Sonic Scope: New Approaches to Audiovisual Culture

Amateur Content Creation as Compositional Practice: Viral Videos and Internet Memes in Online Participatory Culture

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ABSTRACT

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For the last two decades, the internet's participatory culture has facilitated a proliferation in non-professional content creation. This has resulted in the emergence of new audiovisual forms. Two notable examples are viral videos, prominent in the early Web 2.0 era, and memes, which have gained popularity more recently. This article will examine these two digital forms, comparing and contrasting the ways in which they remediate the practices (and materials) of traditional media. It shall demonstrate that viral videos and memes often employ musical composition techniques, namely the reiterative practice of popular music and procedural organisation. I will also explore the multivalent meanings these forms produce through their repurposing of traditional media. I posit viral videos, made in the early years of video sharing platforms such as YouTube, emulated the practices of professional media, and thus restated their cultural narratives. By contrast, recent memes formally deconstruct media texts, to an absurd extent, and in doing so challenge the stances they present

Introduction

Online platforms, most notably YouTube, have been a major site of the 21st-century's digital participatory culture. This is a culture in which the roles of media producer and consumer are no longer distinct categories as they interact in multivalent ways.¹ These platforms allow audiences to actively engage with the media they consume, through liking, sharing and commenting. Some consumers take this active role further by imitating and/or remediating texts through the creation of viral videos and internet memes. These are two highly significant audiovisual forms in online participatory culture that are often understood as entirely separate. However, Limor Shifman more accurately situates these forms as making up “two ends of a dynamic spectrum.”² Shifman defines a viral video as “a single cultural unit,” a single text, “that propagates in many copies.”³ By contrast a meme is “always a collection of texts” that share “common characteristics of content, form and/or stance ... that were created with awareness of each other; and ... were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the internet by many users” (emphasis in original).⁴

For Shifman this spectrum is exemplified in Chris Crocker's video "Leave Britney Alone."⁵ The original video, in which the blogger and actor emphatically defends pop star Britney Spears, is a viral video, a single text propagated via sharing. However the multitude of subsequent parodies, such as one created by comedian Seth Green, constitute memes. They are a collection of texts that were made with the awareness of both the original text and each other; they shared common formal characteristics, parody makers often wore heavy eyeliner and used bedsheets as a background to mimic the original video, and they were uploaded to YouTube and shared via similar platforms.

"Leave Britney Alone" is understood as one of YouTube's first viral videos, as it was released two years after the platform was founded. Many viral videos from this early period can be understood as audiovisual contributions to online participatory culture. However, the form has increasingly become the purview of traditional media. More recent instances are often advertisements, such as Evian's "Roller Babies," or videos made by amateurs that are subsequently embraced by professional media.⁶ An example of the latter is "Chewbacca Mom," a video that achieved viral status, in which a woman reacts humorously to wearing a mask of the *Star Wars* character.⁷ The video's popularity was, further emboldened by the maker's appearance on *The Late Late Show with James Corden*.⁸ In more recent years, memes have overtaken viral videos as the preeminent audiovisual form in digital participatory culture, in part because memes tend to exist further outside the remit of traditional media than viral videos.

This article shall examine the continuities and distinctions between early viral videos and more recent memes, through Shifman's parameters of *form* and *stance*, with a particular focus on musical intervention. The aim is to situate these forms within online participatory culture, so my analysis shall focus on texts by non-professional content creators (hereafter the term for the authors of viral videos and memes). Despite this focus, the relationship between the texts examined below and professional media shall still be of significance. I shall examine how creators of both mediums make content to express fandom for, and/or critique of, traditional media. I shall also explore how the formal distinctions between the two forms relate to their respective relationships to this media. In particular, how early viral videos often attempted to emulate the aesthetics of popular music, music video and film, whereas recent memes remediate popular culture in a way that distorts its conventions and encourages critical reevaluation. An examination of these formal distinctions shall reveal the differing stances of each medium toward traditional media.

Defining and Expanding Shifman's Parameters

Shifman's parameters of form and stance shall be central to my comparison of the two mediums, so I shall define them in full here. The majority of texts examined in this article are videos, therefore I

shall also describe several concepts from various audiovisual disciplines that shall inform my analysis and will help to expand Shifman's parameters.

Form

Shifman describes form as the "physical incarnation of the message," including "both visual/audible dimensions specific to certain texts and ... genre-related patterns organising them."⁹ Shifman's formal analysis of viral videos and memes generally focuses on their visual components, but a major continuity between the two forms can be found in their audial makeup. In a case study of online video mashup, musicologist Nicolas Cook observes that new media often employs "musical principles of construction."¹⁰ He examines how software is used to manipulate audio and video as "a single digital stream quantised ... to musical bars and beats."¹¹

Both viral videos and memes are often constructed in this manner. One musical principle of construction used in both mediums is what Carol Vernallis, another musicologist and audiovisual scholar, dubs "pulse and reiteration."¹² She describes this as "the most prevalent ... YouTube aesthetic," and notes common structures of videos such as "AAAAA..." and "AAABAAABCAAAA," reflecting musical forms such as strophic and rondo.¹³ Pulse and reiteration occur in both viral videos and memes in distinct ways. In early viral videos, it generally occurs in a manner that aligns with the recursive practices of both popular music and music video, as I shall explore in the formal analysis later in this discussion.

However, recent memes use pulse and reiteration in much less familiar musical and visual syntaxes. This is exemplified in the "technical meme," as identified by journalist Lizzie Plaugic, in which "mechanically achievable formula" are ironically applied to "pop culture novelties" of the 90s and 00s.¹⁴ An example cited by Plaugic is a meme in which every instrument of Barenaked Ladies' *One Week* is replaced with the song's opening lyric "it's been."¹⁵ This particular formula is indicative of how recent memes use reiteration to remove the texts they remediate from their original, syntactical contexts, often with absurd results. The meme's formula reduces the song to a constant, pulsating reiteration of its iconic first line. It is simultaneously familiar, as the harmony and rhythms of the original remain, and humorously alien.

This article's examination of recent memes shall predominantly focus on technical memes, because they present two clear formal distinctions from early viral video. The first distinction is that technical memes use another musical principle of construction not present in viral videos – procedural organisation. This is a principle more commonly found in 20th-century experimental music. Examples include John Cage's "Imaginary Landscape No. 5," in which forty two recordings are selected by the

performer and then placed into a predetermined system of durations and dynamics; and Steve Reich's "It's Gonna Rain," where two copies of a recording are put through the composer's famous phasing procedure, in which one copy is played at its original speed while the other is slowly sped up.

The comparison of 20th-century electronic music to 21st-century digital media may seem erroneous, but in both cases procedural remediation has a similar effect. Cage and Reich's procedures serve to sever the audio being remediated from its original context. A similar pattern occurs in technical memes. A procedure is applied to a familiar piece of media, removing it from its original syntax and transforming it into a joke. The procedure is central to the technical meme, demonstrated in the fact that they are usually described in the memes' title. For instance, the aforementioned example given by Plaugic is titled "Barenaked Ladies' One Week but all of the instruments are replaced with 'Its Been'."¹⁶

The second formal distinction present in technical memes is that their use of musical principles of construction creates *hypermediacy*, whereas early memes' use of such principles strives for *immediacy*. These are terms used in Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin's discussion of new media that shall be instrumental to the analysis of both forms. They argue that all audiovisual mediums are remediations of their predecessors.¹⁷ For instance, they cite the "historical resonances" between "renaissance painting, nineteenth-century photography, twentieth-century film, and so on."¹⁸ Each of these forms are a remediation of linear perspective, first set out in the renaissance, into new technological and cultural contexts. In a similar way, both viral videos and memes can be understood as remediations of traditional media. Early viral videos emulate its practices, and memes repurpose its audial and visual content.

For Bolter and Grusin, hypermediacy and immediacy are "the two logics of remediation."¹⁹ Immediacy is the logic in which the medium is rendered "transparent."²⁰ This is the logic favoured by traditional media. Consider the three examples given by Bolter and Grusin. In representational art, photography and film, linear perspective is used to encourage us to see *through* the medium – the canvas, photograph or screen – and observe the subjects depicted within. The analysis below shall reveal that by mimicking the audiovisual practices of film, music video and popular music, early viral videos shared traditional media's drive toward immediacy.

By contrast, hypermediacy is the logic of "opacity," in which the medium is emphasised, rather than concealed.²¹ Bolter and Grusin give the example of the "windowed style" of "World Wide Web pages, the desktop interface ... and video games" which "emphasises process and performance rather than the finished art object."²² Technical memes' use of procedural organisation demonstrates this same emphasis on process. They emphasise the procedures behind their own construction by stating them in their titles, and the procedures themselves are often designed to highlight the constructing principles of pop culture mediums. To return again to Plaugic's example, the Barenaked Ladies meme's

procedure emphasises the centrality of repetition in the syntax of popular music, by showing us a particularly extreme example. This is a pattern that we will continue to observe, in which technical memes employ hypermediacy to emphasise, and, by extension, critique and lampoon, the structural tropes of popular media.

In summary, the formal analysis undertaken below shall attempt to move away from Shifman's focus on the visual, and towards the examination of viral videos and memes' audial and musical components. Cook and Vernallis' musicological view of new media shall be instrumental for my approach. I shall examine the musical principles of construction employed in early viral videos and recent memes, namely pulse and reiteration and procedural organisation. This analysis shall also reveal how the two forms use these principles to achieve immediacy and hypermediacy respectively. Much like Shifman, Bolter and Grusin demonstrate a focus on the visual in their discussion of new media. This analysis shall place their model into a new context, in order to explore the contrasting manner in which early viral videos and recent memes use audio and music to render their mediums either transparent or opaque.

Stance

The previous section defined Shifman's parameter of form and demonstrated how this article shall expand upon it with notions from various audiovisual disciplines. Here, I shall achieve the same with stance. Shifman defines stance as the way in which content creators position themselves in "relationship to the text, its linguistic codes and their audience."²³ It is broken down into three subdimensions: *participation structures*, "which delineates who is entitled to participate and how"; *keying*, "the tone and style of communication"; and *communicative functions*.²⁴ This third subdimension draws from the linguist Roman Jakobson's notion of six fundamental functions of human communication, meaning that the communicative function of a meme can be understood as one or more of the following:

- (a) referential communication, which is oriented toward the context, or "outside world"; (b) emotive, oriented toward the addresser and his or her emotions; (c) conative, oriented toward the addressee and available paths of actions (e.g. imperatives); (d) phatic, which serves to establish, prolong, or discontinue communication; (e) metalingual, which is used to establish mutual agreement on the code (for example, a definition); and (f) poetic, focusing on the aesthetic or artistic beauty of the construction of the message itself.²⁵

These functions offer up many lenses with which to view viral videos and memes. Yet, as a communications scholar, Shifman's model privileges the search for semantic meaning; understanding

these two forms as artistic practice shall expand the limits of this model. This article aims to unpack the complexities of early viral video and recent memes as poetic communication by exploring the meanings presented in their distinct use of filmic and musical language.

Understanding these forms as artistic practice overcomes another limit of Shifman's approach. Her model casts the addresser as active and addressee as passive. This is perhaps more true of early viral videos, since in this period audience participation was generally limited to commenting and propagating via sharing. The audience's role in recent memes, however, is multivalent. Again, the work of Nicolas Cook can help us expand Shifman's model. He argues that in new media "meaning is negotiated" by addresser and addressee.²⁶ Content creators act as "mediators ... together with viewers and interpreters with their various backgrounds, experience and interests" who collectively parse out meaning together.²⁷

Memes create meaning through remediation so they don't simply reference the outside world, as in referential communication. They incorporate texts to be hermeneutically unpacked by their audience, and create meaning through the interactions of these texts. Meaning that "cannot be adequately translated back into verbal discourse."²⁸ By understanding memes as creative practice, we gain the insight that their audience are not simply a passive agent addressed with literal information, but active readers of the semantic and non-semantic meaning presented by memes.

To summarise, Shifman's parameters of form and stance have been defined, and the ways in which this article intends to expand on these parameters have been laid out. This has served to preface a comparison of viral videos and recent memes in regards to form and stance that shall make apparent early viral video's emulation of popular culture and recent memes' deconstruction thereof. This comparison shall then be furthered by a subsequent discussion of the distinct ways in which the two forms have remediated the same piece of popular culture, the *Stars Wars* franchise.

The Form of Early Viral Videos and Recent Memes

The Formal Emulation of Early Viral Video

Many early instances of viral video on platforms such as YouTube and Newgrounds can be understood as amateur emulations of the music video form. Examples include "Numa Numa," in which blogger Gary Brolsma lip-syncs to the song "Dragostea Din Tee" by Moldovan group O-Zone; and "Chocolate Rain," an amateur video for an original song by musician Tay Zonday.²⁹ Both remediate many formal

facets of music video into an online and non-professional context. Like in music video, the singer is the main subject of both videos, and the music featured in both is constructed around pulse and reiteration. Yet both are filmed on poor quality cameras, and feature odd performance gestures from their makers. Despite these limitations, they both still achieve the same immediacy found in music video. In both cases the audio and the visuals line up. Even in “Numa Numa,” in which Broolsma is not actually singing. His exaggerated lip-syncing allows us to ignore the crass mediation, the poor-quality webcam and unorthodox dancing, and be convinced that he is the one singing, just as we are when watching a music video.

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Video 1. Dork Daily, “Numa Numa,” December 11, 2006, accessed October 6, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmtzQCSh6xk>.

The following section shall explore the ways in which another example of early viral video, “Badgers,” formally emulates music video.³⁰ This analysis shall draw from Vernallis’ discussion of the video. It is significant to note that her intention in *Unruly Media*, from which the analysis is cited, is to examine the “media swirl,” and the chapter “YouTube” is proceeded by “Music Video.”³¹ This indicates that these two forms can be understood as overlapping aesthetically, and thus share the same drive towards immediacy.

“Badgers” is a flash animation that depicts an ever increasing amount of badgers, set to repetitive music that features a “mounting chant” of “badger, badger, badger.”³² It is exemplary of Vernallis’ notion of pulse and reiteration both visually and musically. In terms of the latter, “Badgers” uses reiterative practice in a way that parallels electronic dance music, featuring techno stylings and being structured in binary form. The A section being the song’s main motif, “badgers badgers ... mushroom mushroom,” and the B section being the section in which a “camp ... German dude” sings “Shnake! Ooh!”³³ Vernallis demonstrates the effectiveness of the video’s use of familiar musical syntaxes anecdotally. She describes how her students would often greet each other with chants of “badger badger badger...,” adding the video may cause us to “sense that we’re one badger in a larger community of them.”³⁴

This sense of community is common in online participatory culture. But the sense of community elicited by “Badgers,” and similar early viral videos, is in part drawn from their emulation of popular culture’s conventions. Vernallis’ students and, by extension, the communities that form around similar viral videos, are experiencing *plaisir*. This is a form of pleasure, described by critic Roland Barthes, that emanates from recognition of “syntactic conventions,” and results in “the cultural enjoyment of identity.”³⁵ This is a term from literary criticism, but Richard Middleton cites familiar repetition-based structures, such as song form, as examples of this conventional syntax in music. The use of

these culturally coded forms, without subversion, results in musical immediacy. These musical syntaxes are so ingrained into culture that listeners recognise them unconsciously. They are not listened *to* but listened *through*, acting as a transparent mediator between the listener and a piece's content. Barthes dubs texts that adhere to these conventional forms as "readerly," in that they don't challenge the role of the audience as passive subject, a role in which popular culture and viral videos tend to cast their audience.³⁶ Therefore, in using a readerly musical syntax, "Badgers" achieves immediacy.

This immediacy is furthered by the synchronisation of visuals and music. The visuals feature just as much pulse and reiteration as the music, with badger after badger popping up and bobbing incessantly to the music. The degree of audiovisual synchronisation featured in "Badgers" can be understood as an emulation of music video, particularly that of electronic dance music. Examples contemporary to "Badgers" include: the video for Alex Gaudino's "Destination Calabria," in which the repetitive sax riff is matched visually with the repeating motif of dancers wearing matching band uniforms and holding instruments; and the video for Benny Benassi's "Satisfaction," in which the music's repetition is synchronised with the subjects' performance of repetitive construction work.³⁷

Music video features less verisimilitude than narrative film, but it is still an immediate form. The video for "Satisfaction" is not trying to convince us that the women depicted are real construction workers, as a feature film might. Instead, it is trying to convince us that they belong in the world the video has created, and this is achieved by corresponding their actions to the music. Similarly, the badgers in "Badgers" are anthropomorphised, as they might be in a traditional animated film, but the crudeness of the video's Flash animation means that their movements are much less convincing. "Badgers" overcomes this by having their limited movements (the bobbing up and down) fit with the pulse and reiteration of the music.

A brief comparison between "Badgers" and a music video with a more outlandish visual conceit, Aphex Twin's "Come to Daddy," shall further demonstrate how pulse and reiteration can result in immediacy.³⁸ In "Come to Daddy" the repetition of Aphex Twin's music is matched visually with the recurring motif of his face appearing on others' bodies. The multiplying badgers were created through Flash animation's copy and paste function, while the recurring faces were created with production quality prosthetics and CGI, but in both instances the accumulative visual reiteration serves to conceal their artificiality, and, by extension, their mediums. If they only depicted one badger or one doppelgänger we might observe the flaws in how they are mediated, but such scrutiny is hard to apply to a multitude.

Figure 1. Screenshots from Weebl's Stuff, "Badgers: animated music video: MrWeebl," June 28, 2008, accessed May 6, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ElyixC9NsLI>.

In both mediums, the synchronised repetition of aural and visual elements promotes immediacy by placating the viewers' natural urge to connect sound and image.³⁹ I compare "Come to Daddy" to "Badgers" because they are both an extreme example of this. The visual imagery in both is bizarre, but the viewer is convinced to accept it, and ignore its mediation, through repeated insistence. In "Come to Daddy," a causal link is created between the television and the gang of little girls bearing Aphex Twin's face through repeated cutting between the two. These repetitive images correspond to the most repetitive part of the song, in which there is a consistent bass line. Thus, the causal link is extended to the music. Similarly, in "Badgers" each new appearance of a badger is signposted by the chant, as though the singer was creating them. The music not only brings the badgers into being, but also insists that the crude Flash animations you are seeing are not mediations, but in fact real "badgers, badgers, badgers...."

Figure 2. Screenshots from Aphex Twin, "Come to Daddy (Director's Cut)," November 24, 2019, accessed October 2, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZ827lkktYs&ab_channel=AphexTwin.

In these examples we can see how early viral videos emulated the formal practices of popular culture. These content creators matched popular music and music video's use of pulse and reiteration, and audiovisual synchronisation. This emulation resulted in immediacy, despite the limitations of their non-professional means.

The Technical Meme's Formal Deconstruction

As previously stated, the technical meme is a genre that uses procedural organisation to create hypermediacy. Content creators tend to remediate texts that use conventional syntax, and in doing so,

place a critical focus on their construction. Kazumi Totaka's "Mii Channel Music" is one such text, and this section shall examine several technical memes that remediate it.⁴⁰ Before this, a formal analysis of the original piece shall reveal how its adherence to syntactical conventions serves to conceal its medium. It will also highlight some of the key features content creators centre their remediation around. The piece's reiterative practice is comparable to that observed in Muzak by Roland Radano, as it serves as background music for the Mii Channel, an app in the Nintendo Wii console.⁴¹ Figure 2 is a diagram showing when the materials described below occur. As one revolution of the piece takes 52 seconds, the time codes refer to a first play through, from 00:00-00:52.

Figure 3. Structural diagram of "Mii Channel Music."

Macrocosmically it can be understood as in binary form, with an A section, and B section. Each section also features internal repetition. Microcosmically, section A is made up of four four bar periods: A1, A2, A1' (a variation on the first period) and A3. A1 features the first instance of a recurring three quaver motif which content creators call "dun dun dun" (00:02). A3 is not a reiteration of A2, but they do feature similar downward movement. At this scale the A section can be understood as ABAC. This is a structure ludomusicologist Andrew Schartmann suggests was employed in the ever-looping music of early video games to avoid "listener fatigue."⁴² The B section is similarly built around repetition. Its melody consists of a four bar phrase (B) repeated in sequence a tone higher (B') finishing with the "dun dun dun" motif (00:52).

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Video 2. Winry Rockbell, "Mii Channel Music," March 2, 2007, accessed May 6, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E9s1ItPGQOo>.

The piece's continuity, as in Muzak, serves to conceal the music keeping it "below the threshold of common attention."⁴³ It features regularly repeated materials, which are barely developed, and it maintains a constant dynamic. Its frequent pauses are another parallel to Muzak. Rodano observes

that in professional settings people inhabit for long periods, Muzak broadcasts would be broken up by fifteen-minute silences “to avoid attracting attention through sheer monotony.”⁴⁴ “Mii Channel Music” achieves this on a smaller timescale. These parallels with Muzak demonstrate how successful Tokaka’s composition is as background music. Just like Muzak, its immediacy creates a style “devoid of information” or “surprise,” an “epitome of innocuous sound forms.”⁴⁵

Several recent memes have remediated “Mii Channel Music” in a way that places new emphasis on the piece’s reiterative construction and critically deconstructed its innocuousness. In these examples pulse and reiteration and procedural organisation work in tandem as constructing principles. For instance, in “mii channel theme but every time it goes dun dun dun it gets bass boosted,” repeated application of the procedure is centred around the familiar recurring gesture.⁴⁶ The continuity of the Muzak stylings is replaced with escalation. Each “dun dun dun” occurs louder and more distorted. One viewer sarcastically comments “I like the part where its goes **Dun Dun Dun**,” demonstrating how this memes’ use of hypermediacy presents its audience with the excessive degree of reiterative syntax in “Mii Channel Music.”⁴⁷

The frequent silences are another gesture that content creators centre their procedures around. Examples such as the videos “Mii channel but all the pauses are uncomfortably long” and “mii theme but with almost no spaces and a lot more anxiety inducing” present us with the central difference between repetition in early viral videos and recent memes.⁴⁸ Early viral hits such as “Badgers” and “Chocolate Rain,” while eccentric, used the syntactical conventions of popular music, and in doing so elicited *plaisir*. The procedures of recent memes often seek to deconstruct this syntax. The eponymous discomfort anxiety the above memes induce is the result of the once transparent medium of musical form being rendered opaque. We could call this sensation *displaisir*, the recognition that syntactical conventions are not being upheld. SardinWhiskers and InsomniacPenguins certainly succeed in invoking *displaisir*, with some of the top comments on their videos being “no no no” and “This is the song that plays when you’re in hell.”⁴⁹

We can expand our understanding of this formal distinction by exploring the distinct teleologies of early viral videos and recent memes. Robert Fink observes a “recombinant teleology” in popular repetition based musics.⁵⁰ The construction of desire through constant, expansive tension and release, and through their emulation of popular music, early memes adopted this as well. The technical meme’s use of the procedure does not define them as completely anti-teleological, as Fink suggests of its use in experimental music.⁵¹ It does, however, point to a rejection of the dominant teleological frameworks commonly found in popular culture, frameworks that early viral videos were so keen to embrace. The procedures of technical memes are often purpose built to sever texts from their original contexts, critiquing their mechanics in the process. Perhaps hypermediacy is the telos of these recent memes.

The examples discussed above are evidence of a common technical meme naming format that places the procedure at the forefront: [The cultural novelty being dissected] but [the mechanical process it is being put through]. The procedures may differ from meme to meme, but in every other respect, reiteration is the main principle of construction for technical memes, therefore contributing to their hypermediacy. The texts to which the procedures are applied are repeated meme to meme ("Mii Channel Music," Smash Mouth's "All Star," *The Bee Movie* etc.). The processes themselves are repeatedly applied, and in the case of the Mii Channel Music, they are applied at regular intervals. All this repetition incessantly reminds the audience of the various processes behind what they are hearing. The title makes clear when to expect an application of the procedure. The procedure itself subverts the recognisable syntax the original text was constructed around, and in doing so highlights the structural differences between the original text and the meme. This recognition of difference elicits what some have termed *displaisir* in meme audiences.

Vernallis' assessment of the conditions that lead to pulse and reiteration's ubiquity in the YouTube aesthetic is apt. She argues that these "clips may bear the knowledge that they reside within a conversation with a million others," competing not only with other content creators but with the "hyperintensified, CGI-laden, blockbuster-seeking, new digital cinema" and video games.⁵² To stand out they must become "audio visual earworms" that through these reiterative practices gain a "blockbuster-like intensity in miniature."⁵³ Indeed this can be considered a formal through line between early viral videos and recent memes, exemplified by how quickly the "Mii Channel Music" becomes cacophonous with the memes' repeated application of their procedures.

However Vernallis also posits that content creators work in "do-it-yourself aesthetics," and that this limits their creative potential.⁵⁴ She suggests that another reason pulse and reiteration are so common is that "fans with no training want to make something ... but don't know how to put materials together," when "a realisation dawns near the near the two-minute mark that they'd prefer to make something resembling a pop song and they peter out."⁵⁵ This positions content creators simply as failed professionals, but as Henry Jenkins observes "amateur media makers often signal their averageness ... openly acknowledging their ... limited technical means."⁵⁶

This kind of signalling is central to the appeal of memes, but is not exclusive to the form, as it also occurs in early viral video. For instance in "Chocolate Rain," Tay Zonday explains away his odd performance gestures, the repeated dips to camera left, with text reading "***I move away from the mic to breathe in."⁵⁷ This suggests that throughout the history of online participatory culture, the content creator has not been a failed amateur whose only means of aesthetic salvation is the use of pulse and reiteration, but a maker that embraces the unique opportunities their position affords them.

However, technical memes are distinct because they employ this kind of signalling to not only expose their own limitations, but to also critique the texts they manipulate. The hypermediacy of technical memes is instrumental in this. The mechanics of this critique can be demonstrated in some historic parallels. Bolter and Grusin state that “the cultural dominance of the paradigm of transparency [i.e. immediacy] was effectively challenged” by the use of hypermediacy in modernist practice.⁵⁸ They cite examples from the visual arts, such as collage and photomontage, that challenged linear perspective. Another example is Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre. Literary critic Chris Baldick notes that Brecht used hypermediate practices, such as sudden scene changes, bare stages and ironic distancing, to remind “the audience of the performance’s artificial nature.”⁵⁹ This resulted in Brecht’s famous “alienation effect,” that encouraged “an attitude of critical detachment in the audience, rather than a passive submission to realistic illusion.”⁶⁰

The technical meme achieves the same with self-explanatory titles, on-the-nose reiteration of processes, and their emphasise on the syntaxes of popular culture. In the examples examined above, the various processes applied to “Mii Channel Music” destroy the immediacy of its Muzak stylings, designed to encourage passive listening. Instead, listeners gain a critical detachment from its former pleasant innocuousness, because they are cognisant of the processes behind its construction. Just as modernist collage challenged linear perspective and epic theatre challenged theatrical realism, the technical meme uses hypermediacy to challenge the dominant logic of immediacy within popular culture.

Thus, the key formal distinctions between viral videos created in the early days of platforms like YouTube, and more recent memes, have been demonstrated. Early viral videos emulated the aesthetics of popular culture, whereas recent memes deconstructed it. These formal distinctions point to a difference in stance. Early viral video’s formal imitation of popular culture suggests, to a certain extent, alignment with its narratives. We have examined how the use of familiar, repetition-based syntaxes elicits *plaisir*. John Fiske casts *plaisir* as an everyday pleasure drawn from “conforming to the dominant ideology.”⁶¹ This reflects how repetition-based music has been understood as an unconscious reflection of life and consumption as defined by mass production. In his polemical *Noise: A Political Economy of Music*, Jacques Attali states his fear that the prevalence of repetition in music demonstrated an adherence to the ideology of a “fully repetitive society.”⁶² He was writing in the latter half of the 20th-century, when the balance between consumer and participatory culture was swung in favour of the former. Despite emanating from a different historical moment - the early years of the Web 2.0 era - the viral videos we have examined might still confirm Attali’s fear. Vernallis states that their use of pulse and reiteration matches the “11111 pulse” of typing and clicking “link after link after link.”⁶³ In this sense they could be seen as conforming to the dominant ideology of the digital age.

Fiske also states that “equally there are pleasures of opposing or modifying that ideology ... when they fail to meet our interests.”⁶⁴ Recent content creators and their audience find this kind of pleasure in *displaisir*. Technical memes use this procedure to produce humour by destroying the conventional syntax of the original text. A similar destruction occurs in the aforementioned *Imaginary Landscape No. 5*. John Cage’s piece remediates recordings, and in the process severs them from their structural context. 20th-century experimental music and the technical meme, while seemingly disparate, both use procedural organisation and hypermediacy. The former has even directly influenced the latter on occasion. Examples such as “All Star but it’s Schoenberg’s Fourth String Quartet,” and “All Star, but it’s the rite of spring by Igor Stravinsky” suggest that avant-garde musical practice is not as alien to content creators as it may seem.⁶⁵

I draw this parallel to suggest the nature of the technical meme’s critique. Attali suggests that Cage’s compositional approach was him “blaspheming, criticising the code and network” of classical music, that he began “the destruction of the preceding codes,” and that his work foreshadowed “the death of the specialist.”⁶⁶ As non-specialists, content creators use the procedure in their own modern polemic. Recent memes use hypermediate procedures to highlight popular cultures’ constructing principles and satirise its excessive reiterative practice.

Both early viral videos and recent memes are remediations of popular culture. The examples examined above reveal that both forms remediate pop culture’s use of pulse and reiteration. In their imitation of popular culture’s reiterative practice, early viral videos were also imitating the ideology of a repetitive economy. Recent meme’s imitation of popular culture, however, is more parody than pastiche. The technical meme repurposes the reiterative practice of popular culture and uses hypermediacy to draw attention to it. This has a rather Brechtian effect, with the meme audiences gaining a new critical distance from the media being remediated.

The Stance of Early Viral Videos and Recent Memes

The analysis above revealed both similarities and distinctions in the form of early viral video and recent memes, but in regards to stance, the two forms are rather distinct. Early viral video’s formal emulation of popular culture generally corresponds to an emulation of its various stances. By contrast, the content creators of recent memes often place themselves in a position of critical opposition toward the texts they mediate. This section shall examine the difference in stance between the two forms, and further explore recent memes’ critique of popular culture.

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One clear distinction in the stance of the two forms is their respective participation structures. Early viral video's use of conventional forms evoked *plaisir*, and as this is "linked to cultural enjoyment and identity," we can infer that the gamut of people entitled to participate was wide.⁶⁷ For instance the aforementioned "Chocolate Rain" appeared on Channel 4's *Rude Tube* – a show that presents internet clips to a television audience – demonstrating how the participation structures of early viral videos and televisual media overlapped to a certain degree. This overlap has increased over time, as old media growingly utilises online platforms such as YouTube. This is not the case with technical memes. Their deconstruction of conventional forms results in *displaisir*, rendering them less accessible. The participation structures of technical memes are aptly described by Pete Gofton who states that they are "elliptical, self-referential jokes to the exclusion of those who don't 'get' it ... a secret handshake that others acknowledge, and engage with further, through sharing and remixing."⁶⁸

The keying of internet memes is often tied up with their function as emotive communication and, in this respect, memes very rarely deal in half measures. This tends to manifest itself in one of two ways: either the mundane is elevated to the sublime by a highly expressive tone; or the melodramatic is reduced to the prosaic by an unemotive one. This is often achieved formally through the use of audiovisual dissonance, a term theorist Michel Chion coined to describe when a film's sound and score oppose its visuals.⁶⁹ An example of the former is a video that casts the mild inconvenience of dropping a free taco as a tragedy by scoring it with Enya's "Only Time."⁷⁰ An instance of the latter is "I Put Wii music Over A Final destination Death Scene."⁷¹ The original scene, from the fifth film of the Final Destination franchise (Steven Quale, 2011), features a gymnast being killed by an elaborate series of events put into motion by the personification of death, to correct for their earlier escape from a fatal accident. As is typical for the series, this is achieved by the disembodied force of death manipulating elements in the character's environment to cause their exaggerated, gory demise. The film uses the recognisable syntax of cinematography and scoring to explicitly lamp-shade these events to its audience.

The use of audiovisual dissonance in experimental film has been understood as a means by which "avant-garde directors ... distance themselves from, and critique, the language of mainstream cinema."⁷² Its use in memes can be understood as doing similar from the perspective of an amateur film fan. Matn's use of audiovisual dissonance can be understood as hypermediate as it makes the film medium opaque. In terms of keying, it neuters the means by which the original scene expresses its tone, its score.

In the original scene events signalling the character's ultimate fate are bluntly sign-posted. When her lucky rubber band snaps before she takes to the beam the camera pushes in on her worried expression. At this point, the ambience is faded out and replaced with an ominous gust of wind, the bang of a funereal bass drum and a swell from the lower strings. The camera then lingers on drops of

water falling near an exposed wire, which is marked aurally with another swell from the lower strings. This is followed by a cut to a rattling ceiling fan, clearly marked as dangerous by a crescendoing dissonant flat 9th in the horns, accompanied by a cymbal roll. The visuals and score have a practically cartoonish level of synchronisation. The sound of the snapping band is given a similarly wet reverb as the aforementioned drum, resulting in the same foreboding quality. A tracking shot follows a nail from the previously seen fan, as it falls onto the pommel horse our doomed protagonist is using. The score reaffirms this with a minor second fall in the melody.

YouTube user Matn's superposition of the Mii channel music overrides the emotionally manipulative qualities of the original scene. They not only replace the original score, but almost completely drown out the diegetic sound as well, circumventing how we usually consume cinema. Claudia Gorbman states that film music works most effectively on the "spectator-subject" when they are "inaudible," not literally, but in that they are secondary to the registers of language and narrative.⁷³ A cognitive understanding of Matn's use of audiovisual dissonance shall demonstrate just how distinct their approach is from how music usually relates to film. We are understood to perceive film multimodally, that is "the sounds and images are perceived ... as coming from one source."⁷⁴ Mainstream cinema tends to cater to this form of perception, and thus commonly avoids clashes in its audio and visual elements.⁷⁵ Steven Willemsen and Miklós Kiss argue that even in cases of audiovisual dissonance, this natural bias causes us to "readily ascribe the music, in terms of emotional or narrative information, to whatever is happening onscreen."⁷⁶ But this bias has its limits. "Immersion-breaking audio-visual collisions emerge primarily when the incongruence concerns the music's fundamental acoustic and temporal elements," and the way Matn drowns out the score and diegetic sound breaks the scene's cinematic illusions in this way.⁷⁷

As previously mentioned, the original diegetic sound is extremely low in the mix. It is significant that it is still included, as whenever it is perceivable (the fan can faintly be heard rattling at 01:22 and a character's clapping can be heard at 02:05) we are reminded how odd this balance of sounds is compared to the balance we are used to hearing in film. Similarly, the Mii Channel music's synthesised sounds are more apparently false than the orchestral forces commonly used in film scores. This creates a video in which sound dominates the visuals, which is jarring because in cases of radical audiovisual dissonance, the inverse is usually the case.⁷⁸ Vernallis claims that "within a webpage ... videos must compete with lurid, flashing pop-up ads and other scrolling devices," suggesting that generally viewers do not watch YouTube videos in fullscreen.⁷⁹ In this mode of viewing, the title of Matn's video, formatted in typical technical meme fashion, furthers the domination of audio over visual. The words "I Put Wii Music Over A Final Destination Death Scene" sit, like a Brechtian placard, below the once dramatic events as they unfold, ensuring the incongruous musical superimposition is at the forefront both aurally but visually.

Once again, an immediate text is rendered hypermediate, and in doing so, a form of the alienation effect is created. The original scene used cinematic and musical cues to compel us to fear for a girl's life, but Matn's video renders us completely apathetic to her plight. Just as Brecht showed "human beings and their interactions on stage as a process in order to reveal how and why people behave as they do," the technical meme places the mechanics of filmmaking centre stage, and creates a critical distance that allows us to examine the reasons for their use.⁸⁰

Figure 3. Screenshot from Droid Games Fan, "I put Wii music over final destination death scene," September 27, 2017, accessed January 8, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBcTesSv0gk&t=126s>.
Note: this screenshot is take from the reupload of this video so the title differs slightly.

"I Put Wii Music Over A Final Destination Death Scene" displays some key aspects of the stance of recent memes. It displays the media knowledge their participation structures require. Viewers must not only be aware of "Mii Channel Music" and the *Final Destination* series, but they must also understand why combining them is funny. It displays how memes use keying to rendered melodramatic texts mundane, and it shows how memes transform the communicative functions of the texts they incorporate. The original scene was both poetic and highly emotive communication, but Matn's intervention nullifies its emotiveness by removing its main affective tool, its score. What is left over might be called meta-poetic communication, communication *about* the aesthetic construction of the text.

This is a form of communication that technical memes often engage in. A brief comparison to a more familiar form of meta-poetic communication shall reveal how content creators position themselves in relation to the texts they remediate. Film criticism, just like viral videos and memes, has a long history on online platforms like YouTube. Content creators, such as The Nostalgia Critic (Channel Awesome), Lindsay Ellis and Red Letter Media, have been making and uploading criticism since the early days of these platforms. While these critics often use the piece-to-camera and roundtable styles employed in televisual film criticism, they also often express criticism through audiovisual practice. For instance Red Letter Media's early reviews, such as the 7-part review of *The Phantom Menace* (George Lucas, 1999) were delivered by the fictional "Mr. Plinkett."⁸¹ Skits featuring the character would be used to elaborate on points within the criticism, as well to inject humour.

In more traditional online criticism jokes, like the ones delivered by Mr. Plinkett, often make up part of the content creator's critique. In technical memes the joke, made through audiovisual practice, is the critique. But since technical memes contain less semantic meaning than traditional criticism, the stance of their content creators is a matter of interpretation. The joke of "I Put Wii Music Over A Final Destination Death Scene" is that it strips away the filmic and musical syntax of the original scene, and thus emphasises the excessive violence. This might be to express a stance popular among film critics of the early 2000s. A stance that derided horror movies, like the *Final Destination* franchise, as "torture porn," bereft of narrative and solely concerned with gory spectacle.⁸² Or it might be saying the opposite: "here's *Final Destination* without the boring narrative and tension." In either case, Matn, like many meme creators, has placed himself in a position of critical distance from the text they have remediated, and has engaged in meta-poetic communication about it.

The Content Creator as *Star Wars* Fan

I have examined how early viral video displayed a desire toward immediacy, mirroring that of professional media, while recent memes employ hypermediacy to subvert this desire; how memes employ musical principles of construction in service of these goals; and how the formal distinctions between early and recent memes reflect the differing stances they adopt. I shall now examine how these differences manifest even when content creators of the past and present are discussing the same subject. Content creators have been using the internet as a means to express fandom since its inception. A testament to this is the swathes of *Star Wars* related content, and the series as a topic of discussion spans the gap between early viral video and late memes.

In the chapter "Quentin Tarantino's *Star Wars*," Henry Jenkins examines the participatory role fans have played in the media industry.⁸³ His case study further demonstrates the immediate practice of

early memes. I shall update and expand this discussion by examining “Ryan vs Dorkman” – a fan-made lightsaber duel from 2003 – and some of its contemporary, hypermediate counterpoints.⁸⁴ Jenkins aptly posits that “fans’ ... fascination with fictional universes often inspires new forms of cultural production,” and that they “refuse to simply accept what they are given, but rather insist on the right to become full participants.”⁸⁵ This refusal of the role of consumer and insistence on participation is found in both early and recent remediations, but early content creators accepted certain caveats in order to gain these rights.

Visit the web version of this article to view interactive content.

Video 3. Maniacmike, “Ryan vs Dorkman,” March 14, 2006, accessed May 6, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NE5eLL30w4>.

The rights-holders of *Star Wars* universe have had a turbulent relationship with fan created content. The series is considered a modern myth by many, but it is also deeply codified in copyright law. For a long time this informed the creative practice of fans. For some, fan fiction became a pathway into commercial publication. In 2000 Lucasfilm created www.starwars.com, a platform in which fans could share their creations, but with the catch that this content would be the intellectual property of the studio.⁸⁶ The website also set strict rules for fan films:

Films must parody the existing Star Wars universe ... No 'fan fiction'—which attempts to expand on the Star Wars universe—will be accepted. Films must not make use of copyrighted Star Wars music or video, but may use action figures and the audio clips provided in the production kit section of this site.⁸⁷

This was the landscape in which “Ryan vs Dorkman” was created. The *Star Wars* fan film as a form had been defined by these strict parameters, but also by the allure of success for a lucky few. This resulted in early *Star Wars* remediators attempting to legitimise themselves by striving for an immediacy akin to the films. “Ryan vs Dorkman” does this by adhering closely to the rules of its fictional universe, and its successful imitation of professional practice is cemented in that fact that the eponymous Ryan Weiber was hired by Lucasfilm in 2004.⁸⁸ The mechanics of the lightsabers work just as they do in the films, they are just a hilt until ignited, and when dropped they switch off. The force is used to pull the weapon back to their owner just as characters often do in the series. This immediacy is upheld aurally as well, with the familiar lightsaber sound effects working in tandem with the choreography. The video is unable to use John Williams’ familiar score due to Lucasfilm’s diktats, but a copyright-free soundtrack is used. The piece is genre-appropriate and thus contributes to audience immersion through its inaudibility. It is less prominent in the mix than the lightsaber sound effects, which serve as the main aural register of the narrative, and the driving electronic rhythm track augments the tension of the conflict.

The fan made lightsaber duel is a genre that is alive and well today. But while the viral video discussed above employs immediacy and a rather serious tone, recent memes typical to the form do not. “If She Breathes She’s A Thot [ORIGINAL]” is a notable example.⁸⁹ In the video, a figure holding a green toy lightsaber enters the frame and exclaims, “all women are queens!” This is followed by another figure wielding a red toy lightsaber who retorts, “If she breathes she’s a thot!” “Thot” is a pejorative, similar to ‘hoe,’ and is delivered very affectingly by this second speaker. The word is vehemently shouted and tinged with a menacing growl.

In edits of this video, hypermediacy is employed for comic effect. “All women are Queens vs If she breathes she’s a thot” has only 216,740 views compared to the most popular version, “all women are queens” which has 32 million (as of February 2, 2021).⁹⁰ The latter takes the opposite approach to that of “Ryan vs Dorkman.” It humorously superimposes a blue lightsaber effect over the green toy, accentuating the medium of VFX as a form of human intervention, subverting film’s typical effacement of this. It also adds John Williams’ “Duel of the Fates.” However “Thot Wars” features a musical choice that is more hermeneutically rich.⁹¹ This video uses a leitmotif associated with the character Kylo Ren from the most recent trilogy (2015-19), playing as the second character enters frame. This choice could be understood as being made simply for the sake of accuracy, as the lightsaber wielded by the video’s antagonist is a toy modelled on Ren’s. But I posit that this choice reflects the stance of this collection of memes.

The empire of the original trilogy was heavily coded as a Nazi-like organisation. As its successor the First Order, to which Kylo Renn is aligned, has been understood as allegorical to recent far-right groups, such as the “alt-right.”⁹² Tensions between left- and right- wing politics within the *Star Wars* fandom have been apparent in recent years. The fact that many major characters (including the protagonist) in the recent films have been female has been viewed as a manifestation of progressive politics within the series. This has earned celebration from some fans, while receiving ire from others.⁹³ Heralded by one side as “triumphantly feminist,” and “feminist propaganda” by the other.⁹⁴

This context reveals the network of stances that these memes, through their remediation of *Star Wars*, place themselves into. The conflict in “Thot Wars” could be interpreted as mirroring the schism amongst fans. “All women are queens” is spoken by the character holding the green lightsaber, used in the films to indicate heroic characters. The man calling women thots for simply existing gives an exaggerated vocal performance, holds a villain’s lightsaber and is musically bound to a fictional fascist group. The resultant meanings are multivalent. It could be suggesting that the former is a feminist hero, while the latter is a sexist villain. It could be using the exaggerated keying afforded by Williams’ score ironically, painting the hero as a patronising white knight and the villain as an example of the straw man argument feminism is so often accused of using. It could be satirising the very idea that this conflict exists within the fandom, as it has been the subject of many media think-pieces (several of

which are cited above), and these institutions are firmly outside the participatory structures of the fandom.

Ultimately the stance of the various authors is not the issue. Memes can be understood as hyper-Barthesian form. Barthes famously proclaimed “the death of the author,” encouraging a hermeneutic approach that goes beyond authorial intent.⁹⁵ Such an approach is required to understand memes, as the author is not only dead, but was a ghost to begin with. These memes’ discussion of the gender politics of *Star Wars*, even if to mock it, demonstrates how recent memes’ musical interventions can present a form of fandom much more critical of itself, and of media, than early viral video. It also shows that hypermediacy is employed by content creators not only to critique popular culture’s formal construction, but also its stance.

“Ryan vs Dorkman” may seem neutral in the matter of the gender politics of *Star Wars*, but as previously stated, by imitating the form of popular culture, early memes also align with its stance. The video acts in accordance with the rules set out by Lucasfilms. Rules that favoured its form of action-packed mimicry over the emotional focus of other forms of fan participation. Jenkins views this as a gendered issue, stating “Lucas and his movie cronies clearly identified more closely with the young digital filmmakers ... than they did with female fan writers sharing their erotic fantasies.”⁹⁶ This position is evidenced by the historic dismissal of fan fiction, a predominantly female form of fan participation.⁹⁷ For instance, Rey, the female protagonist of the recent films, is often dismissed as a ‘Mary Sue.’ A supposed trope of fan fiction in which a female character, often an author’s self-insert, is overly capable and lacks character flaws.⁹⁸ Elizabeth Minkel suggests that “the term has seeped across pop culture to the point where ‘Mary Sue’ becomes any female lead.”⁹⁹

On a wider scale, as Sarah Gatson and Robin Reid posit, the “default fanboy” as having a “presumed race, class and, sexuality: white, middle-class, male, heterosexual.”¹⁰⁰ “Ryan vs Dorkman” uses conventional filmic and musical syntaxes that conform to and express this identity, asserting itself as masculine in a number of ways. Visually it is focused on a fight, bereft of emotional, narrative or even logical context. Musically the aforementioned, copyright-free score would not seem out of place in an early 2000s action movie, and thus might be considered even more masculine than Williams’ neo-romantic score. “Ryan vs Dorkman” demonstrates how viral video’s formal emulation of popular media often resulted in an emulation of its stance. It not only conforms to the masculinity presented in the films, by imitating the swordplay of its heroes, it also conforms to the stance of Lucasfilm, by engaging in the masculine form of fan remediation the company favoured.

Despite how distinct they are “Ryan vs Dorkman” and “Thot wars” both resemble *Star Wars* in some sense. They both display an interest in the conventional syntax of the films, by either embracing it with immediacy or subverting it with hypermediacy. But “Star Wars Wars: All 6 Films at Once” uses the

musical principle of the procedure in a radically abstract expression of fandom, that moves beyond these structures.¹⁰¹ It does so by embracing a constructing principle alien to film: aleatoricism. Just as Cage strived to “let sounds be sounds,” “Star Wars Wars” lets the films of the series be themselves, as in what they are when they no longer have to signify narrative meaning – a collection of sounds and images.¹⁰² This totalising abstraction creates an intense degree of critical distance. As we examined previously, “I Put Wii Music Over A Final Destination Death Scene” leaves the original visuals intact to be judged, while “Stars Wars Wars” leaves just the outline of its images, foley, dialogue and score.

But the whole is still recognisably *Star Wars*. The first two minutes features the repeated gestures that open the films, occurring in near unison. “A long time in a galaxy far, far away ...,” and the title card appear superimposed. The latter is marked with the declamatory tonic chord, which at first appears unchanged by the multiple layers, simply complimenting the excessive use of doubling in Williams’ orchestration. As the overture continues, rhythmic collisions occur, but due to the concert hall acoustics the result sounds as though a delay has been applied. This unison begins to dissolve as the opening crawls come to an end. Visually speaking, familiar characters, scenes and set pieces can be made, but the overall effect is unintelligibility. Narrative is removed from the films as the typical principle of film music inaudibility is subverted; the register of dialogue is almost completely drowned out, rendering exposition impossible.

Left in its place is the rich sonic palette of the films, which is what compelled the content creator behind “Star Wars Wars” to do this. maurcs (their YouTube and Vimeo handle) states their desire was to “hear how all the opening title themes sounded being played simultaneously” which “ballooned into wanting to hear it with sound effects.” Indeed, the familiarity of Williams’ score and Ben Burt’s sound effects guide us through the chaos, but they are removed from their original context. Williams’ themes lose their intended associations as they underpin their original action beats, as well as five other unrelated scenes.

The early viral videos previously examined in this article have been readerly texts that adhere to the conventional syntax of popular culture, and thus display Barthes’ notion of *plaisir*. The recent memes discussed have deconstructed, yet are still reliant on, these syntaxes, so I have used the term *displaisir* to describe the pleasure they elicit. “Star Wars Wars” comes the closest to evoking “*jouissance*” pleasure in the Barthesian model drawn from completely breaking away from these syntactic codes.¹⁰³ It could also be understood as what Susan Sontag, a theorist contemporary to Barthes, would call an “erotics of art.”¹⁰⁴ She argued against a hermeneutic approach that searched for semantic meaning, and instead one that examines art experientially. “Star Wars Wars” achieves this with the film series. It is the phenomenological experience of the series without any interpretive context. “Star Wars Wars” is an example of how radically non-discursive the negotiation of meaning can be in memes.

The Content Creator as Anti-Fan

The content creator *maurcs* is a *Star Wars* fan. Their website (starwarswars.com) features a “fan creations” section where many parodies are posted. But “Stars Wars Wars” presents how recent memes express fandom in a much more complicated manner than in early viral video. An examination of scholarly understanding of fandom shall prove helpful in illuminating these differences. The imitative practice of early content creators can be understood as what Derek Forster calls “official fandom” in that it does not “play with the world of the text.”¹⁰⁵ *maurcs* could be defined as a “guerilla fan” seeking “to spoil the text,” but the understanding of “Star Wars Wars” as erotics makes the term unsatisfactory.¹⁰⁶ Jonathan Gray defines the anti-fan as someone “who actively and vocally hates ... a given text.”¹⁰⁷ The negatively charged “electron” to the fans “proton.”¹⁰⁸ These terms paint anything other than blank acceptance of the world of the text as malevolent, but by injecting nuance into the notion of the anti-fan we can find a suitable category for the fandom of recent memes. The anti-hero is not the polar opposite of the hero. Batman, The Man With No Name and Phillip Marlowe all do good, while cutting some of the moral corners that the typical hero would not.¹⁰⁹ To the same effect we can improve the term suggesting that an anti-fan can still express a stance in support of a text, while still using hypermediacy to break down its world.

By removing the binary between fan and anti-fan we can understand where early and recent memes’ respective stances place them in this spectrum. Shifman points to memes’ multivalence stating that “when recreating a text users can decide to imitate a certain position that they find appealing or use an utterly different discursive orientation.”¹¹⁰ As we have examined, early viral video’s formal imitation of popular cultural was also an imitation of its stance, and this can be understood as erring on the side of typical fan interaction. Their use of the familiar reiterative syntax of popular music resulted in an overlapping of the participation structures of the two forms. Similarly, in early viral video’s discussion of film, immediacy was upheld with the use of the aural and visual syntax of mainstream cinema, with the common film music principle of inaudibility being upheld to encourage immersion into the medium. This resulted in an expression of fandom that preserved the world of the text.

On the other hand, recent memes’s hypermediacy destroys these worlds. The repeated application of procedures to “Mii Channel Music” completely sever it from its original context as inaudible background music. The use of this Midi-muzak to score the *Final Destination* death scene destroys the melodramatic world the original film creates with its conventional audiovisual syntax. These examples can be interpreted as content creators finding “pleasure in knocking the text” as Duffet states of anti-

fans.¹¹¹ But these anti-fan practices are not only employed to knock texts, they are also used to open up new conversations about them. The *Star Wars* memes examined above reveal the multivalent meanings that these practices can present.

Conclusions

Viral videos and internet memes are two major audiovisual forms in the history of online participatory culture. This article has examined the continuities and distinctions between them to unpack the manifold ways people interact with, and participate in, popular culture online. In terms of form, both viral video and memes are often built around musical principles of construction, and pulse and reiteration are principles commonly featured in both. In the early viral videos examined above, including “Badgers” and “Chocolate Rain,” this occurred in a manner that paralleled professional music video. The music in these videos emulated the reiterative practice of popular music, featuring audiovisual synchronisation. In their use of familiar popular culture syntaxes, early viral videos shared this drive toward immediacy and elicited *plaisir* - the pleasure of syntactic recognition. By contrast, rather than emulate the syntactic conventions of popular culture, recent memes deconstruct them. The memes examined above, such as the ones remediating “Mii Channel Music,” achieved this by combining pulse and reiteration with procedural organisation. These procedures highlighted the syntactic conventions, by disobeying them (eliciting *displaisir*), and rendering once immediate texts hypermediate.

These formal distinctions reflect the difference in stance between early viral video and recent memes. The former’s emulation of popular culture often resulted in an alignment with its stance. For instance, the faithful remediation of “Ryan vs Dorkman” reflected the masculinity presented in the *Star Wars* films, and favoured by Lucasfilm. The latter’s formal hypermediate deconstruction places meme authors and audiences at a critical distance from the texts being remediated. By placing emphasis on the construction of media texts, such as Barenaked Ladies’ “One Week,” *Final Destination* 5, and *Star Wars*, recent memes stimulate new conversations about them. Through these practices content creators present their own multivalent stance, and challenge those presented by popular culture.

This article has historicised viral videos as an early form within online participatory culture, and presented memes as a more contemporary one but this is by no means absolute. Content uploaded to the platform TikTok, that has come to prominence in recent years, often emulates popular culture in a similar way to early viral video. There is also an ever-increasing amount of cross-pollination between amateur content creation and traditional media. In an attempt to understand this media landscape,

this article has explored two forms within online culture, and demonstrated the myriad ways that users participate in it.

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Biography

Barnaby Goodman is a musician, interdisciplinary composer, researcher, and educator, with an MA in Popular Music Research from Goldsmiths, University of London. He has composed commercially, collaborated with the likes of the New Maker Ensemble, and musically directed the Goldsmiths Composers Collective. Barnaby is a saxophonist and arranger for the band *Town of Cats*, which has been a fixture of the UK and European festival circuit. He is currently researching a cultural studies PhD proposal, and his approach is informed by aesthetics, Marxist philosophy and sociology. The focus of his research is the overlap between popular music and internet cultures, examining the formation of imagined communities and the multivalent discourse that occurs in online spaces.

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