

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 mediated 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.

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=MVq7Ho5FoVo>.

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

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.” @BurkeTruez, 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-w eb1.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 anymore¹⁴ – 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 imprints 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 nebulosity 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 blatin' 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-awareness seems 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/uiceheid/d/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

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 sub-genre 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 Marcloud, 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, Marcloud 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, Marcloud 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:

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%694%CE%B1d-%C3%AD-w%C3%ADId%C3%ADscuss-tr%CE%B1ck-%D0%B2%D1%687-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 Cubison, review of “Fire-Toolz – Rainbow ∞ Bridge (official music video)” by Fire-Toolz, *Impose Magazine*, April 1, 2020, <https://imposemagazine.com/bytes/new-music/fire-toolz>

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

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 Marcloud, “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.