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.

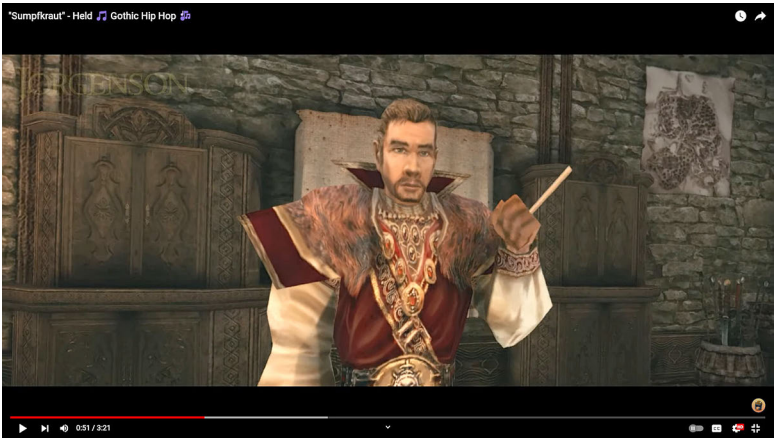
An example for the playful and combinatorial navigation and traversal of the (im)material dimensions of aesthetic media objects in conceptual remix practices can be found in the German video game community on YouTube: Since 2019, hip-hop music videos related to the fantasy-themed single-player video 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

"'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.

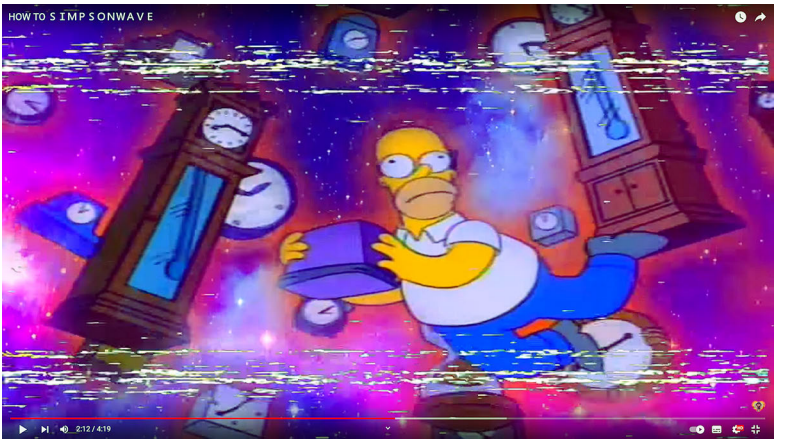
35 @Hothi, "B A R T O N T H E R O A D," December 3, 2015, YouTube video, 3:30, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_rC-495Z_A.

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 upon 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]

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]

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.