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]

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

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.

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).