, 2018, YouTube video, 7:21, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aQkPcPqTq4M.

"CD-ROMantic," which automatically generates entire vaporwave albums based on the uploaded original tracks.[88] Different from early hauntological music, no historical technological settings are being re-enacted in order to evoke cultural memory or associations to analogue sound production. According to media theorist Wolfgang Ernst, only the processuality of actually using analogue devices such as tape or vinyl players would transform these historical media into "media-archeological objects,"[89] or even into "active 'archeologists' of knowledge" themselves[90] – an aspect which is entirely missing in the production of vaporwave, as the sound-generating technological setting is completely emulated by automated software procedures to create the impression of "grainy" sound textures or subtle pitch shifts associated with tape and vinyl records. Thus, with regard to the reception of vaporwave, one could detect a disregard of the "media-archeological ear" in favour of an "ahistoric listening." However, this argument misses the point, as it ignores today's overall post-media condition in digital environments of media convergence, which the vaporwave aesthetic reflectively points at by evoking detectable sonic interface effects that are neither primarily linked to historical technologies nor used as a disguise, but rather hyper-affirmed as fetishistic computational surfaces. Thus, the composition of vaporwave appears to be informed by what David M. Berry, with regard to "post-digital" aesthetics, calls the "implicit notion of surfaces as theatres of action and performance […] which highlights the machinery of computation" (and is by no means exclusive

88 MAA FOR APPS, "CD-ROMantic: Slowed + Reverb," Google Play, version 3.2.3d (last update June 19, 2024), https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=maa.slowed_reverb.vaporwave_music_maker. Of course, the "trippy" effect of slowing down entire tracks is not without historical predecessors. For instance, the similarities to the aesthetic of the "chopped and screwed" remix technique, which emerged in Houston's hip-hop scene, are noticeable: "Chopped and screwed" remixes became popularised by DJ Screw's mixtapes in the early 1990s and are characterised by slowed down tempos, scratching techniques, and skipped beats, resulting in "chopped and screwed" versions of the remixed tracks. Unsurprisingly, the influence of DJ Screw on the vaporwave genre has been discussed in online boards such as Reddit. See @RockoTreez, "Does the Vaporwave community recognize the influence of DJ Screw?," r/Vaporwave, Reddit, June 11, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/39g95g/does_the_vaporwave_community_recognize_the/.

89 Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive*, ed. Jussi Parikka (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 177.

90 Ibid., 55.

to screenic interface-centric approaches).[91] All in all, the microgenre meta-referentially engages with the specific hauntedness – or: the "non-past" and "non-present" – of visual, sonic, and musical patterns and textures within a computationally accelerated simulacric (pop-)cultural space. It emerged in awareness of a media environment which continually accumulates images and styles, where the "new spatial logic of the simulacrum," as Fredric Jameson puts it,[92] can fully unfold, condemning us "to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach."[93] The visual imagery, which can exist on its own or complement a concrete piece, co-constitutes the modular aesthetic of vaporwave and only reinforces this impression: communal contributions engaged with the co-development of a visual "vaporwave vernacular" typically include motifs from late 90s web design, 3D renderings, classic video games, Japanese letterings, skylines, company logos, and many more, often composed in collage form.[94] The pattern aesthetic of the visuals, in combination with the slowed down and surrealistically manipulated musical detritus found on YouTube and other online archives, aims at evoking a "reflective nostalgia" for a past that never existed[95] – and, through its eery retro-futuristic renderings of aesthetic objects which invoke early cyber-capitalist utopias: for a future that never was.[96]

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91 David M. Berry, "The Postdigital Constellation," in *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, Computation, and Design*, eds. David M. Berry and Michael Dieter (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 44.

92 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 18.

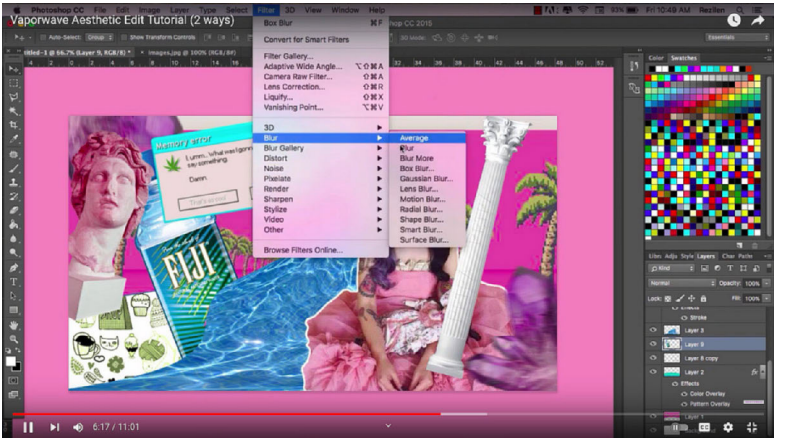
93 Ibid., 25.

94 See this video tutorial on how to create vaporwave collages: @SquishyTutorialsx, "Vaporwave Aesthetic Edit Tutorial (2 ways)," July 1, 2016, YouTube video, 11:01, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OmZUIuxAYB8.

95 See Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 49.

96 The link to Derrida's notion of hauntology, however, remains superficial. Vaporwave does not represent an "applied theory" of Derrida's writings, since this would require reference to and discursive engagement with the historical layers pertaining to the assembled cultural objects. Rather to the contrary, historical and cultural specificities of appropriated aesthetic objects are hardly retained but rather blurred in mashups guided by demonstrative indifference and hyper-affirmation of the genre's fundamentally ahistorical character.

Figure 7: Still from the "Vaporwave Aesthetic Edit Tutorial" by @SquishyTutorialsx (2016).



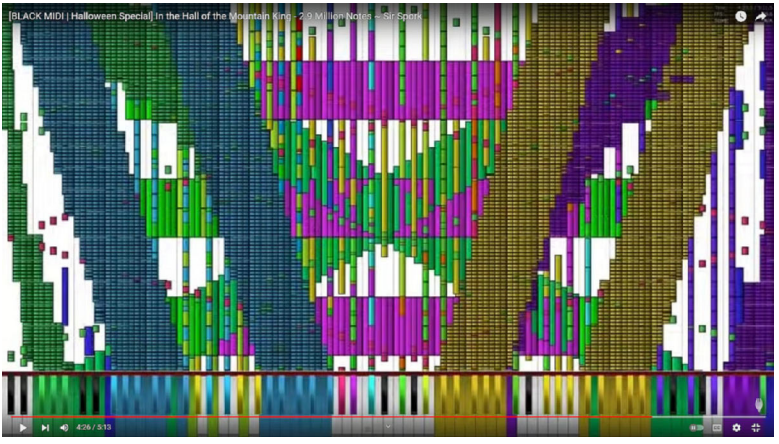
Banal Interfaces and Musical Events

Notwithstanding the fact that the visual pattern aesthetic of vaporwave at times includes representations of concrete computational objects and frames (see Figure 7), the symbolic remediations of technologies and their aesthetic properties – for instance through the use of automated surreal colourisation/saturation/blurring effects or, on the musical level, vinyl pitch shifts and crackles – render perceptible the properties of the used software filters and plug-ins in a rather *implicitly* interface-centric fashion. In contrast, the phenomenon of "Black MIDI" on YouTube can be characterised as an *explicitly* interface-centric musical practice. Black MIDI, as a term, emerged in 2009, when the first compositions were uploaded on the Japanese video-sharing platform Nico Nico Douga (since 2012 known as Niconico).[97] It denotes compositions based on MIDI files that include an excessive amount of notes, up to millions or billions, in the form of MIDI signals. Written out in musical notation, the score would appear "blacked out," hence the name. While the first Black MIDI compositions included an accompanying screen recording of the playback by a notation software, the convention shifted to solely record the

97 See, for example, @白鷺ゆっきー, "【East】I tried to black the score of the modified version of Final Savage Sister Flandre S.," July 27, 2009, Niconico video, 10:41, https://www.nicovideo.jp/watch/sm7764460.

playback by virtual MIDI piano softwares around the time Black MIDI became more than a niche phenomenon and started to spread on YouTube – one could thus argue that Black MIDI, in its current visual representation, emerged as a YouTube-specific vernacular musicking practice. Musically, arrangements of pre-existing musical pieces are far more common than original compositions, ranging from video game music over anime soundtracks to famous pop songs.

Figure 8: Still from @Sir Spork's Black MIDI arrangement of Edvard Grieg's "In the Hall of the Mountain King."



By becoming Black MIDI, the musical material is enriched to the point of not only becoming impossible to play for humans, but also challenging with regard to the processing capacities of the computer. Transparent and "consumable" sound patterns are enabled by distinct MIDI sounds, while dissonances are somewhat contained by their low volume and their balanced distribution across the whole frequency spectrum – however, this impression does not last long, as the tracks usually escalate into a barrage of notes, letting the tone-noise ratio tilt by introducing loud "mega clusters" and decreasing the temporal intervals of repeated notes.[98] The graphical user interfaces of the playback

98 See, for example, this Black MIDI arrangement by @Sir Spork with 2.9 million notes: @Sir Spork, "[BLACK MIDI | Halloween Special] In the Hall of the Mountain King – 2.9 Million Notes ~ Sir Spork," October 31, 2017, YouTube video, 5:13, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXRPchyPXfI.

software – such as Synthesia or Virtual MIDI Keyboard – furthermore suggest concrete visual creations, as both the spatial arrangement of the visualised MIDI signals and the possibility of displaying them in different colours often result in intricate visual creations which complete the multimodal experience.

Despite unarguably being an Internet-born and YouTube-situated musical practice, Black MIDI, in its embrace of the material agency of computational interfaces within a distributed human-software system, has an analogue ancestor, namely the Studies for Player Piano by Conlon Nancarrow. For his Studies, which he composed between 1948 and 1992, Nancarrow manually punched piano rolls for his self-playing piano, creating highly complex rhythmic proportions that exceed human playing capabilities and, quite often, notational possibilities. The spatiality of the piano roll and the automatic playback afforded a new temporal control, most apparent in his proportional canons that would imitate the melody or entire scores at different speeds – an approach that arguably climaxed with his Study 41c (composed 1969–1977), a double proportional canon for two player pianos with the ratios $\frac{\frac{1}{\sqrt[3]{\pi}} / \sqrt[3]{1316}}{\frac{1}{\sqrt{\pi}} / \sqrt{23}}$.[99] Whereas, in Nancarrow's case, the piano roll can be detected as the human-machine interface which enables and shapes the musical rendering, the determination of *the* corresponding human-machine interface with regard to the digitised vernacular practice of composing or arranging Black MIDI proves to be futile. Merriam-Webster's definitions of interface as "the place at which independent and often unrelated systems meet and act on or communicate with each other" and "a surface forming a common boundary of two bodies, spaces, or phases"[100] help imagine the *mise-en-abyme* structure of human-computer interfaces: The Musical Instrument Digital Interface (MIDI) itself, as a communications protocol, can only be accessed and implemented by physical interfaces – such as controllers, mouse, and keyboard – in combination with visual software interfaces. Moreover, following the above-mentioned definition, the signaletic sound event that occurs when a MIDI file is triggered could be defined as a sonic interface by itself. However, commonly it is the *visual* interface which is mistaken for "interface" as a whole, as it is that what we permanently perceive as "workable" when operating the computer – it is within the frame, seemingly

99 See Margaret Thomas, "'Not Exact, but Near Enough': Complexity and Playfulness in Nancarrow's Study No. 41," *American Music Review* 42, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 10–13, http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/web/aca_centers_hitchcock/AMR_42-1_Fall2012.pdf.

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

not operating from "outside." Alexander Galloway calls this kind of interface the "intraface," as it can be defined "as an internal interface between the edge and the center but one that is now entirely subsumed and contained within the image."[101]

Yet, in terms of Black MIDI compositions, the intraface of the used playback software, which we get to see in the YouTube videos is merely used as a means of visualisation and succeeds the actual programming of the MIDI files. The example of the software Synthesia, which has become the aesthetic standard for Black MIDI visualisation, helps clarify this: Synthesia is a software aimed at the gamification of keyboard practice, encouraging players to press their keys following a visualised MIDI file which moves from top to bottom. The software, which was released in 2006, combines the conventional visualisation of MIDI files known from digital audio workstations with the already widely popularised design of the game Guitar Hero – Synthesia is therefore also known as "Piano Hero." For its clean "MIDI look" and its gamified "Guitar Hero aesthetic," which increases the impression of "workability," the intraface standard set by Synthesia represents a vernacular banality which, due to its immediately palatable design, has become the most spreadable template for the representation of Black MIDI. However, the actual MIDI file is programmed using digital audio workstations or MIDI sequencers and then transferred to the playback software like Synthesia,[102] the intraface of which then visualises the playback of MIDI signals. Along the lines of what media theorist Joanna Zylinska noted with regard to visual retro-fetishism in digital art, the symbolic fetish of the "MIDI interface aesthetics" is knowingly embraced "as a construct and figuration, without relinquishing a desire for it."[103] The audiovisual surface of Black MIDI is shaped from the edges, yet it does not aim at bringing about notions of "autonomous machines." Rather, Black MIDI can be seen as a playful compositional practice deliberately aimed at pushing the envelope of computational processing capabilities. Here lies the irony – or the humour – of Black MIDI: the "banality" of the used MIDI sounds and the intraface is in stark contrast to the high demands that are made on the computer's performance in terms of RAM and processing speed. In order to avoid performance

101 Galloway, *Interface Effect*, 40–41.

102 To attain different colours different colours, one can create multiple tracks within the MIDI file itself.

103 Joanna Zylinska, *AI Art: Machine Visions and Warped Dreams* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2020), 70.

issues, a high-performance system is needed; additionally, lags can be avoided by recording the playback slowed down and speeding it up again in the video editing process.[104] Although the underlying computational operations are disguised, the represented interfaces, as naturalised and banal aesthetic objects, become concomitantly de-banalised over the course of a video, as they set the stage on which Black MIDI's characteristic "aesthetic of impossibility" unfolds: conventional forms of MIDI usage linked to the qualities normally ascribed to MIDI, such as low data volume and operational reliability, are taken ad absurdum by the sheer quantity of processed signals, the musical and visual outcome of which theatrically represents human and material agencies fostered by human-computer interfaces.

Software Glitches and Aesthetics of Failure

Despite the exploration and exploitation of processing capabilities towards an "aesthetic of impossibility," the software's functionality is preserved in Black MIDI produsage. Moreover, although the surfaces attain a theatrical function, the performativity of underlying code is not brought to the centre of attention, as, ironically, the explicit interface-centricity of the Black MIDI aesthetic obfuscates the underlying *mise-en-abyme* of interfaces. In comparison, the aforementioned aesthetic ascribed to the microgenre of vaporwave consists of sonic and visual surfaces which do not render the submedial layers legible either, but, as deliberately "poor images" engaged with their own "non-past" and "non-present," implicitly refer to the computational regime of spatial montage and the accompanying simulacrum of "haunted" pop-cultural images that are collectively imagined as tangible and desirable. A third option of musically re-imagining, representing, and reproducing vernacular audiovisual patterns of computational "interface aesthetics" can be found in approaches concerned with revealing the computer's functionality through technological limitations and "failures." As composer Kim Cascone points out, an "aesthetics of failure" in the digital realm is concerned with exploring "[t]he data hidden in our perceptual 'blind spot' […] by capturing and examining

104 See Sam Reising, "The Opposite of Brain Candy – Decoding Black MIDI," *NewMusicBox*, April 15, 2015, https://nmbx.newmusicusa.org/the-opposite-of-brain-candy-decoding-black-midi.

the area beyond the boundary of 'normal' functions and uses of software."[105] The disruptive moment of temporary dysfunctionality created by exploiting software "glitches" – i.e. provoked or unprovoked computational errors – is central to any computer-related "aesthetics of failure" in that it marks a perlocutionary effect with transformational potential: it renders those interface effects recognisable that elude direct recognisability. Hence, Lori Emerson asserts that glitch "defamiliarizes the slick surface of the hardware/software of the computer and so ideally transforms us into critically minded observers of the underlying workings of the computer."[106] Although technically, a glitch is defined as a result of an error, sometimes the default functions of a program can be exploited to bring about unpredictable and unintended changes. Thus, Olga Goriunova and Alexei Shulgin point out that "[w]hat users might perceive as 'glitchy' can arise from a normally working function of a program."[107] In the following example, the term "glitch" is applied in such a colloquial manner.

In his YouTube video series "JOTW" ("Jam of the Week"), Simon Fransman creates crude performances of jazz standards by 3D animated virtual personas that are synchronised by instrumental recordings or voice synthesis,[108] often embedded in bizarre voice-over narratives which are focussed on character development and situated in contexts connected to jazz and meme subculture on and beyond YouTube.[109] The audiovisual compositions in this series make de-

105 Kim Cascone, "The Aesthetics of Failure: 'Post-Digital' Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music," *Computer Music Journal* 24, no. 4 (Winter 2000), 13–14, https://doi.org/10.1162/014892600559489.

106 Lori Emerson, "Glitch Aesthetics," in *Hopkins Guide to Digital Media*, eds. Marie-Laure Ryan, Lori Emerson, and Benjamin J. Robertson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 236.

107 Olga Goriunova and Alexei Shulgin, "Glitch," in Software Studies: A Lexicon, ed. Matthew Fuller (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 111.

108 See, for example, Fransman's "JOTW" video featuring a rendition of Antônio Carlos Jobim's bossa nova/jazz standard "Wave"(2015): @Simon Fransman, "Wave – a Jam of the Week Tribute," October 21, 2015, YouTube video, 2:06, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRvEy2YE8cs.

109 In Fransman's JOTW video "How To Play Funk with Mr. Magic," which features fellow jazz musicians Rob Araujo and Joe Albano as animated avatars, Araujo presents his "dank 420 synth" that "comes pre-programmed with 120 dank memes," before referencing famous jazz pieces and clichés in his playing, such as the opening phrases from Charlie Parker's "Scrapple from the Apple" and Sonny Rollins' "St. Thomas" – and, of course, the inevitable "lick," a diatonic phrase that keeps reappearing in jazz records and is often used with comedic intent, particularly in the context of online

liberate use of the eventfulness of random or unpredictable glitches that the used software concomitantly afford. For instance, in order to attain his vocals, Fransman exports a MIDI file of the arranged piece into the musical notation and rendering software "Melody Assistant" and, depending on the respectively performing virtual persona, selects a different vocal synthesizer and a different set of sung words or syllables – in the case of the character "Bom Bom," he chooses a bass voice, the syllables "bom bom," and a Finnish language preset.[110] In addition to the comical effect of the synth voices, often increased by the programming of humanly unsingable passages, Fransman makes use of the unpredictable lags in playback mode, which the software is known for, thereby generating autonomous musical events that intersperse the vocal parts and result in counter-intuitive, stumbling micro-rhythms. The musical rendering is accompanied by "glitchy" 3D animations created with the software iClone 6: the avatars' facial and bodily expression settings and "morph animations" allow for bizarre movements like uncontrollably flailing arms, bobbing and rotating heads, or postures and slides that defy the laws of gravity. In tactically precipitating these musical and visual events of computed chaos, Fransman aims at exposing and, in a manner of speaking, de-automating the underlying automated procedures. Given its aesthetics of failure and profanity, his compositional approach towards creating his virtual performers can be seen as a discursively vernacular performance, contrasting the commensurability of animated Vocaloid pop personae – like the virtual anime character Hatsune Miku – which are tailored to become smoothly embedded in industrially standardised production chains, including music videos, live concerts, merchandising, etc.[111]

Fransman's "JOTW" videos are influenced by the cultural dialect of "Internet Ugly," which is most prevalent in visual Internet memes and rooted in an ethos of "voluntary constraints and affected visual carelessness" and the re-functionalisation of software tools originally "meant to smooth and

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jazz communities. Simon Fransman, "How To Play Funk with Mr. Magic – FEAT. ROB ARAUJO & JOE ALBANO," July 29, 2016, YouTube video, 6:49, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q0N5MNPhTzk&t.

110 See @Simon Fransman, "How Bom Bom Is Made – Step by Step Tutorial," November 27, 2017, YouTube video, 2:06, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKTJIZMwvSs.

111 See Holger Schulze, "Das sonische Kapital," 21.

beautify."[112] In his videos, an authorial function is bestowed upon the glitch itself in order to bring about a "not-entirely human-produced reality, […] not one-hundred percent compatible with customary human logic, visual, sound, or behavioral conventions […]."[113] In embracing – and provoking – random aesthetic effects of seemingly dysfunctional computational procedures, the failure of (computational) performance becomes a performance of failure at the same time. A glitch does not actually render legible the computational subsurface, yet it perforates the audiovisual surface with aesthetic effects that hint at the underlying performativity of code, thus marking a medial transformation which potentially encompasses discourses and evidences *within* and *about* the architecture of software interfaces.

Figure 9: Still from a "JOTW" video by Simon Fransman, featuring a rendition of Antônio Carlos Jobim's bossa nova/jazz standard "Wave" (2015) – "Bom Bom" is playing guitar and singing the bass lines, an unnamed singer is unnaturally bobbing her head.

112 Nick Douglas, "It's Supposed to Look Like Shit: The Internet Ugly Aesthetic," *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (December 2014): 337 and 315. https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412914544516.

113 Goriunova and Shulgin, "Glitch," 115. Goriunova and Shulgin thus call glitches "a manifestation of genuine software aesthetics" (ibid., 111).

As the examples in this chapter show, contributions engaged with the exposure of computational surface effects hold the potential to invoke, in their own ways, an ethos of Internet-situated vernacular creativity through the remediation, de-familiarisation, and perforation of implicitly or explicitly interface-centric audiovisual figurations, which are collectively (re-)imagined as elements of vernacular expression. Against the background of the domestication of personal computers and the accompanying obfuscation of interfaces, the (re-)composed surface and interface effects call attention to the underlying (im)material agencies which afford the collective imagination of new media objects as "tangible." As Diane Gromala and Jay David Bolter note, in the institutionally territorialised symbolic realm of computation the user is expected "to focus on the task, not the interface itself […] If the application calls attention to itself or intrudes into the user's conscious consideration, this is usually considered a design flaw."[114] Yet, interface-centric vernacular (re-)compositions gain authority by actually pointing to – and developing – the screenic and sonic repertoire of interface effects, becoming meaningful exactly by way of implicit and explicit meta-reference to the all-encompassing symbolic realm with institutional imprint, the computational procedures of which are realised by a below-surface dimension that renders itself invisible. By way of co-creating productive and playful aesthetic experiential renderings of computational surface effects, aimed at their re-domestication within communal or community-oriented practices, vernacular compositional practices invoke an ethos of bottom-up cultural making. Thereby, they potentially afford a certain accessibility – through discursive and aesthetic examination – to forms and agencies of digital materiality which, by subsuming and informing any communicative and creative networked practice, shape our aesthetic online experience and concomitantly accelerate the proliferation of images and aesthetic patterns attributed to popular and digital culture.

114 Jay David Bolter and Diane Gromala, *Windows and Mirrors: Interaction Design, Digital Art, and the Myth of Transparency* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 375.

4 Circulation, Imitation, and Play

Affective and Formal Dimensions of Contagious Musical Remix

Remixed forms and formats need to circulate in high volume in order to attain visibility on and beyond the platform. In processes of re-composition, they spread via quasi-hypnotic imitative encounters, over the course of which affective stimuli are passed on and result in ever-new generic conventions. In opposition to celebratory views on participatory culture, on the one hand, and to naturalising notions of virality, on the other, the following analyses and reflections aim to make describable the textual, temporal, social, and affective dimensions of collaborative and combinatorial remix. My discussion affirms human agency in these circulatory processes, even as it preserves concepts of contagion to help animate themes of imitation, affect, and play. Necessary revisions of Dawkins's meme theory in this context are inflected by readings of Henry Jenkins, Tony Sampson, and Gabriel Tarde. Guided by Tarde's approach to contagion in socio-cultural contexts, I point out how imitative encounters rely more on a shared sub-representational state than on concrete media objects that mobilise circulation. Such a concept of contagion seems apt for vernacular re-composition, as (musical) produsage on sites like YouTube is always changing its media objects through processes of creative relay: communal co-creation generates surplus effects that constantly re-form and fragment conventions, entailing inner branchings, oppositions, and graftings of material and ideational forms of remix.

Moreover, against this backdrop, the chapter conceptually demarcates the sphere of what I want to call "meta-memetic remix," which is playfully constituted via creative relay of concise short forms with materially repeatable templates and operational and constitutive features (or "rules"). Through an in-depth look at its established pragmatic conventions and compositional

competencies, this second sub-chapter provides a comprehensive conceptualisation of platform-mediated "meme music" beyond mechanistic notions of virality and contagion.

4.1 Conceptual Remix Beyond Notions of Mechanistic Virality

On the basis of the confluence of algorithmic curation and the various kinds of read/write activity, contributions of produsers on YouTube become categorised and interlinked, granting them visibility and encouraging others to contribute to the overall data stream by way of sharing, re-contextualising, and re-signifying media content. One could thus say that the platform's functionality as an archive and a communicative environment – situated within the infrastructure of social media at large – enables a "collaborative remixability" of content. The technological affordances for high-volume remixability, however, arise with the modular condition of new media itself. As Lev Manovich points out, "a new media object consists of independent parts, each of which consists of smaller independent parts, and so on, down to the level of the smallest 'atoms' – pixels, 3-D points, or text characters."[1] This fundamental modularity affords operations of selection and compositing, meaning that a new media object can be assembled from different sources, allowing its elements to "retain their separate identities and, therefore, [to] be easily modified, substituted, or deleted."[2] With regard to the musical remixing of multimodal media objects constituted by separate layers of audio, video, and text, the potential modifications are manifold. However, it is the emergence of social networks aimed at curating the creative contributions of users that encourages and perpetuates *collaborative* media remix and thus enables the massive spread and proliferation of forms, formats, and concepts of vernacular networked re-composition. The repertoires of iterative compositional practices on YouTube evolve within a networked media environment characterised by the convergence of old and new media as well as of cultural and computational logics. It is not least because of this that the tripartite structuring of the preceding chapter, which exemplified and analysed vernacular compositional practices in relation to their aesthetic objects of fascination (computational objects, audiovisual objets trouvés, music video-like figurations), needs to be regarded as an intro-

1 Manovich, *Language of New Media*, 30.

2 Ibid., 139.

ductory taxonomy which, for the purpose of better understanding, sought to identify and define compositional trajectories towards the (meta-)referential engagement with the cultural, historical, and medial layers of said aesthetic objects. Of course, the therein described compositional phenomena have to be imagined as necessarily entangled, as the digital condition of media convergence affords and downright suggests the navigation and traversal of the (im)material dimensions of aesthetic media objects in playful, combinatorial ways.

As conceptualisations of the participatory condition – and of processes of produsage – suggest, information needs to circulate in order to become visible and, thus, collaboratively recognisable and (re-)producable as significant cultural content. Vernacular networked composition on YouTube follows the same logic: in order to become inscribed into a general compositional repertoire, audiologovisual forms and formats need to circulate. Both the sharing of contributions and iterative, referential, and palimpsestic creative relay increase the visibility of musical content and provide orientation and inspiration for further platform-situated – and community-oriented – musical contributions. The need for a sufficient volume of shares and contributions in participatory networked practices is extensively thematised in Henry Jenkins', Sam Ford's, and Joshua Green's book on *Spreadable Media* (2013). As the authors note, cultural content in participatory new media needs to attain a quality of "spreadability" in order to become and stay relevant. In their own words, "[s]preadability refers to the technical resources that make it easier to circulate some kinds of content than others, the economic structures that support or restrict circulation, the attributes of a media text that might appeal to a community's motivation for sharing material, and the social networks that link people through the exchange of meaningful bytes."[3] As the last part of the sentence already indicates, Jenkins, Ford, and Green are building their concept of spreadability on their perception of human networked actors as sovereign creators of *meaningful* cultural exchange. Even more so, they start from the assumption "that anything worth hearing will circulate through any and all available channels,"[4] stressing the human agency regarding the circulation of data – and seemingly affirming any kind of online participation as a democratic act based on the awareness and active engagement of individuals. Against this backdrop, it is

3 Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 3.

4 Ibid., 7

not surprising that the authors actively seek to oppose metaphors of contagion, such as buzzwords of "viral" media and "memes," by introducing their paradigm of spreadability. In a blog post, Jenkins states that "[a] continued dependency on terms based in biological phenomena dramatically limits our ability to adequately describe media circulation as a complex system of social, technological, textual, and economic practices and relations."[5] Contrary to this hasty rejection of notions of virality, the following reflections can be considered an attempt to apply concepts of contagion beyond naturalising depictions of passive users and active media viruses. It seems to me that a thorough and comparative look at existing conceptualisations – not only those exclusively pertaining to digital culture – helps shed light on issues of imitation, affective labour, and play from a more differentiated and critical standpoint, especially with regard to networks of digital distribution as well as aspects of human consciousness.

Contagion Beyond Neo-Darwinian Conceptualisations

Regardless of the concrete renderings of notions of virality in business jargon, evolutionary theories, or simply through colloquial use, the buzzword of "viral" content generally describes the massive circulation of digital units through online communities and platforms by way of sharing, interlinking, and re-uploading, while definitions of a "meme" point to *iterative* processes of circulation and re-contextualisation, thus requiring the creation of multiple derivative versions of digital objects or content. When Richard Dawkins introduced his concept of the meme in his 1976 book "The Selfish Gene,"[6] nobody could have predicted that his term would become widely used – while hardly being re-conceptualised in a thorough manner – in the context of participatory online culture. Dawkins originally derived the term from the Greek *μίμημα* (mīmēma) (meaning "that which is imitated"), the French *le même*, and the similar sounding "gene." The latter being his main inspiration, he conceives of a meme as a *cultural* analogue of the gene, due to the gene's function as an information carrier for *biological* inheritance and evolution. Thus, the biologist

5 Henry Jenkins, "If It Doesn't Spread, It's Dead (Part Two): Sticky and Spreadable – Two Paradigms," website of Henry Jenkins, February 13, 2009, http://henryjenkins.org/2009/02/if_it_doesnt_spread_its_dead_p_1.html.

6 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 2nd ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

Dawkins defines the meme as "a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation,"[7] thereby exemplifying his notion by listing numerous possible "units" of memetic conveyance such as "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches."[8] Consequentially, given the initial point of his undertaking, Dawkins compares patterns of cultural evolution with biological mechanisms by applying the respective terminology: replication, "memotype," "phemotype," selection, mutation, etc. He describes the replication of "memes" in analogy to cell division and, as a consequence thereof, to DNA replication, thereby perceiving any means of communication as a possible catalyst for cultural transmission. Although, according to Dawkins, these processes of replication do not result in mere copies of ideas, his meme theory starts from the assumption of an "essential core" of a message that is culturally reproduced and permanently undergoes processes of variation and selection, which often are not subjectively informed. Dawkins disregards the fact that any exchange of thoughts, ideas, or feelings – which already are representations by themselves – can only take place by means of mediating signs, which again are interpreted by subsequent signs in potentially endless succession. Neither does his naturalising meme theory appear compatible with any semiotic model of representation, nor does it offer any gain of knowledge regarding complex linguistic and cultural processes of translation or the ways in which the sub-representative affective charge of communicative and medial surface effects can trigger imitative activity. The result is an abridged illustration of socio-cultural contexts, which consequently also characterises many adaptions of Dawkins' theory: the widely used conception of humans as passive hosts for virulent memes in the field of (post-)Dawkinian meme theory, combined with a lack of definitional clarity and terminological reflection, drew widespread criticism across disciplines in the humanities. Given the neo-Darwinian orientation of Dawkins' theory of cultural contagion, Jenkins' objection to viral metaphors in the context of online participation seems all too understandable. However, the emergence of a cultural logic of participation and sharing in our digital information space has entailed the shift of the originally Dawkinian concept of the meme to a term of everyday parlance: in the context of today's Internet culture, a meme is generally perceived as cultural content (e.g., in the form of images or a small video files) that is continually re-contextualised and varied in a playful manner

7 Ibid., 192.

8 Ibid.

within or across online communities. As Limor Shifman's conceptualisation of the term suggests, it may have been three Dawkinian attributions that led to its embracement by Internet communities before it became an independent pop-cultural buzzword: In his book, Dawkins states "longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity" as three fundamental qualities for high survival value among memes.[9] Shifman argues that these qualities appear to be potentiated and rationalisable in social media environments, in that a digital artefact allows for its lossless circulation ("copying-fidelity"), its high and fast diffusion ("fecundity"), and its potentially perpetual storage ("longevity").[10] While the analysed "cultural unit" in Dawkinian meme theory stays abstract and speculative, Shifman's notion of "memetic remix" refers to iterations of concrete visual and audiovisual contents and forms which are traceable in terms of their diffusion, continual variation, and re-contextualisation. Moreover, contrary to the Dawkinian meme, an Internet meme, according to Shifman, is *intentionally* created and circulated, serving as a playful (meta-)discursive contribution within a transtextual fabric. Dawkins himself hinted at this major difference to his concept: "An Internet meme is a hijacking of the original idea. Instead of mutating by random chance, before spreading by a form of Darwinian selection, Internet memes are altered deliberately by human creativity. In the hijacked version, mutations are designed – not random – with the full knowledge of the person doing the mutating."[11]

Interestingly, different from Shifman's re-conceptualisation of memetic remix as a deliberate practice primarily based on human agency, Paula Harper argues for the usage of notions of viral spread in order to conceptually counter "narratives of digital utopia, in which the World Wide Web and other digital platforms are framed as liberatory sites of democratic, creative production and exchange," noting that "[a]n erasure of 'viral' language can function to obscure the ways in which corporate protocols constrain, manage, and profit from such proliferating user action and content."[12] Tony D. Sampson's book "Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks," which provides a whole theory of contagion in the age of social networking, gainfully develops and

9 Ibid., 194.

10 See Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 17.

11 Richard Dawkins, "Just for Hits," lecture, Saatchi & Saatchi New Directors' Showcase at Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity, Cannes, June 20, 2013, video of lecture, 8:46, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T5DOiZ8Y3bs.

12 Harper, "Unmute This," 10–11.

differentiates this thought. Sampson notes the popularity of viral metaphors in business practices, used in marketing rhetoric with the aim of propagating and predicting the circulation of products, content, innovations, and the increase of socio-cultural influence of commercial enterprises in digital networks. In this context, he points out the underlying assumption of cultural contagion as "a mechanistic virality analogically compared to the canonical imprint of genetic code," occurring "in a representational space of collective contamination in which individual persons who become part of a crowd tend toward thinking in the same mental images (real and imagined)."[13] Hereby, Sampson identifies the widely uncontested neo-Darwinian logic of cultural contagion in business-oriented models of networked virality, which are based on the assumption of determinable cultural units with essential cores which spread and are imitated in a networked sphere characterised by a universal logic of representation and commensurability. His book counters this assumption by introducing a Tardean notion of consciousness, aiming at re-conceptualising viral and memetic spread in networked environments beyond the naturalising constraints of evolutionary theory as well as overly affirmative fantasies of free and meaningful networked participation. A main inspiration for Deleuzian thought, Gabriel Tarde's works – particularly his *Laws of Imitation* (1890) – are known for his relational approach to sociality, based on the notion of an assemblage-like folding of the social and biological as well as of the corporeal and incorporeal. For Tarde, social inventions and subjectivity form via imitative encounters which, by actualising organically essential desires as well as social desires, lead to imitative and repetitive activity. It is this activity that, according to Tarde, constitutes the relational field of the social in the first place. As Sampson elaborates, Tarde "prefigured an epidemiological relationality in which things (caffeine, sentimental novels, pornographic works, and all manner of consumer goods) mix with emotions, moods, and affects – an atmosphere awash with hormones, making people happy or sad, sympathetic or apathetic, and a space in which affects are significantly passed on or suggested to others."[14] The relationality of the Tardean imitative encounter is thus not explicable on a representational level; it is rather the affective charge of cultural content that spreads, expressed in the formation of cultural fashions followed by way of repetition, imitation,

13 Tony D. Sampson, *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 61.

14 Ibid., 59.

and iteration. In the context of networked remixing, cultural artefacts might spread materially from surface to surface, thus enabling imitative encounters. Yet, there exists no universal fantasy bound to concrete audiovisual figurations and events. Hence, Sampson, in Deleuzian terms, understands cultural contagion as the passing on of "phantom events" which can be characterised as surplus effects of the nonconscious that etablish the relation of "social corporeality (bodies) and the incorporeal event (the imitative encounter or passing on of the event)."[15] These phantom events affectively stimulate the individual, suggest imitation, and thus underlie the social invention of – and belief in – objects of desire. In other words, the moment of contamination is taking place on a sub-representational level, very different from the idea of measurable cultural units that spread analogically to genes. Based on the postulation of an inseparable entanglement of biological processes and social experience, Tarde described the social as "a form of dream, a dream of command and a dream of action,"[16] characterising imitative encounters as partially hypnotic processes carried out by individuals in a half-conscious state comparable to that of a sleepwalker. The Tardean "somnambulist" thus imitates "his medium to the point of becoming a medium himself and magnetising a third person, who, in turn, would imitate him, and so on, indefinitely."[17] For Tarde, this hypnotic state of imitative encounters, which are triggered by desire events – or "magnetisations," underlies the formation of subjectivity and the social as such. In this context, he points out that "both the somnambulist and the social man are possessed by the illusion that their ideas, all of which have been suggested to them are spontaneous"[18] – an interesting thought in view of the fantasies of participation and creativity in the current digital sphere characterised by many-to-many communication. Referring to the spread of relational and non-universal phantom events, Sampson concludes that what spreads in networks "cannot, beyond analogy, become unitized like a gene or, for that matter, be made concrete," as it lacks an "organized unit or molar body."[19] However, while it implies the absence of "the meme" as a universal unit of cultural contagion, Tardean sociology almost suggests itself

15 Ibid., 94.

16 Gabriel Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation*, trans. Elsie Clews Parsons (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1903), 77.

17 Ibid., 84.

18 Ibid., 77.

19 Sampson, *Virality*, 62.

with respect to viral spread in social media and the concomitant strategies of anticipating, encouraging, and rationalising it. Consequentially, Sampson illustrates the sphere of networked sociality as a relational field of hypnotic imitative encounters "that can be affectively primed, or premediated, so that imitative momentum can be anticipated and purposefully spread."[20] Beyond any biological determinism, his Tardean model of contagion allows for the description of "viral atmospheres […] in which corporations and politicians increasingly deploy the magnetic pull of mediated fascinations, intoxicating glories, and celebrity narratives so that small events can be encouraged to become bigger contagious overspills."[21]

In a networked condition characterised by the fundamental modularity of digital units, which affords ongoing operations of selection and compositing, and the curating and algorithmic impact of social networks, which encourages and perpetuates forms of *collaborative* media remix, imitative processes can be easily approached from the material level, as the iterations of audiovisual content and forms are traceable in terms of their diffusion, continual variation, and re-contextualisation. At the same time, against the backdrop of imitation as a passing on of uncontainable "phantom events" that let any binary between the corporeal and incorporeal, the conscious and unconscious, and the real and imaginary collapse, the effects of circulating musical forms and formats on YouTube on the actualisation of desires and their transformation into communally shared habits and routines of (re-)composing digital artefacts and objects become graspable. Musical produsage is underlaid by an immediate and self-forgetful receptivity to affective stimuli. Interestingly, the somnambulistic state of mind, as described by Tarde, strongly resembles Baudelaire's and Benjamin's accounts of *flânerie*: for instance, Tarde notes how, in animated environments of urban life, the recipients' "memory becomes absolutely paralysed; all its own spontaneity is lost. In this singular condition of intensely concentrated attention, of passive and vivid imagination, these stupefied and fevered beings inevitably yield themselves to the magical charm of their new environment."[22] Impacted by this quasi-hypnotic state, iterative compositional activity emerges as the result of an "imitative encounter that appropriates desire into the 'desire to invent,'"[23] further contributing to the

20 Ibid., 58.

21 Ibid.

22 Tarde, *Laws of Imitation*, 84.

23 Sampson, *Virality*, 25.

ongoing formation and development of collaborative compositional practices. For instance, the involuntary communication of presence effects in audiovisual artefacts of musicalised human (self-)capture – and their "indexploitation" by produsers – affectively stimulates the recipient, suggesting further creative relay based on the passing on of musical associations and, at the same time, the perpetuation of experiences like *schadenfreude* or moments of ridicule. Practices of musical aestheticisation of data-captured human display are a striking example how social desires become actualised and form into compositional concepts driven by deliberate humorous, parodic, and/or political intent.

While the passing on of affective stimuli in novel and surprising ways can magnetise produsers in effective ways, the uncontainable and contagious "overspills" of the ensuing and ongoing creative relay are concomitantly entailing the repetitious imitation of generalisable stylistic and thematic features. Over the course of wide-spread creative relay, the sheer volume of contributions, however capricious they might be, results in the – often diffusely entangled – formation and fragmentation of vernacular compositional habits and conventions. In fact, even the most conceptually concise contributions form into phantom events containing contagious surplus effects that catalyse imitative encounters. The retro-futuristic and eerily nostalgic pattern aesthetic characteristic of the musical microgenre of vaporwave (see chapter 3.3) serves as good example for this. Here, the symbolic fetish of strangely familiar and de-familiarised musical and visual patterns from within – and inspired by – a computationally operated simulacric (pop-)cultural space is perpetuated following clear generic conventions, thereby exposing "authenticity as a construct and figuration, without relinquishing a desire for it"[24] – and encouraging the perpetuation of aesthetic patterns aimed at creating affective surplus effects of melancholia and reflective nostalgia that magnetise other produsers.

Contagious Remixable Concepts

In general, one could say that the familiarity and recognition of aesthetic patterns is a main precondition for communal chains of iterative re-composition. Contributions can, on the one hand, be built on the technologically enabled remix and mashup of digital music and video files, for example through the modification of – or addition to – audio samples, video, or text selected from

24 Zylinska, *AI Art*. 70.

one or multiple source file(s). On the other hand, re-composition extends into the immaterial realm, as generalisable stylistic, material, medial, and thematic features are taken up in practices of "conceptual remix […] where ideas are cited, but not necessarily the material object or concrete instantiation."[25] In conceptual remix, a frame of reference is re-articulated *ideationally*, by use of material that might not belong to a source file but, nonetheless, affords the readability of generalisable generic features. Within the sphere of producerly conceptual remix, established and conventional approaches to medial and material objects of vernacular musical expression constantly overlap and update themselves, adding to an uncontrollable and unenclosed web of intersubjectively imagined (sub-)genres, shared design patterns, and textual interrelations.

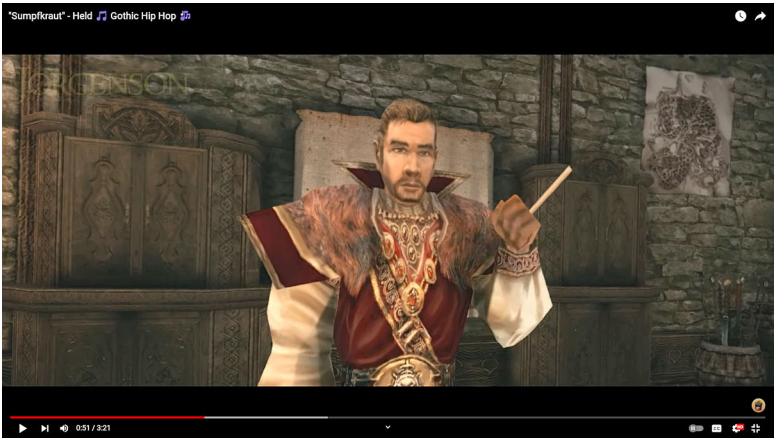
An example for the playful and combinatorial navigation and traversal of the (im)material dimensions of aesthetic media objects in conceptual remix practices can be found in the German video game community on YouTube: Since 2019, hip-hop music videos related to the fantasy-themed single-player video game series *Gothic* have been uploaded to the platform and quickly became a communally recognised remix concept based on the re-appropriation and re-contextualisation of computational aesthetic objects, sonic *objets trouvés*, and music video-like figurations. In *Gothic*-related music videos, protagonists from the series – both non-player characters and the player character, the "nameless hero" – are staged as musical performers by making use of in-game animations and original speech files from the game. A look at the video "Sumpfkraut" ("swamp weed") by @Jorgenson helps shed light on the distinct characteristics of these music videos: In the opening sequence of "Sumpfkraut," a person can be seen smoking in front of a house. This is followed by a short dialogue, taken from the speech files of the game, introducing swamp weed, a plant known in the play world of *Gothic* for its relaxing qualities. The ensuing musical composition of "Sumpfkraut" consists of the instrumental hip-hop track "Valley" by @wydastral,[26] a slow "boom bap" hip-hop beat @Jorgenson bought exclusively from the artist for the creation of the video, and the "rapping" of the nameless hero, generated from spliced

25 Eduardo Navas, "Culture and Remix: A Theory on Cultural Sublation," in *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies*, eds. Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, and xtine burrough (New York: Routledge, 2015), 123.

26 @wydastral, "VALLEY," June 24, 2020, YouTube video, 3:15, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7BayoLFisw.

segments taken from the games' limited number of speech files. The patchwork quilt of spliced and rhythmicised speech of the nameless hero's voice actor results in an uncanny rap performance characterised by counterintuitive stresses and awkward rhymes.[27] The combination of the "anti-flow" of spliced audio with the smooth vibe of the beat is not the only humorous juxtaposition this remix concept offers. In general, it is characterised by the re-appropriation of visual and thematic features of the game as constituents of a hip-hop music video. This is possible thanks to the "modification-friendliness" of the first two *Gothic* games in particular, allowing fans to alterate or completely replace the original map, textures, and storyline by designing and scripting their own *Gothic* "mods." For example, in "Sumpfkraut," @Jorgenson exploits dance animations, which were originally designed with regard to female dancers in the game, by writing a script that lets the nameless hero dance in different locations on the original map of *Gothic II: Night of the Raven* (2002).

Figure 10: The nameless hero smoking swamp weed. Still from @Jorgenson's video "Sumpfkraut" (2020).



27 "Hey, ich habe Sumpfkraut bei mir, du kannst es haben / Ich hab' das Sagen, da kannst du jeden fragen / […] Ich hab das Sumpfkraut, ich kann nicht klagen" ("Hey, I've got that swamp weed, you can have it / I'm in charge, you can ask anyone / […] I've got that swamp weed, I can't complain"; my translation), see @Jorgenson, "'Sumpfkraut' – Held 🎵 Gothic Hip Hop 🎶," October 31, 2020, YouTube video, 3:32, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGwWTQHszVE.

Symbolically, the object of swamp weed is re-functionalised with the purpose of lyrically and visually evoking "gangsta rap" tropes of drug consumption and dealing, accompanied by little details, such as the chosen outfit for the nameless hero, a governor's doublet, which symbolises the "bling" style and attitude of the virtual performer (see Figure 10).[28] This juxtaposition of a hip-hop backing track and stereotypes pertaining to the music genre with the medieval fantasy setting of *Gothic* – as well as the game's "lore" – has quickly become an established concept for fannish transmedial and transtextual play with references to the plot and the characters of the *Gothic* series.

All in all, the medial and material concretions and interrelations of *Gothic*-related music videos constitute a remix concept that unites several basic conventions and competencies of vernacular re-composition on YouTube: Beyond the re-appropriation – or own production – of an instrumental backing track, *Gothic* hip-hop videos are, similar to the practice of vidding, based on the remediation of music video as a community-based medium for participation and generic symbolic play. This includes the engagement of contributors with the musicalisation of pre-captured speech patterns, making characters from the game series "rap," thereby exploiting the indexicality and recognisability of the voice actors' speech patterns for the purpose of pleasurable and humorous musical aestheticisation. Moreover, as the music videos are set in the play worlds of the *Gothic* games, they also represent compositions with aesthetic surface effects of the game. Unlikely visual scenarios, the playful deployment of character animations, or scenic tracking shots showcasing the game's play world are communally embraced as aesthetic objects of fascination – while constituting a performance of profanity in relation to the production standards and visual aesthetics of commercial music videos. In *Gothic* hip-hop videos, ubiquitous vernacular practices of media remix have formed into a concise concept based on the co-creative play with the cultural and medial layers of the chosen aesthetic objects, entailing the generation of desire events that are passed on through imitative encounters within a fan community. Since 2019, conceptual branches have emerged, including the occasional video that experiments with other musical genres (such as Metal or Eurodance[29]), self-made beats using samples of the game's soundtrack as well as in-game sounds, or "real" rap

28 Regarding this somewhat naïve approach, it might not come as a surprise that the *Gothic* community is predominantly European and white.

29 See @Jorgenson, "'ALARM' – Vatras 🎵 Gothic Metal 🎶," January 16, 2020, YouTube video, 1:35, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NemdtkKNSLI; @KhorinisPictures,

performances and battles by members of the community who become virtually embodied in the respective music videos by avatars from the virtual play world, performing pre-recorded lines that are guided by thematical references to *Gothic* and their community.[30]

In *Gothic* music videos, contributors re-appropriate visual and thematic features of the game and imitate (inter-)subjectively generalised themes of hip-hop and other musical genres – rather than taking apart and remixing one specific audio-/logo-/visual cultural object. The case of *Gothic* music videos exemplifies the relay not of materially repeatable media objects, but of a set of fannish references and (re-)imagined generic conventions from another milieu. There exists no single material or affective unit that is continually re-propagated, but rather a more complex and diffuse mimotext that suggests the continual branching and development of remix concepts.[31] Of course, community-oriented creative relay always generates surplus effects that constantly re-form and fragment compositional and communicative conventions. In order to account for the complex relations between repetition and difference in imitative encounters guided by remix concepts, I want to take a second in-depth look at vaporwave, as the microgenre invites imitative encounters with a high volume of contributions, letting emerge various genre offshoots with extra-musical communicative incentives that make visible underlying mechanisms of imitation, opposition, and adaptation. On the one hand, the microgenre of vaporwave is often defined in musical and material terms, as its community lays claim to "its own" aesthetic, which involves the remix and modification of pre-existing musical and visual objects – such as muzak, synth pop, company logos, or early web design aesthetics – by use of

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"'Richtig Party!' – Held – Gothic II – 90's Eurodance," March 3, 2021, YouTube video, 2:18, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vw-nR3lkSrs.

30 See, for example, @Sumpfkraut Records Inc., "GOTHIC RAP || KHORINIS TAPE || Ur-Shak, Lothar, Pedro || prod. by Innosbeatz," September 26, 2020, YouTube video, 5:40, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07l405XSqr4. Furthermore, a deep learning text-to-speech tool that recognises and synthesises the speech patterns of the game's voice actors is now increasingly being used in *Gothic*-related music videos, allowing for an unlimited lyrical repertoire and new ways of creating bizarre and humorous juxtapositions.

31 However, there is a second-order level to this series of videos: the first few remix videos themselves become "meme-like," and set the conceptual frame for following imitative contributions, rather than the generic qualities of hip-hop itself.

automated software filters and plug-ins. This pattern aesthetic, however, developed in dependence of vaporwave's ideational frame of reference, which in turn affords the readability and imitation-suggestability of its generic material features. According to Georgina Born and Chris Haworth, the microgenre is characterised by the replication of "the addictive, almost compulsory participation that feeds social networks" and its "citational reflexivity in relation to the Internet," all in pursuit of "an unruly and ambivalent celebration-cum-critique of late consumer capitalism."[32] The remixed media objects thematise their own online mediation, implicitly referring to the historicity of the Internet, "home-born" Internet-mediated cultural practices, or simply to the state of "being online." Besides visual mediations through collages, GIFs, or surreal videos that constitute an interface aesthetic, "vaporwave sound" is merely another element of mediation. In cultural practices of conceptually remixing new vaporwave content, even "the condition of being a genre––manifest in its rigid sonic and visual conventions, and its immediately identifiable online subculture––[…] appears to be a primary, ironic and meta-reflexive concern," as Born and Haworth point out.[33] Since 2015, the emergence and dispersion of new genre offshoots that adhere to the Internet-reflexive pattern aesthetic of vaporwave, yet introduce their own aesthetic and sociopolitical trajectories, can be noted on YouTube. Against the backdrop of these new "genre" articulations I want to outline the dynamic relations underlying imitative encounters informed by remix concepts. Hereby I want to focus on Gabriel Tarde's relational social theory, which presents repetitive imitation as inextricably linked to and entwined with mechanisms of opposition and adaptation. Often overlooked in its implicit inclusion of temporal relations and transformations, Tarde's theory, which is built on the notion of imitation as a universal tendency, gainfully lets us conceive (historical) trajectories of variation, differentiation, or stasis as cumulative outcomes of repetitive activity, as Georgina Born highlights in her striking article on temporal relations

32 See Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth, "Mixing It: Digital Ethnography and Online Research Methods – A Tale of Two Global Digital Music Genres," in *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*, eds. Larissa Hjorth, Heather Hors, Anne Galloway, and Genevieve Bell (New York: Routledge, 2016), 79–82.

33 Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth, "From Microsound to Vaporwave: Internet-Mediated Musics, Online Methods, and Genre," *Music and Letters* 98, no. 4 (November 2017): 636, https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/gcx095.

in Tardean thought.[34] Against this backdrop, the following reflections on the emergence of Simpsonwave, fashwave, and laborwave on YouTube account for the potentials of diversification and resistance fostered by imitative encounters in and across niche-mediated spheres of collaborative conceptual remix.

In October 2015, the retrospectively first Simpsonwave video appeared on Vine and was soon after reuploaded on YouTube.[35] The video shows a looped animation of Bart Simpson and his friends riding in a car. On the visual level, it is remixed with retro neon filters for a nostalgic flair, which is musically supported by the dreamy chillwave track "Resonance" by HOME. The idea to draw on the nostalgic effects of multimodal vaporwave remix to create audiovisual dreamscapes featuring edited clips from the animated sitcom *The Simpsons* soon magnetised other produsers: In February and March 2016, Lucien Hughes uploaded several videos, which he added to his playlist "S I M P S O N W A V E."[36] This first proclamation of the genre was soon followed by a Simpsonwave subreddit and a surge of Simpsonwave produsage on YouTube.[37] In the video "HOW TO S I M P S O N W A V E" from April 2016, YouTuber @FrankJavCee ironically thematises Simpsonwave's condition of being a genre, garnering more than 72.000 viewers in less than 48 hours.[38] Simpsonwave can be regarded as a logical consequence of vaporwave's meta-reflexive re-enactment – or even acceleration – of networked participation. Just like vaporwave, it features iterative multimodal remixes which are inspired by our computationally operated simulacric pop-cultural space and evoke descriptions of "memories we never had" – however, this surreal and hazy nostalgic effect is exclusively applied to visual material from *The Simpsons*.

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34 See Georgina Born, "On Tardean Relations: Temporality and Ethnography," in *The Social After Gabriel Tarde: Debates and Assessments*, ed. Matei Candea (London: Routledge, 2010), 230–247.

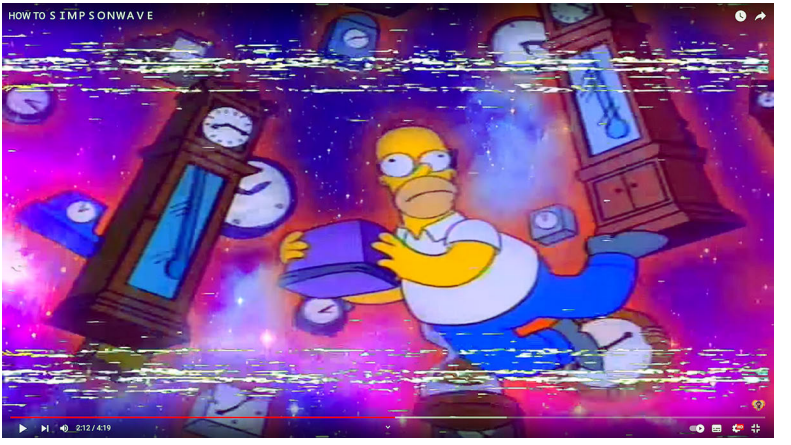
35 @Hothi, "B A R T O N T H E R O A D," December 3, 2015, YouTube video, 3:30, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_rC-495Z_A.

36 @Lucien Hughes, "S I M P S O N W A V E," YouTube playlist, last modified April 9, 2018, accessed March 30, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLwXZJ72PzThfKWr30ajYaHId3GjF2XSh1.

37 See r/Simpsonswave, Reddit, accessed March 30, 2023, https://www.reddit.com/r/simpsonswave/.

38 @FrankJavCee, "HOW TO S I M P S O N W A V E," April 11, 2016, YouTube video, 4:19, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BfVWjxQCfEA. See also "Simpsonwave," Know Your Meme, accessed March 30, 2023, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/simpsonwave.

Figure 11: Homer Simpson floating through time and space to a synthwave track. Still from @FrankJavCee's video "HOW TO S I M P S O N W A V E" (2016).



Through this arbitrary focus, Simpsonwave implicitly thematises the ongoing modularisation and fragmentation of content and audiences as well as our situational conduct in participatory online spaces, playfully adding a new niche for meta-reflexive produsage under the umbrella of vaporwave's "radically involuted, self-sufficient online 'genre world.'"[39] In Tardean terms, vaporwave represents a form of invention, which is spread and strengthened through imitative repetition. "[T]hrough the encounter of one of its own imitative rays with an imitative ray emanating from some other invention," he elaborates, new inventions emerge, "which soon radiate out imitatively in turn, and so on indefinitely."[40] Simpsonwave, as a new form of invention, results from the adaptation of generalised features of vaporwave produsage, which then are grafted upton visual templates from a concrete media franchise and become integrated in a new form. Since vaporwave's ideational frame of reference is focussed on the (meta-)reflection on our haunted pop-cultural memory through the lens of online mediation, *The Simpsons* are a promising carrier for the passing on of desire effects of nostalgia through vaporwave-like dreamscapes of half-recalled references. In that sense, Simpsonwave represents a "logical synthesis," as the imitative encounters that yielded its

39 Born and Haworth, "From Microsound to Vaporwave," 636.

40 Gabriel Tarde, *Social Laws: An Outline of Sociology*, ed. J. Mark Baldwin, trans. Howard C. Warren (1899; reis., Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2000), 64.

invention introduce no "social struggle" with regard to the remix concept of vaporwave. Yet, in Tarde, even "harmonious" social adaptations that introduce new orders of open-ended repetition necessarily result from oppositional encounters which, far from establishing binary opposites, introduce difference via repetition in the first place. For Tarde, opposition "is a very special kind of repetition" which simply "implies a relation between two forces, tendencies, or directions."[41] The social adaption of Simpsonwave as a remix concept, which resulted from a producerly interference with the multimodal mimotext of vaporwave that gave way to colliding imitative rays, is a good example for what Christian Borch calls "rhythmic adaptations; that is, situations where the opposition generates new inventions that establish harmony rather than opposition."[42]

In contradistinction to the conceptual remix of Simpsonwave, the emergence of fashwave and laborwave resulted from the introduction and adaptation of socio-political struggles and *diametrical* oppositions over the course of vaporwave-like produsage. The first fashwave videos emerged soon after @∼CYBERNAZI∼ uploaded the video "Galactic Lebensraum" to YouTube in November 2015.[43] What characterises fashwave produsage is the combination of synthwave or vaporwave tracks with ultranationalist, racist, and antisemitic messages that are conveyed through paratext or audio samples taken from political speeches and movies, all set to imagery of Roman emperors and sculptures, nationalist politicians, and Neo-Nazi symbols like the Black Sun or SS runes. Following the visual vaporwave aesthetic, a hazy nostalgia effect is invoked through 80s-style neon colour filters and grainy images. Fashwave and adjacent "genres" like Trumpwave were soon identified as a soundtrack of the alt-right movement and heavily rejected by the vaporwave community.[44]

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41 See ibid., 44–45.

42 Christian Borch, "Urban Imitations: Tarde's Sociology Revisited," *Theory, Culture & Society* 22, no. 3 (June 2016): 93, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276405053722.

43 The video has since then been deleted. See "Fashwave / Tradwave," Know Your Meme, accessed March 30, 2023, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/cultures/fashwave-tradwave.

44 See Penn Bullock and Eli Kerry, "Trumpwave and Fashwave are Just the Latest Disturbing Examples of the Far-Right Appropriating Electronic Music," *VICE*, January 30, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en/article/mgwk7b/trumpwave-fashwave-far-right-appropriation-vaporwave-synthwave; "Vaporwave Artists Mad that their Music is Popular with Fascists," *Ravenews*, February 9, 2016, http://www.ravenews.ca/en/read/2016/february/09/.

At roughly the same time, laborwave videos emerged on YouTube, conveying a pronounced critique of capitalism, thereby "reconciling nostalgia for a Soviet past with a nostalgia for the visual motifs of the 80s, 90s and early 2000s," as laborwave artist Leonardo Galletti explains.[45] Musically, there exists no concise aesthetic, as laborwave draws on pre-existing synthwave and vaporwave tracks as well as disco and pop music from the Soviet era. For example, in the video "[l a b o r w a v e] L E N I N G R A D I N L O V E" by @Courant Anarchostalinien, impressions from Leningrad and propaganda videos of Lenin are edited with a purple and magenta colour filter and set to a slowed down track by the Soviet Belarusian band Verasy.[46] Via cumulative imitative encounters that entail a proliferation of audiologovisual significations, the remix concepts of fashwave and laborwave have become established, introducing repeatable "oppositions of sign" which arouse a communal rejection of vaporwave's ambiguous character.[47] While, in the case of fashwave, a reactionary attempt at renunciating (post-)modern realities altogether informs the "social adaptation" of its remix concept, "laborwave" seeks to overcome the tactically hyper-affirmative character of vaporwave's engagement with late capitalism by promoting a (Marxist-Leninist) communist agenda via aestheticising means. Both "genres" stabilise each other: having emerged in diametrical opposition to each other under the umbrella of vaporwave-like produsage, their respective imitative spread is fuelled by the internal condition of discord between two ideologies.

This Tardean foray into vaporwave-like produsage outlines how the mediation of community-oriented networked practices of re-composition potentially expands on material, social, and discursive levels, thereby traversing very different social, cultural, and political milieus. As Chris Haworth and

45 Leonardo Galletti, "The Rapid Proliferation of 'Laborwave' and What It Means," *Medium*, June 11, 2019, https://medium.com/@laborwavedesigns/the-rapid-proliferation-of-laborwave-and-what-it-means-4782d60d7b48

46 @Courant Anarchostalien, "[l a b o r w a v e] L E N I N G R A D I N L O V E," May 22, 2017, YouTube video, 5:18, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bn2YF_gvCfE.

47 Tarde differentiates between three forms of opposition, as Georgina Born summarises: "oppositions of series, of degree, and of sign. Oppositions of series involve heterogeneous entities and result in evolution or counter-evolution. Those of degree involve homogenenous factors and entail increase or diminution. Oppositions of sign, finally, consist in entities engaged in the negation of each other, or diametrical opposition." See Born, "On Tardean Relations," 267.

Georgina Born note, the cultural practice of vaporwave composition "illuminate[s]—through music—the increasingly reflexive aesthetic and political uses being made of the Internet."[48] As the examinations of compositional re-functionalisations of vaporwave's nostalgia effect go to show, these uses can easily turn into re-appropriations or even co-optations of aesthetic surfaces and material carriers, driven by purely communicative and ideological incentives. What is more, on a superordinate level, the presented remix concepts highlight the ongoing inventions that take place over the course of open-ended repetition, which lets imitative rays collide and, via oppositional encounters, yields ever-new inventions that give rise to "logical syntheses" as well as "logical duels."

Aspects of Affective Labour and Play

Collaborative media remix on YouTube is based on the composition and spread of modular new media objects; however, as we have seen, it does not necessarily include the passing on of concrete "copying-fidelitous" material but might entail practices of "conceptual remix" that follow generalisable conceptual frames which spread *ideationally*. Based on the socio-technical architecture of the platform, conceptual frames emerge, overlap, and update themselves by way of imitative encounters, affording the ongoing grafting of material and textual figurations and the emergence of ever-new compositional concepts. Notwithstanding the concrete multimodal and conceptual arrangements of singular contributions, vernacular musical produsage is necessarily stimulated by the passing on of affective charge through phantom events which actualise the recipient's desire and suggest the ongoing invention of new objects of desire which become embedded in processes of creative relay on the essentially apocryphal play field of producerly media text. By coining the term "viral musicking," Paula Harper accentuates the contagious spread of cultural objects and practices as a processual and social act, taking up Christopher Small's famous notion of "musicking" which denotes any activity related to musical performance and highlights "musicked" meaning-making as an establishment of "a set of relationships […] not only between those organized sounds […] but also between the people who are taking part."[49] Building on

48 Born and Haworth, "Mixing It," 75.

49 Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 13.

this relational approach, Harper notes that "[t]he efficiency of viral musicking is also fostered via the *affectivity* of viral objects and practices," concluding that "the objects under consideration here are often situated precisely at articulation points between *labor* and *play* […]."[50] Indeed, collaborative media remix of circulating compositional objects and concepts, which can be conceived of as a form of viral musicking, constitutes a sphere of free affective labour by providing the affective cultural production that the platform serves back to its users as content, the consumption of which affords further producerly activities. The wide spread of contributions and remix concepts, which become cultural virtualities for value creation in today's digital economy at large, is enabled by the conveyance and passing on of contagious moods and feelings of surprise, belonging, nostalgia, excitement, etc. These affective flows are the binding force that makes vernacular musical produsage cohere and suggests imitative encounters, which constantly renew objects of desire over the course of iterative compositional activity – an activity that can be considered as playful, as it constitutes a "temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own," to quote Johan Huizinga's definition of play.[51] According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, "[t]he movement of playing has no goal that brings it to an end; rather, it renews itself in constant repetition."[52] Following Gadamer's thoughts on play, one could go beyond the characterisation of iterative composition as an ongoing playful development media text, describing it as movement which follows and renews *itself*, letting emerge a "structure of play" which "absorbs the player into itself":

> Play clearly represents an order in which the to-and-fro motion of play follows of itself. It is part of play that the movement is not only without goal or purpose but also without effort. It happens, as it were, by itself. […] The structure of play […] frees [the player] from the burden of taking the initiative, which constitutes the actual strain of existence. This is also seen in the spontaneous tendency to repetition that emerges in the player and in the constant self-renewal of play, which affects its form.[53]

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50 Harper, "Unmute This," 12–13.

51 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), 8.

52 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., originally translated by W. Glen-Doepel, translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (1989; reis., London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 108.

53 Ibid., 109.

The synergetic relation between Gadamer's reflections and the Tardean concept of partially hypnotic imitative encounters, particularly with regard to producerly media texts, is striking. While Gadamer approaches iterative play on an overarching structural level, Tarde's micro-sociology focusses on the moment of imitative encounter from which any repetitive activity arises in the first place. Following both Tarde and Gadamer, one could thus say that iterative contributions on YouTube, as somnambulistic actualisations of desire, constitute, in their imitation-suggestibility, the structures of infinitely self-renewing structures of play, which "happens, as it were, by itself," bringing about "musicked" social inventiveness while relieving the subject of (some) initiative.

...and What about Memes?

Against the backdrop of my theorisation of iterative vernacular composition as affective play, how does the viral metaphor of the "meme" relate to and become applicable with regard to the aforementioned iterative processes? Several aspects that have been discussed in meme theory – before and after its transfer and application to our Internet age – can be found with regard to collaborative media remix. Produsedmedia text that "knows itself as text," embedded in self-renewing structures of play, not only fosters viral spread and the ongoing reiteration of concepts and ideas – it also matches Limor Shifman's description 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."[54] However, as we have seen, a conception of Internet-based memetic remix needs to go beyond the neo-Darwinian analogy of digital and genetic units and take into account the uncontainable contagion of moods, feelings, and affects, which cannot be brought into a universal relation to the concrete material figurations that are being passed on from produser to produser. While the trajectories of circulation as well as the alterations of remixed digital artefacts can theoretically be pin-pointed and rationalised, an accompanying essential "affective unit" is missing. Moreover, the postulation of rigid overarching conceptual frames can at times seem problematic, as the producerly media text of vernacular re-composition is, on the one hand, based on subjective generalisations and, on the other, intertextually entangled with other media texts in uncontainable ways. Thus, the spread of "memetic units" can only be

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

made describable against the backdrop of the fundamental issue of iterability arising from iterative practices. According to Jacques Derrida, any written or spoken syntagma is essentially grounded in its iterability, i.e., in its structural readability, since no performative utterance can be successful without being identified as a "citation." However, it can never be completely enclosed by a context, considering that the notion of context only "conceal[s], behind a certain confusion, philosophical presuppositions of a very determinate nature."[55] Hence, the possibility of failure is immanent to every form of communication. Of course, this also holds true with regard to forms of disembodied communication, which, due to their own (re-)mediations, are not mere extensions of locutory or gestural communication, but create new issues of iterability: any repetition of a sign has the potential of creating alterity, as its readings can always differ from, or even run counter to, the intention accompanying its originary moment of inscription. In addition, Derrida asserts that, by virtue of its essential iterability, a written syntagma can always be detached from the chain in which it is inserted or given without causing it to lose all possibility of functioning, if not all possibility of 'communication', precisely. One can perhaps come to recognize other possibilities in it by inscribing it or grafting it onto other chains."[56] With regard to conceptual remix, this means there is no possibility to assert a context which could contain an Internet meme or help unambiguously determine its kernel and its boundaries. While the interrelations between all constituents of a multimodal arrangement provide for its internal coherence, the *iterability* of each unit's respective inner semiotic chain affords their constant alteration through repetition as well as the disengagement and grafting of their constituent parts within and across endless chains of differential marks. Thus, in consideration of Derrida's notion of iterability, the locus of "the meme" cannot be ultimately determined – it is, in fact, missing. In the face of these reflections, Internet memes could be defined as iterable overarching multimodal patterns and arrangements which, as a result of affect-driven imitative encounters, emerge from the multitude of hinges between conceptually interrelated contributions.

However, this definition could be applied to any form of conceptual media remix. Thus, in addition, the main origin and incentive of "memetic" forms

55 Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 3.

56 Ibid., 9.

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-logo-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 "constituative [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.

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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 "Millenial 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 "Millenial 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 "Millenial Falcon" image macro. "Millenial 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 "Millenial 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 ("Millenium 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

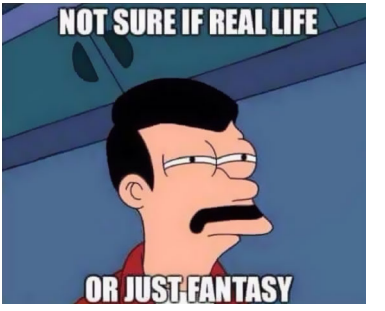
images of each respective digital unit, there also exists a superordinate form of anchorage: every hypertextual element of a meta-memetic digital unit refers to a larger corpus of shared narratives, stances, humour, or stylistic features which they can be attributed to. Even if they were to be extracted 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 uncontainable affective surplus effects.

However, there are no fixed anchorages, as the subjectively informed recombinations 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 resignifications 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 "Millenial Falcon"

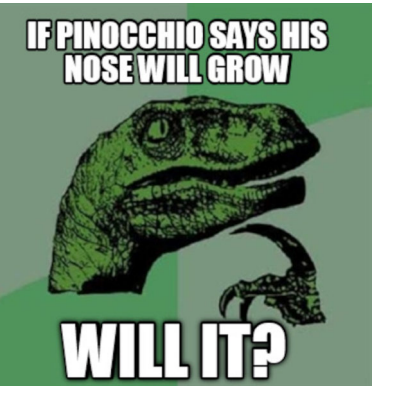
65 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 58.

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, 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-it0.



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, theoperational 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).

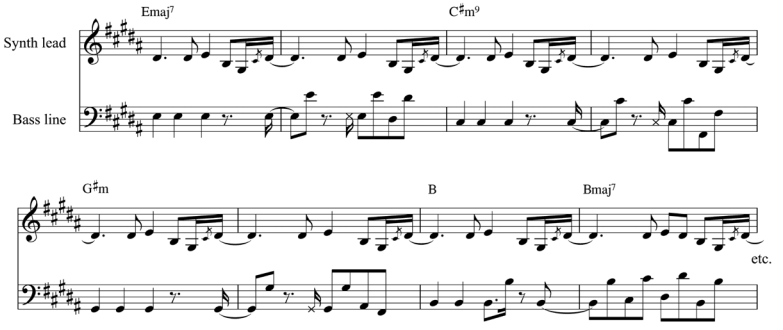
Figure 19: As realisation and disbelief become visible, the picture turns black-and-white and "Sound of Silence" starts playing. Still from @SonsyToast882's video "Hello darkness my old friend" (2016).

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=9Q2D8vNz8M8; @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 tonicality 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 produsers' 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 compositing 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 produsers' 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 potentialand 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 @Groudon0199, "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.

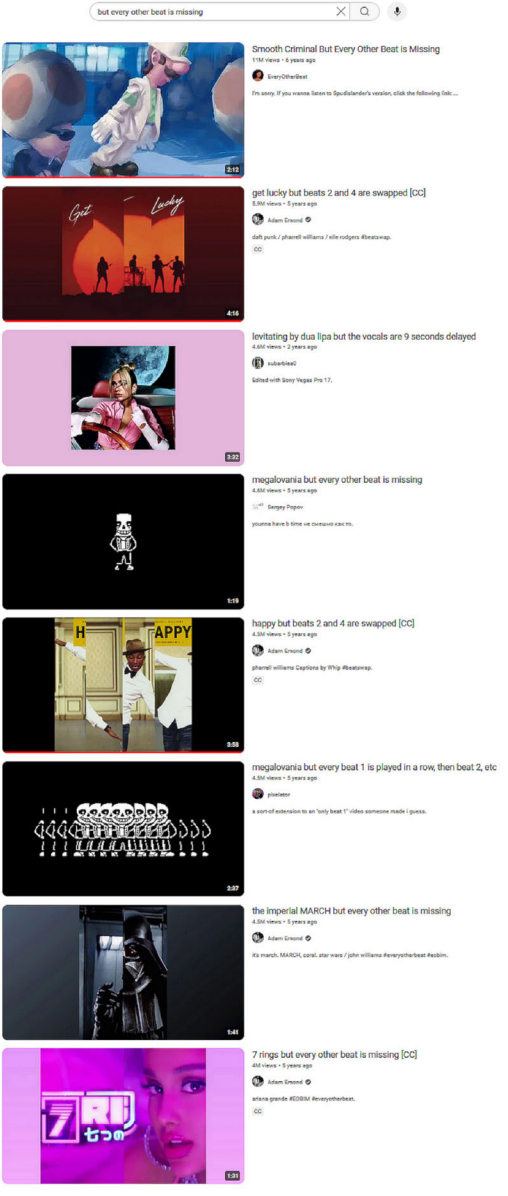
of the video or an increasingly pixelated image.[77] The first applications of these replacement formulas to musical pieces appeared in the context of the ongoing Internet trend of playfully referencing the song "All Star" by Smash Mouth, which, similar to Toto's "Africa," has evolved into an iconic 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=wLtBGGX8GIk.

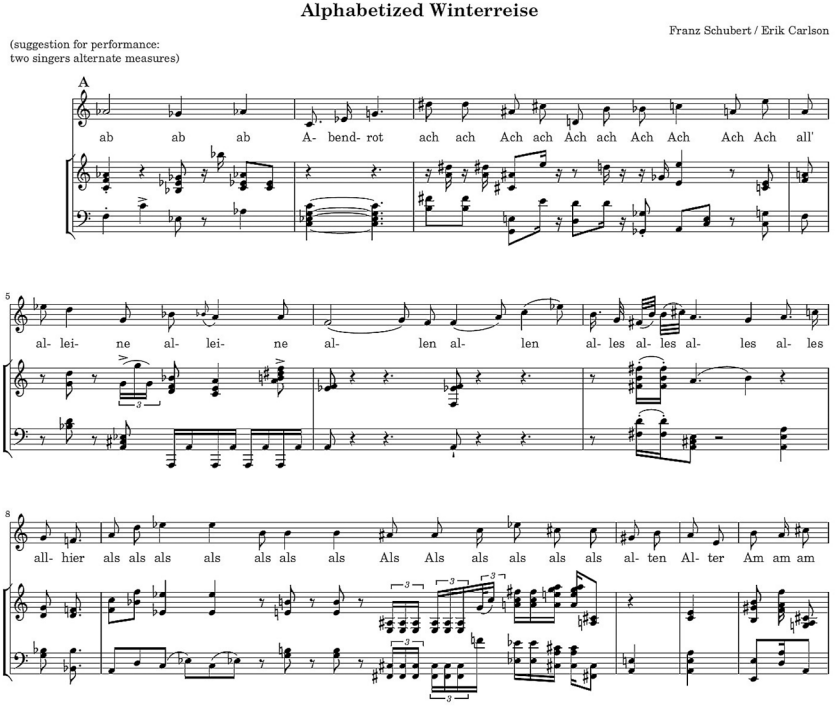
78 @This Is That Guy, "All Star but they don't stop coming pitch corrected," October 31, 2017, YouTube video, 3:21, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eT3BFzSD6YY.

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).



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 produsers 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=NRfk9u2ZEg8. @–, "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=Ey5GItze-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=0WiINuiVm6o.

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).

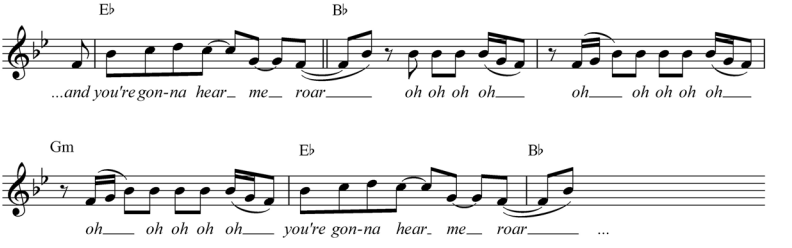
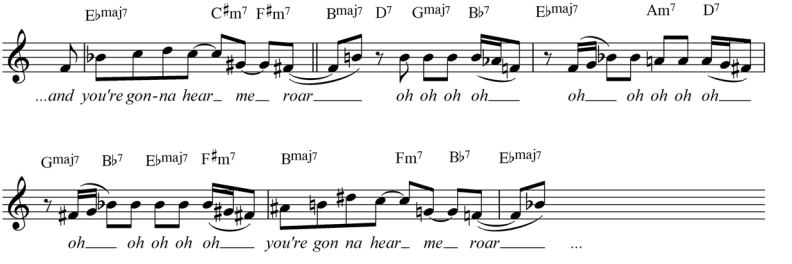


Figure 24: Katy Perry's pitch-shifted voice singing over Coltrane changes in Simon Fransman's video "Katy Perrys 'Giant Steps' but it's John Coltranes 'Roar' but it's smooth jazz" (my transcription).



Towards a Fluid Musical Memescape

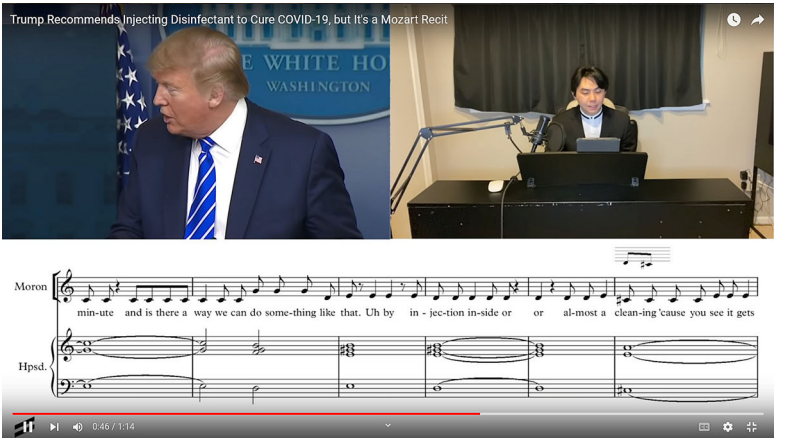
The previous examples shall not hide the fact that continuous playful graftings have entailed a fluid musical memescape which can pose a challenge in terms of conceptual traceability. Depending on the discursive framing, mere hypertextual reference to certain audiologovisual elements, in awareness of 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 pinnacling 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.

5 Musical (Micro-)Celebrities

Authorial Strategies and Vernacular Repertoires

Vernacular contributions are in need of successful signalisations of belongingness to the overall YouTube community. According to Thomas Mosebo Simonsen, communicative connectability and communal belonging on the platform is expressed through a sense of "ordinariness ('you are like the rest of us'), the low-grade style and the communication of transparency (e.g., through self-reflexivity) as well as frequent acknowledgment (the YouTube 'we') and involvement of viewers."[1] Different from external corporate attempts at capitalising on the platform-specific vernacular repertoire, these conditions are potentially met by aspirational performances by individuals who reiterate, resignify, and personify cultural content within online attention markets. As Martin Gibbs (et al.) postulates, aspirational content creation – and the visibility labour it is accompanied by – thereby relies on "shared (but not static) conventions and grammars of communication, which emerge from the ongoing interactions between platforms and users."[2] The hereby dynamically constituted "platform vernacular," as Gibbs calls it, encompasses "genres of communication" afforded by the interplay between communally mediated and shared cultural practices and the concrete "material architecture" of social media platforms.[3] Of particular interest in the context of the following chapter are the

1 Thomas Mosebo Simonsen, "Identity-Formation on YouTube: Investigating Audiovisual Presentations of the Self" (PhD thesis, Aalborg University, 2012), 181.

2 Martin Gibbs et al., "#Funeral and Instagram: Death, Social Media, and Platform Vernacular," *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 3 (2015): 3, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2014.987152.

3 See ibid., 3–4. In his article, Gibbs highlights the usage of hashtags on Twitter as an example for the emergence of community-specific practices of interaction and self-expression based on software affordances.

modes of self-display and self-thematisation, for example in terms of addressing the audience and representing oneself as an authentic and approachable self, that have emerged in relation to popular video formats on YouTube and continue to shape platform-specific genres of communication. Regardless of the concrete video formats they can be associated with – be it make-up tutorials, unboxing videos, Let's Plays, or diary vlogs, these modes of self-representation have arisen due to a blurred producer/consumer relation which results from the overall read/write condition in social media, presenting new challenges for aspirational YouTube users with regard to audience construction and self-celebrification. As Mingyi Hou states, social media's "participatory affordances enable ordinary aspirants to fame to conduct self-branding and self-celebrification practices, thus maintaining an audience of peer users as their fan base. As a result, celebrity status may be achieved in a DIY manner, bypassing the gatekeeper role of media and entertainment industries."[4] Different from conventional forms of celebrity, practices of self-celebrification situated in social media are based on the fostering of an intimate and interactive relationship with their audience. Senft explains this phenomenon with the affordances of our participatory digital condition, thereby proposing the term "micro-celebrity" for this "new style of online performance that involves people 'amping up' their popularity over the Web using technologies like video, blogs and social networking sites."[5] As Alice Marwick further points out, micro-celebrity is not only "a state of being famous to a niche group of people, but it is also a behavior: the presentation of oneself as a celebrity regardless of who is paying attention."[6] Micro-celebrities on YouTube strategically cultivate and optimise their content, thereby aiming at generating intimacy to an (imagined) fannish audience, to which they present themselves as a person of special interest.

Taking the aforesketched notions into account, this chapter sets a focus on authorial strategies and vernacular repertoires of self-display and communication by aspirational subjects. Against the backdrop of the platform's socio-technical infrastructure, entanglements of self-evaluation, self-representation, and communally mediated and shared compositional repertoires

4 Mingyi Hou, "Social Media Celebrity and the Institutionalization of YouTube," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 25, no. 3 (June 2019): 535, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517750368.

5 Theresa M. Senft, *Camgirls*, 25.

6 Alice E. Marwick, *Status Update*, 114.

shall be rendered visible. The first sub-chapter, which focusses on musical performances of the self and their relation to – and influence on – vernacular repertoires and communal participation, is followed by an in-depth examination of the modular conception and constitution of music-related channels and the strategies of self-optimisation, communication, and collaboration that go along with becoming a popular music communicator or entertainer on YouTube. The final sub-chapter engages with the interactive relations between "role-setters" and "role-followers" in collaborative musical formats – and with the multidirectional contagions and multisocial dynamics initiated by aspirational strategies of engaging the community in processes of musical co-creativity.

The recognisable and shared symbolic repertoires inscribed into the media architecture as well as into cultural content on the platform encourage produsers to refer to and partake in communally mediated forms of everyday communication and aesthetic practices. Within the domain of permanent rationalisation that is YouTube, musical labourers are interpellated as subjected as well as free and responsible subjects. It is against this backdrop that the multifaceted and multidirectional modal relations between aspirational produsers, communities, media artefacts, and channel contents shall be examined – with the aim of going beyond conceptualisations of one-directional influencer-audience relations as well as binary divides between producers and audiences, "active" and "passive" users, and amateurs and professionals.

5.1 Musical Performance of the Self in Aspirational Channel Concepts

As social recognition on YouTube is primarily generated through bodily self-display, the faces and bodies of content creators serve as central components in aspirational musical performances. While, in this context, the notion of a "platform vernacular" accounts for the communally and technologically mediated communicative tools and genres produsers rely on, it can only serve as a conceptual vantage point regarding the concrete musical and performative means of self-representation and self-celebrification. Thus, the following exemplary analyses of musical performances Matt Mulholland and Felix Kjellberg (@PewDiePie) focus in detail on aspirational strategies of conceptualising musical performances of the self in relation to musical and discursive vernacular enunciations on the platform. Both YouTubers take up site-specific commu-

nicative 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 YouTube-situated media experience. Mulholland's content is focussed on showcasing his cultural capital as a singer and performer in one-man a cappella and live-looping performances, thereby making use of the meta-referential potentials and auto-mediacies of the technical apparatus in order to create differences to traditional stagings of musical ingenuity and virtuosity. Kjellberg's musical content, on the other hand, serves as a vehicle for self-narration within a wider discursive frame shaped by his *communicative* affective labour and the ongoing produsage within his community. Both examples highlight the content creators' need to perform their authenticity and ordinariness – both core features of self-celebrification on the platform. By focussing on aesthetic conventions within vernacular musical performances as well as on the interrelations between musical enunciation and (niche-mediated) vernacular discourse, my observations aim at shedding light on musical strategies of self-reference and self-narration – and their intrinsic dialectical relation to the commercial framework of YouTube and social media, mainstream media environments, and traditional forms of authorship.

Auto-Mediacy and Self-Reflective Aesthetics

Practices of sampling, remix, and parodic re-enactment have been widely romanticised as inherently subversive techniques of re-appropriation. There are good reasons for this: they tend to irritate traditional concepts of authorship, thereby potentially aiming at re-conceptualising or deconstructing notions of authenticity. On an almost rhetorical or narrative level, technical reproduction and referential performances can create off-centred media texts while rendering their non-linear structures perceptible and creating operational moments of difference. However, in addition to making use of these cultural techniques and their effects, aspirational musical performances of the self on YouTube provide a high dose of indexicality in their display and representation of authorial bodies. Here, in various ways, the apparatus of reproduction appears to be tactically embraced and performatively inscribed into an overall aesthetic of transparency in order to create a sense of "authentic inauthenticity" and (self-)affection. It seems that performing "the inscription of mediatization within the im-mediate," as Phil Auslander put it, highlights the video's own mediacy – and the contributors' awareness of their mediated self-performance as both a self-driven *and* subjected form of media

(re-)composition. Such a self-reflexive aesthetic can be found on the YouTube channel of Matt Mulholland: Since his first upload in 2008, Mulholland has garnered more than 200.000 subscriptions with his often comedic takes on popular songs. At first, his channel primarily featured a cappella multitrack renditions of pop songs, at a time when the format emerged on the platform and, due to the low-threshold means of creation in terms of the easy access to affordable home recording equipment, quickly became a popular form of musical performance on YouTube. The one-person vocal ensembles formed by Mulholland are displayed in split-screen videos, each panel featuring him singing a different voice of his arrangements. Visually, his early renditions are characterised by an aesthetic randomness with regard to the overall set design (or the lack thereof). In his first YouTube video, a multitrack cover of Beyoncé's "If I were a Boy," Mulholland performs against a rather austere backdrop, consisting of a white wall, an empty shelf, and a doorframe. Interestingly, this "set" both signalises a certain realness in its apparent randomness and, at the same time, refers to the original video clip, in which Beyoncé can be seen singing in front of a white wall.[7] Mulholland soon went beyond the unembellished aesthetic of his first uploads and began to stage his performance personas more carefully by incorporating moments of self-ironic overacting, dressing up in costumes, and including unambiguous references to iconic original videos. In his multitrack cover of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody,"[8] for instance, Mulholland pays homage to the original music video by re-enacting the iconic opening shot of the song's a cappella intro. Like in the original video, the first thing to be seen are silhouettes which, when the light fades up, turn out to be four layered recordings of Mulholland, arranged in the same diamond shape as the four Queen members in the original shot. In analogy to the original opening sequence, the video features cross-fades from the a cappella formation into close-ups of Mulholland (instead of Freddie Mercury). When the instruments chime in, the video shifts to a split-screen intraface,

7 According to Kathrin Peters and Andrea Seier, random "bedroom aesthetics" in (self-)referential YouTube performances create a contrast to the referenced original videos and, in their (performed) lack of self-consciousness, make "the video's very mediacy the center of attention." See Kathrin Peters and Andrea Seier, "Homedance: Mediacy and Aesthetics of the Self on YouTube," in *The YouTube* Reader, eds. Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009), 193.

8 @Matt Mulholland, "Bohemian Rhapsody by Queen | A Cappella Multitrack by Matt Mulholland," February 14, 2011, YouTube video, 5:52, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fIlMfIQskE.

each screen showing Mulholland singing one vocal or instrumental part (piano, bass guitar, electric guitar, and drums) while playing "air versions" of the imitated instruments. While each of his performance personas are dressed differently, his guitar solo performance is particularly flashy: wearing a silk shirt, a gold chain, sunglasses, and a red bandana, Mulholland plays the air guitar to Brian May's solo while being visually and musically accompanied by his alter egos (see Figure 26). During the song's famous pseudo-operatic section with its choral call-and-response moments, three one-man vocal ensembles – dressed in differently coloured shirts – compete against each other ("Bismillah!" – "We will not let you go" – "Let me go!") before the "band" takes the stage again for the ensuing hard rock part and the outro.

In his multitrack cover videos, Matt Mulholland aims at creating productive differences to the referenced cultural objects by way of re-enactment and remediation. The performative use of split-screens for homemade music performances represents an auto-medial technology of the self that emerged within the platform's overall socio-medial dispositive. Furthermore, Mulholland's hyper-expressive renditions are paradigmatic for the aspiring YouTuber's need to contrast the performance of one's own talents – in this case an impressive vocal range and variability – with meta-reference and self-irony. As fundamental modes of vernacular self-representation, the implicit meta-awareness of the performed self and its relation to the technical apparatus creates a distance to the performed persona and, at the same time, suggests a certain proximity to the YouTube community by evoking attributions of transparency and sincerity.[9] In rendering the overall performance detectable as a façade, contributors pro-actively counteract any notions of arrogance that could arise within the YouTube community with regard to virtuosic and self-affective musical performances. However, in their oscillating motion between (phallic) presumption and ironic attitude, Mulholland's videos exemplify how the indexical overdose of aspirational self-affective performance and the contributor's necessity to subvert traditional concepts of authorship and virtuosity create a constant field of tension. Despite the meta-referential mode of self-representation, comparisons to traditional stagings of musical

9 Of course, these tactical signalisations are not exclusive to communication in social media. For example, Paddy Scannell described sincerity as "one defining characteristic of any person appearing in the public realm who lays claim to ordinariness. It is how you prove you are like the rest of us." See Paddy Scannell, *Radio, Television and Modern Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 74.

ingenuity suggest themselves, as Mulholland still aims to prove himself as a creative and virtuosic musician.

Figure 26: Matt Mulholland playing an air guitar solo and accompanying himself. Still from Mulholland's a cappella multitrack cover of "Bohemian Rhapsody" (2011).

Besides his multitrack videos, other popular video formats on his channel add to this impression, as they bring attention to different facets of his virtuosic self-staging. For instance, in his live looping cover versions, Mulholland increases the experience of liveness by letting the disparity between "live situation" and "recording" collapse. In these videos, the loop pedal is tactically brought into the picture as the source of the overall sonic outcome. At the same time, Mulholland's body itself appears as a centred authorial body: he records his own tracks in real time with multiple instruments and his voice, thereby accomplishing by himself what only a band would normally accomplish. Generally, in live looping performances, the human actor becomes a potent author beyond considerations of the potentially covered original tracks. By "revealing" the technical apparatus behind the musical outcome, the "real" person and its "real skill" are highlighted, as the sonic outcome and the musical structuring are transparently linked to the performer's hands, feet, and mouth. The re-centralising and re-humanising aspects of live looping evoke strong attributions of originality and realness, which is complemented by the minimalist "living room aesthetic" of Mulholland's sets.

On a macro level, these performances are integrated in the overall modular composition of his channel. While his live looping videos are (mostly) serious stagings of musical skill, other uploads aim at counteracting the notion of self-affection by way of pointedly profane, self-ironic, and anti-virtuosic musical performances. In his "Recorder by Candlelight" cover series, for instance, Mulholland performs tunes such as "My Heart Will Go On" or "Silent Night" on recorder, thereby posing and playing against the backdrop of idyllic natural sceneries, at "romantic" candlelight, or in his bathtub.[10] The cacophonic recorder playing, the obvious playback in the videos, and his general overacting create a strong juxtaposition to the instrumental backing tracks and any connotations with the original songs. Unsurprisingly, his recorder cover of "My Heart Will Go On" became a viral video, garnering more than 20 million likes and leading to an actual YouTube trend of recording "terrible" recorder covers with humorous intent.[11] Thus, even the most anti-virtuosic musical performances are integral elements of YouTube-adaptive self-staging, which tactically navigates a wide range of conflicting (self-)attributions. Mulholland's channel paradigmatically highlights how aspirational musical performances of the self on the platform are composed of juxtaposing moments of sincerity and absurdity, skilfulness and failure, self-affection and self-deprecation. In a way, the successful balancing of these moments, driven by the incentive to attain authenticating content showcasing the creator's idiosyncratic musicality and, at the same time, to introduce or develop remix concepts with a high imitation-suggestibility, could be considered the "real," superordinate virtuosic practice native to aspirational musical (co-)creation in social media.

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10 @Matt Mulholland, "My Heart Will Go On – Recorder By Candlelight by Matt Mulholland," November 28, 2009, YouTube video, 4:16, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X2WH8mHJnhM; @Matt Mulholland, "Silent Night – Recorder By Candlelight by Matt Mulholland," December 8, 2011, YouTube video, 4:08, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Al_y-v7qcjg.

11 For example, a dilettantish recorder performance of the 20th Century Fox Fanfare garnered around 7 million views since its upload in 2013. See @20th Century Flute, "20th Century Fox Flute (ORIGINAL)," January 9, 2013, YouTube video, 0:21,https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XCPj4JPbKtA. Moreover, since 2015, the channel @shittyflute regularly uploads cacophonic recorder covers. See @shittyflute, YouTube channel, joined January 24, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCHMmLi8z1HbyhTEvfBgXpyg.

Figure 27: Matt Mulholland playing recorder in his bathtub. Still from the video "Silent Night – Recorder by Candlelight by Matt Mulholland" (2011).

Musical Performance and Community-Adaptive Self-Narration

Musical performances on aspirational channels may serve as vehicles of enabling and reinforcing a sense of belonging to an in-group that is moderated and controlled by the affective labour of the content creator, who may even take on the role as a community's "tribal chief." Particularly on channels where non-musical self-narration plays a central role, these musical performances form a *complementary* part to the YouTuber's overall communicative strategy of fostering a sense of inclusion and communal identity. The channel of Felix Kjellberg alias @PewDiePie shall serve as an example in this context: Since 2010, Swedish YouTuber Felix Kjellberg has uploaded Let's Play videos to his channel. He quickly rose to Internet fame as one of the most influential Let's Players on the platform. His recognisability and success on the platform is arguably linked to his performance of exaggerated emotions, which helped him establish his brand as YouTube's "classroom clown." While, in the beginning, Kjellberg's channel was focussed on the display of emotional reactions to his own playing, he soon transferred his strategy of excessive emoting to other objects and areas of entertainment, such as his format "LWIAY," in which he reacts to memes from his community, or his "Pew News," a mock newscast dealing with current social media-related topics. In awareness of his predominantly young male (and white) audience, Kjellberg utilises the word "bro" to address his fans,

jokingly referring to them as his "9-Year-Old Army." Overall, his affective labour is shaped by the performative integration of masculine talking points which, as an "ideological product," materialise in his rhetorical repertoire, the conceptual framing of his videos, and the contributions by his community in the form of comments and memes. Thereby, many of his uploads deliberately exploit the dilemma of ubiquitous irony in vernacular social media interaction, camouflaging transgressive and otherwise unacceptable utterances under the veil of irony in order to cater to online attention markets and take on the role of an "irreverently authentic" community leader. For instance, for a "prank" video in 2017, Kjellberg paid two Indian men on the platform Fiverr to hold up a sign with the text "Death to All Jews," filming his own shocked reaction and expression of disbelief – including an apology – in the face of the unlikely realisation of his idea.[12] By provoking situations like this, Kjellberg attains the material to which he can react with the display of "authentic" emotions. The fact that this concrete video has been taken down and Kjellberg faced an initial economic backlash only reinforced his standing as an "authentic" content creator within his community, where his disruptions represent and enable articulations of supposedly "subaltern" white and male identity within the Internet vernacular. While his ironic – and often transgressive – performances in opposition to mainstream media narratives and corporate identity policies let him gain influence far beyond his original target group of video game fans on YouTube, Kjellberg keeps being conceived of as a "home-born" DIY YouTuber. By now, his channel has garnered more than 110 million subscriptions and even held the position for being the most-subscribed channel on the platform between 2013 and 2019. Moreover, Kjellberg has the highest yearly income of all YouTubers in terms of ad revenue, affiliate marketing, merchandise sales, video sponsorships, live streaming contracts, etc. His channel can be considered an alternative media empire based on the performative cultivation of affects satisfying the community's desires for an online community driven by laissez-faire and anti-corporate ideals linked to Internet-based vernacular communication.

Early on, Kjellberg recognised the influence of musical performance as a remediating agent of community-oriented vernacular enunciation. He thereby often relies on the free labour of his community, who he encourages to remix and "songify" speech patterns taken from his vlogs and Let's Play

12 A reupload of the episode can be found here: @Allnickstaken, "PewDiePie – Death to All Jews full episode (Reupload)," March 22, 2019, YouTube video, 13:18, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=il-QpNTbm2E.

videos – which provides new material for compilations and reaction videos on his channel.[13] Moreover, he uploads music videos featuring the compositions of fellow music YouTubers such as Joel Berghult (@RoomieOfficial) or the Gregory Brothers (@schmoyoho), thematising his private life, musicalising inside jokes from his videos, or directly addressing and invoking a community spirit.[14] However, his most impactful music video – and the most-viewed video on his channel with over 300 million views – is a diss track directed at the YouTube channel of the Indian music label T-Series, featuring a rap performance by Kjellberg.[15] The video with the title "bitch lasagna" came out in October 2018, at a time when @T-Series – which features Bollywood soundtracks, movies, and Indian pop music – was about to overtake @PewDiePie as the most-subscribed channel on the platform. His music video served as a catalyser for a hyper-medialised rivalry between the two channels that lasted until April 28, 2019, when Kjellberg called an end to the competition with T-Series holding a considerable lead in subscriptions. The instrumental track of the song, which was produced by Dutch YouTuber @Party In Backyard, is carried by a trap beat and a harmonic ostinato (F#m – A – D – C#m – E) in the synth lead and synth bass. Lyrically, Kjellberg's rapping includes the disparaging uptake of Indian stereotypes as a way of establishing a contrast between the external "threat" of T-Series and the @PewDiePie community. For instance, the term "bitch lasagna" and lines like "bobs or vegana, whichever will it be?" refer to viral Facebook messenger screenshots of sexually explicit messages written by Indian men, which have been uploaded to the subreddit /r/IndianPeopleFacebook and inspired countless meta-memetic remixes.[16] Using vulgar language, Kjellberg goes on to highlight the worldwide reach and communal spirit of his "9-Year-Old Army" against the backdrop of India's high population, which he identifies as the main audience of the content featured on T-Series' YouTube channel: "You got a fifth of the population in your nation

13 See, for example, @PewDiePie, "The Pewdiepie Song(s)," July 21, 2017, YouTube video, 13:53, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g1d7hrfc7wM.

14 See @PewDiePie, "His Name Is Pewdiepie – Extended Version (By Roomie)," May 11, 2014, YouTube video, 3:19, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BmxCR4_abd4; @PewDiePie, "Jabba the Hutt (PewDiePie Song) by Schmoyoho," September 14, 2013, YouTube video, 2:11, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxw3C5HJ2XU.

15 @PewDiePie, "bitch lasagna," October 5, 2018, YouTube video, 2:14, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Dh-RL__uN4.

16 See "Bobs and Vegana," Know Your Meme, accessed 30 March 2023, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/bobs-and-vegana.

// But I got nine-year-olds of worlds so hold your defecation." At times, the racist undertones in his lyrics are expressed more overtly, for example when Kjellberg refers to himself as a "blue-eyed white dragon while you're just dark magician," or when he ridicules the Hindi language ("Motu Patlu, what the fuck is that even supposed to mean? // Your language sounds like it came from a mumble rap community"). The anti-Indian theme of the lyrics establishes T-Series as an external alien entity and helps solidify an in-group identity. At the same time, it connects to an overall "David versus Goliath" narrative: On the one side, there is @PewDiePie and his community, representing the platform and its ideal of vernacular creativity and communality. The account of T-Series, on the other hand, serves as an external corporate threat to the ideal of "broadcasting yourself."

Figure 28: Still from Felix Kjellberg's music video for his diss track "bitch lasagna" (2018).

As soon as the diss track was released, a surge of communal produsage and activism ensued. Using the viral slogan, "Subscribe to PewDiePie," prominent YouTubers announced their support for Kjellberg, organised pro-PewDiePie flashmobs, and bought billboards;[17] hackers even attacked devices like printers and smart TVs as well as websites of newspapers and social media accounts

17 See @MrBeast, "I Bought Every Billboard In My City For This," October 26, 2018, YouTube video, 15:30, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZNxvnQvoh4.

of politicians in order to spread their message and encourage YouTube users to subscribe to @PewDiePie.[18] In this subscription battle, the composition of "bitch lasagna" played a central role, spawning countless cover versions, remixes, and instrumental tutorials of the track – and inspiring conceptual performances in support of Kjellberg's channel: Joe Jenkins, whose channel is based on public piano performances of viral songs (and the reactions of passers-by), created a live stream with the self-explanatory title "Playing B**** LASAGNA in a mall until someone asks me to stop in order to save PewDiePie."[19] @Davie504 even went as far as to travel to India in order to perform "bitch lasagna" on bass guitar in front of the T-Series headquarters.[20] The volume of contributions encouraged individual contributors to perform visibility labour by further imitating, reproducing, and re-interpreting the track, which, by 2019, had become the main signifier for a communally perceived battle for the "real" YouTube. Contributions by aspirational labourers aiming to achieve recognition and exposure through a shout-out in a @PewDiePie video – and Kjellberg's own aspirations of gainfully harvesting the ongoing stream of contributions – focus on the performative invocation of a "YouTube we," which serves as a mutually circulated emotional product. Kjellberg's channel functions as a hub for the "market-based" actions of aspirational produsage based on the exchange value of the "subscribe to PewDiePie" tag and its musical signifier "bitch lasagna." Thereby, his strategic directing of affective flows profits from the nervous attention economy within the systemic constraints of communicative capitalism, as his "ironic" integration of anti-Indian stereotypes exemplifies. In the face of criticism by mainstream media, Kjellberg's appeal and brand as a "common man" only rose within and beyond his community, as he and his public campaign against T-Series came to epitomise the general anti-elitist attitude and edginess of certain white Internet vernaculars (particularly those influenced by North-American media

18 See Thomas Brewster, "A Hacker Forced 50,000 Printers To Spread PewDiePie Propaganda – And the Problem Is Much Bigger Than You Know," *Forbes*, December 3, 2018, https://www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbrewster/2018/12/03/a-hacker-forced-50000-printers-to-spread-pewdiepie-propagandaand-the-problem-is-much-bigger-than-you-know/?sh=5f2fbb173819.

19 @Joe Jenkins, "Playing B**** LASAGNA in a mall until someone asks me to stop in order to save PewDiePie," December 7, 2018, YouTube live stream, 1:27:40, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DibSoXZGaEg.

20 @Davie504, "I went to INDIA at T-Series HQ just to play this song…," January 20, 2019, YouTube video, 2:12, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KprzFp9A0kc.

environments). His example goes to show that, in the current (post-)ironic cyberscape of vernacular communication, even an apparent compatibility with right-wing populist agitation can be discursively and economically gainful and, depending on the communal framework and self-understanding, enable effective self-narrations of vernacularity.

*Figure 29: Still from @Joe Jenkin's video "Playing B**** LASAGNA in a mall until someone asks me to stop in order to save PewDiePie" (2018), including chat messages from the live stream.*

Whereas on Mulholland's channel, the moment of self-reflection and self-positioning as an authentic actor is conveyed by his musical performances, which aim at letting the apparatus of technical reproduction and the charged relationship between performances of virtuosity and ordinariness appear in a meta-referential manner, Kjellberg's musical enunciations are embedded within a broader communicative strategy of self-narration and self-branding. In awareness of his role as a communal "tribal chief," which is based on the generation of proximity and authenticating reactions to his community's input, Kjellberg functionalises musical compositions on his channel as signifiers for communal belonging, thereby anticipating and encouraging the passing on of its affective charge in forms of creative relay. His channel relies on the fostering and harvesting of free and aspirational labour carried out by his community and fellow YouTube micro-celebrities. However different, both examples highlight the necessity for aspirational content creators to performatively evoke a vernacular in contrast to communally imagined institutionalised forms of self-representation and self-branding. In contrast to a

conventional status of mainstream celebrity that is based on spatial distance to the audience, temporal scarcity of appearances, and extraordinary performances, Mulholland and Kjellberg become objects of consumption-oriented demands by generating and capitalising on authenticating sensual stimuli. Thereby, the inner juxtapositions and paradoxes of self-entrepreneurial vernacular performance become evident on different levels: In Mulholland's musical performances, musical skilfulness and virtuosity is counterbalanced by audio-visual displays of randomness, transparency, profanity, or failure in order to evoke a "home-born" YouTube aesthetic. Kjellberg's pro-active strategy of "producing produsage," on the other hand, exemplifies how a channel can turn into a highly impactful, commercially oriented intermediary on the platform – which functions as an intermediary itself – and still enable the content creator's successful self-positioning as an ambassador and face of a communally shared fantasy of heterarchical participation.[21] Both cases highlight the impact of musical performance as a remediating agent for vernacular creativity and self-representation in the context of aspirational channel concepts. Adaptive to technological settings, guided by narrative strategies of self-celebrification, and situated within the overall collaborative environment

21 It seems that anti-corporatist ideals function as the ultimate demarcation for vernacular enunciations on the platform, enabling dialectical vernacular enunciations: Felix Kjellberg, for instance, could perform his white "subaltern" identity and DIY ethos as a "private" uploader in contrast to the corporate "threat" of T-Series. Moreover, corporate uptake of media artefacts and practices associated with Internet culture are often met with resistance, as the track "Ocean to Ocean" by Pitbull ft. Rhea exemplifies: The song, which is part of the official soundtrack to the 2018 superhero movie Aqua Man (Warner Bros. Pictures), can be described as a remix of Toto's "Africa" with some added rap lines. This low-effort attempt at capitalising on Internet and meme culture was not well received, as the like-dislike ratio for the YouTube video suggests. The reason for the rejection of the song on the platform has arguably to do with the position of the uploader, as corporate territorialisations of vernacular Internet phenomena – and thus: of co-creative practices which evoke ideals of non-hierarchical content creation and self-expression – necessarily represent an unconcealable breach with fantasies of abundance and equivalent participation at the base of vernacular content creation on YouTube and other platforms. See @WaterTower Music, "Aquaman Official Soundtrack | Ocean To Ocean – Pitbull feat. Rhea | WaterTower," December 14, 2018, YouTube video, 2:25, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xhfnTs0RZLs. Before YouTube removed the public dislike count on videos in November 2021, the video had like-dislike ratio of approximately 55.000 to 139.000 (November 2, 2021). See ibid., archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20211102180707/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xhfnTs0RZLs.

of YouTube, musical performances of the self represent an integral part of the affective labour of aspirational content creators, as they are aimed at 1) leaving an authorial mark by way of developing and influencing musical, screenic, and discursive patterns of convention within the overall field of produsage, 2) generating or reinforcing a sense of transparency, proximity, and communal belonging, and 3) serving as a point of reference and communal orientation within the endless stream of contributions on the platform.

5.2 Beyond Composition: Communication, Collaboration, and the Constitution of Channels

As indicated in the previous chapter, musical re-composition can be part of an overall strategy of self-celebrification influenced by vernacular genres of communication. These genres shape the overall "platform vernacular" and dynamically constitute a grammar of communication between aspirational YouTubers and their audience through shared – and continually developing – forms and conventions of interaction and self-representation which allow for the achievement and ascription of micro-celebrity. Of course, communication further becomes niche-mediated in concrete communal and subcultural contexts; for instance, in music-centred YouTube channels, constructions of screen personas and the screenic and rhetorical repertoires of generating affinity or authenticity usually relate to specific musical topics, events, and objects – and to a potentially musical community. Thus, on the basis of our understanding of the dynamic platform vernacular as a provider of communicative tools and conventions for self-representation, self-narration, and the construction of an affective relationship to an (imagined) audience, one question needs to be answered in depth: In which ways do communicative strategies of self-celebrification integrate ideas of a primarily *musical* vernacular into forms of communal everyday communication and co-creation on the platform and beyond?

The example of British singer-songwriter dodie can help us differentiate: dodie – or: Dorothy Miranda Clarke – began uploading her own songs and cover versions to YouTube in 2011.[22] In addition to the bedroom aesthetic of some of her musical performances, such as her ukulele covers, her channel content is characterised by a documentary ethos. In a low-tech filming style,

22 @doddleoddle, YouTube channel, joined February 7, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/c/doddleoddle.

making use of a single camera, Clarke addresses her audience in real-life situations, entertaining tutorials, or autobiographical and confessional vlog formats. On her first as well as on her secondary, more vlogging-oriented channel,[23] viewers can find tutorials for French braids as well as insights into Clarke's COVID-19 infection and her quarantine life. Some of her vlogs are more music-related: besides weaving in comments on her professional life as a songwriter and touring musician in diary-like vlogs, she creates authenticating formats that depict her creative process, give recommendations to her audience, but also expose her own moments of self-doubt and insecurity. In the video "how to write a song,"[24] for instance, Clarke self-ironically takes up the genre of how-to tutorials to re-enact her own struggles with a writer's block. In nine steps, the video shows her mental development from confidence over self-deception to desperation, starting with the declaration that "there is no 'right' way to write a song" and keeping up a positive façade ("…sitting in silence is…all part of the process"), until her desperation suddenly bursts out ("GIVE UP, fuck it all"). Although the video was scripted, it gives her extra-diegetic credibility in that it contains tactical self-criticism which, on the one hand, weakens the (traditional) authorial subject but, on the other, strengthens the relational dynamic between her and her audience.

While a few of her short songs – such as her coming-out song "I'm bisexual," which resulted from a collaboration with Skittles during Pride Month 2017 – similarly capitalise on the authenticating moment of Clarke performing her private self, they remain a YouTube-adaptive accompaniment to her professional career as a singer-songwriter: Besides her more than 90 cover videos and short songs, she has released 15 singles, four EPs, and one studio album. Due to a contract with the multi-channel network VEVO, her official music videos are released on a separate VEVO channel (@dodieVEVO).[25] An

23 @doddlevloggle, YouTube channel, joined January 28, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/user/doddlevloggle.

24 @doddleoddle, "how to write a song," October 30, 2021, YouTube video, 10:09, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hbFzz6LXF8M.

25 Multi-channel networks (or MCNs) like VEVO are organisations which act as intermediaries on the video platform, offering support to a channel owner in terms of (cross-)promotion, monetisation, or audience development. As Ramon Lobato describes it, MCNs "operate in and around YouTube's advertising infrastructure. A common business model is for MCNs to sign up a large number of popular channels to their network, then, using YouTube's content management system, to sell advertising and cross-promote their affiliated channels across this network, while also working

emerging popstar on and off YouTube, Clarke conceptually separates her "professional" musical content from her vernacular communication. Although her uptake of established genres of communication (tutorials, vlogs, live formats, etc.) has helped her gain a status of micro-celebrity on the platform, with a total of about 3 million subscriptions on her two self-created channels, her mastery of the platform vernacular is mostly restricted to communicative matters of self-thematisation and interaction with her audience – however, her content is largely detached from ongoing collaborative and viral forms of musicking and musical produsage on the platform. Apart from her occasional DIY bedroom aesthetic and her recognition value as a YouTuber, most of Clarke's commercially oriented musical performances do not aim at expressing, pointing to, or reflecting on the "home-born" qualities that inform our experience on the platform; moreover, no circulating audiologovisual and musical artefacts, objects, or themes are taken up or re-appropriated. Rather, her official songs and music videos exist independently from YouTube-specific musical produsage of circulating and materially or ideationally repeatable themes, concepts, and aesthetic objects. A communal and vernacular ethos is created through her strategies of authentication – for example through her DIY production and her ways of addressing the audience – and less by way of musically engaging with communal and referential practices that perpetuate and shape "commonplace" competencies and conventions of musical (re-)composition on and with YouTube.

As can be seen, Gibb's notion of the platform vernacular can aid us in identifying established communicative practices against the backdrop of a platform's socio-medial infrastructure. However, it must be added that the concept does not offer concrete indications of a channel's potential to invoke and develop a platform-situated *musical* vernacular. Thus, the mere adaptation of platform-specific genres of communication by authorial subjects might not lead to the integration of their individual musical content and knowledge into communal repertoires of platform-based everyday musicking, if they do not engage with or encourage the ongoing performative re-contextualisation and re-domestication of circulating forms of vernacular musical (self-)expression. Taking these observations into account, this chapter will shed light on the mul-

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with popular YouTube celebrities to develop them into fully fledged video brands." See Ramon Lobato, "The Cultural Logic of Intermediaries: YouTube Multichannel Networks," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 22, no. 4 (August 2016): 349, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856516641628.

tifaceted ways in which the affective labour of "music YouTubers" can impact forms and formats of vernacular musical produsage in their community and beyond. In this context, the interrelations between communicative strategies of self-celebrification, concise channel concepts, and musical ways of re-signifying and personifying pre-existing vernacular forms deserve the utmost attention.

Transcribing, Growing, Specialising: Hybridised Forms of Music Communication

Since the platform's launch in 2005, channel concepts oriented towards musical communities on YouTube have emerged and taken shape alongside ever-shifting formal and social modular relations. In his video "14 years of YouTube," New York-based jazz musician and YouTuber Adam Neely provides a vivid account of his channel's development from within a musical community of amateurs, which was driven by an ethos of free collaboration and cooperation, to a highly popular and financially successful channel based on a concise channel concept and strategies of self-branding.[26] Neely sketches how he started uploading YouTube videos in 2006, being inspired by a growing amateur-to-amateur culture driven by "musicians of varying degrees of education uploading fairly haphazard DIY lessons for free to YouTube and then creating communities around these lessons based on a culture of participation."[27] While, at first, his channel featured bass and music theory lessons and was exclusively addressing fellow bass players and jazz musicians, he soon started to notice his peers' pioneering attempts at viral success and tried to aspirationally incorporate their strategies into his repertoire. In doing so, Neely began to reflect on and increasingly adapt to the dynamic entanglement of social practices, processes of subjectivation, and infrastructural affordances – a lesson he passes on to his viewers: "[K]now the space that you're creating for and know what other people are doing in that space. Transcribe other people's work, kind of the same way that a jazz musician might transcribe a good solo."[28] By taking up and remixing trending formats of musical content creation, Neely gradually increased the variety of his content, which, at around 2015, encompassed bass

26 @Adam Neely, "14 Years of YouTube," April 2, 2020, YouTube video, 20:10, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-NJIyiTe4sU.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

lessons, music videos, reharmonisations of pop songs, and gig vlogs. However, it was arguably not only the "transcription" of other music-related content but also the successful "re-instrumentation" of *non-musical* channel concepts as well as the adaptation of strategies of self-branding and self-presentation that led to his breakthrough as an influential and highly visible YouTube personality. For one, Neely fully took on the role as a broadcaster, establishing regular upload dates, increasing the production quality, creating tailor-made visual designs for his channel and video thumbnails, and composing intro themes for his videos. Secondly, as a result of gaining a deeper understanding of his audience on the platform, he sought inspiration in non-musical education and infotainment formats. Neely recognised that "it wasn't just bassists watching. Plenty of non-bassists and also even non-musicians were watching my channel now and so I felt like I could expand out to explore other things in music besides just bass."[29] Addressing this audience – and, by way of algorithmic anticipation, aiming at an imagined, potentially broader audience – Neely found a voice on the platform as a music communicator who, on the one hand, leans on academicised musical topics and gives insights into his life as a jazz musician and, on the other, takes up issues of Internet-mediated musical aesthetics and imagines, explores, and develops connections between Internet culture and music.

In video essays of 10 to 20 minutes, Neely approaches musical and visual Internet phenomena from a music-theoretical and musicological perspective, thereby introducing them into his own compositional practice. For instance, he tries to sketch a "music theory of vaporwave" based on the timbre and socio-aesthetic effect of the microgenre's quasi-readymade sonic material, explaining the surreal nostalgic effect it conveys – and exemplifying his findings by recording his own track based on the Kmart sound logo and samples from a commercial.[30] In "The Music Theory of TikTok Sea Shanties," Neely thematises the musical tradition of maritime work songs as well as the technological affordances that led to the emergence of a sea shanty trend on TikTok – hashtag: #ShantyTok – in the winter of 2020/2021, which spawned a massive circulation of renditions of sea songs like "Soon May the Wellerman Come," often realised by way of using TikTok's duet function that enables split-screen col-

29 Ibid.

30 @Adam Neely, "The music theory of V A P O R W A V E," October 24, 2016, YouTube video, 11:06, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QdVEez20X_s.

laborations with other participants.[31] In yet another video, he follows the viral promise of kitten content in social media by producing a video essay on the bizarre historical concept of the "cat organ."[32] While for historical versions of the instrument – allegedly dating back to the 16th century – the instrumentalist arranged cats according to their natural pitch and, by pressing a key, pulled their tails in order to produce "music,"[33] Neely programmed a torture-free "cat piano" based on MIDI signals that would trigger meow samples and corresponding video snippets of cute kittens. These video essays, which form the core part of Neely's channel and popularised his brand as a "home-grown" music YouTuber, are characterised by the integration of Internet-related topics and phenomena into his communicative and musical performance. Moreover, inspired by his Q&A videos and video comments, Neely has cultivated a repertoire of meta-memetic inside jokes of a music-theoretical nature, his thematisation of "memey" time signatures and polyrhythms being a good example for this: On tour with guitarist Shubh Saran and his band, Neely and his colleagues found a way to apply a 4/20 time signature to music, the music-theoretical implications and intricacies of which he extensively explains and exemplifies by including videos from live shows and discussions with Shubh Saran and his bandmates.[34] Furthermore, in a video on 7:11 polyrhythms, Neely films himself standing in front of a 7-Eleven, playing said rhythm, breaking it down theoretically, and encouraging imitations by his community.[35] Both videos result from Neely's understanding of the affectivity of the meta-memetic process he refers to and introduces – that is, a temporary sphere of communal activity focussed on the playful and self-referential re-enactment of the memetic logic of mechanistic viral spread. Neely productively takes up concepts with a viral and

31 @Adam Neely, "The Music Theory of Tik Tok Sea Shanties," January 19, 2021, YouTube video 15:53, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1ovAB4vKzw.

32 @Adam Neely, "The Cat Piano | Morose Delectation and Music," June 19, 2017, YouTube video, 8:21, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3I1pEbiYSCw.

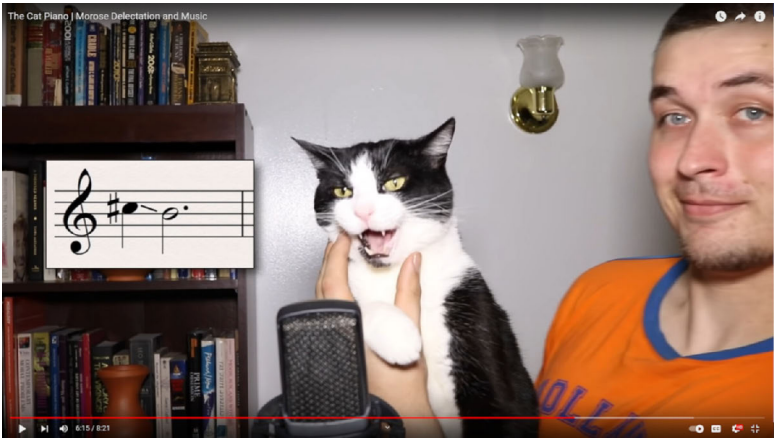
33 See Jean-Baptiste Weckerlin, *Musiciana: Extraits d'ouvrages rares ou bizarres, anecdotes, lettres, etc. Concernant la musique et les musiciens* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1877), 349.

34 @Adam Neely, "4/20 Time Signatures," November 25, 2019, YouTube video, 10:31, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BG1zZ7K5sf0. "4/20" is used in cannabis culture to refer to marijuana and hashish consumption. Particularly in the US, many protesters gather publicly on April 20 (at 4:20 p.m.) in order to celebrate cannabis and advocate for legalisation.

35 @Adam Neely, "7:11 Polyrhythms," February 25, 2019, YouTube video, 12.18, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9CgR2Y6XO4.

meta-memetic potentiality as vantage points for his own musically ambitious explorations and playful interactions with his community, thereby channelling the emerging affective flows in order to attain unique musical outcomes and show ways to musical aptitude.

Figure 30: Adam Neely recording meow samples with his cat for his torture-free "cat piano." Still from Neely's video essay "The Cat Piano | Morose Delectation and Music" (2017).



Adam Neely's channel exemplifies the ways in which communicative genres, musical and screenic vernacular repertoires, and personal musical styles and preferences can hybridise into new personalised forms and formats of YouTube-based music communication. For comparison, the channel of Charles Cornell offers other distinctive examples: Based on a similar incentive to combine the "issue vernacular" of "nerdy" music-theoretical inquiry with the genres of communication that form the overall "platform vernacular," Cornell focusses on a wide variety of musical topics and objects from the most diverse genres and contexts, such as jazz, pop, classical music, video game and movie scores, and viral Internet phenomena. Thereby, his content oscillates between review videos – in which he listens to, analyses, and improvises over the presented musical (or sonic) material – and entertaining formats that combine comical audiovisual content and elaborate musical re-arrangements. By choosing objects of musical inquiry that originate from

contexts widely perceived as banal or "low-brow," Cornell signalises a strong interest in vernacular musical aesthetics. Besides his reviews and analyses – e.g., of the "Thomas the Tank Engine" theme or characteristic chord changes in anime music,[36] Cornell regularly exhibits his own re-arranging skills, often accompanied by comedic scriptwriting: In his video "5 Versions of Row Row Row Your Boat | Terrible to Amazing," Cornell impersonates the characters of 7-year-old Jimmy and his birthday party guests, as they try to sing the nursery rhyme, thereby successively optimising their own performance.[37] After a failed and a mediocre attempt at singing in a round, the "party guests" introduce barbershop harmonies (level 3), a contemporary choral arrangement (level 4), and, as the final point of culmination, a four-minute, Michael Bublé-inspired instrumental re-arrangement of the tune – much to Jimmy's dissatisfaction, as his deadpan inner monologue and facial expressions convey. In accordance with his channel's motto ("I make music out of stuff"), Cornell derives his YouTube-adaptive compositional approach from the juxtaposition of theoretical knowledge and (musical) everyday artefacts and observations. At times, he lets his objects of fascination guide his creative process more rigorously, as in his musicalisations of viral videos that use human speech as quasi-melodic *sprechstimme*.[38] In one musicalisation, Cornell harmonises televangelist Kenneth Copeland, who, in a sermon in April 2020, claimed victory over COVID-19 after channelling the "wind of God" and blowing it toward the camera. The video shows Cornell's working process of attaining Copeland's tonal material by analysing – and improvising to – his incantation, followed by a piano performance of his final harmonisation.[39] On the one hand, one could certainly detect a tutorial character in Cornell's video. In equal measure, however, it can be categorised as a reaction video, as his emotional bodily reactions to Copeland's sermon – sarcastic comments included – are filmed in real-time.

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36 @Charles Cornell, "The Thomas the Tank Engine Theme is Unironically Really Good," July 7, 2022, YouTube video, 13:42, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=og1Pbn8OufI; @Charles Cornell, "Does All Anime Music Use These Chord Changes," June 20, 2022, YouTube video, 18:48, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yz19qzup10U.

37 @Charles Cornell, "5 Versions of Row Row Row Your Boat | Terrible to Amazing," February 27, 2020, YouTube video, 6:09, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1yWh6FSDQY.

38 See chapter 3.2.

39 @Charles Cornell, "Megachurch Pastor Tries To Blow Away Coronavirus but I make it music," April 17, 2020, YouTube video, 12:43, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnZBOwMHte4.

They go hand in hand with his intuitive musical accompaniments, which re-contextualise the pastor's speech, for example by way of contrasting it with silly "oom-pah" figures or hyper-affirming its ceremonial and portentous tone with epic arpeggio figures over the whole keyboard.

Figure 31: Thumbnail from Charles Cornell's video "Megachurch Pastor Tries To Blow Away Coronavirus but I make it music" (2020).

Neely's and Cornell's videos paradigmatically highlight the entangled interrelations between YouTube-specific communicative formats and compositional ideas and techniques. Do, for instance, the formats of tutorials, reaction videos, sketches, video essays, vlogs (to name only a few) primarily incentivise the compositional process or is it rather a musical idea or concept that inspires the development of these established genres of communication? The same could be asked with regard to vernacular objects of creative relay – such as TikTok shanties, kitten content, 7:11 polyrhythms, or viral videos of scam artist preachers. The answer is: in the context of visibility labour performed by aspirational music YouTubers, genres of communication, vernacular repertoires of collaborative remix, and the content creator's musical concepts (which are based on their musical education, knowledge, skills, preferences, etc.) always develop interdependently, forming into platform-adaptive, hybridised, and personalised forms of music communication. Of course, at times, the overall tendency towards playful conceptualisms lets the musical outcome itself be-

come merely accidental. Representing an extreme case, the channel of Swedish "piano prankster" Matthias Krantz is informed by an almost completely anaesthetic concept. Krantz regularly rebuilds his piano, for instance by exchanging the piano hammers with actual hammers from the hardware store, putting guitar strings on the piano, or tuning every single piano string to the note E.[40] He then goes on to confront unwitting piano teachers and technicians with his latest inventions, filming their reactions while playing or listening to the instrument. Through the ongoing upload of variations on this prank concept, the overall channel appears as a meta-meme in itself, informing a potentially endless chain of derivative videos. Both the instrument and the channel concept become constantly re-composed in Krantz' videos – musical performance, however, is only insofar relevant as the pranks revolve around sonic events.

Regenerating and Self-Evaluating Content

The process of growing with the communicative environment, continually transcribing (or re-instrumenting), and creatively integrating the cultural objects and practices which fuel collaborative remix can be described on the level of singular contributions as well as on the macro level of the content creator's channel. After all, similar to the montage and re-appropriation of modular compositional material and communicative framings within one video file, channels are modular compositions with a high degree of variability – albeit lower in terms of "granularity." The concept of regenerative remix by Eduardo Navas demonstrates how, in networked cultural practices, the logic of mashup can be found on many levels. On the one hand, Navas examines how software procedures, for instance a computer's visual "desktop" interface or automated web applications – such as Google's search engine or news applications – constantly remix and assemble content and information.[41] On the other hand, he likens cultural practices such as (re-)blogging to the performance of a turntab-

40 @Matthias Krantz, "I put Hammers on a Piano then hired Pro Pianists without telling them," June 16, 2021, YouTube video, 29:01, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7l7vF5SjmM; @Matthias Krantz, "I put GUITAR Strings on my Piano then Hired a Piano Tech to Come Fix it," October 9, 2020, YouTube video, 17:24, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wknR4izjXiE; @Matthias Krantz, "I tuned my entire piano to E then took lessons," December 14, 2021, YouTube video, 9:17, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BFetTcrVWII.

41 See Navas, *Remix Theory*, 100–103.

list who remixes pre-existing material.[42] Most importantly, however, both formalised software mashups and networked cultural practices are dependent on constant non-linear updates. The continual co-development of pre-existing (cultural) content in networked culture lends regenerative remix its ahistorical character: "The regenerative remix is specific to new media and networked culture. […] [I]t does not necessarily use references or samplings to validate itself as a cultural form. Instead, the cultural recognition of the material source is subverted in the name of practicality – the validation of the regenerative remix lies in its functionality."[43] Following Navas' observations, the perpetual re-arrangement of YouTube's content in the platform's "feed," which displays videos in a top-down manner based on their popularity, currentness, and the user's watch history, exemplifies the principle of regenerative remix at the base of the platform's functional architecture. Of course, aspirational musical content creation on YouTube, too, is driven by the principle of regenerative remix. It underlies self-optimising practices of imitating, (co-)developing, and re-combining established communicative and compositional forms and formats, which evolve in a fluid manner and situate content creators within ongoing flows of produsage. Beyond the level of single video files, the curation and overall arrangement of videos within a channel concept can be regarded as regenerative remix, as the adaption and re-evaluation of one's own channel concept – in relation to others – entails the constant updating and re-balancing of channel-specific conceptual foci and framings. Thus, with regard to self-optimising behaviour driven by visibility labour and strategies of self-celebrification, communally and algorithmically mediated formats of audience-responsive, self-referential, entertaining, and educational content creation have emerged as elementary modules for the ongoing aspirational re-composition of impactful YouTube channels.

Collabs and Features: Modularisation of the Social

The technological infrastructures of social networks can by no means be regarded as neutral; rather, they have a socially formative impact, as they concretely shape the affordances for platform-situated communality and processes of subjectivation. On YouTube, users navigate the graphical user interface which interlinks and recommends videos and channels and makes

42 See ibid., 120–124.

43 Ibid., 73.

them commensurable by way of displaying views, likes, and subscriptions. In terms of their visibility, implementations of extensive algorithmic changes on the platform in 2012 entailed an increasing algorithmic preference for self-entrepreneurial strategies in terms of concise channel concepts and frequent uploads.[44] Of course, any video with a high view count in the first days after its upload gets an additional boost through trending and recommendation algorithms; however, temporal and continual success on YouTube are closely intertwined: not only the views but also the view duration of the video, the duration of the recipient's YouTube session *before* and *after* watching the respective video, the number of subscriptions to one's channel, and, most importantly, the general upload frequency on the channel are factored into the conditions of visibility for singular videos.[45] It is evident that today's YouTube algorithm rewards "proactive self-optimisers" – to borrow a term used by Ramón Reichert[46] – who, via subscriptions, bind users to their channels and, by means of adjusting their production quality and upload rate, serve as co-manufacturers of the platform's audiences and publics. Moreover, by providing content creators with the option to monetise their videos within the framework of the "YouTube Partner Program,"[47] the platform further

44 See Sophie Bishop, "Anxiety, Panic and Self-Optimization: Inequalities and the YouTube Algorithm," *The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 24, no. 1 (January 2018): 72, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517736978.

45 See Karsten Kurze, "Der YouTube Algorithmus: Fluch und Segen zugleich," *Tubesights by HitchOn*, July 2, 2018, https://tubesights.de/amp/youtube-algorithmus-2.

46 See Ramón Reichert, "Evaluation and Self-Evaluation on YouTube: Designing the Self in Makeup Tutorials," in *Online Evaluation of Creativity and the Arts*, ed. Hiesun Cecilia Suhr (New York: Routledge, 2014), 100.

47 Mingyi Hou provides a concise overview of the main characteristics of YouTube's Partner Program: "Content creators can join the program by displaying automatedly distributed advertisements in their channels and videos, and share 55 % of the ad revenue with YouTube. A key factor in this means of monetization is cost per mille (CPM), or cost per thousand views. For every 1000 ad views, advertisers pay a certain amount of money to YouTube and content creators. We should note that CPM is an advertiser-oriented figure, instead of creator-oriented. It is the advertisement market on YouTube that decides CPM instead of content creators. When the need for YouTube ads is high, for instance, in holiday seasons, the ad prices are high. Some ads are placed by bidding for keywords, so if a keyword is popular among advertisers, the CPM for that ad is also high. In this situation, content creators need to optimize their content and metadata of their videos so as to make sure high CPM ads appear in their channels." Hou, "Social Media Celebrity," 541.

encourages self-entrepreneurial activity – even if only few become financially successful. Entrepreneurial subjects who generate musical content based on communally mediated forms and formats of communication and re-composition willfully adapt to media of control and rationalisation in order to maximise their impact on the platform.[48] On the basis of navigating shared audiovisual, communicative, and musical repertoires, on the one hand, and medial displays of commensurability, on the other, they generate aesthetic difference and innovation and prove themselves as adaptable and creative subjects. These procedures of subjectivation and content creation point to a networked subject who does not act autonomously but within a sphere of networked control based on platform-specific communication options, methods of rationalisation, and algorithmic curation. This sphere is perpetuated by co-creative peers who "broadcast themselves" and co-develop communally recognised repertoires, conventions, and strategies of musical re-composition and self-representation.

In the context of self-optimising visibility labour, formats of collaboration play a crucial part. Collaboration, defined as "the co-occurrence of a YouTuber from a different channel in a YouTuber's video, e.g., in a video showing both YouTubers or playing a (potentially) prerecorded clip of the featured YouTuber,"[49] has arguably become more important in today's oversaturated media ecology. As Mattias Holmbom states, "[t]here are thousands of individuals running channels, creating very identical content, making it harder than ever

48 In order to accumulate social and economic capital on the platform, aspirational users adapt to the feedback offered by YouTube. For example, with "YouTube Studio," Google provides an analytical tool for creators who wish to optimise their content based on algorithmic anticipation. The application manages and displays user behaviour, generating statistics on general hits on the creator's channel, the visibility and click-rate of video thumbnails, playback durations of videos, and the behaviour of target groups such as recurring viewers and subscribers. In case the creator monetises their content within the platform-situated framework of the YouTube Partner Program, YouTube Studio furthermore displays the ad revenue gained through automated advertisements which are placed in their channels and videos.

49 Christian Koch et al., "Collaborations on YouTube: From Unsupervised Detection to the Impact on Video and Channel Popularity," *ACM Transactions on Multimedia Computing, Communications, and Applications* 14, no. 4 (November 2018): 89:9, https://doi.org/10.1145/3241054.

to stand out."[50] Holmbom's case study of five YouTube channels indicates that aspirational subjects can significantly expand their audience by featuring other channels and being featured themselves, which makes collaboration a powerful tool to gain visibility. Collaborative video formats are part of a self-optimising strategy aimed at increasing algorithmic diffusion on the platform by creating synergies across channels and becoming associated with other (preferably popular) persons and personas. They make social relations tangible as modules, comparable to the modular repertoires of vernacular artefacts and concepts that are being regeneratively remixed by content creators. However, these performatively collaborative formats have not introduced collaboration as such into the domain of YouTube-situated musical performance and re-composition – after all, open-ended, often invisible collaboration is a basic requirement for produsage in social media. Similarly, modularisations of social relations are not an exclusive result of collaborative formats; rather, they are always at play in the context of networked individualism, as digitally transmitted communication and co-creation, particularly in the age of social media, is formally and aesthetically influenced by the modularity of media files – as Lev Manovich would say, it is drawing from "a blend of human and computer meanings" and, at the same time, displaying its own modal relations between socio-cultural and computational processes. One could thus regard collaborative videos as a symbolic doubling which makes the modularisation of the social more clearly visible.

Christian Koch's study on the impact of collaborations on the popularity of videos and channels on YouTube provides an overview regarding types of collaborative partnerships as well as improvements in terms of visibility that may come with them. Most notably, Koch observes "a significant increase of subscriber and view count for all collaborations taking place between YouTubers uploading mostly videos of the same category."[51] Of course, the category we might call "music-related communication and entertainment" invites inner differentiations. While a collaboration between Charles Cornell and Adam Neely seems like a natural fit due to their shared jazz and music school background, collaborations between YouTubers who cater to differently attuned

50 Matthias Holmbom, "The YouTuber: A Qualitative Study of Popular Content Creators" (Bachelor's thesis, Umeå Universitet, 2015), 18, http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-105388.

51 Koch et al., Collaborations on YouTube, 89:20.

musical communities hold the promise of harvesting new audiences and fostering algorithmic connectability and diffusion beyond tight-knit musical subcultures or scenes. The collaborations between Adam Neely and guitarist Rob Scallon are a good example of how "crossover" projects help develop or manifest their status as faces of "music YouTube" exactly on the basis of their different musical knowledge and preferences: In the collaboration video "Metal Musician Sucks at Jazz" on Scallon's channel, Neely introduces Scallon to fundamental jazz and blues vocabulary on different instruments and guides him through the recording process of a track, which features Scallon playing the upright bass, guitar, piano, drums, and saxophone.[52] In a video on Neely's channel, Scallon returns the favour and coaches Neely in all things metal and metalcore.[53] By trying to learn different musical styles and genre-typical instruments within just a few hours, both musicians lay claim to ordinariness, tactically exhibiting their unavoidable failure. On the basis of different musical backgrounds, Neely and Scallon have conceptualised an authenticating and entertaining format which symbolically unites niche-mediated musical communities under the umbrella of an overall "YouTube we."

Neely's and Scallon's exchange of collaborations – that is, one internal collaboration on one's own channel, one external collaboration on the partner's channel – represents the common model for aspirational collaborations on the platform. However, as Koch points out, there exists "a small number of highly collaborating channels, denoted as central channels."[54] In the sphere of music communication, the channel of David Bruce functions as such a central channel – or, one could say, as a collaborative hub. Bruce, a composer, regularly invites other YouTubers to composition challenges on his channel. Five participants from various musical backgrounds are asked to write scores based on a specific task, which are then performed by a music ensemble specifically hired for the realisation of the project. In the videos the composers and their final pieces are presented, accompanied by Bruce's commentary as well as additional statements and reactions by the participants. In the video "5 COMPOSERS 1 THEME," for instance, Bruce challenges the featured YouTubers to compose a piece based on widely recognised musical motifs he considers

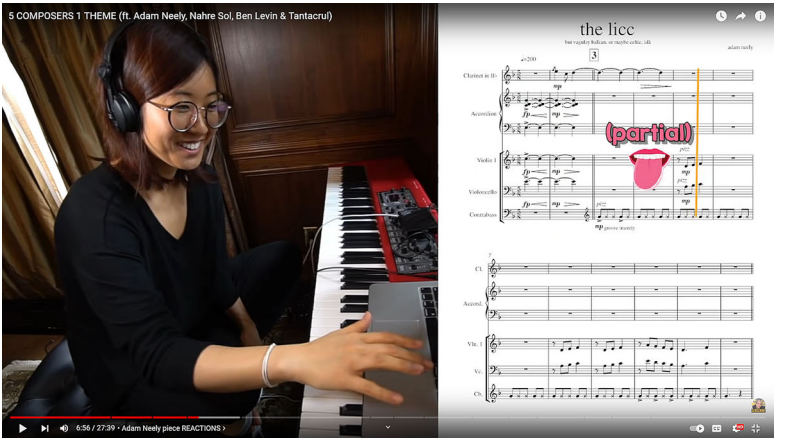
52 @Rob Scallon, "Metal Musician Sucks at Jazz (w/ Adam Neely)," June 18, 2022, YouTube video, 21:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zz2NN48_lV8.

53 @Adam Neely, "Jazz Musician Sucks at Metal (w/ Rob Scallon)," June 18, 2022, YouTube video, 30:34, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yYizxOBqvBE.

54 Koch et al., Collaborations on YouTube, 89:14.

"musical memes," such as the first bars of Mozart's "Eine kleine Nachtmusik," Beethoven's 5th Symphony, and, to include a jazz cliché, the (in)famous "lick."[55] The collaboration format affords a stage for other YouTubers to showcase their compositional talent and react to each other's pieces, while Bruce himself confirms his own channel's status as an intermediary for aspirational YouTube-based composition and music-related communication.

Figure 32: Nahre Sol reacting to a piece by Adam Neely. Still from David Bruce's video "5 COMPOSERS 1 THEME" (2019).



However, despite sharing incentives of increasing one's visibility and prestige on the platform, collaborating subjects are not merely subjected to media of commensurability. Rather, the performative agency of YouTube's graphical user interface – with its numerical displays and analytical tools which suggest pro-active self-optimisation – entails a doubly constituted interpellation, as described by Althusser, as the user is called upon – i.e., interpellated – as both a subjected as well as a free and responsible subject. Against this theoretical backdrop, Ramón Reichert argues that "Althusser's theory […] not only allows

55 @David Bruce, "5 COMPOSERS 1 THEME (ft. Adam Neely, Nahre Sol, Ben Levin & Tantacrul)," May 17, 2019, YouTube video, 27:39, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWDITMZW1XE. "The Lick" refers to a diatonic phrase that frequently appears in jazz recordings and is often humorously referenced within online communities.

us to understand the interface of social media as a technological interpellation, but also to examine the aesthetic forms of staging the interpellative call, which have to be situated within a more or less open and free field in order to effectively and sustainably interconnect technologies of the self with technologies of subjection."[56] In other words, aspirational labourers on YouTube are not merely "pushed to complicity with YouTube's enigmatic algorithmic signals," as Sophie Bishop postulates,[57] but are also creatively and emotionally involved, co-developing vernacular repertoires and collaborative formats in their own idiosyncratic ways. Thereby, social bonds to other subjects – i.e., collaborative partners and (real and imagined) audience members – are not established or confirmed as a mere result of calculated pursuit of gain in terms of prestige, influence, and income. As Pierre Bourdieu notes, mutual social investments are, in all likelihood,

> being experienced in terms of the logic of emotional investment, i.e., as an involvement which is both necessary and disinterested. […] [T]he most sincerely disinterested acts may be those best corresponding to objective interest. A number of fields, particularly those which most tend to deny interest and every sort of calculation, like the fields of cultural production, grant full recognition, and with it the consecration which guarantees success, only to those who distinguish themselves by the immediate conformity of their investments, a token of sincerity and attachment to the essential principles of the field. It would be thoroughly erroneous to describe the choices of the habitus which lead an artist, writer, or researcher toward his natural place (a subject, style, manner, etc.) in terms of rational strategy and cynical calculation. This is despite the fact that, for example, shifts from one genre, school, or speciality to another, […] can be understood as capital conversions, the direction and moment of which (on which their success often depends) are determined by a 'sense of investment' which is the less likely to be seen as such the more skillful it is. Innocence is the privilege of those who move in their field of activity like fish in water.[58]

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56 Ramón Reichert, *Die Macht der Vielen: Über den neuen Kult der digitalen Vernetzung* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2013), 30 (my translation).

57 Bishop, "Anxiety, Panic, and Self-Optimization," 73.

58 Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood, 1986), 257 (footnote 18).

Particularly for YouTubers like Adam Neely, who experienced the gradual professionalisation of music-related affective labour on YouTube and, after their first steps within an amateur-to-amateur online community based on free collaboration, adaptively developed their online personas to become successful brands within YouTube's contemporary media ecology, Bourdieu's assessment of a correspondence between disinterested acts and an "objective" interest in social and financial success suggests itself. Overall, emotional investment is ubiquitous in aspirational music-related practices and niche-mediated discourses evolving around them. Aspirational subjects do not only foster spaces of affinity and belonging for their audience, they are emotionally affected and invested themselves, for instance with regard to forms of musical exchange, communal development of knowledge, and, not least, the friendships and professional partnerships that emerge along the way. In collaborative formats on YouTube, social contacts become tangible and manageable as commensurable modules – and yet, the resulting social relationships are more than simple assets.

YouTube Assemblage and Agency

The given examples of imitating cultural practices, developing communicative repertoires, self-evaluating and optimising one's content, and approaching collaborations as symbolic, social, and emotional investments exemplify the reflexivity and performative adaptation to the platform's socio-technical infrastructure by aspirational "music communicators." In interrelation with human anticipation and speculation, the platform-specific communication options and algorithmic processes of sorting and interlinking generate medium-specific forms of reflexivity that do not pertain to autonomously acting subjects. In a networked sphere characterised by an algorithmically anticipatory and self-optimising "conduct of conduct," individuation is preceded by processes of signalisation and thus accompanied by processes of de-individuation – or, as Galloway and Thacker note: "[i]t is a question not of being individuated as a 'subject' but instead of being individuated as a node integrated into one or more networks."[59] Authorial contributions on the platform are necessarily situated within an assemblage of human-led and algorithmic procedures, audience responses, and circulating musical and medial objects and formats; a heterogeneous and instable field – or mould – of modular

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

relations that seemingly develops and takes shape out of itself. A shift of focus towards processes that both mediate and are constituted by platform-situated vernacular musicking even allows for the conceptualisation of an explicitly *musical* assemblage. Proposed by Georgina Born, this concept elucidates how music is embedded within and exists through multiple ever-changing mediations, entailing "a network of relations between heterogeneous entities–musical sounds, human and other subjects, practices and performances, discourses and representations, material and immaterial technologies, and spaces and locations–while all of these elements in the constellation are themselves entangled in social mediation, in processes of human association and aggregation and in the relay of social relations."[60] As could be seen in this chapter, music-related communication, knowledge production, and self-expression as well as the development of vernacular repertoires of musical produsage on the platform are co-constituted and remediated by modular formal and social relations – i.e., relations between content creators, real and imagined audiences, remixable objects and concepts, algorithmic processes, technical functionalities, and communication options. The affective labour of music communication is part of this relational network – and it is carried out in awareness of it. Aesthetic and communicative forms of staging the interpellative call as a free and responsible subject result from a tactical subjection to the fundamental imperative of circulation on the platform. Pre-circulating and repeatable themes and aesthetic objects of YouTube-specific musical produsage as well as established genres of communication constitute the system of dispersion within which vernacular music-related communication on the platform takes place. At first glance, it seems that hybridisations of circulating communicative genres and musical repertoires, distributed and reproduced by human-computer agencies, might entail a recursive system of YouTube – i.e., its contents and modular social structure – continually re-composing or regeneratively remixing itself, providing aspirational content creators with readymade channel concepts and potential variations to popular musical and communicative forms and formats. However, in the first place, it is the human capacity for reflection and reference, its understanding and channelling of affective flows and pulls, music-theoretical knowledge, humour, as well as the generation of proximity, affinity, and communal belonging that is constitutive

60 Georgina Born, "Digital Music, Relational Ontologies and Social Forms," in *Bodily Expression in Electronic Music: Perspectives on Reclaiming Performativity*, eds. Deniz Peters, Gerhard Eckel, and Andreas Dorschel (New York: Routledge, 2012), 172.

for the audience's desire and shapes its conception of a platform-situated musical vernacular.

5.3 "Role-Setters" and their Activated Community: Hypnotising Tendencies and Networked Relations

As became apparent in the previous two chapters, the affective labour of musical micro-celebrities on YouTube – and those who aspire to become one – is aimed at inspiring and suggesting further producerly activity on the platform in order to enable the content creator's successful self-positioning as a point of reference for communal communication and (co-)creation. The strategy of becoming a "tribal chief" who embodies a communally shared fantasy of open collaboration and participation is built on the fostering and harvesting of communal participation – often in personalised and authenticating interactive formats that suggest further community-oriented produsage. However, in order to account for the unpredictable and reciprocal imitative encounters in this context, any notion of one-directional magnetisations from "influencer" to their (fannish) "audience" needs to be discounted in this context. Contrasting the example of Gustave Le Bon, who described the relation between a "hypnotised" crowd and a "hypnotising" leader, Tony Sampson's theory of contagion represents a relational approach to sociality, thereby attaining a notion of a "hypnotic" social power which neither results from nor entails the total domination of a mindless crowd by an overpowering charismatic leader. Rather, the social field mapped by Sampson is constituted and shaped by multidirectional and simultaneous contagions. In the context of our contemporary networked consumer culture, Sampson accentuates hypnotic potentials embedded in the network itself, rather than focussing on hypnotic subjects: "Decisions are not, as such, embedded in people, or in their voluntary exchanges with others, but in the very networks to which they connect. It is, like this, the network relation that leads the way."[61]

It is true that social media's objects of fascination and their imitation-suggestibility potentially magnetise any produser from the "invisible" everyday user to the prolific (micro-)celebrity. However, the hierarchical relation between "media influencers" and "ordinary users" appears to be re-naturalised, as the socio-technical infrastructures of social media platforms suggest – or

61 Sampson, *Virality*, 168.

even induce – dynamics of role-setting and role-following, granting visibility and algorithmic diffusion to content creators who adjust their production quality and upload rate in order to bind users to their channels, thereby serving as co-manufacturers of the platform's desired and "calculated publics."[62] Although aspirational labourers voluntarily subject themselves to the imperatives of circulation and iteration, they become recognised as the source of the meanings of which they actually are an effect. By way of this Althusserian misrecognition of "the relations of production and the relations deriving from them," the affective and communicative labour of YouTube (micro-)celebrities provides the anchorage for communal participation, fostering iterative processes with potentially massive volumes of contributions. Despite the multidirectionality of the entailing contagions and rays of imitation, such producerly activity is catalysed and harnessed by communicators that aim to "lead the way" and provide a framework which encourages ongoing communal interaction and creative relay. Network-specific fantasies of equal – and equally impactful – self-inscription and proximity appear to be symbolically doubled by the self-performance and communication of the affective labourer, which is aimed at creating or shaping collaborative spaces of affinity and belonging.

Mechanisms of Interpassivity

While Sampson accentuates the non-representability of affects that are passed on through social assemblages beyond collectively determinable units of imitation or imagination, he points to the potentially heightened imitation-suggestibility through (self-)brandings and "slick empathetic performances," which result in a "mesmeric affective flow intended to steer the imitative inclinations of consumers […] to predetermined goals."[63] According to Sampson, "[t]he object of desire is in fact the belief in these contagions to the point where an ascending fashion, for example, becomes the custom that is followed."[64] Psychoanalytical theory offers an explanation how this belief might relate to the symbolic identity of the aspirational "role-setter" and how the performance

62 See Tarleton Gillespie, "The Relevance of Algorithms," in *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*, eds. Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski, and Kirsten A. Foot (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 189.

63 Sampson, *Virality*, 59.

64 Ibid., 25.

thereof reinforces the hypnotic power of the network relation brought about by a blend of human and computer agencies: According to Jacques Lacan, relationships with other subjects are mediated by the symbolic order – or: the (big) Other – through language, law, and societal conventions.[65] The belief in the big Other is always externalised in other (real or imaginary) "subjects supposed to believe" – Austrian philosopher Robert Pfaller even considers this "mechanism of supposition" the very foundation of the symbolic order, stating that "[e]ntire religions could be built after such a principle: Everyone takes the other for the 'real,' naïve believer – without the need for such a person to actually exist."[66] In social media, an overwhelmingly present big Other is brought into existence by help of algorithmic black boxes which restitute the below-surface dimension normally absent in online interactions between (disembodied) strangers, entailing the numerical commensurability and normalisation of our symbolic operations. Communally oriented (co-)creation relies on these algorithmic processes of sorting and interlinking and, thus, is always a performance for the Other. Self-entrepreneurial YouTubers know about the essentially performative function of their job, since media of rationalisation and direct feedback mechanisms – for example likes and comments – let them feel the recognition of the big Other, facilitating the externalisation and "objectivisation" of their subjectivation process while, at the same time, bringing themselves forth as signifiers of the symbolic institution "YouTube." The "mechanism of supposition" is fully at play, as the ambiguity of the other's belief inavoidably lets us imagine ourselves as an object in the eyes of the (imaginary) other – or, to quote Žižek, "[t]he inert object that 'is' my Being, in which my inert Being is externalized," functions as the fundamental object of desire.[67] As the big Other speaks through the "role-setter," who becomes a "living embodiment of the symbolic institution," the real redoubles itself in the symbolic register, letting emerge a differential structure in which "things no longer count as what they directly 'are,' but only with regard to their symbolic place."[68]

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65 Secondarily, "the Other" may designate that very other subject, insofar as it can embody the symbolic order in the eyes of another subject.

66 Robert Pfaller, "Einleitung," in *Interpassivität. Studien über delegiertes Genießen*, ed. Robert Pfaller (Vienna: Springer, 2000), 7 (my translation).

67 Ibid.

68 Slavoj Žižek, "The Interpassive Subject," *The Symptom* 3 (Fall 2002), https://www.lacan.com/interpassf.htm.

Within communal frameworks provided and harnessed by the affective labour of content creators, mutual and multidirectional exchange and produsage cannot be reduced to its *interactive* qualities. Rather, within the differential structure emerging from our symbolic performances of the self, two fundamental "interpassive" shifts are at work in manifold ways, namely the above-mentioned "mechanism of supposition" and the "mechanism of substitution," which entails the delegation of our belief, even our enjoyment, to the Other.[69] Before my analysis will follow this conceptual approach with regard to formats of musical *interaction* and *participation* within moderated channel contexts, the format of the reaction video shall serve as a basic example for an interpassive mode of *reception*: One could say that, by delegating the reaction to the YouTuber, the viewer gets freed of their duty to receptively engage, as, in a way, the video provides for its own reception. Jared Dines' reaction video to the song "Doris" by the American deathcore band Suicide Silence is a good example for this: His mocking imitation of a part of the chorus ("TEE HEE") instantly made the video go viral, not least because of the heavy video editing, the associated "TEE HEE pose" as a thumbnail, and "TEE HEE" shirts on Dines' merchandise page.[70] The viral success of the "TEE HEE" reaction even led to a guest appearance at a Suicide Silence gig, which is documented in Dines' video "Jared Dines on stage with Suicide Silence (TEE HEE)."[71]

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69 Following a Lacanian trace, Slavoj Žižek was the first to thoroughly analyse certain formations of delegated consumption, belief or enjoyment that would later become the point of departure for Robert Pfaller's theory of interpassivity. Years before Pfaller's coining of the term in 1996, Žižek already illustrated potential interpassive arrangements by reference to cultural phenoma such as Tibetan prayer wheels or the included "canned laughter" in soundtracks of television shows and series. While a prayer wheel lets you delegate the process of praying – you are "objectively" praying only by spinning the wheel –, the pre-recorded laughter is relieving us of our duty to laugh and lets us delegate our enjoyment. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 35.

70 See @Jared Dines, "Suicide Silence – 'Doris' (reaction)," January 13, 2017, YouTube video, 4:22, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjdxbW3m1xI. For reference, see also the original music video by Suicide Silence: @Nuclear Blast Records, "SUICIDE SILENCE – 'Doris' (OFFICIAL 360° VIDEO)," January 6, 2017, YouTube video, 4:34, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQgMTuyjATk. The shirt can be found here: "Tee Hee White," Merch Now, http://merchnow.com/catalogs/jared-dines, archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20180824030712/http://merchnow.com/catalogs/jared-dines.

71 @Jared Dines, "Jared Dines on stage with Suicide Silence (TEE HEE)," November 11, 2017, YouTube video, 3:32, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FS7DThv3AdM.

Figure 33: "TEE HEE" shirt from Jared Dines' merchandise page.

According to the conceptualisation of interpassivity by Robert Pfaller, the passive user who acts "through" the reacting YouTuber necessarily pursues one of two contrary interpassive motives, one of them being based on ideal identification, the other being driven by the avoidance of subjectivation. A subject who identifies with a signifier does not delegate their sensations. Rather, the signifier, as an external agent, serves as a "prosthesis" that enables them to be involved in a situation which does not allow for its complete and direct experience due to bodily, personal or spatio-temporal restrictions.[72] With regard to the subject's ideal identification with YouTube musicians, possible restrictions would be a lack of musicality or charisma. Of course, the delegation of action to a signifier may only be provisional: The desire to be or become just like their idol potentially leads to the substitution of the signifier with the subject – if the subject finds a way to overcome the restrictions and turn the enforced indirect enjoyment into a direct one. Thus, the subject's (temporary) delegation of action as a result of an ideal identification appears to enable an "extended

72 Robert Pfaller, "Das Kunstwerk, das sich selbst betrachtet, der Genuß und die Abwesenheit. Elemente einer Ästhetik der Interpassivität," in *Interpassivität. Studien über delegiertes Genießen*, ed. Robert Pfaller (Vienna: Springer, 2000), 68.

narcissism."[73] With regard to the mechanism of de-subjectivation, the opposite is the case: Instead of a prosthetically increased enjoyment that aims at substituting the ideal ego, the subject *relieves* himself or herself by outsourcing actions to an external agent.[74] The mechanism of delegating enjoyment relieves the subject of the superego duty to enjoy, which, according to the famous Žižekian "mantra," is the main posit of our consumer society in opposition to (pre-)modern orders of prohibition. This posit leads to an oppressive obligation to enjoy and (actively!) fulfil oneself – consequently, the recognition of one's own passive attitude would cause guilt and shame. In order to evade the oppressive interpellative call to enjoy and to still "function as pure activity,"[75] the interpassive subject outsources their passive experiences.

Roles, Rules, and Rituals

Of course, this "pure" model of interpassive reception does not account for the non-representational affective flows and desire events that catalyse heterarchical and unpredictable imitative encounters within and beyond niche-mediated communities. Thus, in the following reflections on the hypnotising tendencies of imitative encounters influenced or catalysed by the affective labour of aspirational "music communicators," underlying interpassive mechanisms shall be set in relation to compositional and communicative conventions, thereby shedding light on the formation of role distributions and rules throughout processes of participatory musical engagement. The genre of "Clone Hero" Let's Play videos serves as a gainful example for the entanglement of participatory and interactive moments, interpassive mechanisms of delegation, and the resulting multidirectional contagions emanating from the musical and communicative contributions by popular content creators and their communities. Since 2013, US-American Twitch streamer and YouTuber @JasonParadise performs online as a Let's Player, filming himself while playing the game Clone Hero, a free clone of the music video game "Guitar Hero." The channel's main concept is simple: Members of the community write and program their own Clone Hero arrangements, so-called "charts," which are then played by @JasonParadise. Most Clone Hero charts are produced on the basis of pre-existing songs. Since 2016, the use of mashup techniques and

73 Ibid., 73.

74 Ibid., 78.

75 Žižek, "The Interpassive Subject."

overdubs evolved and turned the composition and programming of charts into a community-oriented, inter-referencing meta-memetic practice, as a result of which @JasonParadise re-conceptualised his own role and mainly focussed on becoming recognised as a "meme music Let's Player."[76] A typical "meme chart" video showcases the work of chart creators and the Let's Player's Clone Hero skills, as they virtuosically play through an entire chart. By setting "traps," such as abrupt breaks or disruptively thrown-in samples, sudden changes in volume ("ear rapes"), shifts in frequency and timbre, or tonal transpositions, the chart creators aim to take the Let's Player off-guard and evoke their reactions. This goes hand in hand with the Let's Player's strategy of excessive emoting: they get served absurdly difficult, bizarre, and overall surprising material to which they can react with intense yet "authentic" emotions – the resulting video format could thus be categorised as a blend between Let's Play and reaction video.

The video "Memetallica ~ bOne(r)," which features @JasonParadise playing a chart by @Frus, @CosmicLatte, and @BandiPat, exemplifies the dynamics between musical and sonic input, communal discourse, and @JasonParadise's performance of the self.[77] Based on Metallica's song "One," "bOne(r)" loosely follows the structure of the original. Overdubs, such as the obnoxious singing and coughing by one of the chart creators which replaces Kirk Hammet's solo guitar track in the intro, or inserted swearwords and sexual language ("Nothing is real but *penis*") set the tone of the chart from the very beginning, combined with short samples – e.g., repeatedly inserted screams by Metallica's frontman James Hetfield ("Yeah-Uh!") – or longer segments of other musical pieces, such as the ubiquitous "All Star" by Smash Mouth. Besides making @JasonParadise laugh, shake his head in disbelief, or almost jump in surprise, the chart seems to comment on and anticipate his playing and even his reactions to the chart: After successfully "playing" a charted cough in the beginning, @JasonParadise gets rewarded with an "Awesome Choke!" (instead of the usual "Perfect Solo!"). A good four minutes into the chart, @JasonParadise confesses "I'm

76 @UKOGmonkey and @Acai are two other successful YouTubers featuring Clone Hero "meme chart" playthroughs, amongst "serious" user-created charts, official Guitar Hero charts, and Clone/Guitar Hero-related vlogs. See @UKOGmonkey, YouTube channel, joined December 27, 2006, https://www.youtube.com/@UKOGmonkey75; @Acai, YouTube channel, joined October 28, 2007, https://www.youtube.com/@Acai28.

77 @JasonParadise, "Memetallica ~ bOne(r)," March 22, 2018, YouTube video, 8:41, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WrteO5dP4Kg.

really scared for what's coming up" – ten seconds later, a speech sample, which went viral in the context of fail compilations on YouTube, seems to address his thought process: "It was at this moment that Jason knew he fucked up." 90 seconds later, @JasonParadise approaches the point of the original song's guitar solo, screaming "solo" in anticipation, just to find his expectations thwarted by a slow Phil Collins drum fill leading into a seemingly never-ending one-chord shred passage for which he gets sarcastically rewarded with a "Perfect Solo!"

Figure 34: @JasonParadise playing through and reacting to the Clone Hero meme chart "Memetallica ~ bOne(r)" (2018) by @Frus, @CosmicLatte, and @BandiPat.

Following Pac-Man sound effects, a ferocious solo passage from Dragonforce's "Through the Fire and Flames," and a snippet from Van Halen's instrumental noodling track "Eruption," a metal version of "The Devil Went Down to Georgia" seemingly brings the chart to a close by letting the singer's voice speak on behalf of the chart creators and eventually getting hung up in a loop: "The devil bowed his head because he knew that he'd been beat […] I told you once, you son of a bitch, I'm THE BEST THE BEST THE BEST THE BEST THE BEST THE BEST THE BEST THE BEST THE BEST THE BEST." The ridicule and schadenfreude transported through the lyrics is supported by the ensuing playback of canned laughter, which laughs for the recipient. Laughing himself while visibly trying to process the experience, @JasonParadise gets taken by surprise by the chart's real ending: a sudden Monty Python reference ("…and now for something com-

pletely different") leads directly into the last bar of Metallica's "One," rounding off the meme chart with yet another surprise element.

Both meme chart Let's Players and chart creators perform on behalf of a community "supposed to enjoy." By catalysing not only the player's reactions but also the communal exchange in the comment section, meme charts lay the foundation for a reflexive feedback loop, as chart creators can speculatively conceptualise and compose their contributions based on previous meme chart videos on this and other Clone Hero-related channels. To a large extent, the recognition value of certain aesthetic patterns and references is dependent on the player's reactions – the more spectacular their reaction, the more likely do further musical, sonic, and lyrical iterations and cross-references become. Yet, the belief in these ongoing contagions is mutually stabilised: while the player's display of excessive emotions influences musical and discursive patterns of convention within their community, they experience themself as an object in the eyes of the (imaginary) Other, whose symbolical presence is ensured through the charts' playful affective stimuli and the reactions of the audience in Twich live streams or in the YouTube comment section. Recipients, on the other hand, can delegate their activity to both the Let's Player, who reacts for them, and to the meta-memetic stimuli of the charts, which represent communally mediated discourse via aesthetic and communicative figurations based on shared humour or musical taste and knowledge. At the same time, these figurations encourage the audience to further navigate and shape communal discourse via comments, as the meme charts' implicit meta-reference to fannish narratives, inside jokes, and knowledge surrounding the remixed musical material – and the original artists behind it – enables a playful process with inclusive and exclusive mechanisms. For example, in the case of @JasonParadise's playthrough of "bOne(r)," users comment on the Metallica-related inside jokes and references hidden in the chart: The fact that the chart creators turned up Jason Newsted's bass sound, which, for obscure reasons, is barely audible in the original mix of Metallica's "One" (and the entire *…And Justice For All* album), is regarded as sarcastic meta-reference ("I like how they intentionally make the bass more audible sarcastically"),[78] appreciated as a musically sensible decision ("As a musician I appreciate that the bass is actually turned up"),[79] or simply pointed out in a humorous manner ("So this is where Jason's

78 @Tarikou, 2018, comment on @JasonParadise, "Memetallica ∼ bOne(r)."

79 @Grindstone, 2022, comment on @JasonParadise, "Memetallica ∼ bOne(r)."

bass went").[80] Moreover, the chart caters to ongoing ridicule about Lars Ulrich's mediocre drumming – by turning some of his fills up in volume to the point of overdriving them (or replacing them by other drum fills) – and takes up the Internet trend of creating samples of James Hetfield's characteristic screams by isolating the voice track (and placing it in mashups or compilation videos).[81] Besides detecting pop-cultural (meta-)references (related or unrelated to Metallica), users primarily comment on the (imagined) interactive dynamic between @JasonParadise and the meme chart. The implicit distribution of roles – @JasonParadise as the reacting part and the chart as the stimulant – provides for the feedback loop of communal self-entertainment characteristic for the produsage of meta-memetic Clone Hero content: The Let's Player reacts to the chart, which is built on pre-circulating references with a certain recognition value, thereby creating a dynamic to which users react in the comment section, which inspires the play with references in new meme charts, which provoke new reactions by the Let's Player and new productions of meaning and knowledge through user interaction, etc.

The implicit meta-reference to a corpus of shared humour, stylistic features, narratives, and pop-cultural knowledge as well as the community's awareness of the implicit roles of interaction underlying the video format enable communal self-affirmation and inclusion. The community is afforded the feeling of being "in on the joke" and, in Johan Huizinga's words, of interacting within a "temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own."[82] Over the course of playful communal produsage, the belief in the ongoing contagions is stabilised. Through bodily performances for an imagined community, the anticipatory creation of charts, or by way of writing comments and proving one's awareness of pop-cultural references or interactive dynamics, the passing on of desire events takes place via half-hypnotic imitative encounters, oriented towards the recognition of the Other, for whom every actor performs. The desire events themselves are ultimately undeterminable, as they cannot rely on a reproducible "essential core"; rather, processes of communal play and interaction bring about uncontainable affective surplus effects that magnetise other users, such as surprise about an unexpected turn in the meme

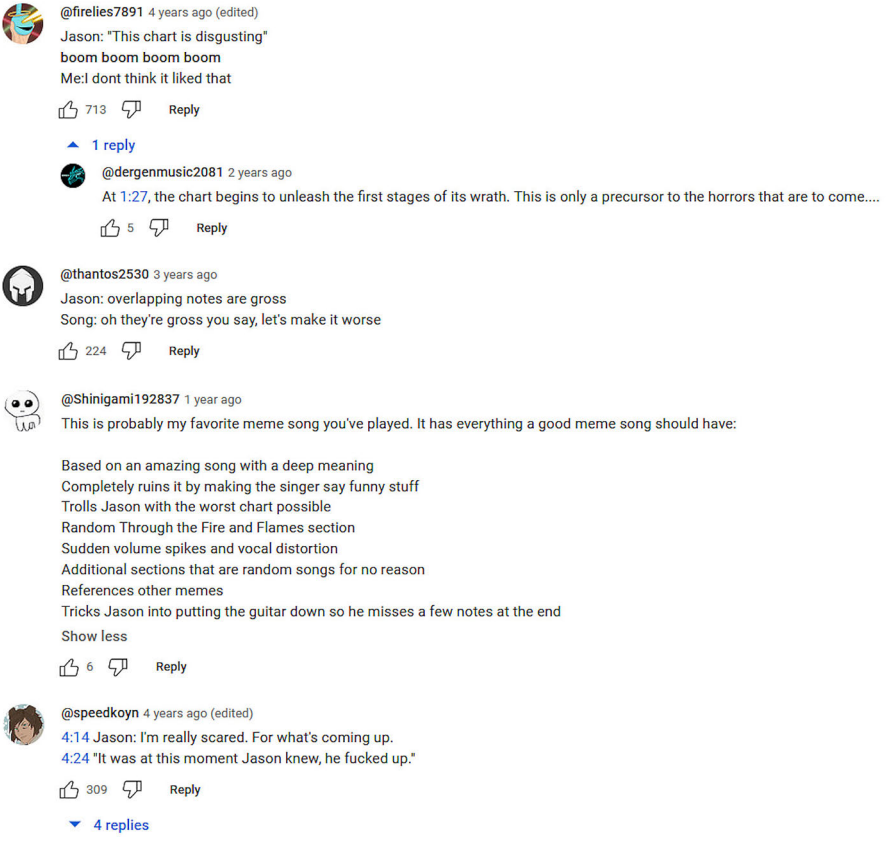
80 @Miss Metalcore, 2020, comment on @JasonParadise, "Memetallica ∼ bOne(r)."

81 See, for example, this compilation video of every "Yeah!" by Hetfield in Metallica's studio recordings: @Blood_Doom, "Every James Hetfield 'Yeah' in songs," February 2, 2021, YouTube video, 7:24, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHJCVlymVUs.

82 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 8.

chart, identification with or *schadenfreude* about the Let's Player's reactions, a sense of affinity and belonging based on shared and communally reflected (meta-)references, etc.

Figure 35: Commenters pointing out and reflecting on the (imagined) interactive dynamic between @JasonParadise and the meme chart "Memetallica ~ bOne(r)" (2018).



The affective labour of the micro-celebrity not only provides a point of reference and orientation for communally mediated playful produsage but also holds the promise of individual prestige, encouraging users to perform visibility labour by commenting, imitating, re-composing, and re-contextualis-

ing pre-circulating communicative and aesthetic artefacts. In this context, the strategic directing of affective flows by Felix Kjellberg alias @PewDiePie exemplifies approaches that make use of the intoxicating pull of celebrity narratives, offering fans and fellow YouTubers their own moments of fame by potentially featuring their creative contributions on the channel – while solidifying the content creator's own image as a face of community-oriented collaboration in the spirit of a "YouTube we." Kjellberg's strategic showcasing of musical talent has even helped kickstart some YouTube careers: for example, bass player Davide Biale alias @Davie504 experienced a massive surge in views and subscribers after being featured with his channel in a @PewDiePie video in 2013;[83] singer-songwriter Joe Berghult alias @Roomie collaborated with Kjellberg on several songs like "His Name is Pewdiepie" or "Brofist,"[84] which helped Berghult gain visibility and rise to prominence as a YouTube celebrity in his own right. At a certain level of fame, the sheer mass of fannish contributers and potential collaborators aspiring for individual prestige affords for the selective scouting and harvesting of their contributions by a communal "tribal chief." A far more reliable option to catalyse ongoing produsage, however, is a concise participatory concept which structures content co-creation on and around the channel and constitutes a self-stabilising playful process with a hypnotic pull, as exemplified above by meme chart-related produsage on Clone Hero-themed channels. Through patterns of expectation which guide the composition of new charts and the reactions by Let's Players and their communities, new contributions emerge within an environment of mutually stimulated creative relay. Here, performative roles implicitly assigned to different actor positions can be detected: 1) the Let's Player who reacts for the community, 2) meme charters who try to provoke spectacular reactions by composing charts based on communal knowledge and pre-circulating references, and 3) commenters who recognise and further develop the (meta-)referential web, thereby inspiring the composition of new meme charts. Even though all of this only constitutes an "implicit" ruleset, Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of playing as a self-renewing movement which "renews itself in constant repetition" and "absorbs the

83 See @PewDiePie, "WALL TWERK – (Fridays With PewDiePie – Part 65)," September 20, 2013, YouTube video, 6:25, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fI947wgrVsk.

84 See @PewDiePie, "His Name Is Pewdiepie – Extended Version (By Roomie);" @PewDiePie, "BROFIST (PewDiePie Song, By Roomie)," July 22, 2016, YouTube video, 3:08, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5pEPpNpbnCI.

player into itself" appropriately describes the resulting half-hypnotic imitative encounters.[85]

Through concise operational rules, the potential state of self-absorption even increases. Against this backdrop, and by way of utilising Robert Pfaller's concept of the "dromenon," I want to illuminate how interactive and inclusive practices may lead to particularly hypnotic modes of reception and participation: *Dromenon* is a Greek word for a "thing done" and was used to refer to ancient rites. According to Jane Harrison, a *dromenon* is "not simply a thing done, not even a thing excitedly and socially done. […] It is sometimes re-done, commemorative, sometimes pre-done, anticipatory, and both elements seem to go to its religiousness."[86] Pfaller leans on this notion while linking the term to conceptualisations of interpassivity, thus thematising the rituality of certain interpassive relations. He argues that, as a thing that is "just there" and "kept running," a *dromenon* does not depend on its own reception or consumption, letting the participants relieve themselves by outsourcing their actions and passive experiences.[87] On the bass guitar-related entertainment channel by Davide Biale (@Davie504), we find an excellent example of ritualistic creative relay catalysed by a musical micro-celebrity: with his comment-responsive conceptual bass covers with self-explanatory titles such as "'Master Of Puppets' played with puppets,"[88] "Red Hot Chili Peppers played with red hot chili peppers,"[89] or "Guns N' Roses played with guns and roses,"[90] Biale has catalysed

85 See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 108–109.

86 Jane Ellen Harrison, *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (1912; reis., New York: University Books, 1962), 43.

87 Robert Pfaller, *Ästhetik der Interpassivität* (Hamburg: Philo Fine Arts, 2008), 179. According to Pfaller, the "Truisms" of US-American artist Jenny Holzer – common-sense statements or platitudes which are displayed on large public screens, walls or storefronts – serve as an example for an aesthetic of the dromenon. By publicly installing sentences that signal "you don't need to read me, I will be here regardless," Holzer provokingly thematises media that are primarily constituted by their never-ending circulation and reproduction and not by their content. See Pfaller, *Ästhetik der Interpassivität*, 193–194.

88 @Davie504, "'Master Of Puppets' played with puppets," January 7, 2018, YouTube video, 2:50, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZ78RuDQDdE.

89 @Davie504, "Red Hot Chili Peppers played with red hot chili peppers," May 21, 2017, YouTube video, 2:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzAOQIbhUp0.

90 @Davie504, "Guns N' Roses played with guns and roses," July 20, 2017, YouTube video, 2:05, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=97IdAnG6Av0.

a potentially endless stream of suggestions and responding videos that always follow the same scheme (see Figure 36).

Figure 36: Comments on Davide Biale's video "Red Hot Chili Peppers played with red hot chili peppers" (2017).

Adam Neely's aforementioned 7:11 challenge is another example in this context: his remix formula, which demands the performance of a 7:11 polyrhythm in front of a 7-Eleven, introduces a concise "operational rule" with high imitation-suggestibility, affording ritualistic creative relay that is kept running for its own sake. However, contrary to Harison's notion of the *dromenon* as a thing that is "not socially done," the temporary self-forgetful state reached by such self-absorbing structures of play is always perforated by the desire to magnetise other users as part of a self-stabilising game-like process focussed on self-referentially re-enacting a communally shared idea of dealing with "virulent" and "replicating" figurations. Furthermore, even the most authoritatively steered half-hypnotic encounters entail producerly gaps, as no "tribal chief" can remove the loose ends that allow for new contributions guided by individual incentives to create difference and further develop communally recognised media texts.[91] Brooks Tarkington's playful contribution to Neely's 7:11 challenge can be viewed against this backdrop: The video starts

91 More fundamentally, regardless of subjective incentives or the degree of "hypnosis," imitative encounters never entail the direct imitation – i.e., reproduction – of another contribution; rather, "magnetised" contributions are based on (inter-)subjective generalisations of specific generic features.

with Tarkington filling up his car tank with $7.11 worth of fuel in front of a 7-Eleven. He then opens his laptop – at 7:11 pm, as the display shows – and plays back a video clip of himself performing a 7:11 polyrhythm on his marimba. In the clip, Tarkington plays eleven notes of "All Star" by Smash Mouth with his left hand, while the right hand plays the seven notes of "The Lick." His musical performance ends with a roll using two notes ($F\#_3$ and D_5) with a ratio of 370 Hz to 587 Hz, which roughly equals a ratio of 7 to 11. Moreover, throughout the performance, we can hear a metronome set to 711 bpm.[92]

The Networked and Multisocial "Role-Follower"

As this chapter showed, communal participation initiated by the affective labour of YouTube micro-celebrities is supported by a shared belief in ongoing contagions, which manifests itself in (musical or musically mediated) imitative encounters with a hypnotic tendency and an implicit distribution of roles that are performed by the content creator and their "passive" or "activated" community. The belief in the big Other – who is overwhelmingly present due to media of rationalisation and direct feedback mechanisms which inform content creation and reception on the platform – is externalised in (real and imagined) "communities supposed to believe and enjoy." Notwithstanding ongoing delegations of activity and enjoyment to the Other, any notion of a remote-controlled crowd needs to be dismissed, as even the most potentially self-forgetful practices bring about the uncontainable – and often unconscious – passing on of desire events, without which no further imitative encounters would ever be triggered. Furthermore, even though the embodiment of the "symbolic institution YouTube" through aspirational subjects appears to re-naturalise hierarchies between "role-setters" and "role-followers," there does not exist a one-sided parasocial dynamic between them. For one, prolific content creators and communicators are interacting within social environments constituted and shaped by multidirectional and simultaneous contagions, as highlighted by the examples in this chapter. Secondly, even though contributors, especially "fannish" ones, are magnetised by celebrity narratives, they also foster processes of communal self-constitution and self-

92 @Brooks Tarkington, "711 Challenge – All Star by Smash Mouth but it's the lick but it's a 7:11 polyrhythm," March 1, 2019, YouTube video, 0:53, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tb_i1iYkIw8.

narration, as they "share and perform these narratives with multiple fan others (both known and imagined)," as Matt Hills notes.[93] In this context, Hills counters notions of parasocial interaction by proposing the term "multisocial interaction" instead, noting that a social/parasocial binary never existed to begin with. Consistent with the psychoanalytical foray in this chapter, Hills describes social relationships as "formed through introjection and projection," meaning "that they are always-already fantasized and imagined, being inherently 'para-'social."[94]

Although the hierarchical relation between symbolic categories of "role-setters" and "role-followers" gives "rise to socially structured fantasies/practices of their collision, meeting, and intersection" to varying degrees,[95] the most fundamental hypnotic power lies in the network relation itself, not in overpowering hypnotising subjects. Thus, this chapter approached the interactive dynamics between communities and musical (micro-)celebrities – which potentially enable imitative encounters with massive volumes of contributions – not from the perspective of potential individual fantasies aimed at establishing a relationship with a (micro-)celebrity but rather by their power of strengthening the self-experience of being part of a social network, which constitutes the primary aim of produsers engaged in formats of vernacular musical interaction on YouTube.

93 Matt Hills, "From Para-social to Multisocial Interaction. Theorizing Material/Digital Fandom and Celebrity," in *A Companion to Celebrity*, eds. Philip David Marshall and Sean Redmond (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 471.

94 Ibid., 478.

95 Ibid., 479.

6 Challenges and Vernacular Competencies of Selectivity and Evasion

In the face of the overwhelming volume of contributions as well as the fragmented social arrangements characteristic of the networked condition, discursive connectability and visibility within temporary communal formations can only be attained through adaptive and situational conduct. The ongoing repetition and imitation of circulating audiologovisual figurations is afforded and suggested by YouTube's algorithmic procedures of sorting and interlinking. Lillian Boxman-Shabtai thus correctly points to the economic advantage of quotation, which "increases the noticeability of an artifact and motivates receivers to further spread and engage with it."[1] At the same time, within chains of creative relay characterised by a high volume of contributions, aspirations for impactful self-inscription through referential re-composition often are futile, reducing content creators to mere contributors "to the circulation of images, opinions, and information, to the billions of nuggets of […] affect trying to catch and hold attention […]."[2] Situated within algorithmically driven attention markets and further fuelled by the digital conditions of media convergence and modularity, YouTube-situated re-composition can be conceived of as an adaptive and speculative process situated within a hyper-accelerated and symbolically oversatured media environment. What does such a condition mean with regard to potentials of meaningful transformation and trans-contextualisation of musical media texts and their successful encoding or decoding?

1 Lillian Boxman-Shabtai, "The Practice of Parodying: YouTube as a Hybrid Field of Cultural Production," *Media, Culture & Society* 41, no. 1 (January 2019): 6, https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443718772180.

2 Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, 24.

Guided by this question, the following two sub-chapters outline fundamental challenges for vernacular aesthetics in YouTube-mediated practices of musical re-composition. For one, informed by academic and artistic discourse on irony in postmodern forms of cultural production, mechanisms and expressions of irony within the unenclosed nexus of references on social media are thematised. In this context, I argue, the proliferation of subjectively channelled *post-ironic* aesthetics, which integrate ironic patterns while overcoming a fundamental ironic attitude, can be noted. In view of the oversaturated and ever-expanding web of references on YouTube and beyond, I want to reflect on the phenomenon of post-irony, which I conceive of as a vernacular competence of situational conduct and self-expression, and interrogate how it shapes networked musical forms and genres based on self-representation and media-reflection. In a second sub-chapter, considering the unique ways in which YouTube attracts and demands visibility and attention, I want to explore the (im)possibilities of temporarily evading the effects and practices of representation brought about by generic signalisations which "envelope" or "disguise" incommensurable aesthetic difference. Informed by Deleuze and Guattari's idea of "becoming-imperceptible" through "anti-productive" moments of acceleration and effective disruption, aesthetics of transgression and profanity, on the one hand, and nomadic potentials of community-oriented music-related (co-)creation, on the other, shall be examined against the backdrop of platform-specific regimes of attention and novelty.

6.1 Transcending Ironic Distance in Networked (Re-)Composition

In the context of contemporary cultural production at large, which is characterised by the accelerated accumulation of audiologovisual signs that refer to each other, Tobias Janz diagnoses an "aporia of forms of communication in which metareference is no longer a special case, or rare communicative disruption, but rather, as a stance and attitude, forms the normal case." He delineates a pop-cultural space

> where immanence and its self-reflexive transgression, where authentic and virtual utterances can no longer be distinguished from one another, but where any communication also gets lost in an ever more complex web of signs […]. As a consequence, not only the borderlines between capitalist consumer culture, avant-garde, and counter culture are blurred, but also

> are all reference points lost from which social developments can be controlled. What was earlier thought to be authentic can now be communicated only in the mode of irony, while irony itself becomes a new form of authenticity, the only form of communication still adequate in a situation where what is hybrid becomes what is real.[3]

In today's oversaturated information spaces, vernacular remix and re-composition, characterised by its electivity, experimentality, and playful aesthetic imagination, takes place within an uncontrollable web of references via signs that are lacking fixable causal or temporal linkings. While symbolic connectability and affective magnetisations are enabled through selection and situational conduct, the fluid and flow-like processes of symbolically positioning oneself simultaneously reinforce and perpetuate the arbitrariness and ambiguity of irony, the critically distanced deployment of which has always functioned as the fundamental rhetorical mechanism of parody. Especially in digitally mediatised communication, an all-encompassing sense of irony without apparent anchorage seems to have become an accompaniment – or even carrier – of pop-cultural production and reception. The ubiquitous use of irony often entails the deliberate and non-deliberate obfuscation of subjective stances. As a result of the accelerated and self-perpetuating re-combinations of circulating referential patterns in the networked condition, intersubjective frontiers, which inform our navigation of discourse, seem dislocated to such an extent that irony and sincerity are often not distinguishable from a recipient's point of view.

MonoNeon's instrumental mimicry and funky remix of Greta Thunberg's speech at the 2019 UN Climate Action Summit in New York serves as an example in this context:[4] By taking up a video excerpt of Thunberg's speech, MonoNeon chooses a viral source that has widely been circulated and served as a popular template for meta-memetic contributions driven by both reverential and ridiculing intent. MonoNeon's video is part of his ongoing series of adaptive musicalisations, which he frequently uploads to various social media platforms.

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3 Tobias Janz, "Goodbye 20th Century: Sonic Youth, John Cage's 'Number Pieces' and the Long Farewell to the Avant-Garde," in *The Metareferential Turn in Contemporary Arts and Media*, ed. Werner Wolf (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 543.

4 @MonoNeon, "MonoNeon x Greta Thunberg – 'MONEY AND FAIRYTALES,'" September 24, 2019, YouTube video, 2:13, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVq7H05FoV0.

Figure 37: MonoNeon musicalising Thunberg's speech at the 2019 UN Climate Action Summit in New York. Still from his video "MonoNeon x Greta Thunberg – 'MONEY AND FAIRYTALES'" (2019).

In the video, spatially organised as a split screen with Greta Thunberg on one side and MonoNeon on the other, famous speech patterns from Thunberg's speech are introduced and quasi-phonorealistically doubled as well as harmonised by the electric bass. After 32 seconds, the actual "hookline" starts, bringing in additional drum, synth, and bass tracks. The result is a grotesque and trippy funk track adaptively composed to Thunberg's speech rhythm and melody, repeating her utterance over and over: "People are suffering. People are dying […] and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales […]. How dare you!"[5] Her emotional verbal expressions appear to be stripped of their semantic context and directedness as they become musically re-functionalised as pure sound objects. As neither MonoNeon's stylistic choices – not only in terms of his composition but also regarding his extravagant fashion sense – nor his real-time bass accompaniment imply or enact a communally shareable critique, goal, or context, both the subject position of the encoder and the decoder remain completely open. This lack of shareability regarding the contributor's and potential recipients' ideological competencies allows for a wide range of possible subjective attributions, turning the video into a vehicle for

5 Parentheses indicate the omissions from Thunberg's original speech.

signalisations of both ridicule and support for Thunberg.[6] Only MonoNeon's hashtags #worldchangers and #freedomthinkers under the re-uploaded video on Instagram indicate that he created his video in a supposedly supportive spirit.[7] Sadly, beyond the scope of musical re-composition, the opposite case of deliberately disguising (politically charged) ridicule and hate speech under the veil of irony in Internet-mediated communication is all-too familiar by now. For instance, it can be found with respect to comments and meta-memetic contributions in online communities based on trolling and/or political activism, which attempt to territorialise, steer, or destabilise online discourse – and evade counter attacks by finding refuge in claims of irony.[8]

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6 See, for example, the following comments on the video: "Only mono could make me almost not puke from this over exxagerated dramatic ass nonsense. Lmfao." @Zen Atman, 2019, comment on @MonoNeon, "MonoNeon x Greta Thunberg." / "The only people who stole your dreams and childhood are your parents. Don't shout from your podium accusing me. If the heat of this funk causes global warming then so be it." @BurkeTrue2, 2019, comment on @MonoNeon, "MonoNeon x Greta Thunberg." / "Not on board with this one mate. That shit is child abuse." @Hank Dapper, 2019, comment on @MonoNeon, "MonoNeon x Greta Thunberg." / "No not at all, I in fact thought Neon was trying to amplify her message in a supportive way." @Lotoreo, replying to @Schwa Iska, 2019, comment on @MonoNeon, "MonoNeon x Greta Thunberg." / "This is funky and all. However I believe that it may take away from her message, presenting it in a less serious view. On the flip side though all publicity is good publicity?" @Phoebe :3, 2019, comment on @MonoNeon, "MonoNeon x Greta Thunberg."

7 See @MonoNeon, "Money & Fairytales," Instagram video, March 29, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/B-S8CSin4qX/

8 In an article for *Wired*, Emma Grey Ellis links the fundamental problem of decoding irony in a disembodied and socially fragmented sphere of online communication to our accelerated informational space, thereby drawing lines from trolling subcultures on 4chan to recent (Trumpian) phenomena of post-factual politics. In the article, media scholar Whitney Phillips is quoted, claiming that "[w]hen social networks used to be bounded by interests, the joke teller could expect that their audience was in on the joke […]. Now a single retweet can cause spontaneous global amplification." Of course, this same mechanism can also be used to disguise genuine and otherwise unacceptable utterances as jokes or sarcasm. See Emma Grey Ellis, "Can't Take a Joke? That's Just Poe's Law, 2017's Most Important Internet Phenomenon," *Wired*, June 5, 2017, https://www.wired.com/2017/06/poes-law-troll-cultures-central-rule/.

Beyond Institutional Discourse: Post-Ironic Selectivity as a Vernacular Competence

Of course, ironic distance is still widely regarded as a common denominator for postmodern strategies of re-appropriation and parody, ranging from subversive hyper-affirmations and bitextual interventions to (self-)vulgarising "trash." However, the omnipresence of ironic expression across the whole spectrum of pop-cultural aesthetic production often entails issues of decoding regarding its differential or negatory intent. In the last decades, irony's potential loss of a positive complement, which frees the subject from formulating any definite meaning on its own, disguised by a tongue-in-cheek attitude, has often been addressed in postmodern literature and the visual arts. Referring to the author David Foster Wallace, Lukas Hoffmann thematises operations of all-encompassing irony, stating that "Wallace describes this with the metaphor of the prisoner who comes to love his cage; the ironist is denying positive content per se, and by continuing to see everything as ironic, the lack of positivity remains undetected."[9] Attempts at productively dealing with the issue of "nihilistic" irony led to "post-ironic" artistic approaches; for example, Lee Konstantinou paradigmatically used the notion of post-irony with regard to postmodern literature focussed on overcoming a fundamental ironic attitude. However, this does not mean that "post-ironic" authors wish for a return to "pre-ironic" times – which, of course, is impossible. Rather, different from a turn towards "new sincerity," irony is integrated as a speech act while overcome as an ideology.[10] In order to strengthen the concept of post-irony, Konstantinou asks critically why sincerity would be "the aspired state one might want to attain if one was concerned about irony? Why not commitment, or passion, or emotion, or decision?"[11] A call for a turn towards affectivity, immediacy and positivity can also be noted with regard to the "first

9 Lukas Hoffmann, *Postirony: The Nonfictional Literature of David Foster Wallace and Dave Eggers* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016), 60.

10 For instance, in his essays "E Unibus Pluram" and "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young," Wallace writes about the challenges and possibilities of transcending postmodern ironic distance and cynicism in contemporary literature. See David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1993). See David Foster Wallace, "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 8, no. 3 (Fall 1988).

11 Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 38.

post-ironic manifesto" (2008) by the Swiss artist duo Com&Com, founded by Johannes Hedinger and Marcus Gossolt. Here, the rejection of ironic doubt – criticised as "dissatisfaction elevated into a lifestyle" – is coupled with a call for temporal and tactical affirmation – "truth […] changes to fit the demands of the moment" – and the equation of post-irony with "total imaginative and creative freedom."[12] As Hedinger and Gossolt are aware that post-ironic art can only build on the remains of an ironic *zeitgeist*, the manifesto itself, besides being stylised in rainbow colours, includes passages with potentially ironic undertones which are in need of interpretation by the recipient. Both post-ironic stances by Konstantinou and Com&Com argue for the inclusion of aesthetic modes of irony within an overall text which is supposed to render the inner stance and decision-making of the artist/author readable. However, the potential ambiguity of irony cannot and shall not be dissolved, as Sebastian Plönges notes:

> According to the hereby proposed reading [of the "first post-ironic manifesto"], the endurance – not the elimination! – of contingencies is the strong suit of the post-ironist, who thus offers a free and productive option for unfolding the ironic paradox. […] The post-ironic manifesto enables us to float in contingencies and, at the same time, offers a productive way of dealing with this – if one is willing to read it that way and to argue in its favour.[13]

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12 The complete text of the manifesto reads as follows: "1. WE ARE LIVING IN A POSTIRONIC AGE. IRONIC DOUBT IS JUST DISSATISFACTION ELEVATED INTO A LIFESTYLE. 2. WE HAVE BEGUN TO HAVE DOUBTS ABOUT THE PROCESS OF DOUBTING. 3. TRUTH IS NO LONGER UNCONDITIONAL, BUT RATHER CHANGES TO FIT THE DEMANDS OF THE MOMENT. 4. THE WORLD IS MORE THAN WHAT IT IS. 5. EVERYDAY LIFE PROVIDES A PROVING GROUND FOR THE HUMAN SPIRIT. 6. EVERYTHING IS FILLED WITH MAGIC AND BEAUTY. 7. BEAUTY CAN INSPIRE US TO BECOME BETTER PEOPLE. 8. BEAUTY CAN GROW INTO LOVE. 9. OUT OF LOVE, TRUTH CAN EMERGE. 10. WE ARE STANDING AT THE VERGE OF SOMETHING WONDROUS: THE REBIRTH OF OUR SELFCREATION. POSTIRONY MEANS TOTAL IMAGINATIVE AND CREATIVE FREEDOM." See Marcus Gossolt und Johannes M. Hedinger (Com&Com), *first post-ironic manifesto*, 2008, rainbow print/airbrush, Courtesy of Galerie Bernhard Bischoff & Partner, Bern, https://postirony.files.wordpress.com/2009/01/postirony-web1.jpg.

13 Sebastian Plönges, "Postironie als Entfaltung," in *Medien und Bildung: Institutionelle Kontexte und kultureller Wandel*, ed. Torsten Meyer, Wey-Han Tan, Christina Schwalbe, and Ralf Appelt (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2011), 444 (my translation).

While the rejection of ironic doubt is clearly conveyed by post-ironists through affective renderings and changes of perspective within their work, the contingency of the included ironic forms is irreducible. Irony appears to be completely detached from any binary logic of affirmation or negation. Furthermore, pre-existent differentiations between authenticity and artificiality are not considered relevant for post-ironic approaches anymore[14] – and anyway, according to Plönges, "the problem which post-irony could be an answer for stops being a problem as soon as one has learnt to deal with paradoxes."[15]

Post-ironic *modi operandi* have never been exclusive to practices and discourse within the social system of high arts; rather, academicised conceptualisations of post-irony emerged in the wake of an overall post-ironic *zeitgeist* in (pop-)cultural production, forms of everyday aestheticisation, and social communication at large.[16] In social media, which provide a simulative space characterised by principles of modularity and variability, playful post-ironic navigations can be considered a vernacular competence, Plönges notes, as they require "a selective approach to selectivity, which is something natural and intuitive for many a native of ubiquitous Internet culture with its instantaneous communication options."[17] A look into visual self-representations on social media platforms like Instagram confirms Plönges' observation; although one does not even need to look that far, as the mere use of emojis, abbreviations, and Internet slang represents potential post-ironic operations. Instant access to freely circulating media objects as well as the material affordances of transforming digital files stand in a synergetic relation to the participatory ethos fostered by social media platforms. In the face of the irreducible symbolic multiplicity and polyvalency within this realm of selectivity,it comes as little surprise that musical forms and formats which emerged in dependence on the socio-technical infrastructure of social media platforms – or engage

14 See Johannes M. Hedinger, "Postironie: Geschichte, Theorie und Praxis einer Kunst nach der Ironie (Eine Betrachtung aus zwei Perspektiven)," *Kunstform International* 213 (February 2012): 117.

15 Plönges, "Postironie als Entfaltung," 445 (my translation).

16 (Academicised) post-ironic artworks and literature thus need to be regarded as *faits sociaux*. According to Adorno, "aesthetic form as sedimented content" can historically and culturally be traced back; moreover, "aesthetic relations of production" only exist as "sedimentations or imprintings of social relations of production." Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 5.

17 Plönges, "Postironie als Entfaltung," 445 (my translation).

with subjective experiences and affective stimuli linked to the state of "being online" – incorporate post-ironic attitude and (self-)expression in an often intuitive manner. The following examined forms and formats of networked and platform-situated musical (re-)composition delineate a wide range of potential affective renderings driven by selective approaches to ironic ambiguities – illustrating the fact that the tactical optimism proclaimed by Com&Com's "first post-ironic manifesto" is but one way of transcending ironic distance in postmodern forms of aesthetic (self-)expression. Most importantly, however, the analyses make describable the accelerating effects digital environments of platform-situated distribution, consumption and iteration have on post-ironic compositional approaches and methods. YouTube's important role within this media ecology cannot be overstated. For one, the platform serves as an all-absorbing distribution channel in its functionality as a "total archive." What is more, it affords the (co-)creative development of impactful post-ironic audiovisual aesthetics and practices of self-representation that are exclusively situated on the platform and help increase the contributors' individual prestige and communal belongingness.

Self-Destruction and Melancholia in SoundCloud Rap and Beyond

In the early-to-mid 2010s, platform-situated musical genre formations informed by post-ironic approaches to self-expression experienced a general rise in popularity. For example, early cloud rap could be attributed to these genres. In its early stages, before becoming commercialised, cloud rap subculture was primarily driven by social media interaction and a DIY ethos, thereby embracing a gift logic based on free distribution and sharing. On a musical and sonic level, the genre is often associated with lo-fi sound production, atmospheric synths, trap beats, and extensive use of voice manipulation. However, Peter Wikström and Erik van Ooijen argue that the label "cloud" functions as the most effective denominator for characterisations of the genre and name "three distinguishing characteristics: its 'hazy,' ethereal aesthetic both in terms of aural and visual expression; its nebulousness as a genre without clearly defined borders; and its internet-mediated emergence, being primarily self-distributed through cloud services (Sound Cloud, YouTube, Twitter) rather than through traditional and analog media."[18] This notion of cloud rap does

18 Peter Wikström and Erik van Ooijen, "Post-Authentic Digitalism in Cloud Rap" (summary), paper presented at the conference *Popular Music Discourses: Authenticity and*

not help define the scope of the genre; however, the last point hints at the crucial moment which helps unfold the genre's post-ironic potential, namely the complete transfer of analogically developed traditions of lyrical output and (oral) presence into the realm of the digital. The new environment of continually remediated signs entailed a break with "most previous forms of hip-hop which have tended to privilege presence, immediacy, and origins. For example, rappers were long expected to write their own rhymes; to be able to rap without the help of technological aids or digital post-production; and to actively represent, and 'stay true' to their geographical origins."[19] Early cloud rap, often referred to as "SoundCloud rap" due to its origins on the platform, is a musical genre primarily defined by its mediation through vernacular forms of digital communication and creativity on platforms like SoundCloud and YouTube – and less so by its quite heterogeneous stylistic features. By way of selective reiteration and cumulation of lyrical and compositional tropes, SoundCloud rap artists deal with symbolic and informational oversaturation, thereby rejecting claims for "realness" or "originality" in the traditional sense. Yet, the digital "post-authenticity" of cloud rap does not necessarily result in a lack of intimacy or emotionality. Rather to the contrary, SoundCloud rappers in the early-to-mid 2010s – particularly artists who would later also be labelled as "sad rap" or "emo rap," such as Yung Lean, Bones, XXXTentacion, or $uicideboy$ – used their music as a vehicle for a new-found sentimentality and emotional fragility. The general anti-virtuosic attitude – especially in terms of lo-fi sound and video production, rapping styles, lyrical output, and vocal post-production – is coupled with a range of visual or lyrical topics, encompassing (pseudo-)philosophical issues, depression, surreal nonsense and profanities, random pop-cultural references, or almost caricatural fetishisations of status symbols and drug abuse. For instance, in Yung Lean's song "Hurt" from his first mixtape *Unknown Death 2002* (2013), we can hear the artist mumble the following lines:

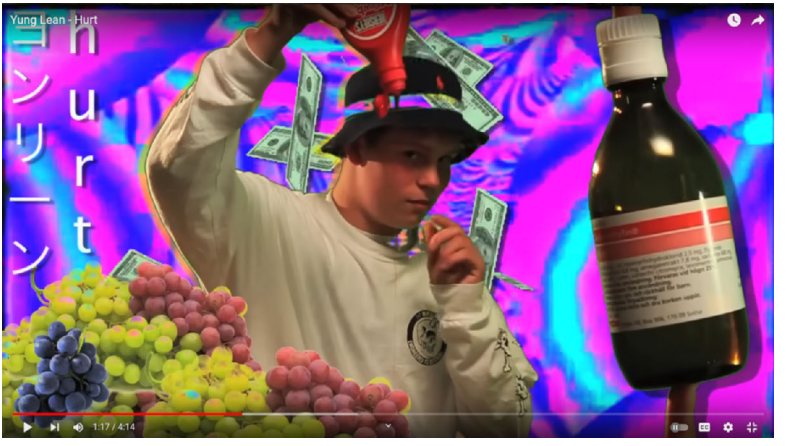
> […] High tech watch, high tech locked
> Broken Skies, Fantastic Fox
> Got keys, but I'll never find the lock
> Emotion boys we in the UFO

Mediatization, Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden, November 13, 2018, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333422124_Post-authentic_digitalism_in_cloud_rap.

19 Ibid.

Skies pink when I'm on ecstasy
In Tokyo, playin' Mario
Sad boys blastin' your stereos
Suckin' on my nuts like pistachios
Mixin' champagne with carpaccio
Slangin' doe, hoe, I'm in that Polo
Stacks of money, more for you
Milkshakes with the crushed up Oreos
I'm in Italy, rodeo
Forgive me after my death, Caravaggio […][20]

Figure 38: Still from Yung Lean's music video for the song "Hurt" (2013), depicting the artist wearing a bucket hat and holding a bottle of Hershey's Strawberry Syrup, amidst a collage of grapes, dollar bills, and cough syrup.



The awareness of the simulacric symbolic sphere they are operating in, or, more generally, the perceived lack of immediate self-awarenessseems to be at the basis of many performances by cloud rap artists. However, there is no oppositional use of irony which would be directed at perforating or "unmasking" the hyperreal imagery they are reproducing. Contrary to de-subjectivised and distanced interferences, the use of dreamy, moody, and melodic soundscapes and

20 @Yung Lean, "Yung Lean – Hurt," June 18, 2013, YouTube video, 4:14, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stgrSjynPKs.

hooks serves as a way of affectively rendering a new-found inwardness, feelings of melancholia, or nihilistic "no future" attitudes. In other words, the audiovisual aesthetic of cloud rap – particularly in its early DIY manifestations on SoundCloud and YouTube – is characterised by the post-ironic affirmation of insurmountable indifference, enabling the artists' and recipients' indulgence in states of floating, longing, or self-loathing.

In general, the frontiers between hyperreal imagery and existential reality, rap personas and real-life persons are blurred in many musical careers hailing from a SoundCloud rap background. By way of networked reception and reproduction, afforded by the storage and communication options of online platforms, the aesthetics and ethics of SoundCloud rap have become socialised quickly and helped establish a thriving rap subculture. Both a result of and a precondition for formations of networked communal communication, SoundCloud rap's "ideological products" – such as the glorification of excessive drug consumption and suicidal tendencies – materialised not only in lyrical and visual repertoires (as well as in many rappers' stage names) but also became integrated in everyday communication, shaping the lifestyle of young artists and fans. Our postmodern condition, in which the hybrid and hyperreal becomes the new "real," seems to be radically accelerated and reinforced by the post-authentic performance of SoundCloud rappers – with devastating ramifications: many rappers with a cloud rap background – among them Lil Peep (age 21), XXXTentacion (age 20), and Juice WRLD (age 21) – have died at a shockingly young age, prompting the notion of a "21 Club," in reference to the famous "27 club," which includes Brian Jones, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain, and Amy Winehouse (among others).[21]

The musical and visual reproduction of affective stimuli of melancholia played a significant role in SoundCloud rap production in the early-to-mid 2010s – and, since then, has informed musical approaches beyond the stylistic constraints of rap. Spooky Black, nowadays better known as Corbin, gained mass exposure through his early SoundCloud and YouTube uploads, which places him in a SoundCloud rap context, although his music from 2014 onwards is stylistically oriented towards alternative, "hazy" R&B. His music video

21 The 21 Club goes back to a line in Juice WRLD's track "Legends" on his EP *Too Soon..*: "What's the 27 club? We ain't making it past 21." In the following year, Juice WRLD died at the age of 21 as a result of a drug overdose. See @Juice WRLD, "juice wrld – legends :(," June 20, 2018, SoundCloud audio, 3:11, https://soundcloud.com/uiceheidd/juice-wrld-legends?in=uiceheidd/sets/too-soon.

for "Without You," which he released in 2014 at the age of 16, received immediate attention and became a source of inspiration for fellow Internet artists due to its uncompromising and genre-defying post-ironic attitude.[22] The non-ironic and at times bizarre combination of visual and musical elements is held together by a VHS video aesthetic and an ethereal instrumental track. The latter drenches the track in melancholia and carries Spooky Black's R&B-stylised singing. His idiosyncratic self-display adds another level: imagery of Spooky Black in a snowy forest – a scenery one would rather expect in a black metal video – alternates with footage of the artist at home. His bodily expressions, ranging from thinker's poses and hip-hop hand gestures to relaxed lounging on his couch, are accompanying his performance of the song's lyrics, which are thematising heartbreak and longing. The text itself offers inner discrepancies, shifting from passages like "Thinkin' I'mma flip and fill my brain with lead, I'mma end my life without you" to "Don't you know you're so sexy the way you move your body up and down." Despite seeming exaggerative, generic, or even out of place, the lyrical patterns are embedded in the consistent overall "flow" of the song and never conveyed in an ironically distanced manner. With "Without You," Spooky Black aims at musically conveying a sense of proximity and affectivity, far from any use of irony which could serve him as a shield from notions of sentimentality or ridiculousness. However, his choice of wearing a durag throughout the entire video entails some questions with respect to the artistic intention, as it represents an uncommented appropriation of a fashion item rooted in Afro-American culture. In an article for the online magazine "DJ Booth," Nathan Slavik writes:

> So a white kid naming himself Spooky Black and dressing in durags and FUBU? Either it's a hell of a coincidence and he's just a weird kid dumbly unaware of the racial implications of his whole artistic vision, or it's an intentional, self-aware provocation intended to get attention on the internet which worked astoundingly well, in which case fuck him.[23]

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22 @Gabe Broderick, "SPOOKY BLACK – WITHOUT YOU (PROD. GREAF)," February 28, 2014, YouTube video, 5:03, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dT2YDdZdE-I.

23 Nathan Slavik, "Spooky Black: Dope, Wack or Kinda Racist? (All of the Above)," *DJ Booth*, July 30, 2014, https://djbooth.net/features/spooky-black-dope-wack-or-kinda-racist.

In any case, the example of this early Spooky Black video proves that the de-differentiating potential of post-ironic selectivity does not entail the erasure of pre-existent contexts and can – and sometimes should – be critically approached from an outside perspective.

Reflective Nostalgia and Spiritual Journeys: Post-Ironic Pattern Aesthetics and Post-Genre Fusions

While cloud rap quickly developed into a highly commercialised hip-hop subgenre beyond its originary environment of platform-situated distribution and imitation, other (micro-)genre formations that emerged in dependence on the socio-technical infrastructure of social media platforms are still driven by a collaborative and pointedly non-individualistic spirit. The Internet-mediated microgenre of vaporwave is of particular interest in this context due to its post-ironic approach to historicity and nostalgia. Being part of a pop-cultural wave of meta-reflexive musical approaches to collective popular memory since the late 2000s, the microgenre represents an Internet-mediated offshoot of "hauntological" music, affording and suggesting reiteration due to its low-threshold and quasi-formulaic means of creation. As vaporwave entirely relies on the remix of samples and images which represent "cultural detritus of a media-saturated capitalist social order,"[24] its audiovisual repertoire and compositional competencies have formed and stabilised over the course of Internet-mediated imitative encounters. The vaporwave aesthetic is usually either described as an attempt at creating a critically directed détournement of symbols of late capitalist fantasies or, quite simply, regarded as a joke. However, any simplified attribution of ironic de-familiarisation disregards the fundamental self- and media-reflexivity underlying these contributions. Vaporwave exists because of – and despite – its community's awareness of the hyperreal nature of our pop-cultural memory. Fittingly, the genre label itself is a nod to the term "vaporware," which is used for computer hardware or software that has been officially announced but never actually manufactured/released nor cancelled. This disappearance without a trace is analogous to the bygone era vaporwave supposedly represents. Similar to the status of "vaporware," it remains unclear whether the times and places vaporwave takes us to have ever existed. The iterative compositions and remixes float within an all-encompassing, computationally accelerated spectral simulacrum, evoking

24 See Trainer, "From Hypnagogia to Distroid," 414.

descriptions of the music as a sonic rendering of "a future which never was" or of "memories we never had." Vaporwave sound can be seen as a manifestation of a general postmodern tendency towards communally mediated practices of reflective nostalgia, which, according to Svetlana Boym "thrives in álgos, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming–wistfully, ironically, desperately."[25] However, the main fascination of vaporwave is not its ironic character – although patterns of irony are easily detectable – but the communal reproduction of "melancholy affect through an aesthetic representation of the depthlessness, waning of affect, new technologies, pastiche, and collapse of high/low categories into consumer culture."[26] All in all, the micro-genre represents a post-ironic approach characterised by intersubjective embracement and conveyance of sentiments of loss and disorientation.

In the wake of networked approaches to community-oriented media-reflection and meta-reference such as vaporwave, highly idiosyncratic post-ironic forms, which defy genre attributions and stylistic constraints, have emerged and continue to proliferate. Artists who are influenced by Internet-mediated forms of collaborative musicking often attain visibility by fostering an intimate and interactive relationship with musical niche communities, which they address as their (imagined and real) audience through social media's various communication channels. For Chicago-based artist Angel Marcloid, for instance, self-representation on YouTube plays a big role in shaping her public profile as an artist. With her web series "Behind the Muzak" she makes use of the communication options of YouTube's socio-technical infrastructure. In episodes of 30 minutes or more, Marcloid extensively talks about her musical, worldly, and spiritual inspirations for her artistic vision and positions herself in relation to pre-existing vernacular forms and repertoires of networked audiovisual composition and (post-)digital aesthetics. Here, Marcloid aspirationally cultivates her artistic online persona, thereby aiming at generating intimacy to a fannish audience – for example through Q&A sessions with fan questions, the sharing of inside knowledge about music-related content on YouTube, authenticating confessional moments, and (post-

25 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xviii.

26 Alican Koc, "'Do You Want Vaporwave, or Do You Want the Truth?' Cognitive Mapping of Late Capitalist Affect in the Virtual Lifeworld of Vaporwave," *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry* 1, no. 1 (2017): 59–60, https://doi.org/10.22387/cap2016.4.

ironic) conveyances of sincerity (see Figure 39).[27] Her musical output itself is characterised by a deeply personal engagement with our computationally accelerated simulacric (pop-)cultural space. Taking the idea of "post-genre" to its extremes, Marcloid relentlessly blends musical patterns into psychedelic amalgams which never rest in one place or time but radically represent the ahistorical spatial montage and experiential compression in today's online environments, where any possible affective stimulus is only a mouse-click away. For example, the music of one of her many one-woman projects, Fire-Toolz, is characterised by a deliberately accelerated oversaturation with musical signifiers: in the track "mailto:spasm@swamp.god?subject=Mind-Body Parallels" from her 2019 album *Field Whispers (Into The Cristal Palace)*, Marcloid navigates the most diverse musical textures and patterns which encompass, among others, elevator music licks, black metal screams and blast beats, kitsch electronica, MIDI instruments, 8-bit sound effects, samples of virtuosic metal guitar sweeping, and soothing synth layers. On her Tumblr page, she describes her inspiration for the track as follows: "The body-mind is a unified unit. I love walking in nature. Being with animals. Being where I am. Waking up out of some bullshit. I tried to nod to my fav no-treble octave smooth jazz guitarist. Imo the beat & bass slams."[28] Both inspired by everyday epiphenomena and banalities as well as by religious, philosophical, and mystical themes, Marcloid regards her music as "melodramatically sincere" expressions of her personal and spiritual journey.[29] Generally, her records follow overarching thematic threads: for example, the title of her newest Fire-Toolz album *Eternal Home* (2021) not only refers to the experience of confinement and isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of its production and release. More importantly, on a spiritual level, it addresses her compositional engagement with ideas of belonging and self-fulfilment, as Marcloid underscores in her liner notes:

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27 See, for example, @Fire-Toolz, "Behind The Muzak #3: Fire-Toolz – Skinless X-1," February 17, 2021, YouTube video, 1:14:40, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWmHkrpBPQo

28 @Fire-Toolz, Tumblr post, September 8, 2019, https://fire-toolz.tumblr.com/post/187584231189/%C3%ADn-th%C3%ADs-thr%D1%94%CE%B1d-%C3%AD-w%C3%ADll-d%C3%ADscuss-tr%CE%B1ck-%D0%B2%D1%87-tr%CE%B1ck-%CE%B1.

29 See Angel Marcloid, "Infinity and 'I': An Interview with Fire-Toolz," by Audrey Lockie, *Slug Mag*, May 7, 2020, https://www.slugmag.com/music/interviews/music-interviews/infinity-and-i-an-interview-with-fire-toolz/.

> Our Eternal Home is Heaven. Heaven is the ultimate reality of our shared Being, but the conscious experience of it is a state of mind (a dimension we are meant for). […] In all of the grief, fear, and stinging emotional pain I have endured in this incarnation, despite the richness and miraculous unfolding that is my beautiful life, it turns out: I am always Home, and Home is always safe. The album is what settled in the sink after I wrung myself dry. It is full of sensory memories, love of nature, spiritual deliberation, and relating childhood experiences to my present-day psychology, but it is also a metamorphosis. It engulfs the vast darkness in more light than it can handle.[30]

Figure 39: Marcloid talks extensively about her music and aesthetic influences in her video series "Behind the Muzak." Still from her video "Behind The Muzak #3: Fire-Toolz – Skinless X-1" (2021).

Beyond defining her musical output by way of genre attributions, which seems futile,[31] it is more productive to regard Marcloid's music as a meta-

30 Angel Marcloid, liner notes for Fire-Toolz, *Eternal Home*, Hausu Mountain Records HAUSMO 111, 2021, digital album, https://fire-toolz.bandcamp.com/album/eternal-home.

31 "Avant-vaporwave" and "cyber prog metal" are but two of the many genre labels applied to Fire-Toolz' music, demonstrating the disparity of attributions. See Jeff Cubbison, review of "Fire-Toolz – Rainbow ∞ Bridge (official music video)" by Fire-Toolz, *Impose Magazine*, April 1, 2020, https://imposemagazine.com/bytes/new-music/fire-t

referential musical rendering of our oversaturated information space, characterised by a post-ironic hyper-affirmation of its principles of acceleration. The eclectic free fall through an endless array of musical references without fixed symbolic anchorage becomes a motor of musical growth and self-discovery, in tune with her spiritual journey: "I'm on a journey; steadily growing every day, until my body no longer works. I'm not even saying I'm getting better and better, but I'm always changing. I'm constantly falling, and there is no ground."[32]

The Irony of Post-Ironic Transcendence

The circulating and materially repeatable themes and aesthetic patterns of YouTube-mediated post-ironic re-composition can be understood as constituents of the productive conditions of possibility regarding discursive formations of musical vernaculars, which serve to integrate socio-aesthetics and certain literacies of encoding and decoding into subcultural everyday communication and creativity. Across a web of modal interrelations between platform-specific forms and formats of content creation, musical, visual, and performative conventions of conveying communally shared post-ironic attitudes emerge, transcending the distancing and often cynical effects of irony by way of navigating the hyperreal "tissues of quotation" with a new-found sense of proximity and affectivity. SoundCloud rap's "post-authentic" subject positions or vaporwave's affective embracement of disorientation are but two ways in which emotional distance can be reduced in favour of a new-found immediacy that denies the possibility of cynically seeking refuge in absolute negative independence through ubiquitous irony. Post-irony in Internet-mediated music genres appears to be an intuitive accompaniment of (often openly confused) compositional engagement with the all-engulfing symbolic multiplicity of popular culture. In contrast to the utopian and optimistic impulse of post-ironic postulates in the fields of literature and the visual arts, a turn towards responsibility and commitment appears as a potential incentive or concomitance, not as a precondition for post-ironic aesthetics in general. After all, as my examples have demonstrated, post-ironic composition aimed

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oolz-rainbow-%E2%88%9E-bridge; see Kristoffer Cornils, review of *Eternal Home* by Fire-Toolz, *musikexpress*, October 15, 2021, https://www.musikexpress.de/reviews/fire-toolz-eternal-home/.

32 Marcloid, "An Interview with Fire-Toolz."

at transcending the distancing effects of irony affords for a wide range of affective stimuli and ethical stances, from affirmations of nihilistic indifference and depression over melancholia and reflective nostalgia to optimistic approaches aimed at self-awareness and spiritual fulfilment.

Lastly, it needs to be pointed out that the post-ironic *zeitgeist* does not solve but rather accelerates postmodern issues of encoding and decoding, as the establishment of (often community-exclusive) post-ironic competencies within the digital sphere further blurs overarching referential codes. In view of previous conceptualisations of post-irony in the "high arts," this development comes across as ironic, as the issue of ironic ambiguity and arbitrariness led to proclamations of post-ironic attitudes in the first place. All in all, digitally mediated post-ironic (re-)composition on YouTube and beyond serves as a playground for new forms of subjectively channelled aesthetics. However, although the reduction of emotional distance in favour of a new-found immediacy denies the possibility of cynically seeking refuge in absolute negative independence, the transcendence of "traditional subject positioning in lieu of an affective rendering of experiential vagueness" entails a de-differentiation and de-politicisation of the used or re-appropriated musical material, as any notion of aesthetic or ideological hurdles in need to be overcome is removed.[33]

6.2 How to be Differently Different – "Becoming-Imperceptible" in an Environment of Commensurability

Across the vast cyberscape of vernacular YouTube-specific re-composition, the visibility of a singular contribution is linked to its ability to pierce through the overall stream of contributions. Regardless of whether or not a concrete contribution is attributable to a generalisable remix concept, it enters a field of open-ended and inherently incomplete produsage which spawns and demands the introduction of difference via imitative encounters. Consequentially, an overarching tendency can be detected that is common for all genres and practices of YouTube-specific re-composition and points to the contributors' aspiration of creating distinctive affective stimuli, namely the omnipresence of bizarre juxtapositions, aesthetics of ridiculousness, surreal sequences, or moments of disruption and de-familiarisation. What at first makes YouTube seem

33 See Trainer, "From Hypnagogia to Distroid," 422.

like a playground for unlimited artistic self-expression or even potentially subversive invention and interference must, however, be strongly relativised at second glance. The following inquiry into the institutionalised attention regarding aesthetic novelties and transgressions in vernacular re-composition on YouTube will further substantiate this skepticism, while aiming at sketching out potential differential lines of tactical aesthetic evasion.

From the very beginning of the platform, the desire for visibility in vernacular musical practices on the video platform has prompted manifold phenomena of self-display and self-representation – as a look into the early days of YouTube shows: As early as in 2004, Gary Brolsma recorded the "Numa Numa Dance," a playback performance of the song "Dragostea Din Tei" by O-Zone, which, due to his eccentric gesticulation and facial expressions (see Figure 40), made him thenceforth known as the "Numa Numa Guy."[34] After the video was uploaded to YouTube in 2006, more and more uploads of "Numa Numa Dance" renditions followed, re-enacting Brolsma's performance, additionally stimulated by the so-called "New Numa Contest," promising US $45,000 in prize money for the best submissions.[35] Such an iconicity of viral "one-hit wonders" is a phenomenon attributable to YouTube's less territorialised early days, as Carol Vernallis notes, thereby referring to musical renditions aimed at self-display as well as to animated musical clips and mashup practices.[36] One of her examples is the "Badger Song," wherein a group of dancing cartoon badgers, a mushroom, and a snake repeatedly pop up and disappear, accompanied by a repetitive techno-like beat and the respectively fitting vocal exclamations ("Badger badger badger," "Mushroom mushroom," "Argh! Snake, a snake! Snaaake! A snaaaake, oooh it's a snake!").[37] Vernallis argues that the unusual causal relations of these early bizarre eye- and ear-catchers point to the infancy of the medium, speculating whether "YouTube's strangeness might have to do with the fact that we are experiencing its first iterations."[38] Since then, the ensuing development and proliferation of remix concepts has effectuated

34 @Dork Daily, "Numa Numa," December 11, 2006, YouTube video, 1:39, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmtzQCSh6xk.

35 @Dork Daily, "$45,000 Worldwide New Numa Contest Promo," September 9, 2006, YouTube video, 0:37, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PHv5d735A3E.

36 See Vernallis, *Unruly Media*, 127–180.

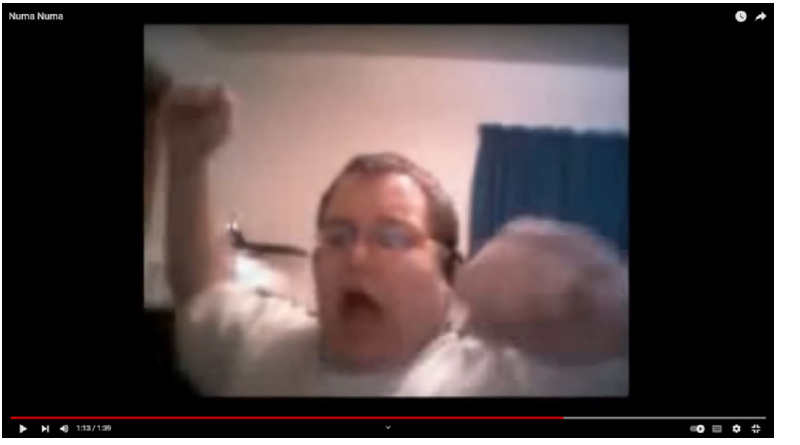
37 See @Weebl's Stuff, "Badgers : animated music video : MrWeebl," June 28, 2008, YouTube video, 1:13, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ElyixC9NsLI.

38 See Vernallis, *Unruly Media*, 139.

a certain normalisation of material and performative repertoires, compositional conventions, and media competencies. Moreover, in the current condition, individuated vernacular contributions are embedded within a symbolically oversaturated and algorithmically territorialised sphere; thus, they are usually accompanied by strategic practices of signalisation (by way of tags, titles, thumbnails, video descriptions, etc.), which are aimed at increasing the contribution's visibility. Thus, from today's standpoint, it is safe to say that, while bizarre, surprising, and enigmatic audiologovisual formations have always held a high potential for further spread and attention, not least owing to their producerly character, their spreadability was merely not as rigidly rationalised in the early years of the platform. Contrary to Vernallis' speculation, however, the medium has not become less "strange" – rather, it has territorialised "strangeness" and turned it into an expected recurring feature of objectified consumption, each return promising sensual and emotional stimulation. Subsumed to circulating remix concepts as well as musical and communicative genres, platform-mediated re-compositions of musical source material as well as original compositions aim at perpetuating contagious moments and introducing new affective stimuli that inform further imitative encounters.[39]

39 "Strangeness" in processes of collaborative re-composition can, for instance, be found in practices of pleasurable musical engagement with pre-circulating, often viral, audiovisual *objets trouvés* (such as "fail videos," footage of animals, or bizarre actions and idiosyncratic speech melodies in forms of human self-display), which provide the material for musically sensitive adaptations and indexploitations. Here, collaborative musical aestheticisation results in contagious overspills based on moments of ridicule, schadenfreude, astonishment, cuteness, etc. (see chapter 3.2). Moreover, vernacular music-video like produsage, encompassing DIY parodies, "shreds" of pre-existing musical material, and videos engaged with communal self-narration based on media fandom, is built on de-familiarisations, anomalous juxtapositions, or fannish fantasies that generate an eye- and ear-catching contrast to institutionalised practices of commercial music video and multimedia production (see chapter 3.1). Re-compositions of interface effects, on the other hand, are often guided by an affected audiovisual carelessness regarding representations of de-familiarised surface effects that refer to computational procedures and often result in deliberate aesthetics of failure and profanity (see chapter 3.3). Furthermore, aspirational self-display in musical performances and communicative genres on YouTube is characterised by hyper-expressive renditions and strategies of excessive emoting which aim at generating and attending to the community's desire for spectacular and transgressive content (see chapter 5.1).

Figure 40: Gary Brolsma performing the "Numa Numa Dance." Still from the reuploaded video on the channel @Dork Daily (2006).



Regimes of Novelty and Attention

According to Andreas Reckwitz, Internet-mediated aesthetic practices are adhering to the logics of an all-encompassing postmodern creativity dispositif which introduces certain affordances and imperatives concerning aesthetic novelty and audience attention. As he points out, this is due to the historical expansion and hybridisation of artistic practices, media "revolutions," diversification of forms and consumer objects, and a strong contemporary focus on sensual perception and aestheticisations of the self.[40] From an economic perspective on aesthetic production, Fredric Jameson notes that "the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods […] assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation."[41] In view of these preconditions, aesthetic novelties cannot be understood as a progressive or quantitatively measurable moment anymore "but by the momentary aesthetic, sensuous, affective stimulus they provide in the present before it is replaced by the next."[42]

40 See Andreas Reckwitz, *The Invention of Creativity: Modern Society and the Culture of the New*, trans. Steven Black (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017), chap. 1.2, Kindle.

41 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 4–5.

42 Reckwitz, *The Invention of Creativity*, chap. 1.3, Kindle.

According to Reckwitz, the attentiveness and receptivity to this form of relative aesthetic novelty is developed mutually by a "novelty-creating subject (or group or practice) and an aesthetically sensitive audience attentive to novelty," leading to the establishment of a social regime of attention.[43] As an environment that affords, curates, and, since its establishment, increasingly demands communal co-creation, YouTube has co-produced its own producerly audiences and aesthetic objects from the very beginning, thereby promising a continual generation of surprising and singular content via imitative encounters. However, whereas viral music clips like the "Badger Song," which proved to be compatible with modes of idle consumption, short attention spans, and an audience focussed on short-term novelty, still explored uncharted territory, the sheer mass of contributions and shares as well as effective mechanisms of rationalisation and economisation have since then turned the platform into an environment of competitive affective stimuli. The resulting regime of visibility is fuelled by the creators' *desire* – and, at times, *pressure* – to become visible.[44] Driven by an incentive of creating affectively intense content, audiologovisual formations aimed at a disruption or disregard of causal relations and cultural reference codes promise affective stimuli that might magnetise other produsers. Particularly supposedly "transgressive" categories and attributions like "trashy" or "bizarre," which are often still conceived of as signifiers of a subversive potential, seem entirely captured by a non-critical logic of differentiation, thus in a way representing "YouTubiness" itself as a symptom and amplifier of the supposedly unhinged symbolic play and expansion the platform affords. As Steven Shaviro notes, "[e]very supposedly 'transgressive' act or representation expands the field of capital investment," as it "opens up new territories to appropriate, and jump-starts new processes from which to extract surplus value. What else could happen, at a time when leisure and enjoyment have themselves become forms of labor?"[45] Of course, the perpetual produsage and (re-)territorialisation of arbitrary stimuli and graftings, which

43 See ibid.

44 In that, the digitally mediated and regulated attention economy of social media platforms like YouTube goes beyond modern disciplinary regimes, as described by Michel Foucault, which are regulated by a disciplining panopticon gaze which one wants to, but cannot, evade.

45 Steven Shaviro, "Accelerationist Aesthetics: Necessary Inefficiency in Times of Real Subsumption," *e-flux journal* 46 (June 2013), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/46/60070/accelerationist-aesthetics-necessary-inefficiency-in-times-of-real-subsumption/.

result from a combinatorial code of signs and thus are detached from any potentially opposing meaning, is not new to aesthetic practices on the platform, it is rather their very precondition. It simply took time for platform-specific aesthetic subjects, audiences, and objects to form and reciprocally stabilise over the course of the accumulation of content: Early YouTube uploads like the 8-bit animation of "Nyan Cat" (2011), a cat with a Pop-Tart for a body that flies through space while accompanied by a track featuring a Vocaloid voice obnoxiously repeating the word "nyan" (Japanese for "meow"), or the dancing banana in "Peanut Butter Jelly Time" (uploaded to YouTube in 2008), marked largely uncharted territory. Although the platform, in its curating agency, commodified aesthetic distinctiveness at the time of these early audiovisual and musical oddities, they were not surrounded by and competing with as many other stimuli as today and thus could not be anticipated in the same way. With the accumulation of platform-specific musical contributions and referential re-compositions since the 2010s, the algorithmic difference engine of YouTube, as a profit-oriented mix-and-match system, noticeably tightened its grip on the circulatory logic of the platform's contents, ceaselessly (re-)territorialising aesthetic singularities, thereby suggesting repetitive imitative and oppositional encounters. The generation of difference and attention is fundamentally *pre-mediated* and *re-incorporated* by algorithmically driven market-like dynamics of commensurability, fostering ever-new social adaptions of compositional concepts and conventions.

Beyond heterarchical musical produsage, musical performances driven by commercial enterprise aim to recapture and reproduce the ethos of bizarreness and ridiculousness that is often ascribed to and expected from platform-specific music clips by audiences receptive and attentive to the fashions of spectacular musical social media content. The viral music video "PPAP (Pen Pineapple Apple Pen" by the Japanese comedian Daimaou Kosaka, who became a social media celebrity in his role as the fictional singer Pikotaro, may serve as an example: In "PPAP," which was originally released as a music video on YouTube in 2016, Pikotaro is dressed in an animal print costume, dancing around and singing nonsensical lyrics ("I have a pen, have a apple – Uh! Apple pen […]") while pantomimically holding and combining the mentioned items.[46] In its emphasis on repetition, the video freezes a single surreal

46 @-PIKOTARO OFFICIAL CHANNEL-"PIKO ST KIDS," "PPAP (Pen-Pineapple-Apple-Pen Official) ペンパイナッポーアッポーペン/PIKOTARO(ピコ太郎)," August 25, 2016, YouTube video, 1:08, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0E00Zuayv9Q.

moment for the audience to hold onto. In general, the ridiculous self-display of Pikotaro must be regarded against the backdrop of several years of deliberate and undeliberate self-ridicule in music-related YouTube performances. Different from certain early choreographies and renditions like the "Numa Numa Dance," which arguably became popular and led to imitative activity on social media thanks to their non-conforming and often undeliberately ridiculous appearance, the gaps for produsers to fill with their own imagination and participation are anticipated in Pikotaro's case, as underlined by an accompanying video wherein he explains his dance moves for others to imitate.[47]

Figure 41: Pikotaro explaining the "Pen-Pineapple-Apple-Pen" dance. Still from the video "How to Pen-Pineapple-Apple-Pen (PPAP)" on his official channel (2016).

The eccentricity and irreality of both the composition and the persona "Pikotaro" can barely disguise the fact that the video strategically reinforces an attention regime geared towards spectacular stimuli, which is fuelled by mechanisms of rationalisation and economisation, on the one hand, and the continual generation of content via aspirational imitation and invention,

47 @-PIKOTARO OFFICIAL CHANNEL-"PIKO ST KIDS", "How to Pen-Pineapple-Apple-Pen (PPAP) (How to ペンパイナッポーアッポーペン (PPAP) /PIKOTARO (ピコ太郎)," September 27, 2016, YouTube video, 2:37, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YdlGVJ7prDo.

on the other. Speculative contributions like Pikotaro's "PPAP" introduce particular aesthetic patterns with a high imitation-suggestibility. In general, the resulting magnetisations have to be considered a concomitant effect of the contributors' subjection to this attention regime, whereunder aesthetic novelty and surprise is always-already anticipated.[48]

Frozen Transgressions: YouTube Poop and its Aesthetics of Vulgarity and Profanity

The continual accumulation of relatively novel and exciting stimuli takes place within a socio-technical infrastructure characterised by dynamic interdependences – magnetisations, imitative encounters, oppositions, social adaptations, etc. – between subjects, communities, and aesthetic objects, and necessarily results in "speculative behaviour and reflexive feedback loops," as Ramón Reichert notes.[49] Reichert asserts that whatever is represented in concrete videos – for example a platform-specific "ridiculousness" or "bizarreness" – is already in itself pre-mediated by the reflexivity of the system "YouTube."[50] Moreover, due to the constant dislocation of intersubjective frontiers, no fixated oppositional aesthetic can be established. As could be seen in the last chapter, post-ironic audiovisual renderings, for example re-compositions in the vaporwave aesthetic, point to this de-differentiation by creating musical and visual melancholy affects that evoke our sense of floating and melancholy in the face of an all-encompassing spectral simulacrum, represented by trash and lo-fi aesthetics as well as re-appropriations of cultural detritus of our late capitalist consumer society. The question arises if, beyond such meta-referential thematisations of our simulacric age of informatisation, there exist vernacular musical practices on YouTube seeking to escape the logic of novelty and intensified affectivity. The following observations focus on the conceptual remix practice commonly referred to as "YouTube Poop" (abbreviated as YTP), which is driven by a vulgar ethos and an established set of remix techniques. YTP exemplifies how collaborative practices characterised by profane rituality,

48 See Reckwitz, *The Invention of Creativity*, chap. 8.4, Kindle.

49 See Ramón Reichert, "Eine Theorie des Populär-Spekulativen in sozialen Medien," in *Pop & Mystery: Spekulative Erkenntnisprozesse in Populärkulturen*, eds. Marcus S. Kleiner and Thomas Wilke (Bielefeld: transcript, 2015), 204 (my translation).

50 See ibid., 206.

radical de-subjectivation, and collective ahistoric (self-)forgetfulness potentially evade the demand for ever-novel stimuli. However, as the example goes to show, concepts based on "frozen" transgression make for highly commensurable practices of *in*difference which facilitate high-volume imitative activity and viral diffusion on the platform:

The origins of YTP videos go back beyond the founding of YouTube itself to contributions on online boards and entertainment sites.[51] In both musical and non-musical YTP videos, the source material of an original video is manipulated by way of editing techniques like stutter loops, word splicing (cuts and re-arrangements of spoken or sung words), and "ear rapes" (sudden increases in volume to the point of distortion), creating a distinctive glitch aesthetic. The re-appropriation of footage does not serve a commenting or reflective purpose but can rather be described as an explorative process with an associative or even completely alogical character. No trans-contextual or bitextual determination can be found as YTP videos are pointedly reduced to a vulgar and vandalising gesture. For instance, on @cs188's channel, one can find several YTP remixes of music videos and songs. In their remix of Bruno Mars' "Uptown Funk" – called "Bruno's Uptown Rectal Cleansing Sing-Along" – splicings, reversals, and replacements of original audio segments lead to new lyrics ("[…] 'cause Uptown Funk gon' 'nog knuF nwotpU esuaC', Saturday night and we on the pot, Don't believe me, just wipe ya ass! […]");[52] a remix of Gotye's "Somebody That I Used to Know" results in a trippy and scatty de-composition of the song by way of pitch modulations, sound manipulations, and quick cuts, accompanied by similarly erratic video editing (see Figure 42).[53] Different from parodic music videos or fan-made homages, YTP is not characterised by any apparent outward purposiveness but by a self-serving permanent absurdity and vulgarity. The constant overload of affective stimuli and the vulgar content do not aim at creating spectacular aesthetic novelties or singularities but are part of a profane ritualistic practice – a *dromenon* – that is at the same time "re-done" and

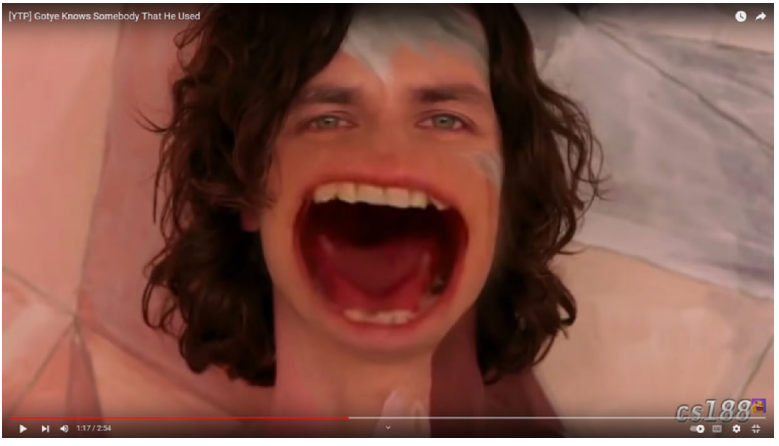
51 The reportedly first YTP video – a remix of a segment from the television series "The Super Mario Bros. Super Show!" – was uploaded to the website SheezyArt in 2004 and transferred to YouTube two years later. See @SuperYoshi, "I'D SAY HE'S HOT ON OUR TAIL," November 28, 2006, YouTube video, 3:20, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=suSSdHr8sog.

52 @cs188, "[YTP] Bruno's Uptown Rectal Cleansing Sing-along PSA," September 25, 2015, YouTube video, 2:13, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2fRCQoxf3w.

53 @cs188, "[YTP] Gotye Knows Somebody That He Used," March 26, 2012, YouTube video, 2:54, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJey74gmkLY.

"pre-done" with every new YTP video, meeting an already oversaturated and spectacular media environment with an aesthetic of permanent, or "frozen," transgression, and ensuring the self-forgetfulness of contributors and audiences.

Figure 42: Still from @cs188's YTP remix "[YTP] Gotye Knows Somebody That He Used" (2012).



In response to a regime of aesthetic novelty which demands for strategic aesthetic differences in relation to an institutionalised regulation of attention built on similarities and equivalences, YTP manifests a commensurable practice of *in*difference by perpetual reiterations of a formalised "aesthetic of the *dromenon*," encompassing symmetrical strategies of profanity. Pre-conceptual and non-mediated differences are still at play in single YTP contributions, yet, at the same time, disguised by "bare repetition," which, in the words of Deleuze, encompasses these compositional practices "like a skin which unravels, the external husk of a kernel of difference and more complicated internal repetitions."[54] These differences and internal repetitions appear to be subordinated to the idea of an "automatism," conditioning repetititive activity by fixation or regression.[55] Thus, despite its aesthetics of evasion, YTP's hypnotic tendency as a profane ritual led to its widespread adaptation

54 See Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 76.

55 See ibid., 103.

as a remix concept with a particularly high potential for imitative activity and viral diffusion. Due to its conceptual approach to perpetuating moments of transgression, thereby stimulating contagious processes of generic imitation and repetition, musical YTP remix can be considered an early proponent of the fluid musical "memescape" on YouTube, which goes beyond rigorous conceptual framings (see chapter 4.2).

Nomadic Movement Towards "Becoming-Imperceptible"

It seems that no vernacular compositional practice on YouTube can stay undomesticated by the medium-specific feedback between mechanisms of rationalisation, imitation, and speculative producerly behaviour. Yet, in Deleuzian terms, one could assert that every aesthetic practice exists as a potentiality of untamed difference. For this potentiality to unfold, accompanying processes of signalisation (e.g. remix formulas, templates, concepts, tags, genre labels, etc.) have to be recognised as "bare repetitions" which *arbitrarily* disguise incommensurable aesthetic difference. The aesthetic difference of a single contribution is necessarily preceded by these processes of signalisation; it "forms itself by disguising itself […] and, in forming itself, constitutes the bare repetition within which it becomes enveloped."[56] However, under the surface of bare repetition, which is subordinate to a logic of generalisation and representation, lies a second form of "disguised repetition," which "includes difference, and includes itself in the alterity of the Idea, in the heterogeneity of an 'a-presentation.'"[57] Both forms, the "bare" and the "disguised" repetition, are inextricably interwoven and influence each other. According to Deleuze, only the tactical affirmation of a fundamental simulacrum, as a field for productive decentralised play between arbitrary, "bare" significations and non-mediated, "disguised" differences establishes a system which can evade and subvert illusory representational effects that aim at commensurability and symmetry while abstracting difference. Examples of "a-presentational" approaches within a tactically affirmed eternal simulacrum of vernacular re-composition on YouTube can be found on the channel of Simon Fransman, which offers a wide array of musical content situated within – or responsive to – chains of meta-memetically potentiated re-composition. His channel could be described as an archive for bizarre and self-deprecating re-appropriations

56 Ibid., 24.

57 Ibid.

and re-compositions of jazz-related content on YouTube with a focus on circulating Internet phenomena as well as idiosyncratic and iconic performances or self-representations of jazz musicians and other music YouTubers. His re-compositions are embedded within or referring to established practices and figurations of creative and meta-memetic relay and aim at the humorous re-contextualisation and re-musicalisation of jazz-related media – and at the permeation of non-musical Internet phenomena with jazz memes and discourse. His contributions encompass short shreds ("Wynton Marsalis trying his best"), remix contrafacts ("Katy Perrys 'Giant Steps' but it's John Coltranes 'Roar' but it's smooth jazz"; see chapter 4.2), auto-tuned de-compositions of iconic musical moments ("Snarky Puppy – Lingus but it's gonna give you severe anxiety"), ridiculous YTP-like remixes of content by other jazz YouTubers ("Jazz Pianist Reacts to Sun Ra"), re-contextualisations of movies and series ("Whiplash as a sitcom"), deep fake videos ("Attenborough on Kenny G"), and grotesque 3D animated videos featuring jazz-related narratives and glitchy musical performances by vocaloid personas and fellow jazz musicians ("Jam of the Week" series; see chapter 3.2).[58]

In the video "The History of Giant Steps Any% Speedrun" from December 2020, Fransman narratively constructs a fictitious communal tradition of "Giant Steps speedruns" in analogy to the video genre of video game speedruns on platforms like YouTube and Twitch, wherein players try to complete a game as fast as possible.[59] Using the deep-faked voice of Sir David Attenborough, Fransman attests "jazz speedrunning" a "cult following" before he commences to guide the viewer through "historic" world records in the category of Giant

58 See @Simon Fransman, "Wynton Marsalis trying his best," November 26, 2020, YouTube video, 0:10, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A8eQFCdfzTY; @Simon Fransman, "Katy Perrys 'Giant Steps.'"; @Simon Fransman, "Snarky Puppy – Lingus but it's gonna give you severe anxiety," September 7, 2020, YouTube video, 4:59, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NmxgHRKkd5A; @Simon Fransman, "Jazz Pianist Reacts to Sun Ra," September 8, 2020, YouTube video, 0:17, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Q9vQ-FVbMU; @Simon Fransman, "Whiplash as a Sitcom," January 24, 2015, YouTube video, 3:54, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ueuaG-N0eY&t; @Simon Fransman, "Attenborough on Kenny G," January 18, 2021, YouTube video, 1:31, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YoNt6I_mvlY&t; @Simon Fransman, "On Green Dolphin Street – JOTW," December 13, 2017, YouTube video, 2:24, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohCnjVvDd3A.

59 @Simon Fransman, "The History of Giant Steps Any% Speedrun," December 18, 2020, YouTube video, 4:11, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OoF2uGZasAs.

Steps speedruns. Accompanied by fake game interfaces, screenshots of Reddit posts, and newspaper articles, famous record holders are featured with their alleged speedrun attempts, among them "Coltrane251_XD_Omegalulz" (impersonated by John Coltrane himself through old video footage; see Figure 43) and "KennyG_D_Chosn1" (impersonated by saxophonist and music YouTuber Dave Pollack). While the former, "through clever use of frame skips, […] managed to bypass a lot of the changes of the song and finished the chorus in a staggering 13.02 seconds," the latter's record of 9.55 seconds became a subject of controversy, as "KennyG_D_Chosn1" was accused of cheating. Although "the moderators of jazz speedrunning are still trying to determine whether or not to accept this as the new world record," Fransman speculates that the history of Giant Steps speedruns is still being written and that one day even the nine-second barrier might be broken. Fransman's video implicitly introduces an operational ruleset for ensuing communal play based on the ironic and meta-reflective replication of the hypnotic participatory flows that feed social media produsage. Beyond the conceptual remix of Giant Steps speedruns by way of recording own clocked performances, the entailing contributions encompass documentations of speedrun training or oddities like Minecraft videos of a player building wooden "giant steps" while the backing track is played.[60]

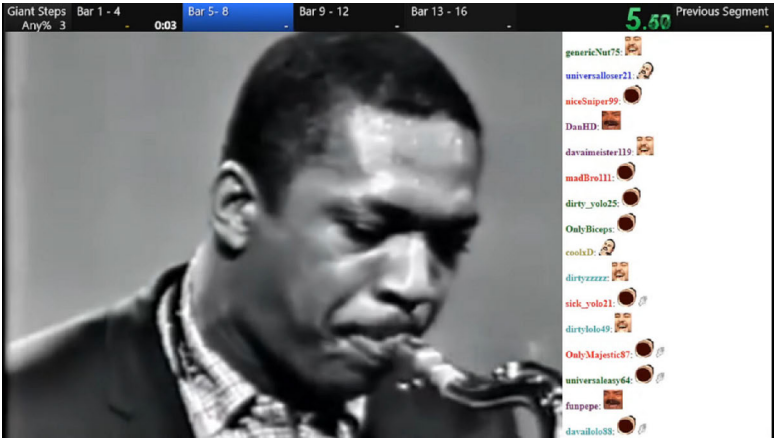
Moreover, the communal play expands to the comment sections of "official" record attempts. For example, the speedrun record by pianist Alan Ding, who managed to complete the chorus of Giant Steps in 2.286 seconds and meticulously explains his fingerings in the video description,[61] caused a lively discussion on the admissibility of his metronome: While Toby Brightman reminds the community that Simon Fransman declared using a metronome a TAS (tool-assisted speedrun), Kennard Cristoval counters: "You guys just seems [sic] to be skeptical about everything. This guys [sic] played the song correctly without any cheating and I think the metronome on the screen is actually useful to prove it is not sped up video [sic]." In an attempt at finding a constructive solution, @Nnotm proposes the introduction of a second

60 See @Dan's Plans, "Giant steps First Chorus Speedrun Training (Road to world Record) 110% – Day 5," November 8, 2021, YouTube video, 0:14, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mN33MVOVyN4; @Johniplier504, "giant steps speed run 3 in Minecraft *500 iq speed run*," January 28, 2021, YouTube video, 0:52, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHHobVZnAXk.

61 See @Alan Ding, "Giant Steps Any %Speedrun FWR: 2.286 (whole note = 420)," December 27, 2020, YouTube video, 0:04, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y652piw4WWQ.

speedrun category that allows for the use of a metronome.[62] By contributing to the made-up tradition of jazz speedrunning and additionally re-enacting the fierce discussions in video game speedrun communities, including obligatory insinuations of cheating, Fransman's community engages in a meta-referential playful process that is focussed on thematising the online mediation of its remixed media objects and pointing to the overall social media environment of competitive singularities and commensurable spectacle.

Figure 43: "Coltrane251_XD_Omegalulz," five seconds into his speedrun attempt. Still from Fransman's video "The History of Giant Steps Any% Speedrun" (2020).



The stimulation of and participation in a simulative game that creates a quasi-non-anthropomorphic sphere by seemingly letting objectified patterns of consumption and production interact and develop independently from any apparent subjective intention lets Fransman and his community tactically hyper-affirm their creations as effects of pre-circulating communicative artefacts and genres. In doing so, any claim to a subjective, unified sovereignty over the aesthetic process, in which actions and thoughts, ideas and interests, motivations and passions, functions and competences would consistently join

62 See @Toby Brightman, 2021, comment on @Alan Ding, "Giant Steps Any %Speedrun;" @Kennard Cristoval, 2021, comment on @Alan Ding, "Giant Steps Any %Speedrun;" @Nnotm, 2021, comment on @Alan Ding, "Giant Steps Any %Speedrun."

together, is consciously surrendered. However, contrary to the self-forgetfulness attained by YTP-related *dromena*, Fransman's aesthetics of de-subjectivation within environments of playful meta-memetic relay do not induce indifference to an underlying, "disguised" logic of material and conceptual difference. By material and discursive relations to jazz-related memes, topics, and music theory, his content is deliberately bound to a set of reference points and thus, on the macro level, marks a communal space of familiarity within alienating territory. This provides orientation and enables the creator's and the community's inclinations, perceptions, and interpretations to temporarily pierce through the algorithmically driven immanence of stimuli and commensurable formations, encouraging new re-configurations and adaptations of remix concepts to continually emerge within and without the channel's boundaries.

Georgina Born notes that the generally fluid and flow-like creative processes ascribable to lateral assemblages of relayed creativity "can lead not only to new openings in musical and discursive possibilities – to invention – but also to closure, reification, discursive and musical stasis, processes in which supervening forms of power are often at work."[63] In the rationalising medium of YouTube, these forms of power are established by algorithmic agency: processes of signalisation, which are necessary to enable any connectability at all, are captured and served back to the user as "bare repetitions." In a transparent system of commensurability and equivalence, they form the disguises that necessarily pre-exist aesthetic singularities and are inscribed into reflexive feedback loops. Simon Fransman navigates this system by letting signalisation processes seemingly interact with each other, generating a constant permeation and folding of meta-memetic potentialities into new formats and contexts, thereby accelerating and even *exceeding* the algorithmically driven processes of formalisation and anticipation, thus reducing them to absurdity. The constant folds and re-configurations are anchored by the referential framing of the channel and built on Fransman's cultural capital gained from his identification with jazz subculture that precedes YouTube-specific aesthetic formations – for instance, his knowledge of repertoire and interpretation or his skills in arranging and improvising. Hence, the compositional approach to, reception of, and imitative encounters with his content resist the total algorithmic instrumentalisation and delegation of perceptions and inclinations. Complementally, at a micro level, Fransman's compositional forms and formats are characterised

63 Born, "On Musical Mediation," 34.

by supposedly random and autonomous machinic interferences and dysfunctions which can be seen as non-anthropocentric and non-standardised ways of expression in a media infrastructure of standardisation. Fransman's simulated autonomy of the machine that defies commensurability goes hand in hand with the overall concept of his channel: the acceleration of permeating formats and re-configurations, driven by (sub-)cultural pre-algorithmic inclinations and skill sets, inserts both a motion and disruption within processes of continual re-incorporation of difference. His content does not spread the idea of meaningful, autonomous participation and self-inscription; rather, by acknowledging the flows of produsage on the platform, it traverses its realm of the symbolised with the aim of gaining temporary non-measurable agency – a modular, tactically affirmative style of niche-mediated re-composition characterised by its nomadic movement towards "becoming-imperceptible."[64]

Along the lines of Vilém Flusser's remarks about the envisioning of technical images, which can only take place "from the inside of the apparatus,"[65] vernacular YouTube re-composition can be conceived of as a programmed

64 In "A Thousand Plateaus," Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari elaborate extensively on their idea of "becoming-imperceptible." According to the authors, the three virtues of "becoming-imperceptible" – namely "the (anorganic) imperceptible, the (asignifying) indiscernible, and the (asubjective) impersonal" – are linked to an ever-shifting and anti-productive "becoming everybody/everything," which offers an escape from a "vertical" logic of generalisation and representation: "By process of elimination, one is no longer anything more than an abstract line, or a piece in a puzzle that is itself abstract. It is by conjugating, by continuing with other lines, other pieces, that one makes a world that can overlay the first one, like a transparency. Animal elegance, the camouflage fish, the clandestine: this fish is crisscrossed by abstract lines that resemble nothing, that do not even follow its organic divisions; but thus disorganized, disarticulated, it worlds with the lines of a rock, sand, and plants, becoming imperceptible. […] Such is the link between imperceptibility, indiscernibility, and impersonality–the three virtues. To reduce oneself to an abstract line, a trait, in order to find one's zone of indiscernibility with other traits, and in this way enter the haecceity and impersonality of the creator. One is then like grass: one has made the world, everybody/everything, into a becoming, […] because one has suppressed in oneself everything that prevents us from slipping between things and growing in the midst of things." See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 279–280.

65 See Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesoty Press, 2011), 36.

procedure in that there is no composing "past the machine" and its algorithmically driven domesticating effects. However, the emergence of materialities of aesthetic perception and discursivity is always bound to acts of re-composition, musicalisation, visualisation, re-configuration, and tagging, which fundamentally are acts of interpreting digital data. Thus, while the institutionalised order of generality and commensurability cannot be ultimately left, a nomadic compositional practice on the platform builds on these interpretive tools to create folds that offer temporary moments of resistance, or – to paraphrase Michel de Certeau – to maintain difference in a pre-occupied space.[66] This means to become uncontainable, or "imperceptible," to normalised modes of reproduction and objectivised consumption. According to Robert Marzec, "becoming-imperceptible names that moment in nomadism when movement effaces previous imperatives, when discursivity stumbles upon what its perception cannot bring to the realm of existence, to the register of socio-symbolic ordering."[67] As Fransman's channel exemplifies, even "anti-production" has to deliberately adapt to the rhythm of its digital environment, including its forces of continual standardisation, circulation, and expansion. Constant motion and disruption within a tactically affirmed eternal simulacrum constitute the lines of flight that open up a field for temporary evasion and subversion of effects of representation. In the communicative and circulatory sphere of vernacular (re-)composition, these differential processes evolve around referential framings that constitute spaces of familiarity and ensure a contribution's and remix concept's connectability and visibility. The interconnected contributions are sonically, discursively, visually, technologically, and socially mediated and constantly re-shaping and re-calibrating along the lines of continual proliferation and re-incorporation of difference, in particular awareness of the institutionalised regulation of attention, which inscribes similarities and equivalences into reflexive feedback loops and informs the perception, aesthetic habits, and decisions of produsers. "Becoming-imperceptible" in the context of vernacular re-composition on YouTube means to actively find and provide orientation by contributing to and within these domains of permanent circulation and rationalisation; it means to compose with

66 See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 32.

67 Robert P. Marzec, "The War Machine and Capitalism," Rhizomes: *Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, no. 3 (Fall 2001), http://rhizomes.net/issue3/marzec/UntitledFrameset-14.html.

aesthetic patterns of objectified creation and consumption – however, it does not mean to become *invisible* as a mere contributor to the overall stream of audiologovisual figurations.To the contrary, it is oriented towards temporary moments of acceleration *and* effective disruption through "anti-productive" movement.

7 Conclusion

With the emergence of our contemporary digital ecosystem of social media, processes of collaboration and communal co-creation have become considerably simplified. Particularly in societies where social media, technological devices, and editing software are freely or affordably accessible, the networking effect of central platforms like YouTube facilitates individual participation in online (sub-)cultures of remix and referential media composition – or suggests it in the first place. The territorialisation and channelisation of user interaction through commercially oriented platforms entails high-volume participation, resulting in media environments characterised by their oversaturation with digital media objects which, due to their modular and variable condition, offer themselves for further user-led re-appropriation and re-combination. In this networked sphere of produsage, old and new media converge, letting media forms and formats shift in terms of their function, production logic, and cultural significance.

1) Over the course of ongoing read/write activity, pre-digital forms of media once characterised by a "read-only" condition are remediated in community-oriented online practices of everyday creativity. In terms of musical re-composition on YouTube, music video-like produsage is paradigmatic in this context, as it involves new Internet-mediated practices of remixing, mashup, and parody that blur the boundaries of music video due to the contributors' (self-)narrative re-appropriations of popular media texts and their discursive orientation towards networked spaces of affinity. Contributions range from DIY parodies of music videos over re-dubs of pre-existing video content to fannish videos that co-develop the narrative structure of TV shows, movies, or media universes by selecting and re-combining visual and musical elements. 2) Beyond media from pre-digital contexts, the mutual remediations of vernacular creativity and media forms extend to aesthetic objects from the realm of computation. Signs, signals, and surfaces effected by computational

interfaces represent banalities of networked interaction which, in processes of creative relay, afford a certain familiarity which allows for their de-familiarisation and re-domestication within practices of musical produsage on the platform. Playful audiovisual MIDI aesthetics, split-screens in musical performances of the self, the rendering perceptible of automated software filters and plug-ins, and glitch aesthetics allow for implicitly or explicitly meta-referential engagement with the media environments and cultural contexts the used surface and interface effects are associated with. For instance, musical re-appropriations and re-functionalisations of computational and Internet-born aesthetic objects may raise awareness of computational subsurfaces which underlie smooth user-friendly interfaces or, on a superordinate level, of the computationally accelerated simulacric (pop-)cultural space produsage is situated in. 3) The technological affordances of (mobile) recording devices regarding captures of the self and the everyday, coupled with the affordances of social media platforms as archives for countless data captures, have turned selfie videos of celebrities, everyday (self-)captures, and pre-recorded footage from other media environments into artefacts of ordinary media produsage, as these videos potentially become material for user-generated remixes and mashups that aim to musicalise the source material. Co-creative practices of musical aestheticisation that have emerged around captures of the self, celebrities, animals, or everyday observations, are often driven by deliberate humorous, parodic, or political intent. While many contributions adapt to the sonic object's inherent time and eventfulness primarily out of musical interest, they are situated within a sphere characterised by ongoing musical uptake and remix of human index effects, which entails a normalisation of pleasurable aestheticisations of data-captured human (self-)display – with problematic ramifications: the establishment of musicalisations of found footage as a vehicle for networked communication gave rise to calculated and intrusive practices of musical "indexploitation," including those linked to public ridicule and peer-to-peer surveillance.[1]

In a digital condition of convergence, the aforementioned media objects of producerly fascination continually intertwine in practices of re-composition due to the fundamental modularity and variability of digital files that affords and suggests the playful and combinatory exploration of the material

1 For instance, as noted in chapter 3.2, musicalisations of black persons' appearances and vernacular speech for entertainment purposes are a popular phenomenon on YouTube.

and immaterial aspects of aesthetic media objects. All of these remediated, remixed, and re-composed objects implicitly refer to everyday practices, knowledges, and aesthetic stimuli of consumption, our browsing experience, or (pop-)cultural phenomena, thus providing immediate connectability on the grounds of which co-creative musical practices emerge and develop. Beyond the commonality and recognisability of the compositional material, networked vernacular enunciations via musical means rely on the performative assertion of difference in the face of institutionalised formats of cultural production, which they contrast by way of parody, vulgar content, no-budget aesthetics, performances of failure, reliance on aesthetic epiphenomena and banalities, etc. Notwithstanding these qualitative similarities, the re-composed communicative artefacts, cues, objects, and topics, which point to and reflect the "home-born" qualities that constitute and inform our experience of networked communicative environments, are vastly different. They emerge and develop as a result of ongoing communal niche-mediations in reliance on an overall "platform vernacular" provided through the interplay of a platform's communicative tools and functionalities with established cultural practices. Over the course of creative relay, new community-oriented forms and concepts emerge which adapt generalisable features of musical produsage and, on the grounds of a shared communicative and audiovisual repertoire, introduce specific musical conventions and ideational frames of reference oriented towards the generation or perpetuation of networked spaces of affinity. On the basis of shared fannish or musical knowledge, taste, humour, or political and ideological incentives, various communally self-reflexive aesthetic forms emerge and branch out under the umbrella of Internet-mediated cultural practices. Just as much as music serves as a remediating agent for this ongoing vernacular discourse and co-creativity, musical forms become remediated themselves through the entanglement of the "platform vernacular" and community-specific "issue vernaculars."

Produsers who aspire to become visible on YouTube through music-related content creation need to strategically rely on the platform vernacular, as it provides the communicative tools and conventions for self-representation, self-narration, and the construction of an affective relationship to an (imagined) audience. Particularly established modes of bodily self-display and self-thematisation, which serve the purpose of addressing the audience and representing oneself as an authentic and approachable self, promise social recognition and shape platform-specific genres of (aspirational) communication. However, beyond their mastery of the overall "grammar" of communication on the plat-

form, content creators need to relate to concrete musical and discursive vernacular enunciations in order to successfully embody a communally shared fantasy of participation and provide orientation within the endless streams of musical produsage. Moreover, in awareness of the surrounding online attention markets, they introduce novel musical concepts which showcase their musical education, knowledge, skills, preferences, etc. To sum up, aspirational music YouTubers create platform-adaptive forms of music-related communication and entertainment through their use of communication genres, vernacular repertoires of collaborative remix, and personalised musical concepts, which are interdependent and mutually influencing.

Aspirational channel concepts are based on both the adaptation and "transcription" of other music-related content as well as on the successful "re-instrumentation" of *non-musical* channel concepts, coupled with strategies of self-branding and self-representation. The self-optimising practice of imitating, developing, and re-combining established communicative and compositional forms and formats goes beyond the micro level of single video files, as it also encompasses the overall curation of content within a channel, which entails the ongoing re-evaluation, updating, and re-balacing of channel-specific foci and framings. Thus, on a superordinate level, communally and algorithmically mediated formats serve as modules for the regenerative remix and re-composition of impactful YouTube channels. In concise channel concepts based on vernacular enunciation, these formats comprise elements of audience-responsivity, collaboration, and self-reference that signalise communal belonging and ordinariness. For instance, musical compositions and performances of the self can become embedded within a broader communicative strategy of communal self-narration. Particularly on channels of YouTubers who performatively take on the role as a community's "tribal chief," musical contributions are functionalised as signifiers for communal belonging. As the example of @PewDiePie shows, musical and lyrical invocations of a "YouTube we," often in contrast to cultural production in mainstream media, serve as mutually circulated emotional products that potentially encourage further community-oriented produsage, enabling the content creator's successful self-positioning as an influential proponent of a communally shared fantasy of heterarchical participation. Beyond aspects of communal self-narration, vernacularity in musical performances by aspirational YouTubers is asserted through audiovisual displays of randomness, profanity, or failure to conteract notions of detached professionalism and self-affection. YouTubers who want to represent themselves as creative and professional musicians through serious stagings of skill

while evoking a "home-born" YouTube aesthetic need to navigate the charged relation between performances of virtuosity and ordinariness by way of meta-referential and self-ironic approaches, making use of authenticating stimuli that subvert traditional concepts of authorship. Similarly, beyond primarily musical contributions, rhetorical strategies of addressing one's (imagined) audience or reacting to their questions and musical performances in Q&A videos or reaction formats, are part of the affective labour of YouTubers aiming for the ascription of (micro-)celebrity through authenticating formats based on the generation of proximity. Furthermore, musical collaborations with fellow YouTubers hold the promise of gaining visibility and expanding one's audience. Beyond occasional collaborative exchanges – one internal collaboration on one's own channel, one external collaboration on the partner's channel – some content creators run so-called "central channels," based on regular invitations of other YouTubers. All of the aforementioned authorial strategies of symbolically positioning oneself within networks of open-ended, heterarchical, and community-mediated musical produsage entail the hybridisation of personalised musical content with communal repertoires of platform-based musicking. In this context, musical composition and reference is more than an accompaniment to aspirational adaptations of platform-specific genres of vernacular communication: in varying degrees of visibility and influence, authorial subjects who relate to established *musical* vernacular enunciations performatively engage in the ongoing, communally navigated re-contextualisation and re-domestication of circulating forms of musical (self-)expression on the platform, thereby developing and perpetuating "commonplace" competencies and conventions of musical (re-)composition on and with YouTube.

It is important to note that aspirational subjects have not introduced affective labour into the domain of musical produsage. Rather, all forms of vernacular musical activity – including contributions driven by a "gift logic" as well as (economically) aspirational forms of content creation – are aimed at the generation of communal belonging on the basis of shared repertoires of collaborative and referential re-composition and thus constitute the affective cultural production the platform serves back to its users as content. As outlined in the previous chapters, processes of re-composition and musical interaction can fundamentally be conceived of as the result of imitative encounters catalysed by affective magnetisations that are passed on to other produsers. Over the course of repetitive imitative activity, concepts of collaborative re-composition emerge, develop, and branch out, continually actualising the recipient's desire and suggesting new inventions. Although produsage is enabled through

the material spread of media artefacts from surface to surface, collaborative media remix does not necessarily rely on actual remix techniques – that is, on the passing on of concrete "copying-fidelitous" material – but entails practices of "conceptual remix" which follow frames of reference that are re-articulated *ideationally*. Over the course of open-ended repetition, new referential frames are introduced, entailing oppositional encounters that form into new remixable concepts. Overall, platform-mediated repertoires of vernacular musical re-composition are influenced by the affective labour of diverse agents – from anonymous contributors to highly visible "YouTube stars" – directed at generating connectedness through shared and relayed desire events.

In order to foster connectability via musical means, compositional and music-related communicative forms and formats need to circulate in high volume. After all, a "viral" condition of musical content, characterised by the massive circulation of digital units through online communities, affords the inscription of iterable audiologovisual figurations into general compositional repertoires on the platform and beyond. However, although this study preserves concepts of cultural contagion in the context of musical creative relay, its overall discussion of viral formations rejects widely uncontested notions of "active" media viruses that infect "passive" users. Instead, beyond any biological determinism, my analyses of remixable concepts and "meme music" highlight the passing on of affective surplus effects through imitative encounters. It is not the concrete materiality of media objects but rather "phantom events" that mobilise circulation in that they affectively stimulate the individual, suggest imitation, and thus underlie the social invention of – and belief in – objects of desire. In other words, the moment of "contamination" is taking place on a sub-representational level. Vernacular creative relay is characterised by imitative activity that cannot rely on concrete media objects with collectively recognisable "affective units" but takes place on the essentially apocryphal play field of producerly media text, continually actualising the recipient's desire via affective stimuli that transpire into dynamic, communally shared habits and conventions of re-composing digital artefacts and objects. In processes of viral musicking, aspects of affective labour and play converge: through the oscillating motion brought about by ongoing imitative encounters, infinitely self-renewing structures of play emerge and develop, introducing implicit rules and conventions on the grounds of imitative media text – or: mimotext – which is not performed directly but rather based on generalisations of specific stylistic and thematic features. Within networks of mimetisms that are constituted by these generalisations, remix concepts

with a high imitation-suggestibility arise, promising the creation of spaces of affinity and belonging through participatory affective play.[2]

Following the pragmatic logic of these remix concepts, musical practices emerge and develop that relate to the other multimodal constituents of a digital unit, bringing about dynamic contextual shifts, as exemplified by musical re-dubs or DIY compositions that refer to or de-familiarise audiovisual conventions, object-adaptive musicalisations of *objets trouvés*, remix contrafacts that add a new melody and arrangement to pre-existing chord progessions, the use of musical themes in multimodal mashups as a recurring connotative element with regard to the visual layer, or narrative media compositions relying on music's semantic qualities within established musical formats of fannish (meta-)discourse. These forms of combinatorial and re-contextualising affective play, which are characterised by the mutual interdependency and anchorage of a digital unit's audio-logo-visual layers, are socially mediated, aiming at the co-creation and passing on of desire events on the basis of communally established generic modifications. Guided by broader "issue vernaculars" such as political stances, shared humour, and musical taste, they spread contagious moods and feelings of surprise, nostalgia, excitement, *schadenfreude*, and belonging. The resulting vernacular enunciations are based on communal exclusivity and signalisations of commonality, contrasting conventions of institutionalised cultural production – often meta-referentially pointing to fantasies of stardom, gender topics, political discourse, corporatist ideology, etc. – and demonstratively relying on commonplace knowledge and competencies relating to (pop-)cultural consumption and aesthetic Internet phenomena with a high imitation-suggestibility. The result is a wide array of community-oriented aesthetic formations, conveyed by way of playful fannish self-narration, politically charged subversion, hyper-affirmative trash, and vulgarisation. The

2 In this context, my conceptualisation of "meme music" in chapter 4.2 demarcates a sphere of viral play with particularly concise short forms, constituted by materially repeatable templates and operational and constitutive features that constitute recognisable and iterable remix formulas. "Meme music" is highly self-referential in that it refers to the viral metaphor of the meme itself, which it hyper-affirms by generating quasi-fetishistic interrelations between circulating remix concepts and objects that, at times, seem to take a life on their own. Within meta-memetic remix concepts, as I call them, vernacular expression becomes remediated by – and often condensed to – a playful engagement with generalisable ritualistic rulesets, aimed at perpetuating a game-like process that represents viral musicking itself.

prevalence of normative whiteness in communicative environments of vernacular musicking on YouTube becomes particularly apparent in the case of naïve appropriations of cultural practices by underrepresented groups or pleasurable musical aestheticsations of human speech and appearances with ridiculing intent. Moreover, my examples of ideological co-optations of musical remix concepts as well as possible communicative exploitations of our nervous attention economy by way of calculated transgressions – carried by a general anti-elitist attitude and edginess characteristic of certain white Internet vernaculars – go to show that an apparent compatibility with right-wing populist agitation can, depending on the community's framework and self-perception, facilitate effective communal self-narrations of vernacularity.

The socio-technical infrastructures of social media appear to re-naturalise hierarchical relations between "media influencers" and "ordinary produsers" in that they suggest dynamics of role-setting and role-following by granting visibility to self-entrepreneurial content creators who gainfully direct affective flows of vernacular musical interaction on and off their channel through the provision of frameworks and rules for ongoing communal interaction and creative relay. Within this sphere, imitative encounters are accompanied by the community's belief in the symbolic identity of the aspirational "role-setter," to whom "role-followers" delegate some of their activity and even enjoyment. The "role-setter," on the other hand, experiences themself as an object in the eyes of the (imaginary) Other, to whom they perform as signifiers of the symbolic institution "YouTube." Mediated by this shared belief in the symbolic order, role distributions emerge and stabilise over the course of communal produsage. As my analyses highlight, ongoing produsage within YouTube communities can be encouraged by (micro-)celebrities through features of – and reactions to – other creative contributions, such as comments, remixes, bodily performances, or original compositions. For particularly popular YouTubers, this selective harvesting of fannish contributions, which helps solidify their image as ambassadors of community-oriented collaboration in the spirit of a "YouTube we," is made possible due to the sheer mass of fannish contributors. However, a more reliable option for aspirational labourers to catalyse and perpetuate produsage are participatory concepts that let emerge dynamic, self-renewing structures of play with a hypnotic pull, as exemplified by community-oriented formats based on niche-mediated and formulaic referential play, such as the ongoing series of comment-responsive music videos by Davide Biale or @JasonParadise's Clone Hero-themed Let's Play videos of musical "meme arrange-

ments" by other produsers. These formats keep running, encouraging ongoing creative relay in ritualistic processes of communal play.

Despite the apparent hierarchies between "role-setters" and "role-followers" in collaborative formats initiated by the affective labour of musical (micro-)celebrities, even the most authoritatively steered practices bring about the uncontainable passing on of undeterminable desire events on the grounds of shared communal narratives, stances, humour, or musical affinity. Thus, any notion of a remote-controlled crowd, hypnotised by one charismatic leader, needs to be dismissed. For one, musical (micro-)celebrities themselves need to relate and adapt to social environments constituted and shaped by multidirectional and simultaneous contagions in order to effectively initiate – and participate in – community-oriented musical interaction. Secondly, although communal contributions by "role-followers" might be incentivised by intoxicating celebrity narratives, they always foster processes of communal self-constitution and self-narration. Thus, there does not exist a one-sided parasocial dynamic between "role-setters" and "role-followers"; rather, as contributions within these collaborative processes are shared with the whole community, thereby suggesting new contributions guided by incentives to further develop communally recognised media text, aspirationally initiated and channelled produsage can be characterised as fundamentally multisocial. While potential individual incentives aimed at attracting a (micro-)celebrity's attention – or fantasies about establishing a relationship with them – might be at play, the fundamental hypnotic power lies in the network relation itself, which stabilises the belief in ongoing contagions and establishes a sense of belonging, of being part of a social network.

In the face of today's networked condition which is characterised by accelerated and self-perpetuating re-combinations of circulating referential patterns without fixable causal or temporal links, issues of decoding emerge. In this context, my study highlights and examinates post-irony as a vernacular competence of situational conduct and self-expression. "Post-authentic" digital aesthetics in early Internet-mediated SoundCloud rap, vaporwave's bizarre and retro-futuristic pattern aesthetics, and hyper-affirmatively accelerated post-genre fusions exemplify how, in (micro-)genres of networked musical re-composition, ironic patterns are integrated within multimodal media texts with the aim of co-creating vehicles for self-expression, proximity, and affectivity. Contrary to (postmodern) deployments of irony that blur intersubjective frontiers, leaving the subject position of the encoder and the decoder completely open, post-ironic compositions meta-referentially engage with

the all-engulfing symbolic multiplicity of postmodern culture with the aim of attaining readable subjective expressions of loss, disorientation, nostalgia, melancholia, or spiritual fulfilment. Far from any distancing use of irony, post-ironic musical forms thus constitute vehicles for a new-found immediacy. By way of interface aesthetics, hazy or grainy soundscapes, heavy vocal post-production, and the eclectic use of endless musical, visual, and lyrical references, materially repeatable artefacts for subjectively channelled meta-referential and media-reflective engagement with our oversaturated information space have become inscribed into the general repertoire of vernacular re-composition, entailing new literacies of encoding and decoding and integrating post-ironic aesthetics into subcultural everyday communication and creativity.

The proliferation and algorithmic rationalisation of remix concepts has effectuated a certain normalisation of material and performative repertoires, compositional conventions, and media competencies, which affords the establishment of decodable musical and discursive enunciations, as seen above, yet turns any vernacular compositional practice into an expected recurring feauter of objectified consumption. Due to effects of representation brought about by the feedback between dynamic systems of commensurability and user-led processes of signalisation through tags, titles, thumbnails, and video descriptions, even "strange" and enigmatic contributions based on bizarre juxtapositions, aesthetics of ridiculousness, surreal sequences, and moments of disruption and de-familiarisation are subjected to an attentive regime whereunder aesthetic novelty and surprise is always-already anticipated. Although no compositional practice on YouTube can ultimately evade or subvert the overall logic of representation and commensurability, it was my aim to make traceable potential differential lines of temporary aesthetic evasion. Following the Deleuzian concept of "becoming-invisible," tactical affirmations of the institutionalised order of generality and commensurability offer moments of resistance through deliberate acceleration and disruption of aesthetic patterns of objectified creation and consumption. Such a nomadic compositional practice finds orientation in the domains of permanent rationalisation; it represents a special form of speculative composition within the overall stream of audiologovisual figurations, as it builds on the interpretive tools of generic signalisation in order to temporarily efface the overall regime of commensurability, thereby maintaining difference in a pre-occupied space.

Overall, vernacular re-composition on YouTube is situated within a relational network that is constituted by heterogeneous social, technological, affective, discursive, and formal elements that are entangled in processes

of communication and creative relay. Contributions are conditioned by this relational network, shaping the productive conditions of possibility regarding effective enunciations of a musical vernacular through the co-development of materially or ideationally repeatable themes, objects, figuration, and concepts of musical produsage. Individuals that engage in the sphere of collaborative remix and musicking need to interconnect technologies of the self with technologies of subjection, as the space for free experimentation and self-inscription necessarily results from a tactical subjection to the fundamental imperative of circulation on the platform. This dialectical relation is fundamental to vernacular musicking, as only the emergence of institutional presences in the web, which interlinked users on a global level and fostered platform-situated social and co-creative exchange, let emerge (im)material repertoires of platform-specific communication and re-composition, which afford the meaningful enunciation of a vernacular ethos in contrast to institutionalised forms of cultural production and the distributed control of network locations that produsage is fundamentally subjected to. Vernacular enunciation can be conceived of as a performative navigation of fields of tension between difference and indifference, individuation and de-individuation, selectivity and generality, invention and stasis, aesthetic singularity and hive mind creativity, resulting from the doubly constituted interpellation of produsers – or affective labourers – as both subjected as well as free and responsible subjects. The affective labour of vernacular musicking is carried out in awareness of these dialectical relations, to which it often relates in a meta-referential and playful manner. Particularly in the domain of aspirational music communication, composition, and performance, modes of self-representation are characterised by tactical navigations of potentially conflicting (self-)attributions through the balancing of juxtaposing moments of sincerity and absurdity, skilfulness and failure as well as self-affection and self-depreciation. However, aspirational strategies are not contradictory to vernacular enunciation; rather, in a sphere of networked individualism, visibility labour and self-entrepreneurial behavior are downright catalysed by social media's communication options and socio-technically mediated genres of communication that form an overall "platform vernacular" which perpetuates the seamless integration of logics of cultural production into practices of everyday (self-)aestheticisation and communication. Moreover, the (blurred) lines between aspirational and free affective labour do not reinforce attributions of vernacularity along the lines of binary oppositions between attributions of amateurism and professionalism. Whether the roles in prac-

tices of collaborative remix and music-related communication are distributed implicitly or explicitly, vernacular musical aesthetics are distinguished by their quality of evoking a sense of communal belonging and affinity. They reinforce communal beliefs in ongoing multisocial contagions by suggesting imitative encounters which create temporary spheres of emotional investment, allowing participants to experience the hypnotic power of the networked relation through affects that are passed on through social assemblages in an open and de-centralised manner.

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List of Figures

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