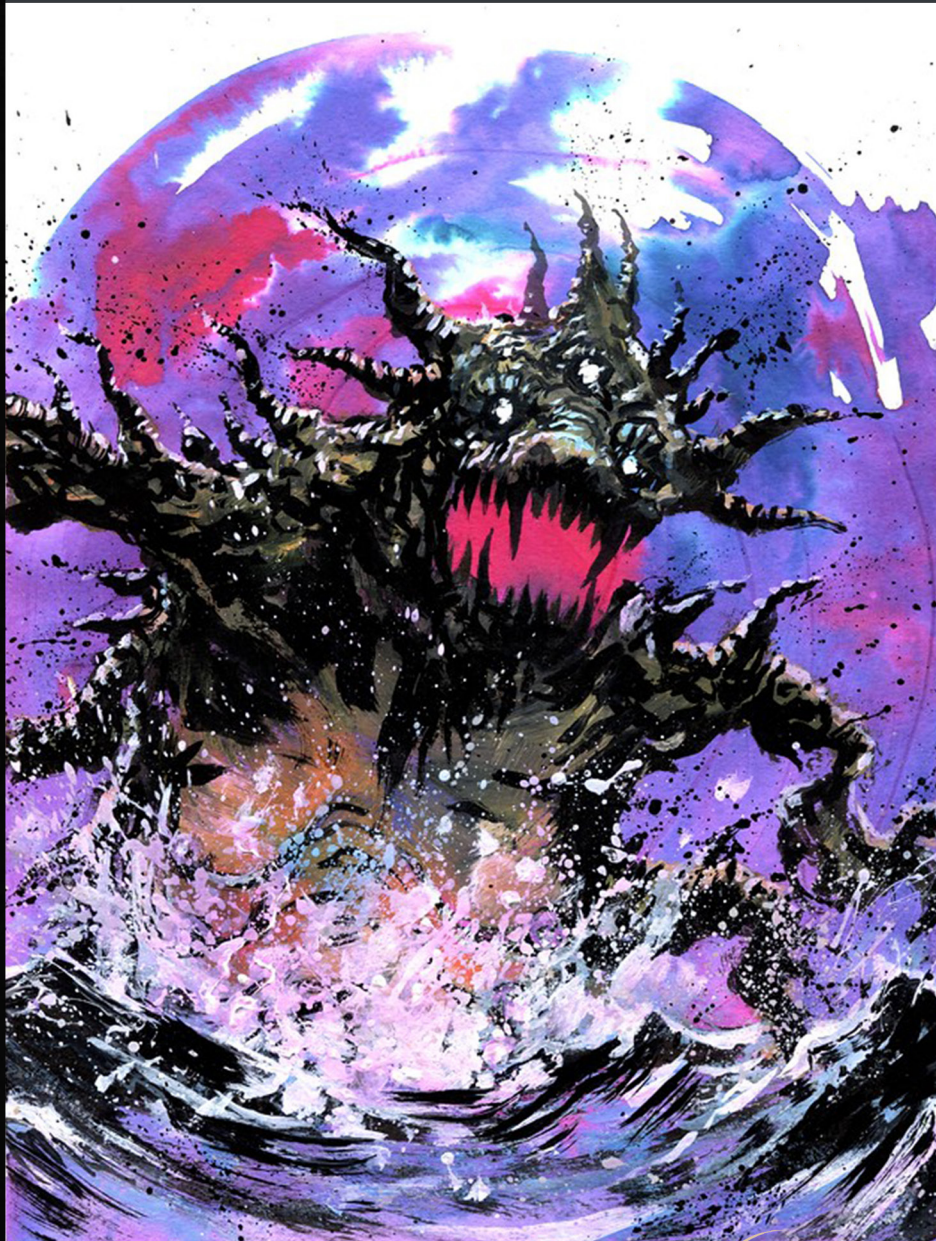


# INSAM

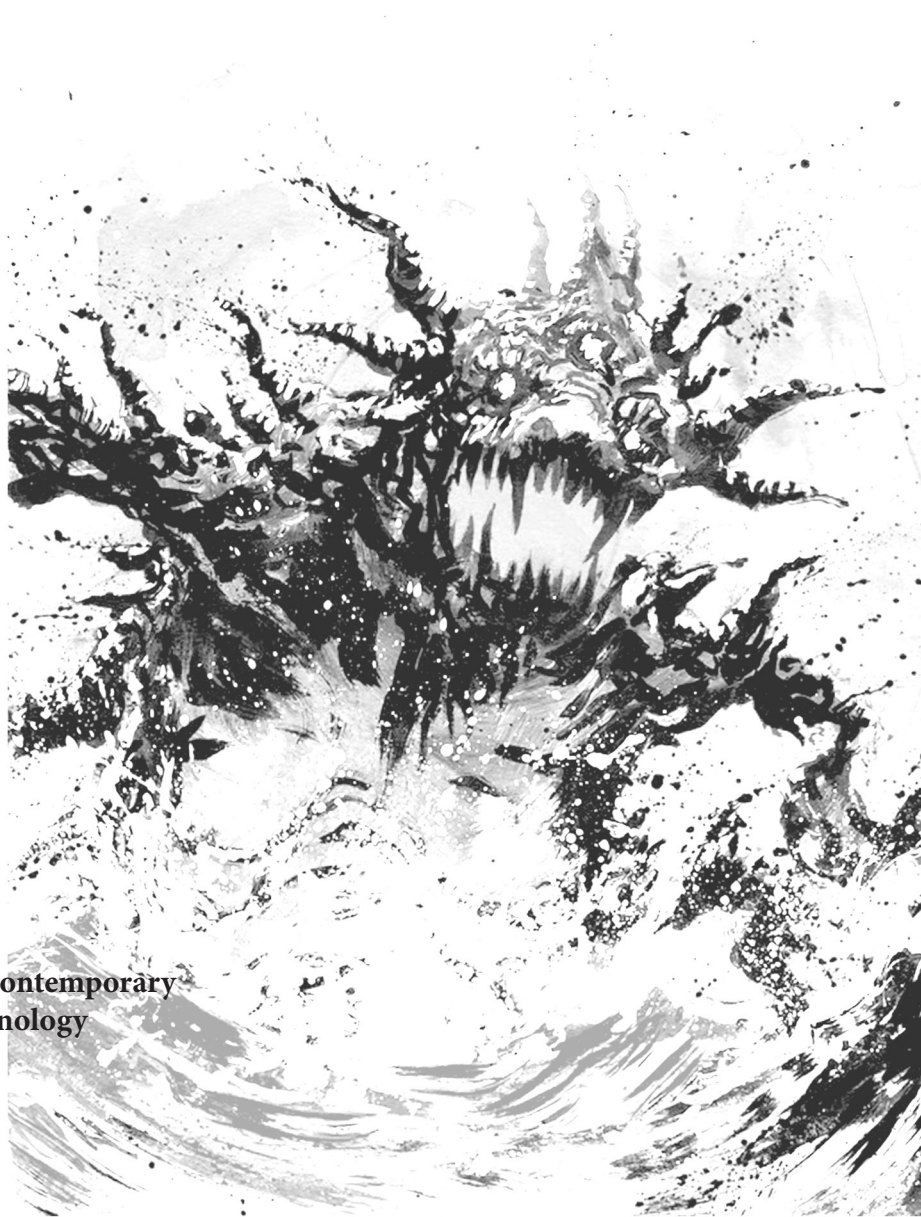
JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC,  
ART AND TECHNOLOGY

8 I/2022



# I N S Δ M

JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC, ART AND TECHNOLOGY



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Sarajevo, July 2022



I N S Δ M

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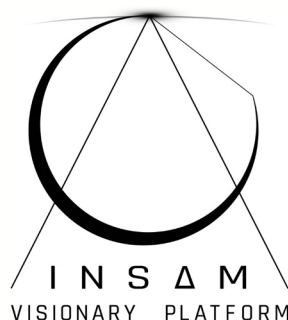
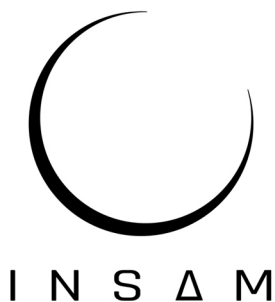
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## EDITOR'S FOREWORD

The couple of issues of the *INSAM Journal of Contemporary Music, Art and Technology* planned for this year – of which the issue before us, No. 8, is the first one – are dedicated to the theme titled “Fighting for the attention: Music and art on social media”. This theme also leans on the previous ones that dealt with music and art in times of crisis or the relationship between music and art with mental health in contemporary society. This time, we are shedding the light on artists, creators, procedures, methodologies and outputs that are in direct correlation with the ways in which diverse social media platforms today function and grab our attention.

The Main Theme section brings us seven exciting papers. In their article, Pascal Gielen and Thomas R. Moore discuss Michael Beil's scenic composition *Hide to Show* (2021), which engages with the principle of hiding mistakes and failures – a principle recognized by Gielen and Moore as the “basic principle of social media”. Furthermore, this piece works with memes/memefication in the compositional process itself and the hyperreal boundary between live performance and digital re-representation, which is analyzed through the lens of digital and Internet art. Taran Harris writes about the manipulation software applicable/applied on singing voice and their repercussions on the reception from the audience and contemporary vocal pedagogy. Here, Harris also gives a fresh perspective on the persistent issue of authenticity in music. The strike of Black creators in 2021 on one of the currently most popular and globally used platforms, i.e., TikTok, is the subject of Yvonne Ile's article. Ile addresses the issues of musical and artistic plagiarism from Black creators, underlining the vital role these (primarily dance) artists and creators have on new media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. With a focus on the works of Óscar Escudero and Belenish Moreno-Gil, Ferran Planas Pla explores these authors' approaches to compositional methodology in the age of social networks. Planas Pla introduces these composers and their poetics looking into them through concepts such as simultaneity, hyperreality and

flat time, as well as the struggle for visibility and profile subject. Gustavo Souza Marques analyzes the oeuvre of a Grammy-awarded African American rapper, Tyler, The Creator, focusing especially on the shock-value of these early works, and the role of racial play. These characteristics of Tyler, The Creator's output are here viewed in the context of the digital environment and web culture they first appeared in. Another global occurrence is scrutinized in the article written by Elina Luise Haessler: the author deals with K-Pop – South Korean popular music phenomena – utilizing tools of semiotic theoretical analysis. Viewing it as an essentially transnational music subculture, Haessler explores the creation, sustainment and effects of 'visual music' within K-Pop. In the last article of this section, Ana Knežević sets up an 'experiment' of the *meming the art* and the *art of meming*. The author chooses several prominent Instagram and Facebook accounts which are working in the "meming of art culture", and considers complex relationships between classical/high art and the Web 3.0 global context.

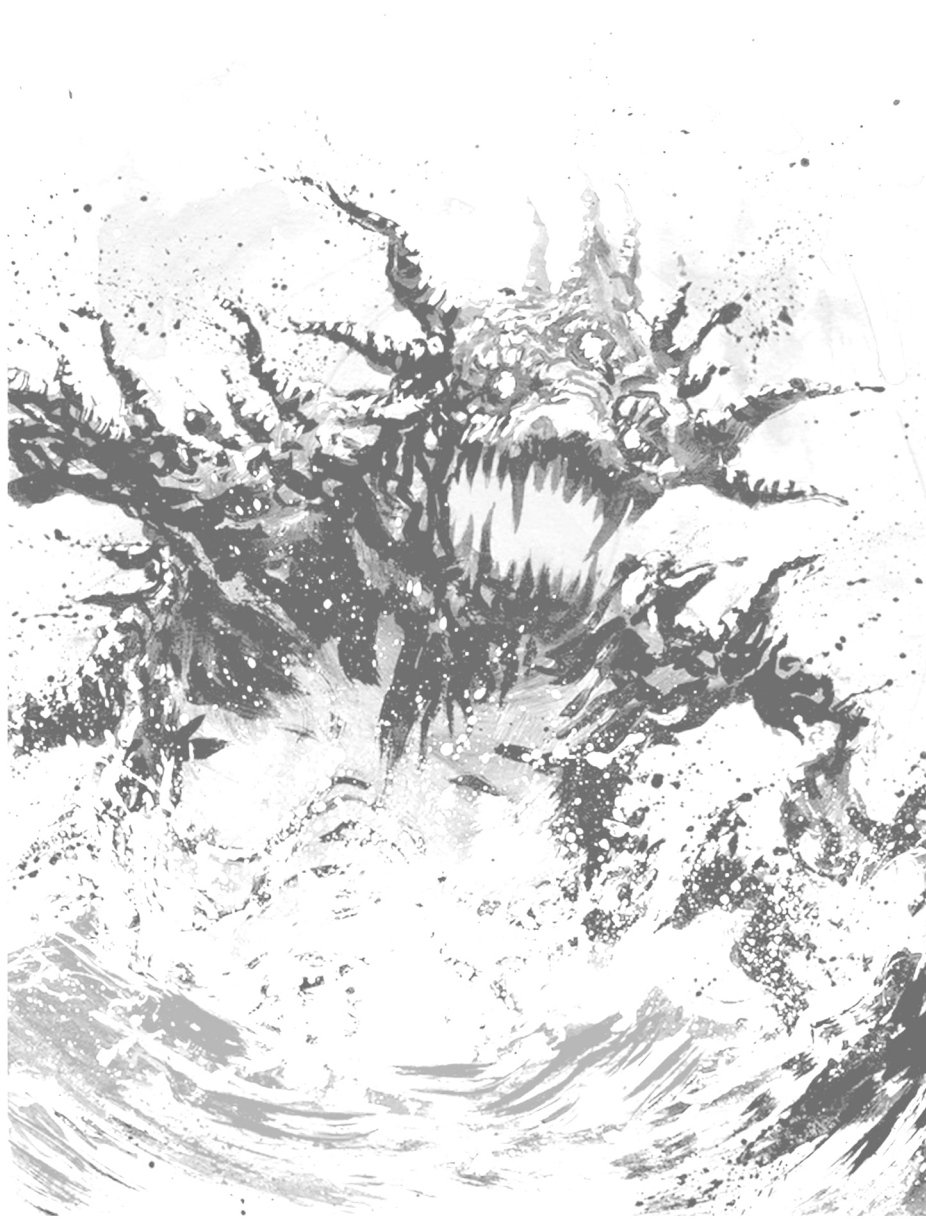
Surrounding the articles in the Main Theme section, we have a sort of an artist portfolio/'image essay' in the (Inter)Views section, that represents the "urban legend of Sarajevo", street artist and rapper Rulof/Cunami. Finally, in the section dedicated to reviews of new publications and relevant events, Milica Grujić writes about the exhibition *The Case of Poor Images*, held in Belgrade from April 14 to May 19 2022. This international review was inspired by Hito Stayerl's text about the phenomenon of the poor image, and resulted in the "anti-institutional gathering of artists from the internet underground, iPhone photographers and videographers, CCTV voyeurs, writers without publishers, publishers from the margins, preachers of the new era with the voice of the generation which grew alongside with the new media theory".

The Editorial team of *INSAM Journal* is grateful to all the authors, who we thank for the hard work in exploring new allies of emerging scientific fields, and, as always, our trustworthy reviewers and proofreader, Dr. Anthony McLean.

In Belgrade, July 10, 2022,  
 Dr. Bojana Radovanović,  
 Editor-in-Chief



# (INTER) VIEWS



**WRITE YOUR NAME. The first thing they teach you at school. WRITE YOUR NAME. Sign for your first bank account. WRITE YOUR NAME. At the top of your exam paper. WRITE YOUR NAME. On the back of your bedroom door with a drippy pen. WRITE YOUR NAME. To log in to facebook. WRITE YOUR NAME. WRITE YOUR NAME. WRITE YOUR NAME. As if you existed. As if you were unique. As if you were separate. IN YOUR NAME. The things you own are in your name. YOUR NAME. That which owns, that part of you which may possess things. And that part of you that possesses your crimes and your crimes against possession. Write your name on the police report. Write your name on the caution. Your name was written on you. Write your name.<sup>1</sup>**

**Banksy**

**Don't think about making art, just get it done. Let everyone else decide if it's good or bad, whether they love it or hate it. While they are deciding, make even more art.<sup>2</sup>**

**Andy Warhol**

**LET'S (NOT) TALK ABOUT STANDARDS.  
RULES Off.**

---

1 **YOU ARE AN ACCEPTABLE LEVEL OF THREAT**, <http://online.anyflip.com/ypci/eoal/mobile/12.07.2022>.

2 Andy Warhol quotes, <https://www.riseart.com/guide/2396/andy-warhol-quotes>, 12.07.2022.

/ METROMAHALA / LICA

## Urbana legenda Sarajeva RULOF: Ja sam vandal po evropskim standardima

26.06.18. 12:54 |

Radiosarajevo.ba



Dijeljenja  
362



Vice / Urbana legenda Sarajeva RULOF

Ako nekoga u Sarajevu pitate ko je RULOF - reći će vam: "To je brat koji se potpisao na cijeli grad".

Interview with graffiti artist RULOF: “Urban legend of Sarajevo RULOF: I am a vandal according to European standards” (2018)<sup>3</sup>

Someone who is a writer, who deals with this seriously, will never write on facades, schools, new buildings, museums, statues, anything that has value. A train, a tram, everything that is state-owned, that is common property – always. I guess because of that anarchy. Writers will always go to bad facades, badly arranged spaces. I'm glad when my graffiti disappears – and a good new facade has arrived. I'm glad if the ruins we were drawing on have been demolished, and something new has been created there. That's mostly how we work. If our graffiti disappear – it means that something new is being built, which is always good.<sup>4</sup>

3 “Urbana legenda Sarajeva RULOF: Ja sam vandal po evropskim standardima”, *Radio Sarajevo*, 2018. <https://radiosarajevo.ba/metromahala/lica/urbana-legenda-sarajeva-rulof-ja-sam-vandal-po-evropskim-standardima/304603>.

4 “Urbana legenda Sarajeva RULOF za VICE Srbija: Ja sam vandal po evropskim standardima”, *Vice*, 2018. <https://www.vice.com/sr/article/9k8qnz/urbana-legenda-sarajeva-rulof-za-vice-srbija-ja-sam-vandal-po-evropskim-standardima>.

## Banksy Tube graffiti: Cleaners 'unaware it was by artist'

15 July 2020



Banksy spray painted his tag in the colours of a medical face mask

Cleaners did not know graffiti on a London Underground train was by world-renowned artist Banksy when they removed it, the BBC has been told.

The piece, If You Don't Mask, You Don't Get, was painted inside a Circle Line service carriage.

“Banksy Tube graffiti: Cleaners 'unaware it was by artist'” (2020)<sup>5</sup>



Vijesti Biznis Sport Magazin Lifestyle Scitech Auto Križaljka Marketing Forum

SARAJEVO

### Vandalizirano 11 tramvaja, iscrtani grafiti se neće moći očistiti

B. R.  
22.06.2022.

212 komentara  
1.3k dijele



AD



11 tramvaja znatno oštećeni (Foto: Facebook GRAS Sarajevo)

“11 trams vandalized, painted graffiti will be impossible to clean” (2022)<sup>6</sup>

5 “Banksy Tube graffiti: Cleaners 'unaware it was by artist'”, *BBC*, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-53415832>.

6 “Vandalizirano 11 tramvaja, iscrtani grafiti se neće moći očistiti”, *klix*, 2022.

### OTKRIVEN RULOF: Reper Cunami išarao tramvaje GRAS-a, snimao privođenje u MUP i objavio na Instagramu (VIDEO)

Prema saopćenju MUP-a KS to je bio [REDACTED] koji se potpisuje kao Rulof, a široj čitalačkoj publici je možda poznatiji po imenu Cunami.

Vijesti 23. Jun. 2022 23. Jun. 2022 0



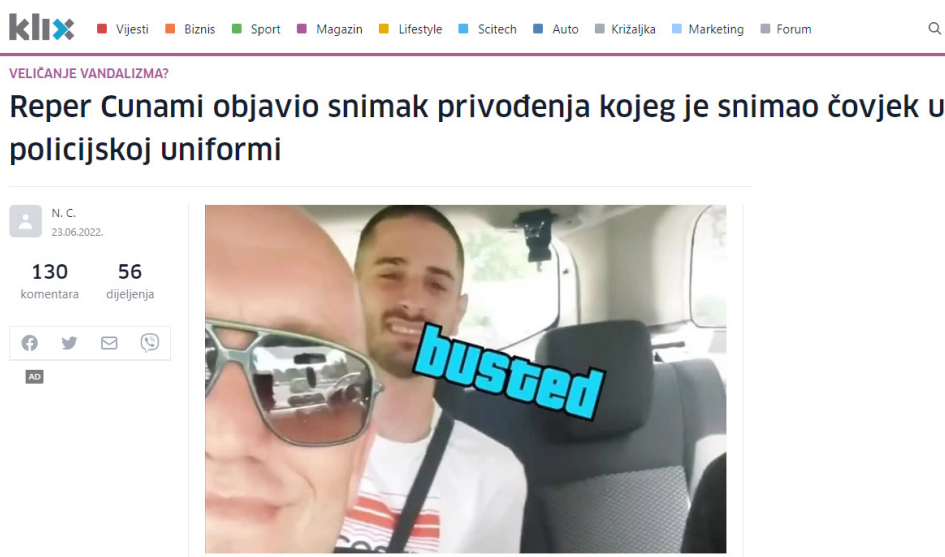
“RULOF REVEALED: Rapper Cunami painted GRAS trams, filmed the arrest in the MUP and posted it on Instagram” (2022)<sup>7</sup>

<https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/vandalizirano-11-tramvaja-iscrtani-grafiti-se-nece-moci-ocistiti/220622008>.

<sup>7</sup> “OTKRIVEN RULOF: Reper Cunami išarao tramvaje GRAS-a, snimao privođenje u MUP i objavio na Instagramu”, *Slobodna Bosna*, 2022. [https://www.slobodna-bosna.ba/vijest/255813/otkriven\\_rulof\\_reper\\_cunami\\_isarao\\_tramvaje\\_gras\\_a\\_snimao\\_privodjenje\\_u\\_mup\\_i\\_objavio\\_na\\_instagramu\\_video.html](https://www.slobodna-bosna.ba/vijest/255813/otkriven_rulof_reper_cunami_isarao_tramvaje_gras_a_snimao_privodjenje_u_mup_i_objavio_na_instagramu_video.html).



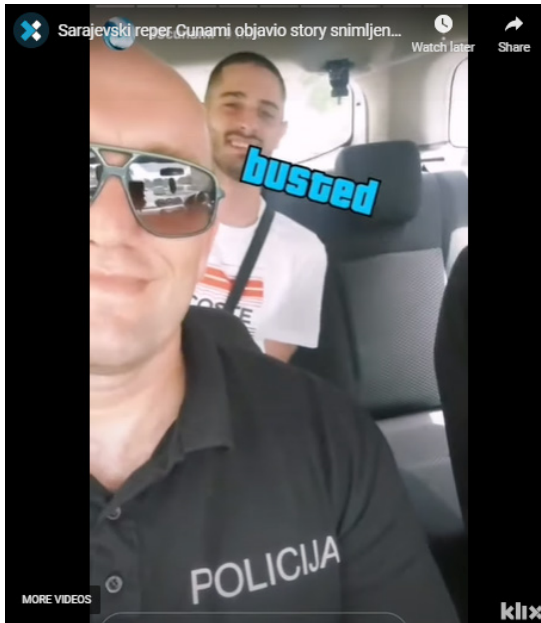
“Police arrested Sarajevo rapper Cunami for drawing graffiti on a tram” (2022)<sup>8</sup>



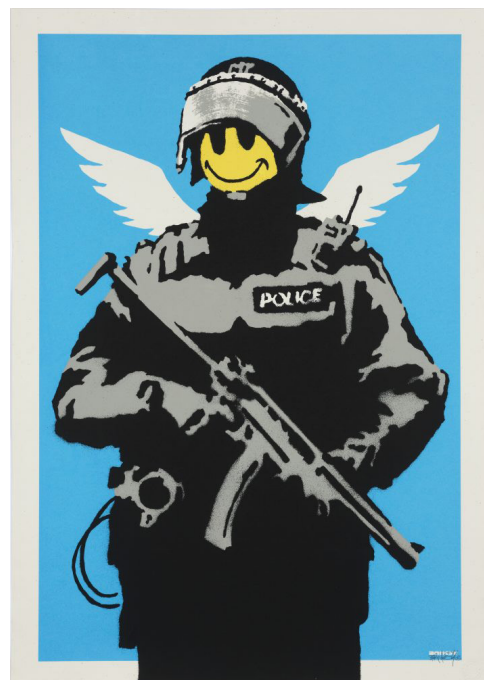
“Rapper Cunami published a video of the arrest filmed by a man in a police uniform” (2022)<sup>9</sup>

8 “Policija privela sarajevskog repera Cunamija zbog iscrtavanja grafita na tramvaju”, *klix*, 2022. <https://www.klix.ba/magazin/showbiz/policija-privela-sarajevskog-repera-cunamija-zbog-iscrtavanja-grafita-na-tramvaju/220622127>.

9 “Reper Cunami objavio snimak privođenja kojeg je snimao čovjek u policijskoj uniformi”, <https://www.klix.ba/magazin/showbiz/reper-cunami-objavio-snimak-privodjenja-kojeg-je-snimao-covjek-u-policijskoj-uniformi/220623060>.



Screenshot of video recorded by policeman posted as a story on Cunami's Instagram profile<sup>10</sup>



*Flying Copper* by Banksy (2003)<sup>11</sup>

10 "Reper Cunami objavio snimak privođenja kojeg je snimao čovjek u policijskoj uniformi", *klix*, 2022. <https://www.klix.ba/magazin/showbiz/reper-cunami-objavio-snimak-privodjenja-kojeg-je-snimao-covjek-u-policijskoj-uniformi/220623060>.

11 *Flying Copper*, 2003, <https://banksyexplained.com/flying-copper/>, 12.07.2022.



Photo taken by policeman posted as a story on Cunami's Instagram profile<sup>12</sup>

*You Told Me  
That Joke Twice  
by  
Banksy, (2000)*<sup>13</sup>



12 "Reper Cunami objavio snimak privođenja kojeg je snimao čovjek u policijskoj uniformi", *klix*, 2022. <https://www.klix.ba/magazin/showbiz/reper-cunami-objavio-snimak-privodjenja-kojeg-je-snimao-covjek-u-policijskoj-uniformi/220623060>.

13 "Police, Cops and Coppers", <https://banksyexplained.com/issue/police-cops-and-coppers/>, 12.07.2022.





Andy Warhol, “Yes No Interview” (1964)<sup>14</sup>



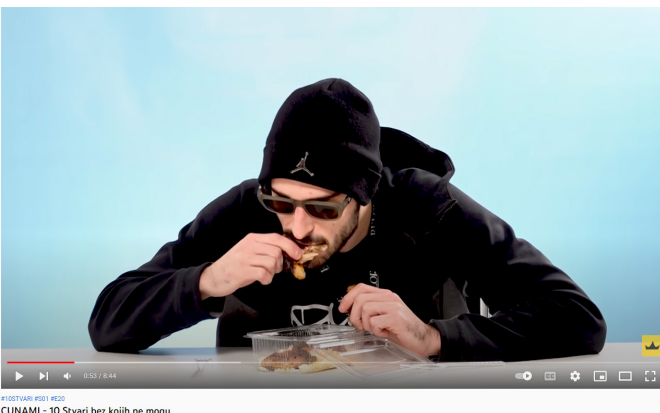
“This is not an interview with Cunami” (2020)<sup>15</sup>

14 Andy Warhol, “Yes No Interview,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVSQTt3hFWo>, 12.02.2022.

15 “Ovo nije intervju sa Cunamijem”, *Fashion, Beauty, Love*, 2020. <https://fbl.ba/ovo-nije-intervju-sa-cunamijem/>.



“Andy Warhol eating a hamburger” (1982): turned into a commercial for Burger King<sup>16</sup>



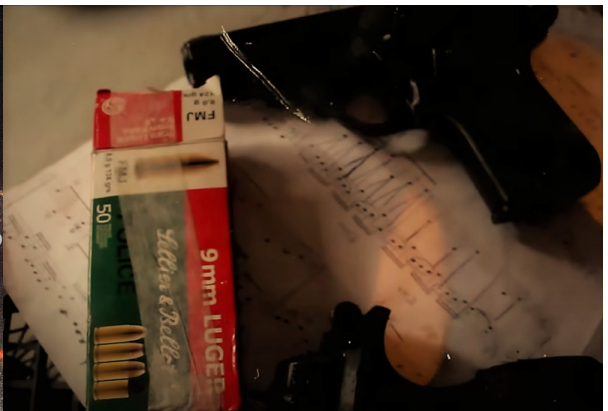
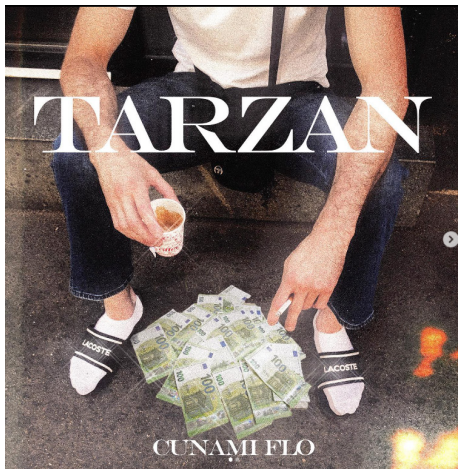
Cunami eating chicken at the show “10 things I can’t live without” (2021): used also as a commercial/announcement for Ibro Chicken Wings<sup>17</sup>

16 “How Burger King Turned Andy Warhol Eating a Whopper into the Anti-Super Bowl Ad”, *Food and Wine*, 2019. <https://www.foodandwine.com/news/burger-king-andy-warhol-whopper-commercial-super-bowl>.

17 “Cunami – 10 stvari bez kojih ne mogu”, YouTube video, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IgT-Gzz0tTs>.



*Dollar sign* from the *Dollar sign Collection* (1981)<sup>18</sup> and *Gun* from the *Gun Collection* (1981)<sup>19</sup> by Andy Warhol



Gun, bullets and music score, a screenshot of Cunami's video for the song *Transport* (2021)<sup>20</sup>

Cover of upcoming EP *Tarzan* by Cunami (2022)<sup>21</sup>

18 "Andy Warhol Dollar Signs", <https://www.vdwny.com/exhibitions/andy-warhol-dollar-signs>, 12.07.2022.

19 "Gun - The Warhol Collection, 1981", <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/andy-warhol-gun-the-warhol-collection>, 12.07.2022.

20 Cunami, *Transport*, YouTube video, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZxP6QmGGJU>.

21 Cunami Flo Instagram Posts, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CfoqH04DjBF/?hl=en>, 12.07.2022.



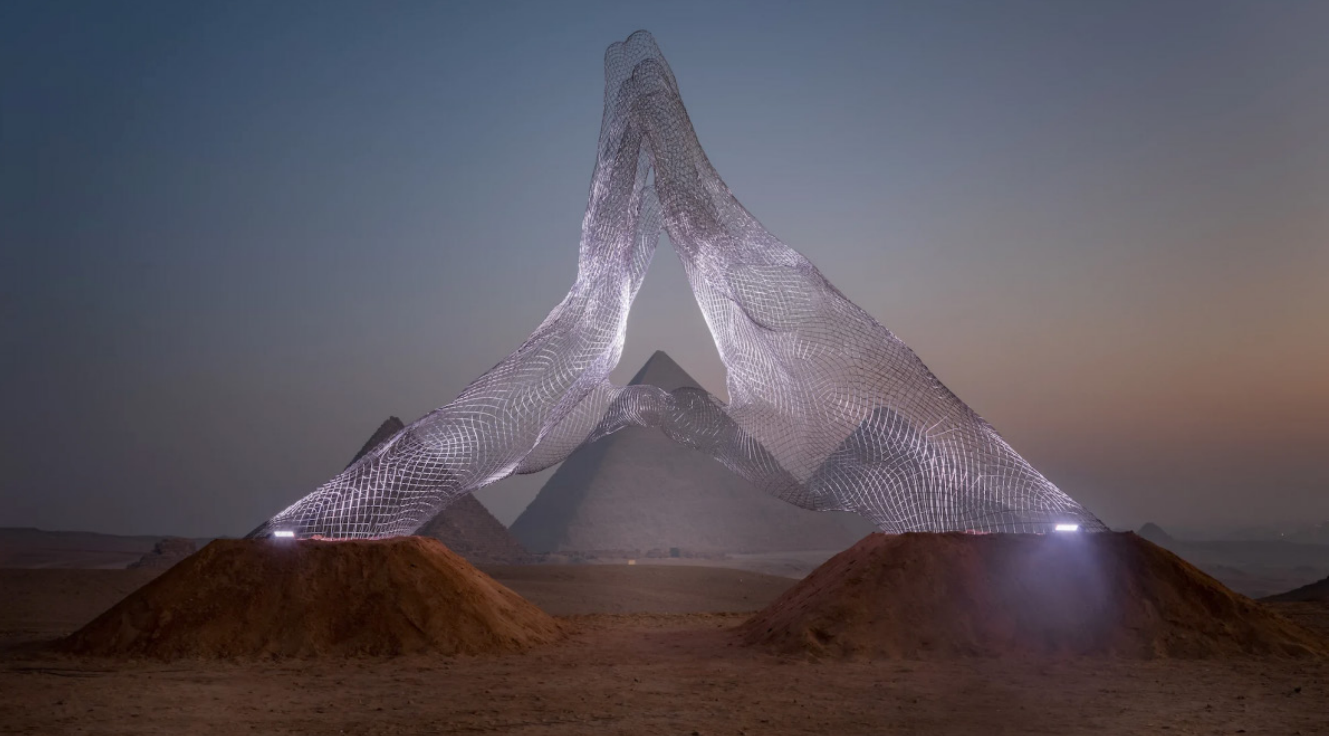
Truck (1985) by Andy Warhol<sup>22</sup>



Trucks, screenshots of Cunami's video for the song *Transport* (2021)<sup>23</sup>

22 Andy Warhol *Truck*, <https://fineartmultiple.com/andy-warhol-truck-fs-ii-367-370/>, 12.07.2022.

23 Cunami, *Transport*, YouTube Video, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZxP6QmGGJUU>.



*Together at the Forever is Now Exhibition (2021) by Lorenzo Quinn*<sup>24</sup>



Cover of album *Geng 33* (eng. *Gang 33*) by Cunami (2021)<sup>25</sup>

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24 “Forever is now: Lorenzo Quinn”, <https://www.halcyongallery.com/news/lorenzo-quinn-egypt/>, 12.07.2022.

25 *Geng 33*, 2021. <https://open.spotify.com/album/7vjdtmyZYZ7ShITPr2buC9>.



Lee Quinones (1979)<sup>26</sup>



Lee Quinones (1976): Piece sold for 75,600 USD at Sothesby's auction<sup>27</sup>

26 <https://www.widewalls.ch/artists/lee-quinones/artworks>, 13.07.2022.

27 <https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2021/public-intervention-art-of-the-street/the-dance-band>, 13.07.2022.



*Beli grad* by Rulof (2020)



*no title* by Rulof (2020)



\$\$\$\$\$ by Rulof (2020)



*Planet Earth* by Rulof (2020)

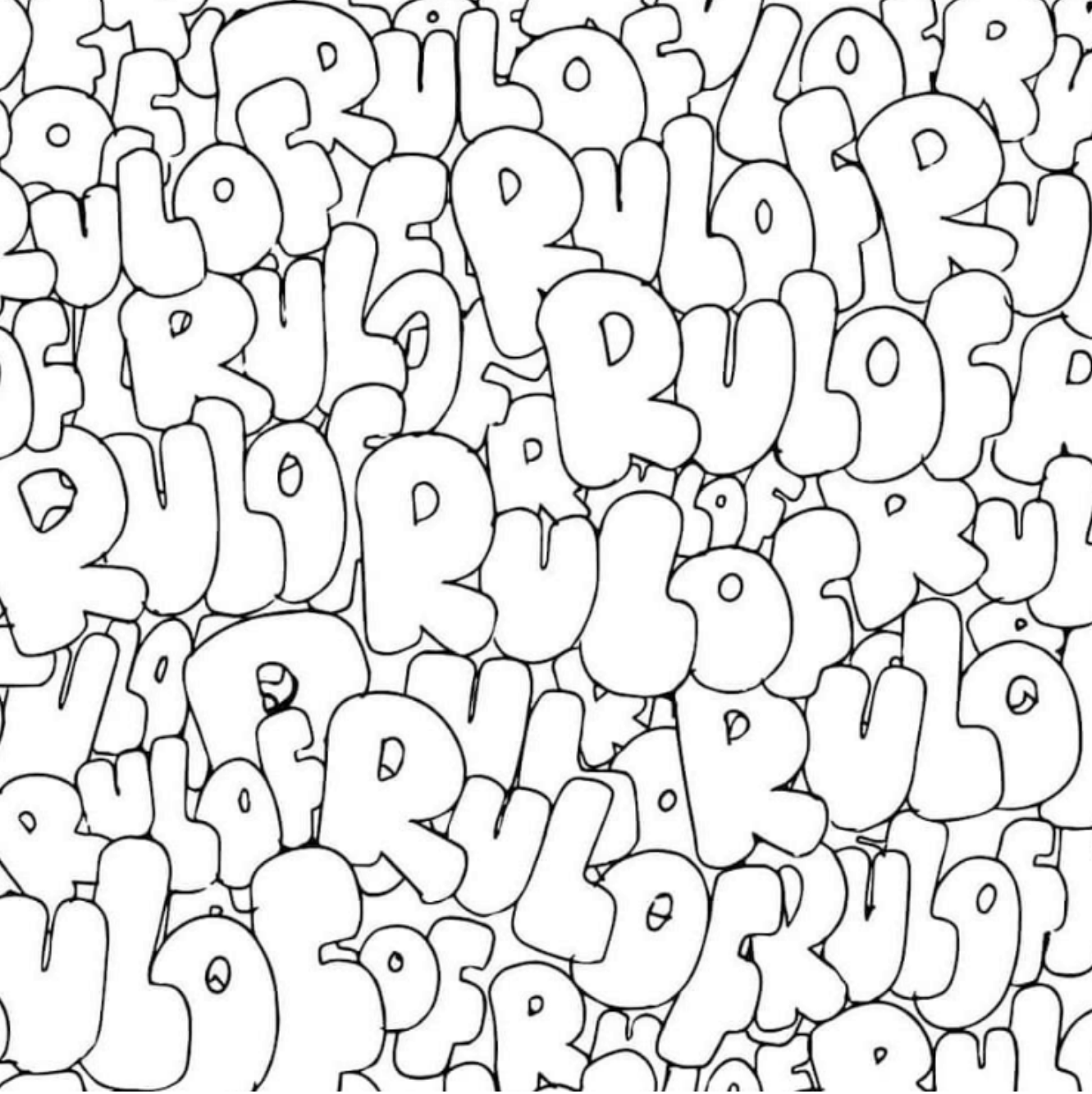




*Morning Sunshine* by Rulof (2022)



*Fast and Furious* by Rulof (2022)



*Rushour by Rulof (2022)*



*Weed Green 110% cotton by Rulof (2021)*  
*Camouflage Green \$ by Rulof (2021)*  
*Random White Tags by Rulof (2022)*  
*Cunami Flo CD Box by Cunami and Rulof (2021)*

MAIN THEME:

FIGHTING FOR THE ATTENTION:

MUSIC AND ART

ON SOCIAL MEDIA



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*University of Antwerp, Antwerp Research Institute for the Arts (ARIA),  
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*University of Antwerp and Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp (ARIA),  
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## **HIDE TO SHOW: 'MEMEFYING' LIVE MUSIC**

**Abstract:** Michael Beil's scenic composition *Hide to Show* (2021) thematizes a basic principle of social media, namely hiding mistakes, failures, or any vulnerable matters with the purpose of simulating an ever-perfect, active, and successful image and profile. Beil's piece, with memes and memefication as a guiding principle and compositional format, plays along the hyperreal boundary between live performance and digital re-representation. The audience is continuously misled and often left guessing between real and digital, confusing a real body with its projected simulation and live performed music with a (pre) recording. Perhaps more misleading, the live music and vocals are frequently processed in real time, too. Mistakes, but also individual interpretations and authentic appropriations of the piece are smoothed out or erased. Beil's composition may realize with this 'fixing' technique one ideal of today's live performer: guaranteed perfectionism on stage. In this article, a performer-researcher from *Hide to Show* and a sociologist of culture and politics analyze the possibilities and limitations of digital art and Internet culture found in Beil's work. What (new) requirements are demanded of the live performers and technicians? And how does digital simulation affect the artistic experience and aesthetics of contemporary art music and of social life itself?

**Keywords:** perfectionism, meme, digital performance, scenic composition, simulation, hyperreality, the Real.

---

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\*\* Author's contact information: [thomas@thomasmoore.co.uk](mailto:thomas@thomasmoore.co.uk).

## Playing lonely together

There is a certain amount of irony in the fact that, due to the aftermath of on-going health measures against the Coronavirus, *Hide to Show* has only enjoyed a limited number of performances. Michael Beil's scenic composition seems to have been written especially for the unreal crossroads in which we now live. The performance by the Nadar Ensemble,<sup>2</sup> for whom the piece was especially composed, reflects something of a parody of the current pandemic society. We can now all arguably relate to following set of lyrics: "Algorithms, ones and zeroes – You will never own – I will always be a network – You are all alone". This message is ubiquitous and repetitious throughout the entire performance of *Hide to Show*.

All of us have by now grown accustomed to full days, weeks, and months sitting in front of our computers. In the last two years, not only have meetings, lectures, and concerts, but also cocktails and even full dinners been organized to be experienced from behind our screens (De Munck & Gielen 2020). Without that mediating technology, communication seemed and sometimes became impossible. In many cases, it was even prohibited by law. But even without those bans, people nowadays seem to prefer to communicate in isolation. In *The Lonely Century*, Noreena Hertz (2020) describes how communication technology and social media paradoxically are at the roots of loneliness found in contemporary societies. Even when people are physically together in a cafe, restaurant,

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2 *Hide to Show* is the third piece Beil wrote specifically for Nadar Ensemble. The first, *exit to enter* (2013) laid the foundations for the aesthetic video choices we find in *Hide to Show*. Here, actions performed and recorded live by the musicians become a moving taffarel of images and avatars, each substituting the other for the perceived performance of the rigorously composed sound- and movement-track. In 2015, Beil wrote *Bluff* for Nadar. This piece and particularly its rehearsal process built the trust between ensemble and composer required to produce an evening-long composition like *Hide to Show*. For the third performance of the 30-minute piece, the ensemble collectively opted to perform the complicated, through-composed, and action-filled piece, by memory. *Hide to Show*, an hour long, through-composed, action-filled, danced, and sung piece *must* be performed by memory. Without the collective experience (and active decision from the ensemble) of *Bluff*, neither side would have engaged in this monumental project. A third piece, *Key Jack* (2017) by Beil for pianist without piano, delineates a clearer line to *Hide to Show*. Not only does it expertly combine the video processing and aesthetics found in *exit to enter* and *Bluff*, it further develops Beil's instrumentalization of the musicians' roles in his pieces. In both *Key Jack* and *Hide to Show*, he actively and continuously develops their movement repertoire and personal idiosyncrasies to be artistic tools he immediately put to use in both pieces. *Key Jack* is for pianist without piano. Important to note is that this piece can only be performed by a trained pianist. The musician must perform the fingering, posturing, and attitude of a concert pianist, 'jacking' the traits in a performative exhibition. Each movement, from eye-blinking to snapping to chord-playing, is timed perfectly with the composer's tape and each is recorded. The playback then occurs simultaneously and immediately in three-fold: on two life size projection panels and live.

or playground – how often do we still spot people, young and old, absorbed in their devices? This seems to be a new digital art, ‘being-alone-together’: communicating with the whole world, just not with our loved ones sitting across the table. Covid-19 has only magnified that development. In hindsight, Beil seemed to have foreshadowed this social reality through his composition, which though only premiered after the pandemic had struck, had already been completed by the beginning of 2020.

With *Hide to Show*, the composer explores the possibilities and limitations of digital communication in music. He puts eight musicians on stage in six lined-up, but distinct booths, a kind of display case into which the audience can occasionally and collectively peep and leer, while the players themselves remain separated. On the side facing the public, each musician controls a blind (of the sort common to all houses), alternating between turning the slats to give a peak into their rooms and opening them fully, offering the audience the complete show. This dramaturgical staging raises questions. What happens to artistic practice and teamwork if performers cannot see each other? What does communication mean when musicians can only hear each other through headphones and are in physical isolation? Beil conducts a similar experiment in relation to the audience. What happens when digital images mediate the live performance and technological fixing techniques correct or even exaggerate ‘blemishes’? What is hidden and what not? Live music’s ‘sound’ and especially its ‘feel’ becomes increasingly ambiguous and unpredictable when reality is simulated. Drawing on Jean Baudrillard (1983), the German composer offers us, with this new scenic composition, a taste of hyperreality. The postmodern semiotic concept was coined by the French philosopher in his book *Simulacre and Simulation* (1983). The notion points to the inability to consciously distinguish reality from a simulation of reality, especially in technologically advanced societies. Hyperreality is the condition in which what is real and what is fiction are blended to the point that there is no clear distinction between where one ends and the other begins. It allows the mixing of physical reality with virtual reality and human intelligence with artificial intelligence (Baudrillard 1983).

Beil does not, however, only explore the boundaries of digital communication and hyperreality. The performance also plays with and explores formats that abound in Internet culture. *Hide to Show* is mainly structured as a series of short, repetitive, gif-like fragments – in other words, memes: short iconic images that frequently circulate, multiply, and mutate online today. Like memes, the origin of Beil’s scenes is not simple to isolate and identify. Baudrillard would conceivably regard them as simulacra: endless copies without an original. Memes are catchy, attract attention, but also fly past our eyes at breakneck speeds. Beil plays with this aesthetic of immediacy. The audience is confronted with a hasty accumulation of scenes that at the outset seem to have little to do with any deeper content.



The performance, at first, feels something akin to the associative scrolling we all find ourselves at some point doing online.

A more analytical observation of the aforementioned characteristics observed in *Hide to Show* suggests that the scenography is based on at least three principles of today's Internet culture: (1) communication in isolation, (2) immediacy, and (3) hyperreality. In this article, we will explore what these principles demand from both performers and the audience. First, we will explore the Internet aesthetics used by Beil. According to Alexander Baumgarten, we can regard aesthetics as being based on aisthēsis (Baumgarten 2007). This contrasts with the more distant scientific approach to the world, one's ability to grasp one's surrounding reality in an affective way with all the available senses. Baumgarten's conception of aesthetics is instead related to the old Greek notion of aisthēsis, which means sensation and affective perception in contrast to intellectual or rational knowledge. For Baumgarten, scientific truth exists outside the possibility of 'aesthetic truth' (*veritas aesthetica*), which is based on the involvement of human affects in processes of communication and our interpretation of the world. The same analytical concepts and words can differ in meaning because they are uttered differently on account of different affects. One must therefore perceive the author's or artist's affects in the expression of words, music, or visuals to understand their correct meaning(s) (McQuillan 2021; Grote 2021). In our view, aesthetics is a way in which reality can touch us and with which a performer can touch the audience (Carroll 2006; Gielen 2022). But what does this mean in a hyperreality in which our perception of reality is determined by technological mediation and simulacra? With our analysis of *Hide to Show* we will posit and formulate an answer to that question.

We will also concern ourselves with how Beil's scenic composition itself relates to reality. Is *Hide to Show* merely a mimesis of our current Internet culture or is it an artistic reflection of our lived and experienced social (media) reality? In other words: the performance shows hyperreality, but is it itself hyperreal? To answer this question, we confront the concept of hyperreality with another theoretical notion that illuminates our perception of reality, namely the psychoanalytic concept of the Real as established by Jacques Lacan (1991) and further elaborated upon in terms of culture and politics by Slavoj Žižek (2002). It is beyond the scope of this article to fully and deeply detail the multiple theories of both thinkers (both of which rest firmly on Sigmund Freud's writings on psychoanalysis). However, in summary, Lacan's most important addition to Freud's theory is the understanding that our subconscious is structured according to language and was therefore strongly influenced by semiotics. Lacanian concepts can also be approached as a process of subject formation. From that perspective, three interrelated notions in his theory are relevant to our study, the pre-linguistic Imaginary, the cultural and linguistic Symbolic, and the Real.

The Imaginary is structured by needs and image-identifications. The Symbolic is structured by language and the law and, finally, the Real is that which can neither be pictured nor articulated through language. The Real is central to Žižek's theory and based specifically on Lacan's analytical apparatus. However, Žižek combines Lacan's Real with insights from cultural studies and critical theory. As it pertains to this article, it is important to underline that, according to both theoreticians, the Real determines our reality and our everyday actions. In that sense it is constitutive and forms a 'hard kernel' at the heart of our existence. The concept does not point to reality, but to truth itself, and is therefore the opposite of fiction, fantasy, or dreams. However, while the Real is real, Žižek suggests that we cannot verbalize it. We can only experience it through enjoyment, alienation, trauma, transcendence, sublimation, etc. For the purposes of this article, we will approach this notion more poetically as the 'truth of life itself', which will necessarily include death and transiency in its definition. Understood from this perspective, the Real cannot dissolve in a hyperreal simulacra, but remains hidden from our culture. It is not susceptible to codes, concepts, and images and never has been. Paraphrasing Lacan: the Real precedes the symbolic order. We can only experience or feel it directly and not through signs (or verbiage). This approach allows us to question whether what remains hidden in *Hide to Show* could ever become visible. In other words: does the scenic composition simply 'show' the Real by suggesting that what is hidden can in fact never be shown? Less abstractly formulated: does the live performance offer a taste of life itself without putting it into words? Even though Beil uses extensive technology and infrastructure that acts as a digital and factual wall between the players themselves and between the players and the audience, during the performance one can arguably experience real life lurking just behind that facade. In this way, *Hide to Show* is profoundly different from our everyday Internet experience. Below we will argue the exact details of how Beil goes about this.

### **Embodied disembodiment**

Throughout most of *Hide to Show*, the players not only cannot see each other (while playing), their focus, at least visually speaking, is also kept from the audience. When the blinds open on each of the little boxes, the players have been instructed to either focus on their private room or on a space just two meters in front of the décor. For the audience, it appears as though any sort of eye contact has been strictly forbidden. Bodies are physically on stage, but at the same time they are dreamily absent. Like zombies, they bathe in an atmosphere of apathy and detachment that shows no involvement at all with each other or with the audience. Yet the musicians play together flawlessly and despite an unbroken

fourth wall they manage to keep the viewer firmly under their spell. It betrays strict stage direction or better, a meticulous composition combined with hours of rehearsals. Our experience suggests that when bodies cannot physically interact and resonate with each other, every movement, every sound and every image must be meticulously set in advance. Because of the combination of both the highly detailed compositional instructions and the inherent isolation in the piece and the time period in which it was created, the performers required a specific rehearsal strategy. Furthermore, *Hide to Show* must be played from memory. Though memorization is not a novel approach, this piece is 75 minutes long and includes not just notes on a page, but detailed choreography and play-acting as well, all of which requires a high level of commitment to the project from the performing musicians.

Initial rehearsals took place in separate and smaller formations because of both the (contemporaneous) pandemic and the simple fact that the players would, in the end, be separated on stage. The eight musicians initially rehearsed in fixed duos and recorded the 32 scenes individually. As a whole group, with Beil, and after Nadar's sound engineer had layered the videos into one complete montaged video, the ensemble studied the recorded rehearsals together and offered collective feedback. Full company rehearsals in the hall progressed in a similar fashion to theatre or dance performances, i.e., the composer (similar to a stage director or choreographer) led the rehearsals, choosing where to begin and offering feedback. However, unlike typical dance or theatre productions, in matters of physical acting and timing, the performers were solely reliant on the critical feedback offered by Beil. There was no ability to fix issues of synchronization through typical collective and embodied ensemble playing. The separateness created by the décor and composition further generated a kind of rehearsal energy that was also unique to each performer (or more exaggerated than usual). Just as our everyday lockdown virtual meetings, emotional issues such as frustration, exhaustion, excitement, and even satisfaction were often felt individually and seldom shared through the walls of the cabins, making the ensemble rehearsals even more separate and isolated.

A third factor that influenced ensemble rehearsals was Beil's complex live video and audio electronics, built and performed by Warped Type from Düsseldorf. Nearly everything that the musicians do in the rooms is recorded live, cut, and manipulated by software written by Beil and Warped Type especially for this performance. The 'new' videos are then projected back onto the blinds on the front of each room, the person in the room, or a combination thereof. The players perform the recorded actions live and based on detailed instructions written in the composer's score. However, the critical feedback of both the composer and his computer scientist colleagues was required to create the expected and required level of perfection for this piece. The participation of the technicians was

thus not a secondary phenomenon of Beil's composition, but an active choice on his part to include them in the compositional process and in its manifest rehearsal practice. For the players, they became the essential link to their fellows in the rooms next door, often only 'seeing' each other in reproduced, after the fact, videos displayed on their closed blinds. Furthermore, the musicians could only hear each other through the in-ear monitoring, making the exact location of the other players (something normally taken for granted) a further unknown. All together it contributed to making *Hide to Show*, from at least the standpoint of the ensemble's interactions, a disembodied performance.

This disembodiment is further enhanced by the occasional use of so-called technological fixing techniques, in which live music and vocals are processed in real time. On occasion, missteps such as erroneous tones were corrected in real time. Just as we hide mistakes, stutters, or stumbles on social media today to present an ideal image or profile of ourselves (De Munck & Gielen 2022), Beil deployed technology to create error-free scenes. At these key moments, perfectionism itself becomes a simulation. The act of failing on stage suddenly becomes extremely difficult. Each player's singular accents and authentic interpretations, which are unique to the body of each performer, were kept under sharp control. Combined with the rigorous direction, these occasional technical fixes limited appropriation of the music. Or more simply put, during these specific scenes, the players were discouraged from inserting their personalities or 'owning' the music.

But does this make *Hide to Show* a simulacrum? The technological disembodiment of the human voice can dissolve any authenticity and singularity. Correcting wrong pitches and crooked melodies could also take the life out of the live performance. Playing live always means taking risks for musicians. It demands a risk and weaknesses, and vulnerabilities are necessarily taken into account. Without this, the arc of tension, required for an audience to understand and accept that what they are viewing is a performance, would simply slacken (Huizinga 1949). This may be the ambivalence found in any live experience. Tension builds in part because the audience knows that the performer can always lapse or misstep. The life of the live performance is paradoxically based on that failure. Borrowing from Edgard Varèse, music is the art of organizing raw sounds, random sounds, or noise into a sounding composition (Varèse 1917). That is why music is always artificial, literally: created art and created life, so always not real. The tension of a live performance consists, among other things, in the fact that noise can still break through the orchestration in an uncontrolled moment. The possibility of hiccups, a cracking voice, a wrong tone, note, or rhythm, but also a sweating body, or an uncontrolled movement creates the chance that real life

could temporarily break through the artificial.<sup>3</sup> Subverting Beil's title: showing art and making music heard is only possible by hiding the rampant, rough life of sounds and noises (or, like John Cage, by framing them within an artificial framework (Cage 1960)). In this way, we could understand Beil's title literally. Life in the wild must at least be tamed to be able to speak of art. But if the public knows in advance that that life can no longer break through (thanks to technological fixes), all tension could dissipate. Nothing would remain of a *live* performance. One can just as well listen to or watch a recording at home. After all, cutting out the risk of failure or vulnerability also means cutting out life. It makes live music sterile, soulless, and lifeless. This may be one of the reasons why so many recordings made during the Covid lockdown were so wearisome.

Beil is clearly very much aware of this potential for sterility. Though he aims for perfection and does his best to create it by tactically deploying auto-tune and a click-track to fix this time-coded piece, he also cherishes the inevitable small mistakes made during the recorded sections in which no computer correction occurs.<sup>4</sup> These small little blemishes, repeated over and over again thanks to Beil's idiosyncratic<sup>5</sup> and repetitious usage of video feedback loops, lets the audience know that what they are seeing is actually live – it's real and not pre-recorded. In addition, *Hide to Show* knows how to create tension, and thus life, in a new way. There are still real live bodies on stage and even a layman-spectator must realize that the players are performing a mighty feat to string all 32 scenes together unscathed. In other words, although Beil employs hyperreal principles of technological media mediation, the public's awareness of a reality remains. It is a reality of sweat, blood, and tears, the hard work the players must put in to keep the virtual wall straight, intact, and scatheless. It is this embodied disembodiment that makes *Hide to Show* a completely different experience than simply scrolling on the Internet. That experience of real life is further enhanced by the physical presence of the audience. Bodies that collectively breathe, laugh, remain silent, cough, and clap. Bodies that resonate with each other and with the performers who make *Hide to Show* a visceral experience that puts hyperreality in brackets, at least for a moment. In other words, Beil has not completely disembodied his scenic composition. As a result, the spectator continues to savor the Real between the virtual.

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3 A whole subgenre exists for those seeking the inevitable blemishes and outright fails. One needs only do a Google or YouTube search for 'Perle Nere' or simply 'concert fails.'

4 This category represents the vast majority of the scenes.

5 See *exit to enter* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxuwaN9yP9U>) or *BLACKJACK 2012* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5iYlejiftAg>).

## Memefying culture, cut up reality

In *Hide to Show*, memes that have circulated the Internet are then copied and put live on stage. Etymologically speaking, meme comes from the Greek word ‘mimētés’ which means both ‘imitator’ and ‘feigner’ – and hardly can be absent in a performance that intentionally thematizes hyperreality. Just as memes act online, the memefied moments in *Hide to Show* are seemingly ‘pasted’ one after the other without any substantive link. Besides the fact that they can all be found on the Internet (and are highly entertaining), the scenes composed by Beil, on the surface at least, appear to have little in common with each other. For example, what does a Beach Boys song, “In my room”, have to do with the Leek Girl “Levan Polka” dance? Just like online, they appear here offline at first sight without context. Their presence in the performance seems like a random choice. The scenes in *Hide to Show*, like their online versions, appear to wander both bottomlessly and detached from time, despite their tangibility on a physical stage.

A meme’s success depends precisely on their universal recognizability. This means, among other things, that they must be easily understandable or ‘legible’ without any historical and geographical context. This requirement presupposes cultural codes and also demands as little ‘on the spot’ deciphering effort as possible. As a result, however, memes feel like pieces of displaced culture, which can have an alienating effect. By using this medium, *Hide to Show* presents a fragmented, carved, and perhaps also cut up reality. Just as on the Internet, the memefied scenes are highly entertaining, but simultaneously, absolutely disorienting. Where do they come from? When were they made? And why are they shown here? Inherent to this ‘context collapse’ (Marwick & Boyd 2011), any key or legend is withheld from the viewer that would help to decipher the presented memes or scenes. The only thing the public can rely on is a memory of memes that they may have previously seen on the Internet. This result is an immediate, bite-sized, and manageable composition. Without time and without geographic context, culture simply must rely on immediacy. Images instantly attract attention. Hyperreality therefore also means hyperactivity. Following the logic of an attention regime, the viewer must constantly be re-stimulated. And so, *Hide to Show* never stalls or comes to a standstill. There is always something to see or listen to – and often multiple and simultaneous miniature scenes battle for the audience’s attention. Beil’s composition masterly weaves catchy ‘Acid’ samples with his own upbeat vocaloid-style jingles in a captivating counterpoint that bangs on at an extremely high tempo. The acted-out images, both live and reproduced, are also alluringly inviting thanks to quick costume changes and the video-feedback-created layered reality. Beil, in one scene, even goes so far as to map players’ legs onto the torso of others (playing even further with the interchangeability of

components found in a modern meme). By applying this principle, *Hide to Show* manages a certain charm. Scenes seem to constantly compete and constantly push each other out of the way. Furthermore, they never really seem to settle before the next has already made its entrance.

Beil also varies and copies his memes, as they scream for attention, appearing and disappearing at breakneck speeds. Yet *Hide to Show* itself does not follow this online logic completely. The scenic composition, for example, does not only grapple with, but outright contradicts the principle of immediacy simply by holding the audience in their seats for more than an hour. The viewer also cannot just scroll associatively like a typical Internet consumer without any act of commitment. In our case, Beil determines what the public will see and hear as well as the duration thereof. Moreover, *Hide to Show* does not float above history, but is embedded in a historical tradition of music history, at least in a tradition of the performing arts, namely the concert. The audience sits still and has no buttons to press or screens to swipe that would operate the performance. The sovereign power rests entirely with the composer and in this case equally with the players to whom the viewers willingly surrender (Schwartz & Godfrey 1993) for more than an hour. Moreover, the performance is not bottomless. The concert hall where the performance is played is physically and materially grounded in a geopolitical space with its own cultural policy, specific cultural education, and traditions. With *Hide to Show*, Beil therefore places the work first and foremost in an artistic tradition that critically observes and comments on everyday social phenomena. Although the scenography is highly entertaining, the viewer cannot escape a sharp and bitter undertone which is in stark contrast to the seemingly random online supply of memes. With further consideration then, Beil's selection does not come across as random at all. Some memefied scenes demonstrate it implicitly, but others sing loudly and explicitly: loneliness! Does not all social media, all our lust for communication and connection, hide our growing loneliness? Like memes, today we seem to float like cybernauts, bottomless and rudderless in a historical vacuum. We cling to fleeting images, easy tunes, and messages. We network endlessly in the vain hope of finding footing and anchoring. Meme etymologically also refers to 'mimeme', which is ancient Greek for 'root'. In *Hide to Show* there is a melancholic atmosphere in which precisely that desire for roots and being able to take root grows ever more present and palpable.

## Hyperreality vs. the Real

Disneyland is arguably Baudrillard's best known example of what he termed hyperreality in the recreational life of the contemporary Westerner. Here, children and adults alike go to literally live a fantasy. "Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra". It yearns to be fake so that rest "can be seen as real" (Baudrillard 1983, 10). While the park itself is harmless, Baudrillard's message is more all-encompassing. For him, daily life, thanks to ubiquitous technology, takes on a constant veneer of simulation, an ever-present innuendo to the absence of anything real. In *Hide to Show*, Beil clearly finds inspiration in Baudrillard's ideas, for example in the Leek-Dance meme and thread that appears early in the piece and morphs into the work's grand finale. The origins of the Hatsune Miku version of "Levan Polka" are murky, but it is undoubtedly an Internet sensation (with its 16 million + views). Early on in *Hide to Show*, Beil re-examines, parses, and then reconfigures (arguably) the 'original' leek-dancing farm girl video.<sup>6</sup> At first, we only hear the highly catchy tune played back with equally recognizable electronic instrumentation. However, just three scenes later, Beil treats the audience to the first live, flesh-and-blood, version of the meme. The dance is still couched in one of the booths and in what comes across as an attempt to drive the point mercilessly home, Beil shows Miku's simulated and 'mapped' version of the dance on the blinds of the room adjacent to the live dancer.

Miku is from head to toe a fantasy. Her body is a cartoon, animated, and while based on real humanoid design, is clearly an 'ideally' drawn figure. 'Her' official image was first drawn by the manga artist Kei (Sabo 2019). Her voice, the basis for vocaloid technology,<sup>7</sup> is a computer enhanced recreation of several voices, all of whom simply recorded a basic set of phenoms. One can 'let' Hatsune Miku sing simply by playing a keyboard that is programmed with her sample bank. By composing a piece in which players dance her moves live, Beil stretches the concept of sampling, programming the players with Miku's physical movement repertoire and then later in the piece, putting her voice literally into the musician's mouths.

That brings us to the second example of hyperreal inspired scenes. Towards the latter half of the piece, five players group around a table outside of the fixed

6 ЛУЧШИХ ТЕХНОЛОГИЯ, *Hatsune Miku Ievan Polkka Dance Comparison*, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DTSkygD1wR0>.

7 "VOCALOID – the Modern Singing Synthesizer" accessed March 15, 2022, <http://www.vocaloid.com/en/>.



décor to reenact the famous Beach Boys video clip to their hit, “In my room”<sup>8</sup>. Though the musicians’ movements are clearly stylized to the 1960s era clip, the music is Beil’s and the audible voices were created using vocaloid software. In other words, the players lip-sync this scene, simulating reality on at least two levels. First, simply by ‘acting’ as though the audible voices were their own. And second, by recreating a visible genre that pre-dates the audible. Beil instructed the musicians during rehearsals to act like the Beach Boys, ‘the perfect sons-in-law’. This picture, for him a total fantasy that the players were to enact in real life, matches succinctly with the phantasmagorically created voice – they have little or no basis in reality besides a recognizable language and vocabulary. A few scenes later, those same players are seen jammed into one room for the same number. Only this time, they sing it live – though heavily corrected using auto-tune: a perfect presentation ensured through technical intervention. Just as genetic engineering hopes for the perfect life, perhaps even eternal life, technological corrections here generate the illusion of the ideal live performance, the possibility of artistic perfectionism without fail.

That hope for technology, however, is based on an assumption that humans will eventually be able to fully and rationally decode real life and the live experience, and that this will lead to the generation of life itself. It is in fact the belief that we could play god, or for music, that mere virtuosity suffices to offer a catchy performance. However, it is delusional to think that, just like the ‘perfect sons-in-law’, there is a calculable success formula for liveliness and life itself. Also, that one could develop an algorithm for subjectivity, spontaneity, and authenticity. Returning to Lacan and Žižek, that would mean that we could actually capture the Real in the symbolic order after all. According to that logic, we could also, for example, develop a chemical formula for love or a composition that induces love, such as Patrick Süskind in *Perfume* (1985) who had his protagonist develop a fragrance that spontaneously evokes lust and blind desire. That vain hope, however, conveniently overlooks the evidence that with every endeavor to mold the Real into codes, symbols, and formulas, we immediately quell any life. As an example, think of analyzing sex verbally while making love. This has the immediate potential to undermine any desire to continue the deed or, rather, to match the deed to the word.

As the word cannot replace the deed, the signifier cannot replace the signified. However, hyperreality today, for example, creates the illusion that money can buy true love or that high quality can be fully compensated with quantity. As an example, we can point to common and deceitful commercials that suggest that one can immediately buy a good feeling or even a happy life simply with

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8 SHAYMCN 5 HQ, *Beach Boys : In My Room (1964) Remastered Stereo*, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu0Jb-QjGm8>.

their product. Hyperreality maintains this illusion by simulating an impression that the Real can coincide with a symbolic order. In semiotic terms, that means the signified, like a man or an object, coincides with their signifier, namely the word 'man' and the word 'object', respectively. In hyperreality, therefore, reality dissolves into signs, just as in the monetized economy, the real economy is determined by the mass psychology and hysteria of virtual markets. The value of a product is then no longer derived from its quality and functionality or its use value, but from its speculative value. According to Baudrillard, the commodities in this state do not have 'use value' (as defined by Karl Marx) but can be understood as signs (as defined by Ferdinand de Saussure). Baudrillard believes hyperreality goes further than confusing or blending the Real with the symbol which represents it. Hyperreality involves creating a symbol or set of signifiers which represent something that does not actually exist, such as Santa Claus (Baudrillard 1983, 130–135). In a hyperreal environment we experience reality as if there is a one-to-one relationship between signifier and signified, and no longer any margin of interpretation and imagination between the two as well. Reality is thereby confused with a sign that literally distorts our experience of it.

These days we are surrounded nearly 24 hours a day by the world wide web, and although it could be considered a simulacre, the functioning of the web (as we know it) relies completely on this one-to-one relationship. Our experiences of life and the meaning thereof are strongly conditioned by it. As intelligent as the ubiquitous digital media may be, a major handicap still exists: any interpretation and ability to imagine or fill the gaps between signifier and signified has yet to be generated. This is one explanation, as an example, for the inability for algorithms to distinguish between nudity and porn. According to the London police, it can even be difficult to distinguish between child pornography and a desert landscape (Du Sauty 2019, 81). Artificial intelligence (still) lacks imagination, so it must take any observed reality literally, or in Baudrillard's terms: the sign = the signified. Digital technologies can only capture sounds, images, and movements logically, encoded in a connection of ones and zeros. Sounds and images can vividly be reproduced, but only through logical links of previously stored sounds, images, etc. As the mathematician Marcus Du Sauty states in his book on artificial intelligence, "A digital camera can take a picture so detailed that it far exceeds the storage capacity of the human brain, but that doesn't mean it can turn those millions of pixels into one coherent story. We are a long way from understanding how the brain can process data and integrate it into a story" (2019, 80).

In contrast to humans, computers have the immense ability to remember anything they record. It's this 'giga' memory – along with their connection speed – that gives the veneer of intelligence. In contrast, people constantly forget and therefore must rely on interpretation and imagination to, for example, link his-

torical facts and ‘narrate’ them in a consequent story (Gielen 2004). Computers, however, must first register everything encyclopedically to make the ‘correct’ logical connections and then reproduce a reality – a voice, a sound. Anything outside of this digi-logic, any ambiguity that slips in, escapes the virtual eye or simply blocks the system. This suggests that, despite all current algorithms and meta-algorithms, we now have artificial intelligence, but still no artificial intellect. Human intelligence exists precisely by the grace of imagination, that ability to glue together illogical and paradoxical events or a contradictory reality. Interpretation for thinking beings rests on that peculiar mixture of factual knowledge (or alleged facts) and imagination: facts and fiction. For us and this article, the Real, the truth of life itself is only ‘attainable’ through imagination. We can only grasp it without really grasping it (in codes, language, symbols, etc.). We can only ‘read’ and feel life – including life in a live performance – between the lines and binary codes and in-between the signifier and the signified.

Beil seems to understand these mechanisms all too well. *Hide to Show* owes its live-ness not primarily to technological ingenuity and digital mediation, but to the public’s imagination. The scenography puts the viewer to work. They are pushed to create a personal whole from sometimes incoherent fragments. Moreover, Beil keeps life in the show by ignoring the distinction between real and artificial, body and the image of the body, between life and virtuality. The viewer and listener are sometimes left literally guessing, and that is precisely what activates our imagination. What is real and what is not? The public knows that a game is being played and it must rely continually on interpretation and imagination to guess what is real and what is not real, to fill in the undecided space between signifier and signified, and the ambiguity between ‘ones and zeros.’ In that imagination we can see, hear, feel, and taste the hidden life itself, the Real, without being able to literally see, hear, feel, and taste it. Was art not precisely the expression of “that about which one cannot speak”? (Wittgenstein 1970) The life of the live performance can only be tasted between the lines, shining through the cracks and fissures in the symbolic order. No logic, codes, or words can comprehend it. Experiencing the Real means an experience that transcends all understanding. True life can only be shown by not showing it. To hold life in a live performance, one hides to show.

## **Grand Finale**

We can conclude that *Hide to Show* makes use of hyperreal ‘techniques’, but extends beyond the hyperreal itself. Beil subscribes to a (modern) artistic tradition that reflects on our contemporary condition through a game of signs. The scenography suggests how we use codes in our digital culture to signify the world

and ourselves. Summarizing Niklas Luhmann, we could say that the composer establishes a second-order observation by showing us how we look at the world today (Luhmann 2000). *Hide to Show* sets our own looking 'to watch' and our own listening 'to listen'. Our first-order observations are nowadays greatly determined by digital lenses and within an Internet culture that has its own aesthetic. As we clarified above, the latter is characterized by a twofold collapse. First, as with memes, we are cut off from time and space in a so-called 'context collapse' and, secondly, the space of interpretation and imagination collapses between signifier and signified. Moreover, the digital screen culture surrounding us is two-dimensional, not only literally, but also in its sensory capacity. Audio-visual media merely appeals to two senses. Touch and smell are often neglected in the digital sensory palette, leaving us with a disembodied experience of the world. The same applies to relationships we have on social media today. They are also disembodied, and Internet connectivity often leaves us with a feeling of loneliness. Beil offers us this message both implicitly and explicitly throughout his composition. Loneliness is not only literally sung of during the performance, the above-described distant focus of the performers, the separated booths, and the technological fixes also displace human presence and coexistence. In summary, a hyperreal Internet culture leads to social and aesthetic deprivation that clamps down our imagination. As a result, we find it difficult to touch life and the world anymore, and the world cannot seem to touch us either. That appears to be the message of *Hide to Show*.

Still, Beil is not a moral 'preacher', and he is certainly no technophobe. On the contrary, the scenic composition demonstrates how Internet culture and digital technology can enhance our creativity. Beil is certainly inspired by it and quite adept at playing with it as well. This makes *Hide to Show* funny, spectacular, and highly entertaining from start to finish. The gloomy message is more inconspicuous. The proverbial hangover only comes after the performance. Here is where we reach the limits of digital technology. It can function as an extension of human creation, but as yet cannot replace it. After all, Beil only achieves this 'under the skin' feeling by reopening our digitized aesthetic horizon. He does this, among other ways, by stretching the space between the signifier and the signified on the one hand, and by putting real bodies to work on stage on the other. That approach becomes most apparent during the *grand finale*. Perhaps not coincidentally, Beil lowers the digital veil just before the metaphorical curtain falls on the performance. The last leek-dance is anything but a pre-programmed copy. Moreover, unlike the voice or instrument, one cannot easily 'fix' this dance. In the finale, perfectionism is no longer guaranteed. Every performer has their own body-idiom with their own possibilities and limitations. It is impossible to fully synchronize this scene. That certainly applies to the musicians on stage here who do not have trained dancers' bodies. At any time, any one

of them could fall out of this meme's mold. A leek could slip out of a hand, and the musicians-come-dancers can and do fall out step. However firm Beil maintains the harmony and synchrony, the viewer cannot fail to notice how exposed the players have become. The dance could fall apart at any moment. It is precisely this fragility that makes the grand finale touchingly beautiful. We are using the slightly sentimental 'touching' here deliberately. With the Leek-Dance, affection breaks the pre-programmed codes. Human emotions suddenly shimmer through the meme and the tight choreography. With this vulnerability, Beil shows exactly where life is in live performance. It is the momentum and force that pushes *Hide to Show* to touch the Real. This performance gains a soul. The audience immediately comes to grips with a reality that every perfectionism conceals failure, that behind our hyper-visual culture an endless void is hiding, and that behind music there is nothing more than eternal silence.

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**HIDE TO SHOW:  
'MEMEFYING' LIVE MUSIC  
(summary)**

Michael Beil's scenic composition for Nadar Ensemble, *Hide to Show*, was ready for its premiere in the spring of 2020, though ironically and perhaps symbolic for its content, it was not able to be performed until late 2021. The piece skirts the lines of hyperreality and immediacy, using memefication and technological feedback and fixes to explore questions that became relevant and inescapable during the COVID-pandemic. How does live music sound and perhaps especially how does live music 'feel' when the staging simulates reality and it takes the form of a simulacrum? Is *Hide to Show* merely a mimesis of our current Internet culture or is it rather an artistic reflection of our lived and experienced social (media) reality? To answer these questions, we delve into the concept of hyperreality and confront it with another theoretical concept that illuminates our perception of reality, namely the psychoanalytic notion of the Real as established by Jacques Lacan (1991) and further elaborated upon for culture and politics by Slavoj Žižek (2002).

In *Hide to Show*, memes that circulate the Internet are copied and put live on stage. In this article we will explore their etymological roots found in the Greek word 'mimētēs' which means both 'imitator' and 'feigner'. We will also follow two particular memes throughout the piece, one based on the Beach Boys hit "In my Room" and the other Hatsune Miku's "Levan Polka" leek-dance. Each meme seems to float, disconnected from the other, above the performance. However, in retrospect, their interconnect-edness we discover is very much present, but only readable 'between the lines'. Meme etymologically also refers to 'mimeme', which is ancient Greek for 'root'. In *Hide to Show* there is a melancholic atmosphere in which precisely that desire for roots and being able to take root grows ever more present and palpable.

We can conclude that *Hide to Show* makes use of hyperreal 'techniques', but extends beyond the hyperreal itself. Beil subscribes to a (modern) artistic tradition that reflects on our contemporary condition through a game of signs. The unique analog and digital scenography (described in the full text) suggests how we use codes in our digital culture to signify the world and ourselves. Summarizing Niklas Luhmann, we could say that the composer establishes a second-order observation by showing us how we look at the world today (Luhmann 2000). In other words, *Hide to Show* sets our own looking 'to watch' and our own listening 'to listen'. Our first-order observations, as are our relationships, are nowadays more greatly determined by digital lenses and within an Internet culture that has its own aesthetic. They are also disembodied, and Internet connectivity often leaves us with a feeling of loneliness. Beil offers us this message both implicitly and explicitly throughout his composition.

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# **TREATING AUDIO MANIPULATION EFFECTS LIKE PHOTOSHOP: EXPLORING THE NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF A LACK OF TRANSPARENCY IN CONTEMPORARY VOCAL MUSIC ON YOUNG LEARNERS**

**Abstract:** Amidst the great and rapid advance in digital audio processing over recent decades, a range of new ‘manipulation’ software has problematised the popular music scene, both in terms of authenticity and achievability of performance. This paper will set out to define *manipulation* effects as separate from the more over-arching umbrella term of *staging* effects, under which they have been vaguely included for a number of years. By separating out the staging of vocals from the manipulation of their core content, by pitch correction for example, we can more specifically observe their impact on audience reception and vocal pedagogy. The reception element of this research would be largely related to that of authenticity and the presentation of liveness in online video, but this paper will focus on the effect of the unachievable on vocal learners. These could range from confidence issues to serious vocal problems.

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This paper explores the possibilities of music following the same trajectory as photography, where manipulation is concerned. Photoshop's usage in media has provoked a great deal of controversy in recent years, with high profile campaigns resulting in legislative changes such as Israel's *Photoshop Law*, which imposes certain restrictions for models and a disclaimer requirement for publishers. It's a possibility that if the music industry were required to provide disclaimers for audio releases and online videos, that there would be more transparency in vocal pedagogy, with the potential for fewer vocal health problems related to copying unachievable performances.

The aim of this paper is to open a conversation about the effect of a lack of transparency surrounding audio manipulation so that more can be done to address it.

**Keywords:** manipulation, digital effects, Photoshop, Auto-Tune, disclaimer, transparency.

## Introduction

The last 25 years have seen exponential growth of digital effects for the production of music, with Antares Auto-Tune developing from the outboard unit that produced the oft referenced and ground breaking new sound of Cher's *Believe* in 1997, to the current fully digital software solution of Antares Auto-Tune Pro that boasts the ability to manipulate not only pitch, but 'throat modeling' and 'automatic formant correction' (Antares 2022). In this time, the image editing software Photoshop, which was originally released in 1990, has not only undergone a similar development, democratisation and cloud-based accessibility, but has influenced headlines and legislation because of its potential for deceit and the impact that potential manipulation could have on public health, both physically and mentally. Whilst it would be insensitive to suggest that the social impacts of audio and visual manipulation are comparable in influence from a public health point of view considering the impact of visual media on eating disorders and body dysmorphia, as well as other aspects of mental and physical health, it is interesting that audio manipulation, as discrete from other forms of audio staging, has not been problematised in the same way as its visual counterpart.

This paper will use the similarities between photo and audio manipulation to suggest the potential positive and negative outcomes of following the *Photoshop* blueprint of public transparency to audio-manipulation's use in digital media. Whilst Adobe Photoshop is not the only photo editing software on the market, it is the market leader and as such has been the go-to for worldwide media on the subject, as well as the shorthand name for multiple countries' laws that have

involved restrictions on manipulation use in visual media. For this reason, this article will use the term Photoshop to refer to visual editing software in general.

In order to problematise the impact of audio manipulation within the context of public reception, this article will first contextualise manipulation for audio in an academic space that has previously included the term under the broad umbrella of staging. It is important to make clear that this article's remit includes intrinsic, and not explicit, uses of technology. These definitions stem from Robert Strachan's definitions of pitch manipulation's use in popular music, where he reminds us that "Auto-Tune was envisaged as a transparent technology and its explicit usage is essentially a misuse or overuse of the function for which it was originally intended" (Strachan 2017). Much in the way that the obvious photo-shopping of a cartoon prop in a magazine article would not be the concern of Photoshop legislation for the modelling industry in Israel (where the Photoshop Law is in effect), the robotic Auto-Tune effect of T-Pain's signature style is similarly not a manageable inclusion within the formulation of a theoretical *Audio Manipulation Law*, where purposes are crossed between style and corrective use. For this reason, only intrinsic use of effects, categorised as "unannounced and actively hidden, leading to a normalisation of the sonic qualities it produces" (Strachan 2017) will be considered for their impact on the reception of audio and, subsequently, the impact that any transparency measures such as disclaimers could potentially have for the artists involved.

This paper's focus will be on vocals within music. I leave no boundary between classical and popular styles because of the reception focused nature of this research, and I would not like genre definers to muddy the argument that focusses on transparency of process. Vocals have been chosen here because of the audience's inherent feeling of vocal exclusivity when listening to music. Several scholars have made the case for the exceptionalism of the singing voice to listeners due to a multitude of factors such as maternal nurture within infancy (Karpf 2006), the association of humanity to the voice (Jarman-Ivens 2011; Connor 2000), and the uniqueness of individual vocal timbres or grains (Barthes 1991). Michel Chion, in reference to sound in film, describes humans as "vococentric" (Chion 1994, 6) and extrapolates further by explaining that it is "because human beings in their habitual nature are [vococentric] as well. When in any given sound environment you hear voices, those voices capture and focus your attention before any other sound (wind blowing, music, traffic). Only afterward, if you know very well who is speaking and what they are talking about, might you turn your attention from the voices to the rest of the sounds you hear" (Chion 1994, 6). Closely linked to Chion's 'vococentricity' is Derrida's observation of 'phonocentrism'. In the same way that Chion notes that listeners are inherently drawn to the sound of a voice, in search of information or storytelling, "Phonocentrism, in Derrida's view, is a cultural tendency that establishes

vocal utterance as the most reliable indicator of individual intentionality, as the locus of testimony and authenticity” (Bhagwati 2013, 78). This can therefore be seen as the second step in a process of human reaction to the voice. From voco-centricity’s step one of seeking out and foregrounding the voice as the highest aural priority, to phonocentrism’s step two of imbruing the human voice with an innate authenticity.

With this in mind, I have chosen to focus on how people perceive the presentation of vocal manipulation because of the seemingly higher levels of humanity and authenticity that are naturally associated with it. I believe that by doing this, it will create a clearer picture of the impact of increased transparency where manipulation effects are concerned because vocals have the clearest and most visible connections to the self, authenticity, and the concept of talent.

The objective of this paper cannot be to problematise and suggest the complete and final answers to the problems brought about by a lack of transparency in audio-based media. Rather, I am aiming to start the conversation on how a longer research trail could be approached going forwards. This paper will set out the problems faced by those teaching and learning to sing, before approaching a potentially suitable course of action. The course of action akin to an *audio manipulation law* would involve the implementation of disclaimers based on the intrinsic use of manipulation effects on the voice, taking care not to limit the creativity of creators and producers whilst increasing transparency of usage regarding effects that change core elements of the original performance. It will act as a proof of concept before much more specific problematising of issues regarding its implementation.

## Vocal Staging and Manipulation

To stage a sound within recorded music was a concept initially approached by William Moylan in the 1992 first edition of *The Art of Recording*. Moylan describes the *sound-stage* in recorded music, which is a conceptual space for the listener, as “the location within the perceived performance environment, where the sound sources appear to be sounding” (1992, 48). This is predominantly a spatial idea, regarding the stereo field ranging from left to right and encompassing the centre ground, but also allowing for the pitch of the sound to orientate a sense of aural location of its source on a vertical axis. In the year 2000, Serge Lacasse refined the concept with regard for the voice, coining the phrase *vocal staging*. This aimed to express the effects that different presentations of the voice, often through a prism of technology, can have on the expressive impact of the voice on the audience. Lacasse defines vocal staging as “any deliberate practice whose aim is to enhance a vocal sound, alter a timbre, or present it in

a given spatial and /or temporal configuration with the help of any mechanical or electrical process, presumably in order to produce some effect on potential or actual listeners” (2000). Throughout Lacasse’s various works, the terms staging and manipulation are constantly conflated, offering the field the blanket term of *staging* as a catch all for technological intervention upon a vocal sound. Indeed, the dissertation abstract for *Listen to my Voice* states the research to be “centred on voice manipulation, or, ... the staging of voice in recorded rock music and in other forms of vocal expression” (2000). In the interest of deeper study, and the examination of potentially conflicting audience reception ideologies, I suggest that *staging* and *manipulation* be seen as separate sound transformation categories, the former concerned with placing the sound object within a space or scene and the latter concerned with the changing or warping of the original sound material. It could be said that the former alters the perception of the sound by placing it into a contextually loaded frame, whilst the latter alters its content at a core level.

By seeing audio technologies as separated in this way, the traceability of the core musical content becomes clearer and the concept of personal authenticity has the potential to have more of a connection to staged performances than manipulated performances, due to the intact nature of the tracked vocal. Drawing the line to the human core of any performance is frequently hugely important for audience members, owing to what Kivy terms *personal authenticity*, meaning that something is “authentically one’s own, emanating from one’s own person” (Kivy 1995). The drive of this research is to aid in the world of vocal pedagogy, and to create a transparency of process for learners so that they have the opportunity to understand what is acoustically achievable to aid in the learning process, but also to steer away from the possibility that the unachievable pushes people towards unhealthy technique or a feeling of inadequacy when unable to perform the un-performable. By marking staging and manipulation as separate, it can be easier for measures to be put in place to grant the necessary transparency for learners.

### **What is the Current Impact of Vocal Manipulation for Vocal Students?**

As part of a larger research objective, I carried out a study with ten vocal pedagogues from across the UK, spanning genres and vocal styles across the classical and popular worlds in order to discuss the impact that manipulation and staging technologies were having on their students’ approach to vocal tuition and their attempts to sing more generally. The key themes that consistently came up were the issues of transparency and achievability. For a vocal student to attempt to copy a recording of a singer without the context of the processes

that their voice has gone through has, according to many of my participants, caused students to adopt pushed, restricted or dangerous techniques in order to replicate a fuller, mediated sound using natural means due to the lack of transparency regarding the technologies used and their application.

As an overview of the types of effects and problems, I shall now give an example of the effects that participants claimed to be causing problems for their students and how they've had to alter their approach to teaching in order to counter potential repercussions. Firstly, compression is an audio effect that is arguably rather difficult to categorise. From a technical level, the clarity of whether compression changes the core content of the recorded audio is purely academic, since it has been seen that the effects that its usage has on learners have been the most widely echoed and have caused the greatest problems for the students of our participants. Compression is a tool that reduces the dynamic range of a sound by setting a threshold for amplitude and acting to reduce any sounds above that threshold by a ratio of the producer's choosing: 2:1 for example reducing the dynamic range of the signal above the threshold by half. Compression has been used liberally and increasingly over the last few decades, contributing to the loudness wars that were said "to be the consequence of an observation made in the 1950s that people tended to play the louder-cut records in jukeboxes more often." (Robjohns 2014). This was a practice that only got more prevalent as technology and media improved, allowing little to no movement in volume in some cases and "with each passing year, CDs got more compressed. More waveforms were slammed up against that 0 dBFS barrier." (Milner 2010). Often, to present a powerful and very present sounding vocal, the dynamic range in mainstream popular music has found itself squeezed to the point that there is no great discernible difference from loud to quiet, with emotion being conveyed by breathiness and timbre instead. For a singer entrenched in the modern production aesthetics, the research participants have said that the compression used in recordings is there to energise the sound and create an exciting vocal, but "nodules hard and soft, and vocal fatigue and all of the things that hamper their development start to happen when they don't understand the importance of vocal technique in trying to emulate a sound that requires them to, as they perceive it, push." (Anonymous Participant, Interview, 2021). By instinctively pushing their voice to sound like the prominent and consistent voices of modern recordings, the consensus among the participants is that a lot of strain is brought upon the phonation apparatus of the vocalist causing a lot of very dangerous strain in an area where freedom and release is much more appropriate.

Not physical harm, but equally damaging, is the potential for compression to affect the confidence and anxiety levels of an aspiring singer as it "can often give the illusion of evenness through the voice" (Anonymous Participant, Interview, 2021), something that can dishearten adolescent singers, who desire an even and

powerful tone, but developmentally are going through hormonal changes which often manifest as breathy and weaker in the *passaggio*<sup>2</sup> areas of the range. This in turn can restrict the ambition, confidence and even enjoyment for the singer “because they think that they can’t sing high and they will often say as much as well. They’ll often say, ‘oh, I don’t sing high’ or ‘I can’t sing high’ because they’ve tried to push their chest voice too high and felt uncomfortable or tired them out or it’s even caused them to lose their voice if they’ve done it consistently” (Anonymous Participant, Interview, 2021).

Other effects and techniques were indicated as being potentially detrimental to vocal students, such as composite vocal takes and Auto-Tune, but the key thing that tie all of these problems together is the lack of knowledge about them and transparency of their usage. Robert Edwin, pedagogue and scholar for the NATS bulletin (now called the Journal of Singing), supported the overall thesis of this paper when he was interviewed as saying “Young singers trying to copy the altered voices they hear can get themselves into vocal trouble very quickly” (Benson 2020, 192).

### Comparing audio manipulation technologies and Photoshop

Out of all of the interviews conducted for this study, one participant professed a very active comparison and course of action to that of Photoshop and its cultural impact on young girls where body image, positivity, and eating disorders are concerned. The participant suggested that:

It’s like the Photoshop movement. It’s like, you know, it’s becoming forward now that you need to say if you’ve edited a picture because people are trying to look like something that doesn’t exist, it’s the same with sound. I think if it’s on Instagram or it’s on YouTube or it’s on something like that. It needs to be put in the information that it has been edited. So that people know that the sound isn’t always natural.  
(Anonymous Participant, Interview, 2021)

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2 Cornelius L. Reid defines and advises on the *passaggio* in *A Dictionary of Vocal Terminology* as such:

“**Passaggio:** Italian, “passageway;” an early frame of reference used to indicate that portion of the tonal range, or “break” (E—F above middle C), where it is necessary to cross from the chest voice to the head voice smoothly and evenly. Although developmental procedures must be designed to lay the foundation for an ultimate smoothness in negotiating the *passaggio*, such attempts should never be incorporated into early training procedures. The smooth and easy negotiation of the *passaggio* without loss of range, resonance, or flexibility is the hallmark of technical mastery” (Reid 1983, 265).

I shall now be examining the body positivity movement's effect on cultures and legislations regarding Photoshop's usage in the public sphere. In doing this, I will be applying the measures theoretically to that of content containing manipulated sound, to see which measures would be practicable, worthwhile and unobtrusive to creativity. It is important to note that this paper is not *anti-technology*, and I do not advocate a total abandonment of different usages of such technologies. I argue that the usage of these technologies should be made clear in order to limit the aforementioned problems associated with ignorance to certain processes.

Firstly, to equate the usage of photo manipulation software to that of audio manipulation, there must be a parallel to how the general public receives them both in kind. Jones suggests that "increasingly, all of our important global images are photoshopped: we now expect that adjustment has happened, even as we continue to demand that photographs represent the real" (Jones, 2013). For this to be true of audio recordings throws up two important challenges. Firstly, that the audience has the same kind of awareness of the technology involved in audio recording and production as they do regarding visual media. By this, I do not suggest an in-depth technical proficiency and knowledge, simply a surface level knowledge of its existence through pop culture. I do not yet believe this to be the case, as there have not been the campaigns of awareness and public displays of concern that have accompanied the body positivity movement's outcries for more inclusive and un-doctored imagery in the media, associated with audio in nearly the same way. This kind of awareness is, in essence, part of the desired outcome of a disclaimer style system for music in the eyes of the participant that recommended it. By looking at how awareness of *photoshopping* has affected body positivity outcomes such as dysmorphia and eating disorders, there could be parallels to be drawn to project the potential for positive benefits in the music industry. If this change does in fact take place and, as Jones suggests "we now expect that adjustment has happened" (2013), the desire for authentic, *untouched* recordings still exists, but with no marker or descriptor to legitimise it. As with *live* music and *acoustic* guitar, the original or unfettered version of something becomes demarcated as the *other* version rather than the standard due to its requirement for a descriptive adjective.

Two of the major enforcements to come out of the campaigning and legislating that has been ongoing from body positivity movements have been in the form of mandatory disclaimers (Knoll, 2020) and Israel's more encompassing and restrictive legislature *The Photoshop Law*, which "says that models must present their employer with a certificate from their doctor that states that they have a BMI of at least 18.5 in order to work" (Bromberg and Halliwell, 2016), a requirement that some other countries' governments have adopted, such as France, who subsequently passed their own form of the law termed *The French*

Photoshop Law, which states that “[c]ausing a person to seek excessive leanness by encouraging prolonged food restrictions' is a criminal offence” (2016). To translate this second form of compliance into the world of audio production would be akin to banning the intrinsic usage of manipulation effects or setting a threshold for the intrinsic usage of effects to be kept under. Given that the Photoshop laws have been enacted to allay potentially mental health problems, it stands to reason that the audio equivalents need not be as prescriptive and restrictive in their remit. Many would argue that the use of these audio effects, even in their most intrinsic forms, contribute to the overall artistic freedom to create that producers value when sculpting the sound of their music, and to restrict this is to impose restrictions on further creativity and exploration. Potentially, then, disclaimers much in the way of Photoshop’s “the image of the human figure has been retouched and/or digitally modified” (Knoll 2020) could be adapted to raise awareness of the levels and prevalence of manipulation present in the recording being presented. The minutia of such a disclaimer and subsequent instances of its use would ultimately have to depend on which effects were ultimately deemed to be *manipulation* effects rather than *staging* effects, with compression being the contention due to its integral nature within modern production and the obvious impact that this paper has shown it to have on young voices, according to the research participants.

Where Photoshop is concerned, a number of studies have been done to determine the effectiveness of disclaimers on manipulated images as to whether the audience receives the image any differently to when it has had no disclaimer. Although the image may have the same content and therefore presumably the same initial visual impact, the idea of the disclaimer is to contextualise the image for the viewer so that its content does not affect their self-esteem and body image in a negative manner, such as it did when the image’s status was ambiguous. In the same way, a musical equivalent that would be likely to hold a disclaimer could be akin to *the sound of the human voice has been digitally manipulated in this recording*, and it can be assumed that the contextual information provided by the disclaimer may have the ability to allow the listener to inform their approach to the learning process.

Evidence from eye-tracking research based on the attention given to disclaimers states that “women do attend to these disclaimers” (Bury et al. 2014), but concludes that the specificity of such disclaimers, for example “Warning: This image has been digitally altered to lengthen and thin legs” (2014), rather than the generic “Warning: This image has been digitally altered” (2014), does draw the participant’s eye towards the area of interest specified within the disclaimer. For the fashion industry, and in support of the body positivity movement, this study suggests that specificity “may actually be detrimental and thus should not be used”, since it has the potential to lead “vulnerable women and



girls to pay more attention to the model's body and relevant body parts than they would normally" (Bury et al. 2014). When translating this into the disclaimer's use within recorded music, be it in audio streaming or an audio-visual context, it remains to be investigated as to whether the *eye-drawing* (or indeed ear-drawing) characteristics of the more specific disclaimer would be a benefit or a hinderance to either the listener or the vocal student. After all, if it were to be believed that people simply assumed a generic manipulation across the board, then a degree of specificity would greatly de-mystify the human voice on the recording.

Whilst it can be seen that disclaimers are attended to for visual media (Bury et al., 2014; Bury et al., 2016), this does not necessarily equate to their effectiveness. Firstly, for this research, determining their effectiveness requires establishing what is considered *effective* or successful for our requirements. For visual media, in the research of Frederick et al. (2016), effectiveness was measured by the differentiation in body satisfaction between viewing "unaltered images" and images with disclaimers attached (2016). But to assess the impact of disclaimers on vocal performances, effectiveness would have to be measured as it pertains to the vocal student, and how the increased awareness would affect their approach to vocal tuition and performance.

The implementation and evaluation of such disclaimers will take a great deal more research to determine how and what is appropriate with their design, placement and effectiveness, but reflecting on the body positivity movement's influence on regulations, it does seem that an active awareness of technology could be a positive step in supporting vocal health and technique for the next wave of CCM singers.

### **Implementing Audio Manipulation Disclaimers in Online Video Performance**

This paper has brought into focus the effect that a lack of transparency in the usage of intrinsic manipulation effects can have on the mental and physical well-being of a young performer. The inherent vococentricity in music has meant that when aspiring singers listen to manipulated vocals in music, they are inspired by what they hear and wish to emulate it. The voice exudes emotion in such a way that these students understand its importance as their primary tool for self-expression. This being the case, it is especially important that, much like in the body positivity movement, young people cannot be pushed to vocal harm or mental anguish by the quest for the unachievable when the voice remains so important for subjectivity and expression for both the performer and listener.

Videos from satire and parody accounts on social media and online video sharing platforms have been increasingly providing disclaimers or *notices of transparency* for their content in recent years. These accounts often provide direct-to-camera *real life* tricks or tips involving a ridiculous concept. As an example, here is the disclaimer from a YouTube video by creator Rick Lax, where Lax shows how to make mini marshmallows by removing the air from regular marshmallows with a backwards hair dryer: “Notice of Transparency: All of the events that take place in this short-film video are purely fictitious. Any similarities to actual people or actual events are coincidences. This video’s only purpose is entertainment” (Lax 2021). True to the notice, the video is, of course, fictitious, but does provide an established avenue to pilot the disclaimer’s use within the online video presentation of singing. Whilst the problem of audio manipulation transparency is not at all confined to the area of online video, the manner in which online videos are presented with descriptions provides the most accessible and clear route to test the deployment and effectiveness of disclaimers in the context of music.

This paper is meant as an introductory step to test the concept of using disclaimers for voices that have been subject to audio manipulation as part of their production. Here, I have brought to attention the potential and observed negative impacts of technological innocence for vocal learners in an attempt to address how transparency can be effectively achieved. To take this forward into an actionable project, more specific focus would have to be made to the implementation and content of such disclaimers, the audience reaction to their presence and the effect that such admissions of transparency would have on the producers and creators of audio content. It is likely that given time and normalisation of disclaimers, there could end up being a stigma attached to the usage of manipulation software, which is entirely not my intention. Transparency should in no way be allowed to stymie creativity.

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**TREATING AUDIO MANIPULATION EFFECTS LIKE PHOTOSHOP: EXPLORING THE NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF A LACK OF TRANSPARENCY IN CONTEMPORARY VOCAL MUSIC ON YOUNG LEARNERS (summary)**

I compare the similarities between Photoshop and audio-manipulation software such as Auto-Tune by problematising that a difference between manipulation and staging for digital audio effects is yet to be talked about in terms of how each effect works with the core audio. I suggest that the concepts of staging and manipulation be separated out in order to better assess the impact of their distinctly separate uses on core recorded audio.

I address that for the general listener, the idea of personal authenticity is key to their fan experience, but broaden the argument to show that transparency of process can actually have a lot more physical and developmental impact when it comes to the world of vocal pedagogy. Recent, anonymous interview research of a wide range of UK-based pedagogues is then drawn upon to create a picture of the types of impacts that hidden manipulation technologies could be having upon young learners early in their vocal journeys.

Stemming from a suggestion from an interview participant, the paper then turns to the possibility of using a disclaimer or *notice of transparency* for manipulated vocal music, in much the same way as countries including Israel have done with Photoshop in the fashion industry.

The paper concludes that transparency is a positive thing for vocal learners, but recognises that such disclaimers are likely to have other impacts and varying levels of effectiveness. More focussed research on disclaimer impacts on transparency and authenticity for creators will be necessary in the future if the concept were to be introduced effectively.

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## HOW BLACK CREATORS STOPPED THE CLOCK ON TIKTOK

**Abstract:** Between June and July 2021, a number of Black creators banded together on TikTok and withheld from creating content – they went on strike. This sudden protest came after outcries from Black creators, who claimed that they created many of the viral dances on the platform, whilst their white counterparts received the accolades. I propose that this strike is a result of underlying bias, antagonisms and an unresolved history of musical and artistic plagiarism from Black creators. Inspired by how race is presented in the media and focusing on novel media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, I assert that creative works by Black creators and subsequently their ownership, use and replication, need to be studied within popular culture.

**Keywords:** cultural appropriation, Internet, artistic plagiarism, social media, expression, TikTok, Black music, Black creators, Black TikTok, Black TikTok Strike.

Debate around the plagiarism of Black music existed long before the formation of social media in the late 1990s. For decades, Black musicians and creators have complained about their works being stolen and replicated by white and other non-Black creators. Put simply, the issue is that non-Black creators have a history of plagiarising the creative works of Black creators, without crediting them.

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This plagiarism has historically taken the form of lyrics and music, literature and fashion (to name a few), but more recently has manifested itself in the form of TikTok dances and dance challenges. It can be argued that the theft of works online is inevitable, as the variety and number of platforms create more avenues for the global creation and dispensation of works. On the other hand, it is not uncommon for individuals to mistake the appreciation of culture for cultural appropriation; it is possible that ignorance is a leading cause of this phenomenon. Artistic plagiarism has been widely debated for decades and seems to be increasing as the years go by.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the music plagiarism and cultural appropriation arguments gained momentum following the controversy surrounding artists like Elvis Presley and the Beatles, and gained a European dimension, as British entertainment inclined to minstrel shows and Reggae music, while the French fetishised Black entertainers. In recent years, the plagiarism/cultural appropriation debate has acquired a new relevance, specifically in a social media context. Approaching the history of artistic plagiarism of Black works from a wide variety of perspectives, scholars such as Lauren Michele Jackson, Susie Trenka, Eric Lott, and David Metzger, among others, explored the impact that the instrumental use of cultural theft has had on popular culture, to erase Black creators and their contributions. This research focuses on the ways in which Black styles, images and sounds have been commercialised by white performers and entertainers, whilst the Black communities and creators themselves are marginalised or unacknowledged. Many scholars agree that plagiarism, digital minstrelsy and exploitation of Black works negatively impact Black communities online and offline and this research aims to contribute to the ongoing study of these occurrences.

In an important recent collection, Trevor Boffone (2020) notes that critics may show scepticism towards the need for a collection that specifically addresses TikTok's influence on popular culture, as it is a relatively new app. However, given the way it has managed to shift social media use and culture, it warrants scholarly inquiry. His research looks at how digital spaces (present and future) will shape cultural literacies. Leslie Kay Jones (2019) emphasises the position of digital spaces within social discourse. Counterpublics on social media networks, such as Twitter or TikTok, are used as spaces to discuss community issues and to mobilise movements but they are also used to express shared, cultural experiences (like music and dance). Jones' essay raises questions on how much influence digital spaces can have on those communities on and offline. She notes that while there is an increase in research that addresses Black cultural and intellectual spaces, their focus is on these spaces as "transgressive social imaginaries". She also points out that there is a need to separate open social media dialogue from movement actions because of their implication in mediation for the public

and she does this by specifically using the word “disarticulation”. Though it is suggested that there is an increase in the study of [Black] cultural spaces, counterpublics and digital spaces, little research has been done on the direct impact of these spaces on the communities they represent. Furthermore, a majority of the existing research looks at these counterpublics as a negative vehicle for the mobilisation of movements and not a discursive space for the marginalised.

This study will look specifically at how Black TikTok creators stood in solidarity with each other in June 2021, to bring awareness to the expropriation of their work by non-Black (specifically white) TikTokers. The aims of this study are to identify how the historically-evidenced exploitation of Black works affects the creation and dissemination of works in digital spaces and to seek to understand what the Black creator TikTok strike tells us about current content creation culture on TikTok practices for social media.

## **The New Social Media**

With its ability to connect different people from different places and unite them over single causes, social media has proven itself to be one of the most expansive and versatile tools at our disposal. While maintenance of the systems themselves is looked after by the plethora of developers employed by the platforms, the same cannot be said for content moderation on the platforms. Who decides what can and cannot be posted online? How do we verify whether content is original or replicated? Do we care whether the content is original or not? The unrestrictive nature of social media has made it easy for individuals to express themselves and gain global audiences that they may not have otherwise been able to reach. Contrary to how works were created before Web 2.0,<sup>2</sup> creators can now create something that they know will be seen by someone and this opportunity has added meaning to their existence; our expression is visible to the world and creators can now receive responses to their expression, which drives them to create more (Burstein 2013). The appeal of being a creator or influencer increases with the possibility that you can reach a wide audience at the push of a button.

The freedom of expression that social media allows can also create the ideal environment for plagiarism. Due to the availability of information and content, it is common for content<sup>3</sup> to appear on the Internet several times, in different formats, different interpretations and by different people (Kurniawan and

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2 Web 2.0 refers to websites that prioritise user-generated content and encourage participatory culture.

3 The word ‘content’ here refers to music, fashion, literary quotes and other works.

Surendro 2018). Whether intentional or not, this makes it difficult to pinpoint the origin of certain works and, typically, creators tend not to cite their work or pay homage online because they don't feel the need to; it doesn't suit the social media aesthetic. Wunsch-Vincent and Vickery (2007) highlight that the concept of citation "may be blurry" in a multimedia space, where there is a combination of text, video and other graphics. It is clear that the nature of social media facilitates the proliferation of plagiarism by the lack of clearly defined protocols for how to create derivatives of existing works, especially with platforms like Instagram and TikTok encouraging the use of user-generated content (UGC) with in-app software like the 'Remix' feature.<sup>4</sup> The replication of creative works on social media is one of the driving factors behind its success because it makes it easy to populate the platforms but this ease and readily accessible content mean that users don't need to create from nothing – they can reimagine an existing work. People believe that if something is on the Internet, it is free and they can do what they want with it. Appropriation art is creative work that borrows images within popular culture, mass media and other places and combines them to create a new piece of art. Technical ability is often less important, as emphasis is placed on how well the art has been envisioned and put together, thereby re-contextualising its meaning (Landes 2000). Social media platforms can be home to this school of thought; all art is rooted in other art, therefore nothing is truly "original" and creators should have freedom of expression without fear of copyright action against them (Emery 2002).

It is currently unclear as to whether social media has exacerbated this form of content creation or whether it has simply highlighted a longstanding issue that went seemingly unnoticed until frequent social media use brought visibility to it. According to Mandiberg (2012), platforms couple identity and content. Focus is placed on the content but the author/creator is directly attributed with it so the publicising of a piece of content is the creator's statement that "This is who I am. This is what I did". Studies show that there is a direct correlation between how the gratification of content creation, offline community (civic engagement) and UGC influence psychological empowerment; specifically, the three components which are self-efficacy, perceived competence and desire for control (Leung 2009). Not only can the online creation of content drive people financially, it drives people psychologically. Leung (2009) reiterates that the creator's behaviour in civic engagement and the degree to which they generate content online can enhance the user's psychological empowerment. The social aspect and necessary interactivity of these platforms appeals to content creators because they are encouraged to do and create more by the comments and reac-

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4 The Remix feature allows users to record responses to and collaborate on any reel/video on the platform. Responses can be done on the spot or be in the form of a camera roll upload.



tions they receive. This drives the production cycle and can increase the creators' audience but also motivates creators to create by any means necessary.

The anonymity of the Internet perpetuates the notion that anything can be done without the user having to face direct repercussions. Subsequently, societal norms are shifted to accommodate this, users normalise this behaviour and the thin line between 'authorship' and 'ownership' is blurred further. This separate identity is another reason why UGC takes the form it does – it is difficult to trace it back to the creators unless they want it to, in which case it is made extremely accessible and the content is claimed as theirs (Desjarlais 2020).

Our consistent use of web-based platforms to enhance our everyday lives means that our lives are growingly intertwined between digital and analogue. Therefore, digital spaces like TikTok force us to reimagine our identity online and, in turn, offline and inform the shaping of our individual and group identity (Boffone 2022). Its ability to penetrate culture with ease is largely due to the fact that it functions as a reflection of society, created and used by members of mainstream society. Constant access to information and content have made it necessary to absorb more content, which naturally also fuels the creation of content. "Virality is a social information flow process where many people simultaneously forward a specific information item, over a short period of time within their social networks, and where the message spreads beyond their own [social] networks to different, often distant networks, resulting in a sharp acceleration in the number of people who are exposed to the message" (Nahon and Hemsley 2014). To 'go viral' is essentially to become famous overnight. Photo and video-sharing social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok and Twitter (among others) have increased the possibility that an everyday user can go viral and achieve fame, acquire financial success and build a brand with a new audience. Acerbi (2020) notes that "there is no recipe for how to go viral" but, as explored by King et. al (2011), it is possible to achieve success by copying somebody else who is successful. In a climate where regular people are achieving pseudo-celebrity status, creators can replicate already viral content in an attempt to also go viral. Examples of this would be people recreating graphics and captions and posting them or participating in an online challenge. This reasoning behind UGC is superficial as whilst any form of content can go viral, it can just as easily become irrelevant. This is often the case when content is driven by trends and online communities.

### **Black Presence on Social Media**

Social media is often used as an outlet for individuals to express themselves and, at times, to escape from their everyday life. It has been documented that engagement with online activities and frequent social media use as a form of

escapism or coping strategy can be associated with problematic use and have a negative psychological impact on users (Kircaburun and Griffiths 2018). Notwithstanding, social media allows two groups of people to come together and coexist; those who share opinions, cultures and experiences and those who never would have taken the time to speak to each other and are linked by their use of the platform. It is somewhere within this space that separate groups of Black people have been able to find their voice.

In recent years, Black people have been able to contribute their specifically Black perspectives and narratives into societal discourse, both nationally and globally. As a counterpublic, Black Twitter<sup>5</sup> has managed to effect change and bring light to the issues of Black people in the diaspora and in Africa (among other things). However, it is yet to be contextualised or researched thoroughly and it can be argued that this lack of empirical research is the reason why significant events have gone seemingly unnoticed because the affected group is yet to be recognised (Graham and Smith 2016). Counterpublics were an inevitable evolution of the “bourgeois public sphere” (Fraser 1990, 56) as the original definition of public sphere failed to include marginalised groups of people and the voices of certain races, religions and sexualities were intentionally drowned out. Civic dialogue and Black media remain an essential element of Black counterpublics (Banjo 2018). Black people have successfully turned Black Twitter from an “emergent social phenomenon” to a widely referenced alternative, non-mainstream public sphere. If not for the #BlackTwitter hashtag, it would have been considered a niche space (Hughey and Gonzalez-Lesser 2020). Black Twitter is formed of users who both identify as Black and make use of in-built platform features to engage with Black discourses and share Black cultural experiences. Participation within this online gathering requires “a deep knowledge of Black culture, commonplaces, and digital practices” though it is not uncommon for Non-Black users to participate in the wider conversation (Brock 2020). Florini (2019) observes that the inherent nature of Black Twitter is transformational; on the one hand, it functions as an enclave, which facilitates the unconstrained and unpoliced conversation that it is known for – on the other hand, it serves as a counterpublic, which engages with external discourses. It is the cultural practices and the way users position themselves within the space that allows for the oscillation between the two states.

Despite the specific nature of this space, it is common for Black-centred narratives and experiences to be appropriated by urban marketing campaigns. The use of hashtags and trending topics on the platform make Black Twitter visible to non-Black users and allows these users to access cultural information, in addition to offering them “topical and cultural coherence” (Brock 2020, 81). The

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5 Black Twitter is commonly stylised as #BlackTwitter.

hashtag brings the counterpublic into mainstream visibility. Feldman and De Kosnik (2019) highlight that Black cultural works do not materialise from thin air but when they appear in the mainstream, their Black progenitors are effaced and erased, leaving the product itself “unauthored and authorless”, thus allowing the work to appear available to be claimed by anybody. Online Black spaces have proven to be great spaces for creators to create and share music, fashion looks, beauty trends, to entertain and to educate one another. Furthermore, social media can also cultivate a collaborative culture, which offers the potential for greater works. Within the communities themselves, these contributions to culture are often recognised or at least acknowledged but beyond the digital space, origins cannot always be definitely traced to a single individual or group. This is intensified by the remixing and replication of content. Social moves quickly so once an idea becomes mainstream, it is hard to trace its roots. This erasure is common with Black creators.

### **TikTok as an Entertainment Platform**

Since its launch in 2017 as the international version of Douyin (before launching globally in 2018), TikTok has risen to become the most popular website and most popular social media platform of 2021 (Rosenblatt 2022). Operating with over one billion users, it is rare that you will find somebody who has not heard of or used the platform at least once. The platform has solidified its place as a medium that pushes short-form media content,<sup>6</sup> with clear audience positioning. The appeal of the platform is that users can choose their own music, effects and, in the simplest way, create videos on any topic of their choice. Therefore, there is a low threshold for creation. The simplicity of the video production has made it easier for creators to exert their creativity. As a platform TikTok excels because in addition to UGC, it accurately pushes content curated for the specific user (Yang et. al 2019).

Where service users were able to sustain long-term fame on earlier social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube, fame and virality on TikTok is dependent upon performance and posts. According to Abidin (2020), TikTokers focus on the success of individual posts, in the form of views, comments and shares, more commonly referred to as ‘engagements’. This focus on the creation of posts is largely driven by the desire to feature on TikTok’s For You Page (FYP) – “one of the most addictive scrolling experiences on the internet” (Zeng, Abidin and Schäfer 2021). As a result, a coherent persona or style is not conscientiously

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6 The platform ‘Vine’ originally hosted short-form media content before it was discontinued in 2017.

maintained by TikTok celebrity aspirants but instead, they adapt to the “latest trends and viral practices” on the platform in an attempt to appear on the FYP. The use of hashtags, keywords and audio memes – the last of which is particularly popular on the app – can allow users to gain a large following ‘overnight’. The drive to become TikTok Famous warrants users to seek out and engage with ‘virality’, so as to remain visible, popular and in some cases, paid. This differs from the earlier social networks, which accommodate niche subcultures. Going viral on the platform, as well as its in-built features (e.g. filters) play a central role in the success of the content creator and have made it a hub for creative expression and social commentary in bitesize form (Zeng, Abidin and Schäfer 2021).

TikTok has ushered in a new age of influence. Its rich content format and accessibility make it a beneficial platform to be an influencer on and this influence can be leveraged to build a following on/offline for both the creator and the company (Van Houtte 2021). The term ‘influencer’ has different criteria on different platforms, with some breaking the term down into subcategories based on size.<sup>7</sup> However, the benefits remain largely the same; brand collaborations, fame, exclusive invitations and platform-specific preference. While anything over 5,000 followers is considered a form of influence in general, the bottom of TikTok’s top 10 influencers can boast of a following of 57.3 million followers.<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that of the top 10 influencers, only two are Black; Will Smith and Khabane Lame, the latter of which only rose to TikTok fame during the lockdown of the COVID pandemic and is now the second most followed account on TikTok. How is it possible that an underrepresented demographic is able to influence popular culture the way it does? When Lame began posting his videos online, his content was visible on every platform, not just Twitter. There is immense potential for typically marginalised people to be represented within the digital space but they are rarely able to view their culture within the mainstream culture, unless they specifically search via hashtag.

Kennedy (2020) recognises that not only are many of the most-followed accounts on TikTok young, they are also female, white and wealthy. Resultantly, our default idea of girlhood and femininity on TikTok are stars like Charli D’Amelio and Easterling. The videos that are propagated on the platform are often of young women who fit the D’Amelio aesthetic – slim, white and normatively attractive, which evidences the racial power dynamic that has been integrated into the app itself. As videos appear on the FYP by the most viewed rather than chronologically, and considering that the top users and TikTok megastars are white, it is highly unlikely that a regular user searching via hashtag, sound-

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7 Large influencer, medium influencer, small influencer and micro influencer.

8 For the full list of the top 50 TikTok influencers, see “Top 50 Most Followed Tiktok Accounts In 2021 | Tiktokblade”. 2022. *Social Blade*.

bite or other will encounter the Black creator and more likely that they will be led to believe that these [white] creators have initiated whichever trend or challenge they seem to be a part of, which consequently results in the continuation of power dynamics (Boffone 2020). As a central aspect of fame on social media is visibility (Abidin 2018), it is important to highlight that the FYP's algorithm leads to the reduced-visibility of Black content creators on the platform (see Boffone 2021). Boffone (2020) argues that TikTok is a white space, which is fuelled by an oppressive algorithm that privileges white, heteronormative content. Algorithms have the potential to be racist as they are embedded with the biases of their creators (Noble 2018) and TikTok's FYP reinforces the perpetuation of White supremacy.

### **Plagiarism and Theft from Black Creators**

From music to fashion and language to literature, the appropriation of Black people and their works is a topic that has gained recognition in recent years. In the past, this phenomenon went mostly unacknowledged outside of the Black community and creators have struggled to call attention to the severity of this plagiarism, due to a lack of interest. In her book, Laura Michele Jackson (2019) states that appropriation is used as a tool for power. She argues that instead of being chastised for flaunting Black culture – a culture which they cannot identify with – white people are praised and rewarded “financially, artistically, socially and intellectually”. Whether created for profit or for fun, the physical products and intellectual property created by Black people are often exploited. This has only increased with the facelessness of social media; [non-Black] creators can now access as much [Black] content as they like and can replicate works without citing the original creator because ultimately it is difficult to trace the content back to them. Moreover, white people do not profit from the acknowledgement or compensation of Black people in a climate where individuals are working for the furtherment of themselves. It is possible that one can take an existing product from one place and transport it to a new audience that has never seen it and believe that their first encounter with that product is at the product's inception. Easy access to the variety of online counterpublics available creates opportunities for non-identifying individuals to access cultural information from specific spaces and recontextualise and recreate them in other spaces.

Digital Blackface is a term used to describe the minstrel performance that takes place in cyberspace. This is presented in the form of memeification of Black individuals as users essentially pretend to be them and take on the emotion/ex-

pression as demonstrated within the video, image, gif or phrase.<sup>9</sup> Coleman et al (2019) note that the language and expression of Black people are used to entertain the masses while the plight of Black people (police brutality, misogyny and educational inequity etc.) goes largely ignored. They emphasise that, “Black content – and, more specifically, Black Culture and Black bodies – dominate digital public spaces”. Brock (2012) adds that it is Black content, “images, words, phrases and ideas” from Black spaces and communities like Black Twitter that “go viral” and receive acclamation from white Internet users and white media. This indicates that Black individuals themselves remain marginalised on and off the screen, while Black culture is desired, fetishised, popularised and commodified within the digital space. It is culturally acceptable to take from Black communities because whiteness is viewed as ‘normal’, ‘neutral’ and therefore, the ‘standard’; online, this assumed normal identity is “white, male, middle class and hetero” (Brock 2012). The normalisation of digital blackface is supported by online fixity,<sup>10</sup> the narrative that the cultural backgrounds of Internet users cannot be determined because visitors to these spaces are too diverse. If cultural origins cannot be ascertained, it’s impossible to know where a word, phrase, behaviour or cultural practice originated and, therefore, gratuitous use cannot be theft. Uninhibited intellectual property theft from Black digital spaces will remain a regular occurrence until these spaces are contextualised and recognised within the mainstream and their contributions are validated as those from an established public sphere.

One possible way to protect the intellectual property of creators is to copyright it. JaQuel Knight<sup>11</sup> is credited as the first choreographer to copyright his dance steps and his reasoning behind this is to transfer power back to the artist. Taking ownership of one’s artistic output is one way to protect the art and potential financial gain. However, copyright of the choreography can be counter-productive because content creators on TikTok need other users to recreate their work. Value does not come from the dance itself, but rather the exposure and possibilities that result from being a recognisable, online personality (Morris 2022). Hence, we should emphasise recognition and acknowledgement, which can build careers and lead to bigger opportunities for creators.

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9 Digital Blackface is explored further by Erinn Wong (2019); Haugan (2020); Davis (2020).

10 The term ‘fixity’ is an Internet and social media practice, coined by Brock (2012, 538).

11 Choreographer whose credits include Beyoncé and Megan Thee Stallion.

## The TikTok Black Creators' Strike

At the end of June 2021, Megan Thee Stallion released 'Thot Sh\*t', her first single of the year, following her debut album. Prior to this release, her singles 'Savage', 'WAP' and 'Body' had become certified hits after dance challenges on TikTok made the singles go viral; these challenges were choreographed by Keara Wilson, Brian Esperon, JaQuel Knight and Megan herself – primarily Black people. Dance challenges on TikTok are a proven vehicle for virality as dances catch on quickly and are spread simply with hashtags but the potential for growth and to develop a following are heightened by app features like curated content on the For You Pages (FYPs). Users searched these pages tirelessly following the single's release, only to be disappointed that, unlike its predecessors, no dance challenge had materialised. There was no challenge for a Charli D'Amelio to popularise (Boffone 2022).

The hashtag '#BlackTikTokStrike' began trending across social media sites in June 2021. Black TikTok creators formed a united front as they took to the platform to express their disdain for the appropriation of Black creative works by white creators; the platform was inundated with videos of creators explaining why they would not create content on the platform until TikTok worked out a way to prevent their work from being replicated by others. Many of the strike videos used audio from a specific user's account,<sup>12</sup> which highlights the importance of Black women gaining popularity like other demographics on TikTok – by doing nothing. One popular video showed a Black creator pretendingly about to dance to the single before flipping off the camera, with the caption "Sike. This app would be nothing without Blk people [sic]".<sup>13</sup> The creator reported in a later post that even this video was copied by white creators, further emphasising the lack of creativity and sheer disregard for the Black TikTok creator community (see Erick 2021). Hashtags play a very important role in the sustained life of the counterpublic; hashtags aid the expansion of social discussions and movements beyond the communities that navigate the online sphere. Johnson (2020) points out that Black social dance comes from Black social gatherings and that by using hashtags, the "circle" is opened up to those who though not physically present, can relate through the screen. Through hashtags like '#BodyChallenge', '#SavageChallenge' and '#BlackTikTokStrike', users could engage with the dance challenges but were also able to challenge those challenges. Despite there being no organised plan to strike, it took place seamlessly and this could be due to the "universality of the cultural appropriation" that many Black TikTok creators

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12 The audio is from TikTok user @thevictorystory's video, dated 23rd of November 2020.

13 The video by TikTok user @theericklouis has been viewed over 440,000 times.

have experienced. The central role that dances and dance challenges play as one of the most popular forms of short-form content on TikTok meant that the impact of the strike was felt across the entire platform.

The dissatisfaction with Black TikTokers and the app itself had been developing for a while with users taking to the platform to express their unhappiness with the preferential treatment received by white creators for a while. Black TikTok decided to leverage their cultural power and by July 2021, had banded together to go on a dance strike – some creators even refused to post at all or left the app entirely. The experiment was done to “highlight just how significant the contributions from Black creators are to viral trends on the app”, to emphasise how Black culture drives traffic to the platform and to show what would happen if they refused to allow their works to be exploited (Chan 2021). Despite Megan giving instructions for how to dance to the song: “hands on my knees, shaking a\*s, on my thot sh\*t” (Pete, Mason and Parker 2021), what surfaced were videos of flailing arms and hand holding. Though the soundbite went viral on the app, no notable dance went viral. This is a testament to the often overlooked capital held by Black creators on TikTok. The strike was propelled by the hashtag #BlackTikTokStrike, which accompanied videos in support of the strike and received millions of views. This movement drew attention to the exploitation that is embedded in the TikTok platform and encouraged creators to collectively work against appropriation and marginalisation on social media. Prior to the strike, several Black creators had complained that the platform censored their content if it related to #BlackLivesMatter or #GeorgeFloyd. One creator even noted that the platform did not allow him to include the phrases “Pro Black” or “Black Success” in his biography, as they triggered the app’s content monitoring system and were flagged as potential hate speech, while other terms like “white supremacy” and “neo-Nazi” went unflagged (Chan 2021). Race clearly plays a role in the way that creators are supported and the platform that their content is given. The disparity between the Black and non-Black creator communities on TikTok was made visible to everyone on the platform as the TikTok strike upset the balance of creation on the platform. Black creators stopped visibly creating so the white creators had nothing to copy and, resultantly, there was a lull in the number of videos created by both communities. An important point to note is that many Black creators did not ‘strike’ completely; several Black creators continued to create and join dance challenges on TikTok – including ‘Thot Sh\*t’ but did so using their own sounds. White creators were unable to find the dances because they didn’t follow the creators themselves but followed and relied upon hashtags for the dance. This reiterates that Black products themselves are often the object of desire, while Black creators are viewed as undesirable and not worth time and investment.



In the autumn of 2019, TikToker Charli D'Amelio garnered fame for her #RenegadeChallenge dance challenge – a challenge that she did not create but did not credit the original choreographer for and that saw her following rise to tens of millions of followers.<sup>14</sup> Another TikTok creator, Addison Rae East-erling was invited to perform viral TikTok dances, made by Black creators, in a dance section on *The Tonight Show* with Jimmy Fallon in March 2021 and also failed to credit the originators of the dance. It was only after outcry by the public that Fallon invited the original choreographers to make an appearance on the show – virtually. This was clearly not the first time that an incident like this had taken place. This controversy over dance credit and the many similar experiences faced by other Black creators created the perfect climate for protest. White creators on TikTok have a history of pilfering choreography from Black creators. Jackson (2019) makes the point that white people are rewarded for appropriating Black culture. This has only been proven repeatedly by the content creators on TikTok; as a result of this fame and popularity from the replication of Black content, white creators are able to leverage their already large followings into major brand deals, media appearances, record deals (music careers) and acting roles, while the original Black content creators are often unable to receive even a mention in a caption (Onibada 2021). Megan's music has been a consistent source for dance challenges on TikTok in recent years but Black creators are rarely credited for creating them and it is no coincidence that these viral dances are [mostly] created by Black women. With tensions still high from the *Tonight Show* appearance, it would have been easy for Black TikTokers to follow suit and join the strike bandwagon once they saw the hashtag trending because they could identify with the movement. Megan's music being a great source for creators to create content on TikTok, it would have been appropriate for it to be used to make a point in this way; it could have been any Megan Thee Stallion single but it just so happened that as the first release post-Fallon, 'Thot Sh\*t' became the focal point of the campaign. This choreography theft is another example of misogynoir, whereby the contributions of Black women are erased, their work goes uncited and their words plagiarised (Bailey and Trudy 2018). Johnson (2020) highlights that though Black performance contains both history and racism, it does not solely represent those things. She notes that, "Black social dance is an instrument of the people: It transmits, convenes, and envisions". Therefore, in addition to entertainment and expression, it can – and should also be used as a vehicle for narration. The idea that Black movement and choreography can be separated from the lived experiences that the creators themselves have and simply taken on as a dance that can be replicated by individuals with no acknowledgment of the context, is one that further emphasises the undervaluing of Black art and more importantly, the Black experience.

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14 Charli D'Amelio is now the most followed account on TikTok.

Additionally, Davis (2020) notes that this strike “demonstrates a tonal shift from petty grievances of kids online to a verifiable labour issue where money, attention, and opportunities are expropriated from Black creators” so the misappropriation and exploitation of Black works rests at the core of this strike. If, as Abidin (2020) suggests, there truly is a formula to become an Internet – more specifically, TikTok – celebrity, it is likely that this issue will persist. She suggests that post-based virality takes precedence over persona-based fame on TikTok. This ‘post privilege’ means that audio memes are often the driving template for content creation on the app since TikTok gives privilege to sounds over images. As these audio memes are often of Black people or Black creators, this parodic performance lends itself to digital blackface. While the ‘blacking up’ of white skin for entertainment purposes faces widespread disapproval at present, black-face minstrelsy has adapted to social relations of the times. Audio memes on platforms like TikTok can evoke humour by performing heightened emotions and appropriating Black vernacular like African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Black British English for the platform’s non-Black users to gain cultural capital<sup>15</sup> associated with Black joy and expressivity. Thus the user’s ability to mime to audio memes has allowed offline racial exaggeration and bias to evolve into a digital minstrelsy, which has increased its impact through the misappropriation and misrepresentation of Black cultural expression (Davis 2020).

The Black TikTok strike magnifies the way TikTok and other similar platforms have infiltrated mainstream culture. This strike opened conversations on anti-Blackness, cultural appropriation and blaxploitation on TikTok up to the public as the controversy was not confined to the platform (Boffone 2022). It became a mainstream, cultural matter when it was covered and discussed by multiple publications<sup>16</sup> and media outlets, across various social media feeds to mainstream news<sup>17</sup> and daytime talk shows. The strike shifted the dynamics on the platform, to expose how TikTok is a microcosm of society that utilises racial politics. Racial bias on TikTok is a reflection of race relations in the physical world and therefore, racial inequality offline. That made its occurrence even more significant; the Black creators’ protest and comments for TikTok were protest and comment for society, for the United States – for the world.

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15 Based on a scale to evaluate the exploitative nature of digital dance cultures. See Davis 2020.

16 See Foreman 2021; Njera 2021.

17 See Paul 2021; McClay 2021.

## Conclusion

With post-based fame taking centre stage on platforms like TikTok, it appears that Bill Gates' statement "content is king" (Gates 1996) rings true now more than ever. Abidin's work on TikTok culture suggests that the attention economy on TikTok breeds users who strive to become celebrities on the app (Abidin 2018; Abidin 2020). This motivation to become famous – whether in-person or on the app via the FYP – drives the personaless nature of content creation and encourages users to jump on trends in order to appear relevant and attain fame. It is highly likely, therefore, that the expropriation of Black culture and mimicry of Black expression is merely a by-product of the process and racial power dynamics on social media. Furthermore, these trends demonstrate that this mimicry remains a "rite of passage for white youth" (Davis 2020) as Black joy and expressivity are used as bargaining power for white teens.

While research has been conducted into established Web 2.0 platforms, TikTok is considered an emerging platform that continues to define itself and mainstream culture<sup>18</sup> globally. Though still a relatively new platform, research by scholars such as Trevor Boffone, Sarah Florini, André Brock, Safiya Umoja Noble, Aria Halliday and Ruha Benjamin specifically focus on the platform's effects on Black communities. In this increasingly more researched area, it is unclear as to how previous studies will affect the way Black creatorship is considered when programming algorithms and organising platforms, though suggestions have been made. What is clear, though, is that previous debates which have dominated discussion on popular culture and within cultural studies have little relevance when we begin to deconstruct the white, heteronormative identity and introduce perspectives using the oppositional gaze. Reluctance to ground Black counterpublics in an empirical framework suggests that more scholarly output is desired to trade its assumed presence for that of a recognised entity. My intent is to fill in the gap in cultural and communication studies by focusing on Black counterpublics.

I argued at the beginning of this article that when non-Black creators are credited for Black work, Black creators are forced to rethink the way they create and disseminate their work. An example of this being during the strike, a number of TikTokers continued to choreograph routines to Megan's songs but without the official soundbite, opting to use their own audio. If the video clips posted on TikTok are "complex, cultural artefacts" as suggested by Schellewald (2022), then not only should they be stored and studied – they should be protected. We need to question the relationship between social media and the way we view intellectual property. The findings that I have presented suggest that TikTok fa-

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18 TikTok's mainstream culture is also known as "Straight TikTok".

vours white content creators over Black content creators and that this racial bias is integrated into the platform itself in the form of censorship, an algorithm that favours white creators, etc. The participatory [social] nature of social media platforms makes them an ideal place for individual and collaborative works but there is a divisive dynamic embedded within the platform that restricts Black creators from benefiting from this way of creating, like their non-Black (specifically white counterparts). Creators have been calling out this disparity but the Black TikTok strike brought this issue to mainstream attention. This is important for Black creators specifically, but also creators in general because it calls into question the ethics of fast content creation and the protection that is (or is not) offered to those creators, on those platforms. Furthermore, it forces users to question how they perceive and discuss race. Historically, Black voices have been stifled and silenced but their presence in the public sphere has given them a space to amplify their voice and position their experiences within the discourse. While this study does not offer a conclusive answer to the question of how Black TikTok can be better understood as a counterpublic, it does take a look at one instance where Black creators were able to gain enough momentum to break free of the boundaries of social media and affect the mechanism that restricted them. This is important as I believe that studying this strike in detail could offer insight into how Black creators can leverage their work and formally unify in the future.

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## **HOW BLACK CREATORS STOPPED THE CLOCK ON TIKTOK (summary)**

This study explores how racial bias and cultural appropriation underpin the creator culture on social media platforms, using the Black TikTok strike as a case study. While I cite various scholars, who have researched themes that are present within this study; cultural appropriation, TikTok culture and online public spheres, I note that most of these studies offer a broader perspective on Black communities. Contrastingly, I focus specifically on Black TikTok as a present counterpublic and the way the creator community itself is able to amplify its message by uniting behind an intention – a hashtag. As individuals, their voice is quieted but as a collective and community, the Internet allows them to amplify their voice within the digital space so I explore the repercussions of this mode of expression. I highlight the importance of earlier research into appropriation, racial inequity and how this research needs to be supported by deeper study of social media and the online presentation of self. I propose that the effect of social media on online Black communities needs to be studied further in order to create policies and legislation around intellectual property. I explore the implications of the ready availability of social media and how this access governs the practice of those that rely upon social media for creative expression and regular income. Following this, I examine TikTok as an entertainment platform that relies on the creation of content. This need for content drives the continuous production of short-form video, which when not governed ethically can result in controversial practices and theft. This allows us to contextualise the issues highlighted by Trevor Boffone in his book ‘TikTok Cultures In The United States’. I examine the significance of the #BlackTikTokStrike movement and how its ability to spread quickly shows that there are underlying issues that extend beyond an isolated incident. There is a history of theft and appropriation of works from Black creators. As a novel form of media, TikTok is still relatively under-researched and as such, phenomena like this go largely unnoticed. This research offers insight into how Black creators navigate self-expression in digital spaces and shape the culture of social media.

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# **COMPOSING SOCIAL MEDIA. THE REPRESENTATION OF THE PHYSICALITY-VIRTUALITY CONTINUUM IN ÓSCAR ESCUDERO AND BELENISH MORENO-GIL'S WORKS<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** Óscar Escudero and Belenish Moreno-Gil, as artists of the millennial generation, proposed an approach to musical composition that takes into account the new ways of being and relating to the world, which has been modified by the irruption of social networks. Their work represents an understanding of the mediatised and globalised world in which we live, making it clear that the philosophical and aesthetic paradigm has changed and must adapt to these new ways of communication. In order to understand their works, it is necessary to understand how social media and the physicality-virtuality continuum work and the effects they have on us. In this article I try to outline this with the help of literature in this respect and to relate it to the different forms of artistic presentation that make up their works. This article is to

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<sup>1</sup> This article would not be possible without the collaboration of the post-composers Óscar Escudero and Belenish Moreno-Gil, who provided me with all the necessary materials for the analysis and whom I was able to interview as part of this research. I would also like to thank the flautist and performer Clara Giner Franco for providing me with the materials for her performance of the work [OST] and information about its preparation.

be understood as an attempt to conceptualise Moreno-Gil and Escudero's aesthetics through specific examples of the works *Custom #X Series* and *Flat Time Trilogy*. The concepts of 'simultaneity', 'hyperreality' and 'flat time' or the 'struggle for visibility' and 'profile subject' help us to understand the new forms of communication through social media and are the philosophical basis for the works of Escudero and Moreno-Gil.

**Keywords:** contemporary music, contemporary music-theatre, social composing, music performance, post-composition, performance analysis, social media.

## Introduction

Since the past decade, several contemporary composers have been addressing the new forms of communication offered by the physicality-virtuality continuum that characterises today's hyper-connected society with a focus on the use of social media. The term 'social composing' coined by Brigitta Muntendorf can be understood as the foundational concept of this new way of composing, which is characterised either by the use of "social media as compositional material" with a "composition strategy" that "incorporates social media into intrinsic communication models" (Muntendorf 2019 [2015], 56) or by a "composition process" that "takes place directly on the social platforms" (57). In addition to Muntendorf, other composers such as Jagoda Szmytka, Michael Beil, Alexander Schubert or Sergej Maingardt put 'social composing' into practice from very different aesthetic perspectives.

Belenish Moreno-Gil and Óscar Escudero stand out as leading figures in this compositional movement, putting into practice the first of the meanings proposed by Muntendorf through music-theatre works that combine different forms of artistic presentation (music, text, video, choreography, etc.). In their works *Custom #X Series* (2016) and *Flat Time Trilogy* (2017–2018), one can perceive both the problems of the blurring between the physical and the virtual of the contemporary mediatised subject and the social and psychological problems of the struggle for visibility derived from informational capitalism and the democratisation of culture through social media. These works, moreover, are a reflection of the singularisation of subjects as hybrid beings operating simultaneously in the physicality and the virtuality, insofar as part of the performance is centred on the social media profiles of the performers, which makes each performance unique and singular. This decentering of the concept of art work and the shift towards the concept of performance together with the de-hierarchisation of the different media and artistic forms in their works, as well as the distancing of the figure of the composer as genius, lead Escudero and Moreno-Gil to call

themselves post-composers. Treating “voice, gesture, movement, light, sound, image, design and other features of theatrical production according to musical principles and compositional techniques and [applying] musical thinking to performance as a whole” (Roesner 2012, 9), their works can be classified with the term ‘composed theatre’, understanding music not as an end, but as a means.

In this sense, Escudero and Moreno-Gil’s works should not only be understood as artistic representations, but also as essays or manifestos, as they entail a reflection on the ways of understanding our experience in social media on the basis of a very solid philosophical and sociological discourse. The incorporation of quotations and references to scientific texts is a common resource in their works and demonstrates the social commitment and role of the post-composers as political actors.

In this article I will analyse what these philosophical and sociological bases are and how they are materialised in the works of Escudero and Moreno-Gil. The first part of the article deals with the ways of experiencing time and space in the physicality-virtuality continuum, understanding social media not as an external device to which we can resort at certain times but as a space with the capacity to configure our way of being in and relating to the world. In the second part, the focus of the analysis falls on the specific problems of the incorporation of social media as an inseparable element of our life experience and its social, psychological and economic consequences.

## **Experiencing Time and Space Between the Physical and the Virtual**

The moment social media become part of our daily lives, they also become part of our environment and we interact with them on the same level as we do with the physical environment. The relationship that is established between both environments and the ways of experiencing time and space in each of them is the subject of Moreno-Gil and Escudero’s work and can be explained through the concepts of simultaneity, hyperreality, flat time and narcotisation and absorption.

### **Simultaneity**

The simultaneity between different elements and media as a metaphor for the simultaneity of the physical and the virtual, typical of today’s mediatised subject, is one of the main characteristics of the work of Escudero and Moreno-Gil. This simultaneity entails a dissolution of the boundaries between the physical and the virtual. This is explained through the concept of ‘X-Reality’ paraphrased in the work [OST] of the *Flat Time Trilogy*, which “describes a world that is no

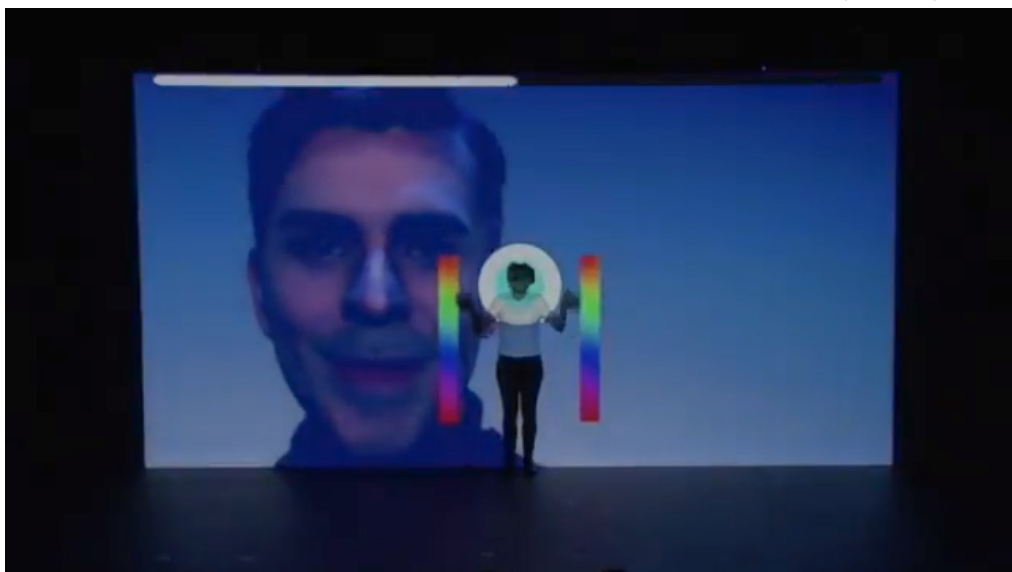
longer distinctly virtual or real but, instead, representative of a diversity of network combination”. The term ‘X-Reality’ marks “a turn toward an engagement of networked media integrated into daily life, perceived as part of a continuum of actual events” and must be understood as “a movement away from computer-generated spaces, places and worlds that are notably outside of what we might call real life and a transition into a mobile, realtime, and pervasively networked landscape”. With X-Reality, Coleman sees “an end of the binary logic of virtual and real” (Coleman 2011, 19–20).

Andreas Reckwitz’s understanding of the digital world as an ‘environment’ explains also the intertwining of the subject and social media, as well as the implications of this intertwining in the physical world. According to the German sociologist, technology is “less and less a tool” as it was in the industrial world and “has increasingly become a technological environment in which subjects operate. At its core, this environment is a *cultural environment* that affects subjects on an ongoing basis” (Reckwitz 2020, 172). Therefore, the digital world does not belong to a parallel virtual and intangible reality, but is present in our daily lives and has become an ‘environment’ in which we operate and communicate with the world and with other subjects. This vision of social media and the virtual world also means, therefore, a blurring between physicality and virtuality, insofar as the latter is tangible and plays a key role in the processes of subjectivation and individualisation in the same way as the former.

In Moreno-Gil and Escudero’s works, the videos that are projected at the moment of the performance are starred by the performers on the stage. They are shown as a representation of the virtual subject that, combined with the physical subject present on the stage, forms a mediatised subject that is real in both strata. This becomes the subject of the work, for example, in [Custom #2]. In this work for three instrumentalists *ad libitum*, the performers have to personalise the sound material, “assigning different sounds/actions to each of the proposed gestures” (Escudero n.d.). These sounds correspond to the movements that are projected on the screen in the form of a video, which combines a record of the busts of the different performers, their profiles on social media and images of the geolocation of the performance venue. With an absolute correspondence between sound and movement on the screen, Escudero uses these sounds produced in real time by the instrumentalists as a link between the physical and the virtual, thus manifesting the simultaneity between the two dimensions. These sounds can be understood as the actions necessary in the physical world to move in the virtual world (clicks, mouse movements, etc.), but also as a reflection of the actions of the virtual world in the physical world. It is interesting to observe the score in this sense, as Escudero notes the movements and actions perceptible in the video in the same way as the rhythms and sounds of the different performers (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Fragment of the score of [Custom #2]. Above, notation of performer 1's video; below, notation of performer 1's actions.

This blurring of boundaries between the physical and the virtual caused by simultaneity is accentuated in the works of the *Flat Time Trilogy*. While in the *Custom #X Series* the difference between the performers of the physical world and their representations in the virtual world are clearly distinguishable, the scenography of *Flat Time Trilogy* suggests a total integration of the physical subject in the virtual world: the screen behind them also forms part of their environment and their bodies are integrated into the digitality through monitoring, mapping and interaction with the medium, as can be perceived in Figure 2. As Moreno-Gil rightly points out, it is interesting here to distinguish between the concepts of 'virtuality' and 'digitality', which serves to differentiate the conceptions of the two cycles. While the virtual refers to an intangible, possible, but in many cases unreal or imaginary, the digital is tangible and measurable and enters into a horizontal and non-hierarchical relationship with physicality.



**Figure 2.** Image from [OST] performed by Óscar Escudero.

The clearest example of this is the staging of [OST] by the performer Clara Giner Franco. In this work, inspired by ASMR videos, a performer is confronted with the task of posting a video on social media. During the performance, we see how the performer records, edits and shares the video on Instagram. The documentation of this process is projected onto the screen behind the performer. While other interpretations of the work present a representation of the subject in the digital world as an alter ego with a clearly differentiated personality with respect to the subject in the physical world, Giner Franco's proposal consists of breaking with this duality, showing herself as natural as possible: naked and with a natural interpretation that is very close to the physical performance (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Image from the video of [OST] performed by Clara Giner Franco.

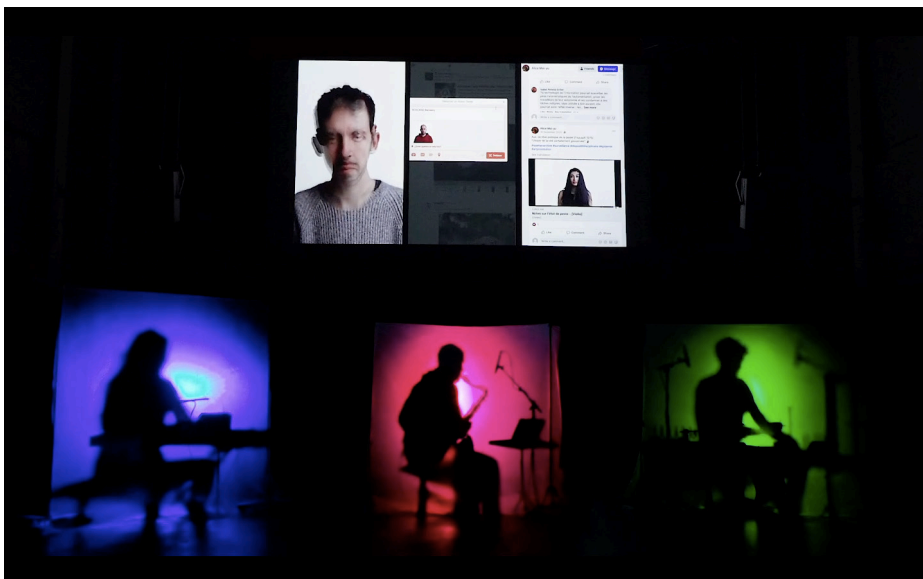
In this way, Giner Franco blurs the relationship between the physical and the virtual or digital, thus also blurring the hierarchy between original and copy, and places the two strata on the same level. This interpretative proposal demonstrates the reality of the two strata and the experience and interaction of the use of platforms in the post-digital era.

### **Hyperreality**

The simultaneity between the physical and the virtual is, in fact, a materialisation of what Jean Baudrillard calls 'hyperreality'. Óscar Escudero refers to the French sociologist and philosopher and his concept of hyperreality to explain the work [POV]: "an illusion, which cannot be combated with truth due to its

impossibility of being understood as any other thing but a representation of itself” (Escudero n.d.). The representation of the subject through the profile on social media or through their digital identity is, therefore, a simulacrum of the subject that is as real as their own body. In its turn, the physical subject can also be understood as a simulacrum, since it is through its forms of representation that it is perceived and therefore exists. In this way, the subject themselves is constituted of simulacra, since the reference to an original does not exist, but has an autopoietic nature through the representation that permeates the totality of its forms of being in the world, both physically and digitally. The simulacrum of which Baudrillard speaks, therefore, “is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (Baudrillard 1995, 1).

This is, in fact, what the scenic proposal of [Custom #2] by the ensemble Soundtrieb shows. In the recording, we can see how the performers on stage are illuminated with coloured lights that only show their silhouettes, while their faces projected on the screens above them are completely clear (Figure 4). This scenography places the physical subject on a different layer. While the idea of the work is to show the body of the performers and their video representations with the same clarity to demonstrate the simultaneity between the two dimensions, in this case, physical bodies are relegated to the background and are presented more as the shadows of the subjects than as bodies, thus demonstrating the equally (un)real and (un)tangible nature of the physical and the virtual. The shadows through which the performers’ bodies are presented demonstrate that these bodies are also a representation of the supposed primary reference, which is omitted throughout the performance.



**Figure 4.** Image from [Custom #2] performed by the Soundtrieb Ensemble.

The concept of hyperreality is also central to [HOC], the third work in the *Flat Time Trilogy*. This work is based on the representation of an action that is omitted in the performance. This action is referenced both by the voice-over that accompanies the video almost in its entirety and by the performer with the phrase “I’d do it again” (and also “I’ll do it again” or “I did it again”). The fact that this action is never performed but is referred to repeatedly is what really constitutes it, so that the idea of the simulacrum as a constituent of the hyper-real is taken to the extreme. After eight minutes of performance, this action has not been carried out, although, almost at the end, we hear a stroke on the snare drum and then frightened voices of a rescue in the Mediterranean Sea. In this case, the action has not been performed either, but a simulacrum that is presented as real within the framework of the performance.

The performance takes place in front of a large screen, which remains black for most of the time. This screen alternately includes a diagram of a snare drum with different parts that light up according to what the percussionist is playing, instructions for the percussionist and other indications and digital artefacts. From a certain moment, the screen goes from being black to being a capture of the performer’s Instagram timeline. This new scenery combines very fast scrolls of the timeline with the static capture of a completely black picture apparently published by the performer on their Instagram feed (Figure 5). This picture becomes the stage where the performer carries out their actions. What this change of scenery demonstrates is that the actions performed on social media or on the virtual/digital world are just as valid and have the same consequences as actions performed in the physical world. This moment of the performance focused on the Instagram interface is accompanied by the following phrases from the voice-over:

Therefore, the individual would do it again, conscious about the impossibility of grabbing a second and printing it on the skin on the flex of its own biography. It could well be linearly done, intermittently, by stopping, going back to the beginning and focusing, impulsing and attacking again, silently or nominating those focuses, impulses and attacks.

This text demonstrates, on the other hand, that although what we do on social media is just as real as what we do in the physical world, the way we experience time and the control we have over it in each of the realities is different. These acts become cultural products on social media and are repeatable and editable and subject to manipulation of all kinds. Later, as the stage becomes the Instagram timeline again, the text is a repetition of what we heard at the beginning. This reinforces the idea that what is performed on social media is a simulacrum that, in this case, has a reference in the physical world. In its return, however, this ref-



erence is also a simulacrum without prior reference. This is evident at the end of the work, when the performer takes off his virtual reality glasses, approaches the audience and recites a text about what they had supposedly done that ends with the question “Does it really matter?” This question raises the question of the difference between what is real and what is hyperreal, giving the same importance to the representation of an action as to the real action in the physical world.



**Figure 5.** Image from [HOC] performed by Wim Pelgrims. Instagram interface.

From a more general point of view, it is interesting to see the representation of the interfaces of social media and everything that represents the physical or digital world in the different works. Especially in the *Flat Time Trilogy*, the actions performed in the digital sphere are very simple in design and are shown in a fluid way. Escudero and Moreno-Gil move away from traditional representations of the digital world by escaping the glitch effect. This effect, which is the result of a technological error that becomes perceptible but does not affect the functioning of the software, is frequently used in the representation of digital interfaces in order to highlight the hypermediation that characterises them in a paradigm in which the digital and the physical are in a dichotomous and hierarchical relationship. This hypermediation must be understood as a logic that “acknowledges multiple acts of representation and makes them visible” and “in every manifestation ..., makes us aware of the medium or media” (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 33–34). The elimination of the glitch in their works also represents the softening of this hypermediation to become a more homogeneous space closer to immediacy, typical of the post-digital paradigm, in which “digital technologies have become smoother, more immersive, less obtrusive” (Bayne et al. in Jandrić 2021, 21).

Thus, “the described shift towards blurring borders between physical and digital social contact, or postdigital human contact, is one of many important steps in development of postdigital humans” (Jandrić 2021, 21). Escudero and Moreno-Gil represent with the simplicity and clearness of their sound and graphic representations, therefore, the ‘smoothness’ and ‘immersivity’ inherent to the experience of social media in the post-digital era, thus eliminating any element that could be reminiscent of hypermediation.

### **Flat Time**

The spatio-temporal conception in social media that differs from that of the physical world presented in [HOC] and in all the works analysed in this article can be explained through the conception of dreams of the Spanish philosopher María Zambrano, to whom Escudero and Moreno-Gil refer in the description of their works. Zambrano considers the dream as a space in which “man’s life appears in the deprivation of time, as an intermediate stage between non-being ... and life in consciousness, in the flow of time. In this intermediate situation one does not yet have time” (Zambrano 2004, 15).

This conception of the dream as a space not governed by time, in which time occurs simultaneously and not successively, is what led Moreno-Gil and Escudero to title the second cycle *Flat Time Trilogy*. Flat time – a concept already present in the *Custom #X Series* – is to be understood here in contrast to time in the physical world. In interaction with social media, as well as in dreams, the past and the future do not condition the understanding of time. On the contrary, the subject is absorbed by the present, which “expands and widens, seeming to absorb past and future” (Zambrano 2004, 85); an absolute present in which everything happens simultaneously and in which an insensitivity develops in the subject that is analogous to the timelessness of dreams. This timelessness is accentuated or even perpetrated by the interface of social media: it can be understood as an archive that breaks down the time barriers between present and past, allowing immediate access to past events without the need for linearity. In this sense, the Facebook timeline is an example of this understanding of the interface of social media platforms, as it “explicitly organizes a person’s content around a linear timeline that supports browsing far into the past, including links directly to activity that happened years ago” (Zhao et al. 2013, 2). Thus, this way of understanding the interface of social media reinforces Zambrano’s idea of the absolute present, since access to the past occurs simultaneously with the intense experience of the present.

This idea is represented in [Custom #3] for cello and piano. In this work we see a screen split in two, each of the parts corresponding to the two performers respectively (Figure 6). These screens are capped by a chronometer that covers

the time span of one minute and moves forwards and backwards in time at different speeds. The chronometer is synchronised with the video that is shown, which combines a close-up of the two performers with some images of their profiles on social media and other texts and graphics. This minute is not a real minute, but rather a smaller space of time. The subjection to the aforementioned chronometers and the dilation and constriction of time in the reproduction of the video make it credible that it is a real minute. This already demonstrates that spatio-temporal perception is not objective but relative and subjective and can be altered by external artefacts. Escudero's idea is that the simultaneity of events at the moment of interaction between the virtual and the physical, as well as the possibility to access different temporal moments by understanding social media as a digital archive, alters temporal perception. This is why there is a large number of simultaneous events during that minute and, moreover, they do not respond to a linear temporal perception.

This becomes noticeable at a very specific moment in the performance. A little further on in the middle of the performance, the chronometer stops at the second 6:16. This moment corresponds to the projection of the social media profiles of the two performers. From the moment when the chronometer stops at 6:16 seconds until it reaches 6:47 seconds, which is the time span in which the social media profiles are shown, 45 seconds pass. Time has slowed down here more than a hundred times. During this period, we see a frenetic browsing through the Facebook and Spotify profiles that are already frenetic in themselves. In fact, when these images appear in real time, we can distinguish that it is a Facebook profile, but the contents are presented in a totally confusing way. Thus, the moment when the spectator sees the social media interface is the moment when time is most dilated and the chronometer, advancing very slowly, reinforces this sensation of dilation.



**Figure 6.** Image from [Custom #3] performed by Lluïsa Espigolé (piano) and Erica Wise (cello). Instagram interface.

## Narcotization and Absorption

On the other hand, María Zambrano's conception of dreams as a space where "the subject [is] deprived of time" also understands dreams as a space in which the subject's freedom is annulled, so that their actions become uncontrollable and unconscious and are automatic. In social media this freedom is also nullified, but the reasons for this nullification are largely due to the large amount of information that characterises social media and which therefore provokes an experience of great affective intensity. This type of experience often results in a narcotization and automatization of the acts performed on the platforms, as novelty and immediacy take control of the subject. This narcotizing effect of social media, intensified by the abandonment to an inertia of actions, is, in fact, already foreseen by Zambrano in her writing on dreams when she refers to the automated actions in physical life as a result of intense experiences:

The excess of speed in the flow of the river of experiences produces a state similar to that of a dream: on the one hand, a duration that attracts towards itself, that buries in itself what has just been born. On the other hand, delirium. We call delirium the automatism of expression without any intervention by the subject; the alienation of certain of the most intensely lived experiences of consciousness ... However, if attention retains in the space of the present, widening it, one of these privileged experiences, then time is lengthened, dilated. And the present instant no longer alludes to the future, since the widening of the present depends precisely on this: on a kind of isolation from the influence of the future, from that pressure that the future exerts on the present, which is thus pushed to open up to another, equally present instant (Zambrano 2004, 82-83).

From the point of view of communication theory, this narcotization can also be explained through the concept of 'narcotizing dysfunction' raised by Lazarsfeld and Merton back in 1948 in reference to the mass media – a concept which "suggests that the vast supply of communications may elicit a lethargic feeling, as informational flood induces a numb, drowsy sensation in citizens ... The constant flux of information overwhelms the individuals' capacity to be sensitive. It puts to sleep their critical competences in order to follow the frantic rhythm of news" (Mateus 2020, 1159). This narcotizing effect is increased by the use of social media, since beyond informing, they also allow the users to express their opinions and feelings immediately and without filters, which multiplies the sensation of having acted without having really done it (Esitti 2016). Narcotization, therefore, is not only to be understood as an impairment of the subject that does not move on to action due to overexposure to information, but also as an absorption of social media that distances it from physical reality due to its

timeless nature. This phenomenon is explained by psychology with the concept of ‘cognitive absorption’ (Agarwal/Karahanna 2000), which consists of a “state of deep involvement with software” characterised by ‘temporal dissociation’, ‘focused immersion’, ‘heightened enjoyment’, the feeling of ‘control’ and ‘cognitive curiosity’ (673). More recently, it has been empirically demonstrated that ‘cognitive absorption’ also has implications for the use of social media (Tourinho/Oliveira 2019) and that it can cause other psychological disorders.

This problem is addressed in the works of Escudero and Moreno-Gil with a great freneticism, a consequence of the large amount of information and the multimediality of the performance. This is present in Moreno-Gil and Escudero’s works almost in their totality and is perceived by the spectator at a pre-symbolic level. Although all the actions that take place on the stage are thought out down to the last detail and maintain a coherent relationship with the other elements of the performance, what the spectator perceives here are not the meanings of each of the elements that intervene in the performance or their simultaneous relationship with each other, but rather the overload of information they contain, which has an almost physical effect and which is presented to the spectator’s consciousness without a specific meaning but with a strong emotionality. The large number of images, expressions and sounds that make up these works succeed each other in a vertiginous way and in a frenetic and confusing atmosphere. The stimuli that the spectator receives in the few minutes of performance are almost impossible to assimilate, not only because of the speed and simultaneity with which they occur, but also because of their multimedia nature. This is not to say, however, that their intention is to provoke this sensation of overpassing or confusion, but rather that this sensation arises from the fact that they represent the experience of the mediatised subjects on social media, who also receive a large amount of information that they are sometimes unable to assimilate. The coherence of the different elements intensifies, in fact, this type of experience and can lead the audience to frustration.

Specifically, as an example of the automatization caused by cognitive absorption or narcotizing dysfunction, it is also interesting to analyse the work [Custom #1], in which the performer gives a tutorial on how to be successful on social media, accompanied by a percussionist.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the piece, we see the performer’s Facebook and Twitter profiles interspersed with different videos performed by the performer themselves. The performer navigates through these profiles and performs actions on them while explaining their strategies. These actions are often repeated, such as, for example, the act of stopping to follow different profiles, scrolling, etc. The role of the percussionist, in this case, is to make

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2 This work has been adapted by Óscar Escudero for different ensembles. In these adaptations, the instrumentalists play the same role as the percussionist in the original version.

explicit the different movements of the mouse and other actions of the performer on the platforms, as explained above. Although this use of percussion may be reminiscent of the technique of mickeymousing, in this case, far from being a redundancy between image and sound, it plays a different role here: as well as representing the link between the physical and the virtual, it highlights the automatization and mechanicity of the actions on the platforms, in such a way that its rhythmic and repetitive nature reveals the inertia that dominates them.

### **Social Media as an Arena for the Production of Cultural Goods**

Social media play a fundamental role in the way people relate to each other and to institutions. These relationships occur in the highly competitive environment of advanced capitalism and have certain psychological consequences. This centrality, on the other hand, favours companies to benefit from the parameterisation of users' actions and interactions on the different platforms, facilitated by the way they (re)present themselves, which can be conceptualised with the terms 'compositional subject' or 'profile subject'. These problems are also present more or less explicitly in the work of Escudero and Moreno-Gil.

### **Struggle for Visibility and its Psychological Consequences**

The paradigm shift that Reckwitz points out in the understanding of technology as a 'culture machine' and as an 'environment' also means a blurring of boundaries between creator and audience. That implies a democratisation of culture, since digital platforms and social media have become arenas of creation in which all users have the capacity (or the need) to create and share cultural products. This also means, however, a "structural asymmetry" between the "extreme overproduction of goods" and the "scarcity of recipients' attention". This asymmetry, in turn, leads to a "struggle for visibility", which often results in a "winner-takes-all" situation (172–173).

In this fierce environment of cultural production on social media, the subject is in a highly competitive space compared to cultural spaces outside digitality, as cultural production has gone from being a privilege to a necessity. Whereas in the industrial capitalism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the subject sought to adapt to the norm and be unnoticed, in today's digital society subjects need to show themselves as unique individuals in order to obtain a certain social status (178–179). This causes, at the same time, novelty and immediacy to become two fundamental characteristics of the cultural material produced on social media (174), since it rewards those publications that have a great affectivity (170–172). In this sense, visual and sound products, as well as short texts with a great emotional impact,

make up the majority of cultural products on the media. It is not surprising, therefore, that Escudero and Moreno-Gil's works have as their subject matter this primacy of affectivity with the incorporation of videos, sounds and fleeting quotations that have a direct emotional impact on the spectator.

The freneticism already explained in the previous chapter, prevailing in [Custom #1], corresponds in this case to the subject of the text, which can be understood as a critique of this need to capture attention, essential to survive as a mediated subject in an advanced capitalism. The fact that the video is customised by the performers themselves and incorporates fragments of their social media profiles means that the subject of the work revolves around their personae and that, therefore, this struggle for visibility, already marked by the artistic nature of the different forms of representation, takes place in an environment where artistic production is much more important. In this case, therefore, although the social media profile can be oriented more or less towards a professional profile without a marked private charge, the distinction between public and private continues to be blurred. So much so that Escudero (Clammy 2021) confesses that some artists have asked him to alter or remove some fragments of the video because they are too private, even though they have given their written consent to use all the content of their social media profiles.

The profiles of the freelance artists – most of the performers in Escudero and Moreno-Gil's work are freelance artists – strike a balance between showing themselves as both professional and personal in order to reach as wide an audience as possible but one that has a real interest in their content and their work. The precariousness and instability that characterises this type of artist and the struggle for visibility that this entails is central to understanding this use of social media, which is a professional practice that at the same time becomes part of private life (see Scolere et al. 2018). It is at this point where the so-called self-branding comes into play, which is based on the dissolution of boundaries between public and private, but also between user and consumer. The subjects must not only be interesting, authentic and unique, but they must also be perceived as such, since they are in a competitive environment in which these values, characterised by a great affectivity, are rewarded.

Thus, the subject has to accumulate what Reckwitz (2020) calls 'singularity capital' (120-122). Analogous to Bourdieu's (2002 [1979]) concept of distinction, the mediated subject uses the tools of social media to accumulate a certain cultural capital, which in this case contributes to the accumulation of singularity capital. However, it is interesting to differentiate here between these two forms of capital accumulation: while the first is based on an expression of taste, as Bourdieu suggests, the second is based on 'taste making'. Thus, as Paßmann and Schubert (2021) point out, "activities, such as liking, sharing, following, retweeting, tagging, bookmarking, replying, commenting, and last but not least posting

and replying on social media are not only ways of taste expression, but always also practices of taste making” (2948).

This is clear in [Custom #1] in the explanation of the different strategies for self-branding and attracting visibility. It is not surprising that this tutorial on how to be successful on social media places special emphasis on the people you follow from your profile, what content you share or what posts you like. Although the text places the main emphasis on the contentment of other users of the social media, with the phrase “masses need to perceive you as a faultless, dapper image, almost unreal” the performer makes it clear that this contentment, framed in a prevailing positive affectivity, is also a strategy for gaining visibility. In this sense, as Reckwitz (2020) states and Escudero ratifies in the third point of the tutorial, the subject has to show ‘culturally uncontroversial’ (182): “From time to time, write a post expressing a clear idea, but not enough to annoy those people you liked in two and didn’t remove in one”.

This struggle for visibility and this novelty and immediacy prevailing in cultural production on social media can lead to different cognitive and psychological dysfunctions and disorders that are also the subject of Escudero and Moreno-Gil’s works. Beyond the ‘narcotizing dysfunction’ and ‘cognitive absorption’, anxiety, depression and emotional fatigue, among others, are some of these dysfunctions and disorders (Dhir et al. 2018). Several empirical sociological and psychological studies have demonstrated this correlation between compulsive use of social media and different psychological disorders (see for example Roberts/David 2020; Keles/McCrae 2020). This problem consists, in many cases, in feedback of this behaviour through the different disorders. Not only does the compulsive use of social media cause them, but people who suffer from these psychological disorders find in the compulsive use of social media a refuge and a point of escape. In this case, therefore, the simultaneous, narcotizing and absorbing nature of social networks explained in the previous chapter plays a fundamental role.

Once again, [OST] serves as an example. The dramaturgy of this work revolves around the obsession of the performer when posting a video on social media. The need to be liked and to appear unique in a compressed format such as the 10 seconds of an Instagram story leads the performer to repeat the recording of the video almost compulsively in order to achieve a satisfactory result. In this journey, also characterised by the idea of flat time explained in the previous chapter, we can see the psychological evolution of the performer, who begins with a gentle and calm mood and ends up in a nervous and desperate state, characteristic of a crisis of anxiety.

On the other hand, [Custom #1] shows how the need to share one’s personal opinion on a specific event and the need to be on social media in order to obtain attention from those people who are a priori necessary for success leads



the performer to exhaustion. This is due to a need for attention and valuation typical of the advanced capitalism prevailing in social media. These reactions of attention and valuation, which are obtained through interaction with likes, links and other practices, provide users with a 'singularity status' (Reckwitz 2020, 183) which, in addition to contributing to the visibility of their profile and therefore having an economic purpose, provide them with immediate personal satisfaction. This need for attention and appreciation, conveyed through the compulsive sharing of personal experiences, is central to the end of the work. When the performance seems to have ended with the performer leaving the stage and the title 'THE END' appearing on the screen, this title disappears in reverse and the interface of YouTube appears, where the recording of the performance that has just taken place is uploaded. Thus, the performance is not finished and, therefore, does not become completely real until it is shared on social media and all the followers can experience it.

### **The Profile Subject and its Commodification**

This need for authenticity and uniqueness is satisfied on social media by a modular composition of the subject. The profile of the subject is presented as a 'modularized tableau', a 'two-dimensional space' that allows "to represent their personalities as a collage of material elements" and which is composed of "individual components that are visible as such and functions on the basis of prescribed formats" (Reckwitz 2020, 180). The singularity of the subject is therefore governed by a logic of collage or assemblage similar to the logics of musical recycling such as remix or mashup, in which a "selective appropriation of dominant cultural elements of diverse provenance ... is carried out in order to construct a discourse of its own, with coherent and exclusive meanings completely different from those of its components in their original context" (López Cano 2017, 244).

On the other hand, in the paradigm of the modular subject, the discourses of authenticity and singularity go from being complex and difficult to access to being comprehensible and palpable in a simple glance and, therefore, characterised by a surprising and highly affective component. Moreover, this way of showing singularity is also determined by temporality: the assembly of the different elements that make up the singularity of the subject in the form of a profile is in a process of constant change characterised by the primacy of novelty and immediacy. Evidently, the interface of each platform also conditions this modular presentation of the subject. The clearest example is Instagram, with a profile in the form of a grid, but Facebook and Twitter also promote this modularity.

The idea of the interface as a conditioning factor in the way of presenting oneself on social media is thematized in the works of the *Custom #X Series*, with

special emphasis on [Custom #2], in which the performers have to personalise the sounds in the same way as they personalise their profiles. The personalisation, therefore, is determined by a series of rules and conditions, which are translated into rhythms and a series of symbols that correspond to the different sounds that the interpreter has to personalise and that refer to the actions on the screen. Thus, the score acts here as an interface that does not determine the contents to be interpreted, but rather its composition, i.e. its rhythm and order.

From a legal point of view, it is possible to speak of a conditioning of the platform when it comes to using the material shared on it. This is also part of Escudero's approach to *Custom* works. The performer has to sign a contract annexed to the contract for the processing of personal data when creating a profile on any digital platform in order to be able to use all the public material shared on their profiles. This use of user's material shared on social media translates in the real life into the sale of information to third companies in order to plan personalised marketing strategies. This is possible, at the same time, thanks to the modularisation of the subject and the creation of singularities from the logic of assembly. The fragmentary and modular nature of the mediatised subjects allows the 'monitoring' of the 'subjects' activities' and the 'automated observation' of the 'discrete elements' that make up the different singularities through algorithms that allow "to observe the uniqueness of individual profile subjects" (Reckwitz 2020, 183–185).

In this sense, the saxophonist's actions in [POV] are digitally monitored and parameterised, converting the apparently complex information into discrete data that can be indexed and commodified. In this work, which is based on the logic of the assemblage, we see how the saxophonist performs four actions with his or her instrument, which are classified with the letters a, b, c and d, corresponding to a tremolo, a long high note, a breathing sound and a glissando respectively. These actions can be understood as actions in the digital world that are susceptible to being *softwareized* through algorithms. In this sense, the work can be divided into different parts that are analogous to some different steps of big data analysis.

In the first phase, the different actions are presented separately and their results are analysed in detail with the appearance of graphs corresponding to the computer tools for analysing and processing sound data (figure 7). In the second phase, the different actions are combined and the results of these combinations are analysed in the same way as in the previous phase (figure 8). The comparison between the different actions is what makes up the third phase, which consists of determining the similarities and differences between them (figure 9). Finally, there is a conceptualisation of the different actions that is presented in the form of a tutorial (Figure 10). Through the information obtained in the previous phases, the analysis leads to a deep and detailed understanding of the different

actions similar to that which can be obtained through data analysis. The different apparently continuous actions are discretised by means of a digital conversion that allows a high degree of accuracy, which makes this digitisation not perceptible. The most evident case is that of the glissando of George Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue quoted in this work: the glissando, understood as a musical effect characterised by the continuity in a change from one note to another, is fragmented into different sections that allow its digital comprehension and computer indexing. On the other hand, what this conceptualisation demonstrates is that the different actions can be defined through smaller actions that form part of a finite series of actions. This also demonstrates the modularity of the resulting actions, as they are formed by the combination of the smaller ones.

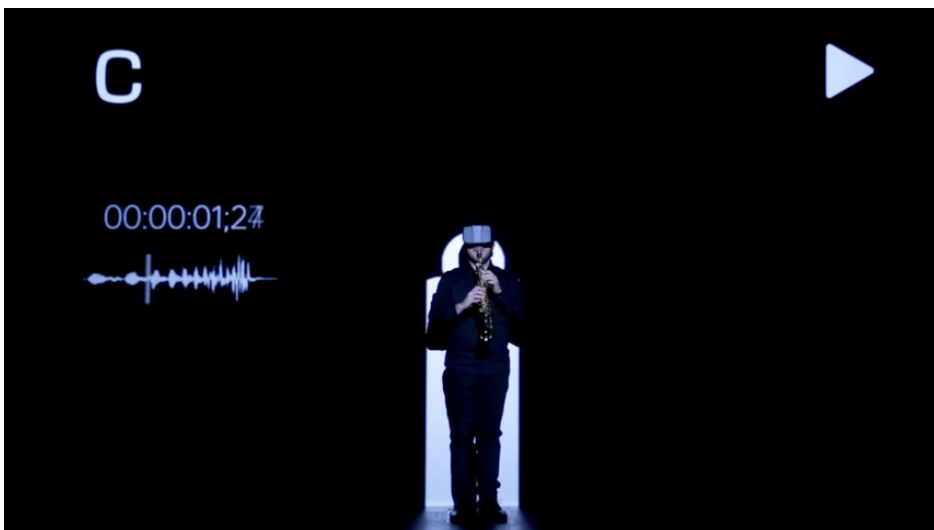
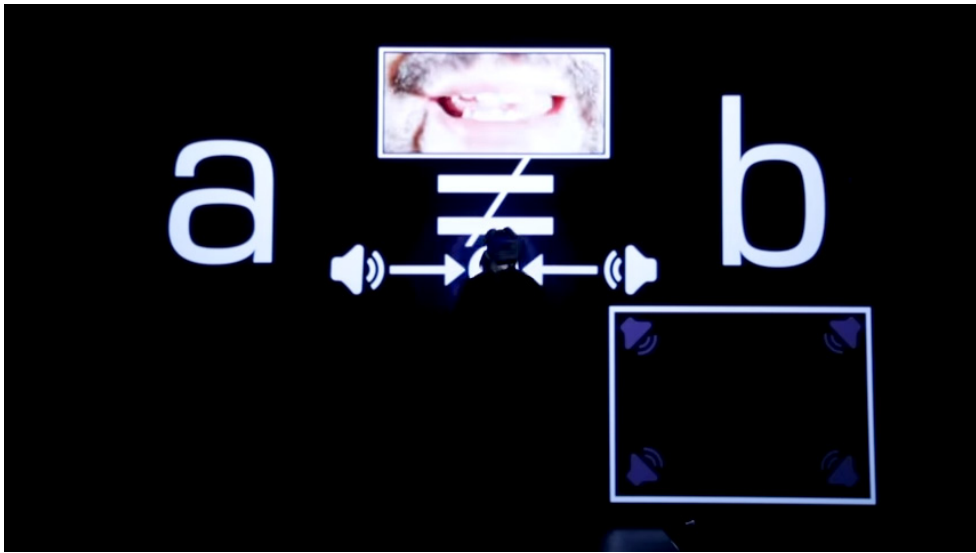


Figure 7. Image from [POV] performed by Pedro Pablo Cámara. Analysis of the action c.



Figure 8. Image from [POV] performed by Pedro Pablo Cámara. Combination and analysis of actions b, c and d.



**Figure 9.** Image from [POV] performed by Pedro Pablo Cámara. Comparison between actions a and b.



**Figure 10.** Image from [POV] performed by Pedro Pablo Cámara. Conceptualisation and description of the action a (tremolo).

## Conclusion

The works of Moreno-Gil and Escudero should be understood as essays that attempt to explain the current mediatised subject within advanced global capitalism and the ways in which this subject behaves and relates in the space that arises from the intersection between the physical and the virtual or digital. The

evolution in their work also demonstrates an evolution in the way of understanding this intersection, starting from a clear hierarchy between the physical and the virtual in the *Custom #X Series* to transform into a horizontality between the two strata typical of the post-digital era in the *Flat Time Trilogy*. Moreno-Gil and Escudero have understood and accepted Muntendorf's premises and have expanded them, making 'social composing' the core of most of their works. The two post-composers stand not only as witnesses and reporters of the paradigm shift perpetrated by social media, but also act as researchers and thinkers, as their artistic proposal helps to understand this paradigm shift.

Moreno-Gil and Escudero's message is one of a certain pessimism with regard to social media, as in their works, they report on the ethical, social and psychological problems they entail. At the same time, they accept this change as something unavoidable, framing the subject as a victim of the prevailing capitalism of social media but with a capacity for action which, although limited, presents some possibilities of escape. Their works can also be read as a tool that helps us to understand social media better, explaining their mechanisms and intricacies, so that abandoning oneself to them, even if unavoidable, becomes a more conscious act.

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## COMPOSING SOCIAL MEDIA.

### THE REPRESENTATION OF THE PHYSICALITY-VIRTUALITY CONTINUUM IN ÓSCAR ESCUDERO AND BELENISH MORENO-GIL'S WORKS

#### (summary)

In this article I contextualise and analyse the aesthetics of the works *Custom #X Series* and *Flat Time Trilogy* by Belenish Moreno-Gil and Óscar Escudero. These works can be framed within the movement of 'social composing' as they adopt strategies that incorporate the ways of communication of social media.

The first part of the article explores the theoretical and aesthetic foundations of Escudero and Moreno-Gil through the concepts of simultaneity, hyperreality, flat time, narcotization and absorption – theoretical concepts that serve to explain the experience of subjects on social media and that can be applied to the ideas of the post-composers. The concept of simultaneity takes into account Coleman's approach to the so-called X-Reality or Rickwitz's approach to the understanding of technology as a 'cultural environment'. This concept is materialised in the works of Escudero and Moreno-Gil

through the interaction between the different media, as well as through the interaction between the physical and the virtual or digital. Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality is central to understanding how the boundaries between the physical and the virtual or digital are blurred, insofar as both strata can be understood as a simulacrum without a clear reference. This is put into practice through different strategies related to staging. The concept of 'flat time' is borrowed from the Spanish philosopher María Zambrano, quoted by the post-composers themselves, and serves to explain the way in which time is experienced on social media: the platforms make it possible to break down the hierarchies between past, present and future. In this sense, the post-composers distort the perception of time through the incorporation of actions inherent to social media: the subject is able to rewind, advance, stop, dilate or contract time freely. The concepts of absorption and narcotization explain the psychological effects of this way of experiencing time, leading subjects to an automatization of actions or to a mental state of abstraction. The freneticism or the correspondence between images and sounds can be understood as a materialisation of these psychological effects.

The second part of the article deals with the effects of understanding social media as arenas of cultural production. In this part, emphasis is placed on the struggle for visibility that this understanding entails and the psychological effects that derive from it. The subject matter of the text and the actions of some of the works analysed focus on this problem. On the other hand, the focus is on the presentation of the subjects through the logic of the profile – that is, in a compositional and modular way, where the important thing is the combination of different heterogeneous elements. This has consequences in the commodification of the data of social media users and becomes the subject of some works by Escudero and Moreno-Gil through the parameterisation and fragmentation of the performers' actions.

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## **FIGHTING FOR ATTENTION THROUGH RAP MUSIC: SHOCK-VALUE, RACIAL PLAY AND WEB CULTURE IN THE PERSONA OF TYLER, THE CREATOR**

**Abstract:** Tyler, The Creator (Tyler Gregory Okonma), is a Grammy-awarded African American rapper, music producer and entrepreneur who has been vigorously challenging tropes of black American masculinity; mainly through his internet savvy and smart use of audio-visual digital platforms such as YouTube. From chattel slavery to blackface minstrelsy, the African diasporic experience in the West is marked by a series of stigmas, contradictions and dichotomies evidenced in the challenge of being black in a white world. This duplicity denounced by seminal scholars such as W.E.B. DuBois and Frantz Fanon informs the theoretical framework of this article but also reflects most of Tyler's investments in subverting American whiteness and blackness in his audio-visual performances. Not by chance, identity is central in our current digital era and so it is prominent in web culture which is marked by the constant exposition of one's persona and its ephemerality in the vast ocean of data. Tyler, as one of the first YouTube music phenomena, knew how to expose and at the same time rework his own contradictions as an African American artist by constantly juxtaposing, shifting and remodeling his own discourses and persona in the digital environment. In this article, I discuss his strategies by inquiring into why his early shock-value ethos and persistent racial play are relevant to connect with fans and expose his artistic productions in our current postmodern times.

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**Keywords:** Tyler The Creator, web culture, critical race theory, rap, hip-hop.

## Introduction

Tyler, The Creator, born Tyler Gregory Okonma, is an African American rapper, music producer and entrepreneur from Los Angeles, California. Tyler's musical work was made apparent by his artistic talent, Internet savvy and his tendency to affect shock value discourses in his early career, helping him to reach success quickly and in an independent manner. Tyler established himself as a sensation in contemporary rap due to his notable productions: leading and founding the Odd Future hip-hop collective (a group largely gathered together via the Internet at 16 years old) releasing his first solo and self-financed album *Bastard* (2009) at 18; scoring a YouTube hit with the "Yonkers" videoclip at 19; winning two categories in the 2011 Video Music Awards at 20, and having his first nomination for Grammy Awards at 22 in 2013 (which happened again in 2018 with his album *Flower Boy*, then with *IGOR* (2019) and *Call Me If You Get Lost* (2022) when he finally won Best Rap Album at the 2020 and 2022 Grammy Awards). Tyler's stripped-down, nihilist and sometimes extreme spirit – partially borrowed from punk/skateboard culture and its irreverent ethos – pushed against the grain of a mainstream hip-hop centered, for the most part, on the search for money, fame and the pleasures of a luxurious life. Tyler's early lyrics ranged from personal dramas like being fatherless (the name of his first mixtape is *Bastard*) and having relationship problems, to more outrageous themes involving rape fantasies and ultraviolent chants performed whilst adopting his (white deviant) alter ego, Wolf Haley.



**Figure 1.** One of Tyler's impersonations of his early white deviant alter ego Wolf Haley.

However, from Tyler's third album *Wolf* (2013) onwards, the narrative and music production started to be less gloomy, approached romantic themes and overcame his inner conflicts through the killing of his alter-egos in the song and music video "Sam (Is Dead)" which appears in Odd Future's studio album *OF Tape Vol. 2* (2011). This change did not happen by accident but seems to have been the consequence of the pressure he felt from feminist groups, the LGBTQ+ community and conservative restrictions from national governments such as the UK, Australia and New Zealand that forbade some of Tyler's tours due to the outrageous nature of his earlier work. All of these controversies, complemented by Tyler's disposition in pushing the boundaries of hip-hop culture, informed his fifth record and fourth studio album, *Flower Boy* (2017), in which he raps about having homosexual relationships with white men. This unexpected and more progressive move confirmed his always iconoclastic ethos: one that had begun with uniquely emotive lyrics counterposed with jarring fictionalized violence in his initial records, until this surprising turn of events. In this way, Tyler's work became a unique production in American rap history.

### **The web as a racial mask: unveiling some core strategies present in the musical work of Tyler, The Creator**

Popular music – in the way it has been produced and consumed in Western society – has always relied on entertainment as its core element to engage the audience. In the Internet era, the user's attention itself is capital and companies have actively sought out ways for people to be unceasingly entertained. The positive impact that humour has on audiences was quickly apparent and the way music production and consumption profited from the use of humour has been proven time and time again and, in many cases, it's been refined into a very efficient strategy. From meme and emoticon communication to the innumerable comedy videos available on the Internet – as was the case in YouTube's beginnings – there is vast evidence that this type of production resonates with a considerable amount of Internet users. The global scenario marked by the predominance of the digital world and worrisome levels of mental health issues such as anxiety disorders and depression offer some clue on how the entertaining and sensorially appealing arena of the Internet might function in relation to postmodern psychological struggles (Chul-Han 2015).

It is not by chance that meme-like rappers such as Berkeley, California's Lil B – who are "equal parts musical performance, surrealist comedy act, motivational speech, celebrity meet-and-greet and dance party" – became a sensation in the digital arena in the first decade of the 2000s (Noz 2011). Not dissimilar to Tyler, Lil B's edgy persona ranged from rape fantasy lyrics in his early career to releasing an album called *I'm Gay* (2011) – a title later changed to *I'm Gay (I'm Happy)*

– which according to B was intended as a gesture of support for the LGBT community and a clarifying statement about his own happiness as a heterosexual man (Godfrey 2011). Regardless of the questionable titling of the record, the themes B approached were quite worthy, being mostly related to systemic racism in America, a fact that led to his work being well received by music critics. This paradoxical and puzzling artist served as an early inspiration for Tyler, The Creator and other rappers from Tyler’s generation such as Vince Staples, who is also known for his tongue-in-cheek commentaries on social media and interviews; a playfulness that also exists side-by-side with a more serious approach indebted to gangsta rap narratives.<sup>2</sup>

Another seminal moment in terms of rap success on the Internet in the first decade of the 2000s is Soulja Boy’s hit “Crank That”. The rapid ascension of his profile on MySpace, due to the catchy beat and chorus supported by original dance moves and lyrics performed in the music video, led to its choreography becoming extremely popular in America in a manner not seen since Los del Rio’s hit “Macarena” (1993) (Jurgensen 2008). Not by chance, the plot of the “Crank That” music video exploits the relationship between going viral on the Internet, being noticed by music industry corporates and subsequently getting signed. The good-spirited and comedic tone of the video with black children and teenagers doing the dance in various urban scenarios with adult characters playing the fool – such as the hilarious Super-Man with his curly wig and the uninformed music industry mogul being told by his kids who Soulja Boy is – played an important part in the song’s success in the digital realm. Therefore, Soulja’s trajectory presaged hip-hop’s particular appeal in the digital arena and gave impetus and ambition to a slew of independent artists such as Tyler, The Creator to pursue recognition through their finessing of a virtual, online presence.

Tyler’s strategy, however, took on a more nuanced direction, notwithstanding the fact that comedy and humour were still major features in his musical work. The notion of digital intimacy – creating the sensation of intimacy through virtual presence – was reflected in many aspects of his productions from his confessional music to the incisive use of social media to interact with fans. The profound transformation of a music genre heavily stigmatized by LA’s black ghetto gangsta narratives into the less predictable image of Tyler’s Internet nerd persona contributed to more diverse possibilities in American hip-hop. The openness with which Tyler dealt with his deepest insecurities in lyrics, in addition to his iconoclastic, playful and witty persona, allowed him to create a strong connection with fans which resulted in Odd Future becoming an Internet sensation by the end of the 2000’s first decade.

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2 Chart Attack: Vince Staples says Lil B is the most important person in his life | RAPID FIRE. YouTube. Posted on 08/07/2015. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aQs6KWuNQoY>> Accessed on 28/04/2020.

For rock and indie music, Tyler's psychologising approach would be considered normal as those genres are dominated by white teenagers and young men generally narrating the boredom of their middle-class lives, or lamenting their personal dramas. But for Tyler, as a black young man from Southern California – the iconic home of gangsta rap – such an approach was a major shift. For the first time in rap music, a black artist became successful discussing his psychological condition in a manner that resembled the narratives of rock stars such as Nirvana's leader Kurt Cobain, an artist known for his inner turmoil and self-loathing persona. Not by chance, Kurt is quoted by Tyler in his song "Sam (Is Dead)" (2011) in which he kills his alter-egos in order to become less abrasive in his future narratives.

However, Tyler's web presence is not circumscribed by digital intimacy only; this is seen in his dialogues with other audio-visual productions such as the MTV program (and then movie) *Jackass* and juvenile Internet contests such as "the cinnamon challenge" in which youngsters (generally from developed countries) post videos eating as much cinnamon as they can and then coughing or even throwing up (Huguet 2010). Both entertainment phenomena – *Jackass* and the cinnamon challenge – encompass Tyler's relation with gross-out humour and web culture which helped him to execute his cross-overs with regard to race and gender.

Robert Sweeny discusses this matter in his article "This Performance Art Is for the Birds: Jackass, 'Extreme' Sports, and the De(Con)Struction of Gender":

Surely part of the provocative nature of the show is due to the fact that the activities caught on film typically require little skill: Can one be a professional *Jackass*? Although the *Jackass* crew represents the 'average,' bored, white male, who, for lack of anything better to do, attempts to outdo friends through physical exertion and body humor, they are, in most cases, well-trained, either as professional skateboarders, or, in the case of Steve-O, as a circus clown. The unprofessional production of the skits, shot on handheld digital video without the assistance of a 'steady cam' device, contributes to their unvarnished allure (2008, 138).

Especially notable for our purposes here is the way Tyler was able to appropriate tropes related to the "average, bored, white male" to promote the racial subversions present in his music video performances. Speaking in scholarly terms, even if authors such as Maeve Sterbenz (2017), Duri Long (2014) and mainly Penelope Eate (2013) have offered excellent contributions on gender issues regarding the music work of Tyler, The Creator, none of them have explored the implications of race and its intersectional connections to gender in popular music, an especially relevant topic in the work of an ambiguous artist such as Tyler. Through his references to Wolf Haley, Tyler is "playing" white-

ness. He is performing the “bored, white male” risking his body in gross-out humour performances while being shot by a handheld camera that legitimates the supposedly spontaneous and “authentic” acts. This is especially the case of his ground-breaking music video “Yonkers” (2011) in which he performs awkward acts such as eating a cockroach, throwing it up and committing fictional suicide at the end of the video. I understand this manoeuvre undertaken by Tyler as racial masking (which I will discuss further in dialogue with Frantz Fanon’s concept of the white mask and W.E.B. DuBois’s double-consciousness).

Along with his anarchic comedy, this psychologising approach helped Tyler’s music resonate with a multi-racial audience, from different places around the globe, with quite diverse social and economic backgrounds. In this sense, web culture also worked as another mask for Tyler’s racial subversions as much as skateboard culture. Its appeal to intimacy and nerdiness clashed with the street appeal and gangsterism so often exploited in mainstream hip-hop and offered a new image of black masculinity, an image that 21<sup>st</sup> century audiences seemed to have been craving. Tyler’s take on digital intimacy embraced one of the most persistent features of the Internet that ranges from people’s use of social media, showing excerpts of their personal life, to the intrinsic humour in performances exploiting people’s flaws and general ridiculousness in daily activities. It is not by chance that YouTube started off as a video platform mostly watched for its funny videos that people used to upload, before it turned into the largest music video website in which many artists and celebrities still exploit its humorous aspects to generate huge engagement from users, and to establish intimate connections with those users.

In just one recent example, rap and pop artist Cardi B went viral during the worldwide Coronavirus pandemic in 2020, merely by articulating her fears about it in a video recorded from a cell phone that was then posted to her Instagram account (Lamarre 2020). Her footage became a piece of comedy, reedited and remixed by many, including experimental funk musician and producer Mono Neon, known for his YouTube channel wherein he musically mimics funny Internet videos whilst playing his bass in his room.<sup>3</sup> Before one assumes that Cardi B was nothing but spontaneous, it is important to consider the potential successful enterprise this type of video has, and which indeed led her to be widely commented on and reproduced in a moment when talking about Covid-19 was the biggest trend in cyberspace. In its context of celebrity and “influencer culture”, the video was, above all, a performance, and intimate sketches such as this example tend to garner a wide response or what are labelled “reactions” in

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3 Mono Neon. “MonoNeon, Cardi B, Charles Cornell - SPREAD THE WORD DON'T SPREAD THE GERMS (CORONA VIRUS SONG)”. YouTube. 19/03/2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pDjGynS0xKg>> 23/03/2020.

the digital field. The knock-on effect to B's entrepreneurial concerns was very positive due to this chain reaction of various remixes, mashups, memes and other appropriations of her video, including responses in the real world such as the graffiti wall in Dublin dedicated to her and re-posted by B on her Instagram account.<sup>4</sup>

Guy Debord, in his ground-breaking work *Society of Spectacle* (1970), postulates on how this myriad of images produces a reality in which the representational becomes more valuable than the actual thing or being that is represented. This also creates an environment in which the replication of the representation becomes the norm. As in Cardi B's case, the performance as a representation is successful because it is widely shared and re-appropriated in an endless fashion. "The spectacle regenerates itself," as Debord writes:

When the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings – dynamic figments that provide the direct motivations for a hypnotic behavior. Since the spectacle's job is to use various specialized mediations in order to show us a world that can no longer be directly grasped, it naturally elevates the sense of sight to the special preeminence once occupied by touch: the most abstract and easily deceived sense is the most readily adaptable to the generalized abstraction of present-day society. But the spectacle is not merely a matter of images, nor even of images plus sounds. It is whatever escapes people's activity, whatever eludes their practical reconsideration and correction. It is the opposite of dialogue. Wherever representation becomes independent, the spectacle regenerates itself.

The replication, however, of the spectacle is not exclusively related to images as Debord's passage suggests. In the current context, narratives of personal drama and grief as representations of disclosure and intimacy are also quite appealing precisely because closeness becomes increasingly scarce in a society of atomized individuals. Paradoxically, these individuals are connected through the web but isolated in the 'spectacle' of their own mobile devices or computers (a situation that was aggravated by the Covid 19 pandemic). In a variety of Tyler's albums, especially his debut mixtape *Bastard* (2009), such narratives of virtual intimacy appear several times in the lyrics. This is a feature in songs such as "Her", with verses such as:

To mental images, her face look,  
the closest I got was when I'm poking her on Facebook (this girl),  
videos chats are so exciting,  
'cause it's like she's inviting me to her world full of privacy

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<sup>4</sup> Cardi B [@iamcardib]. "Ireland take quarantine serious." Instagram. 08/04/2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-s4RgMgCG8/>. 22/04/2020.

This personalising intimacy is also present in the various criticisms Tyler directed toward music blogs for not covering his musical work. In the intro of the eponymous song of his first mixtape *Bastard* (2009), Tyler targets such coverage with the voiceover:

Yo, fuck 2 Dope Boyz and fuck Nah Right,  
and any other fuck-nigga-ass blog,  
that can't put an 18-year-old nigga making his own fucking beats, covers,  
videos  
and all that shit...

Tyler, however, is not alone in his confessional endeavours. Many users have shared their personal experiences for a variety of reasons ranging from marketing and branding to unburdening traumatic experiences, as happened with the movement against sexual violence #MeToo (North 2019). Intimacy and personalisation walk hand-in-hand in the digital arena and again, Tyler's ground-breaking music video "Yonkers", is a significant example of this feature of the Internet, expertly through his general grotesquery and dramatic solo performances intensely directed at the camera in front of an infinite white studio backdrop. This stripped-down performance encompasses his iconoclastic spirit seen in lyrics, interviews, imagery and his overall persona as I have been discussing here in the article.

### **Branding the self, race and digital identities: how Tyler became The Creator?**

In their book *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* (2008) John Gasser and Urs Palfrey describe the idiosyncrasies of this generational group and offer some core understandings of how young people have achieved celebrity in the digital world. The story of Stevie Ryan – a YouTube performer who, tragically, later took her own life in 2017 – is an important starting point in understanding Tyler's productions and the centrality of video performances in the digital arena. Ryan, a young white woman who moved from Riverside, California to Los Angeles to pursue opportunities in the entertainment industry, achieved fame on YouTube through a cross-cultural and cross-racial performance with her Latina character Little Loca which turned her into one of "the top 100 video producers on YouTube in terms of the number of regular viewers who subscribed to her channel" (2008, 111).

Gasser and Palfrey remind the reader that "Stevie's not alone". This type of successful online entrepreneurship became increasingly common over the second



decade of the 2000s. Ryan's case reminds us not only that humour, performance and entertainment are important but also that the possibilities to play with one's identity in the digital realm is endless. In cyberspace, where one, apparently, can be whoever he or she wants to be, identity works as a slippery source rather than a fixed reality. In Ryan's and Tyler's case, both invested in irreverent cross-racial and cross-cultural personas to effectively enact their strategy. The creation and maintenance of several profiles on social media offered a most fitting medium for many Digital Natives to experiment with identity and what we might call "virtual masking" which relates to the concept of racial masking I have introduced previously.

This apparent increase in individual freedom has its challenges, however, for those who rely on such resources. In a world where creating and experimenting with identity can be as easy as changing a profile picture or a self-description on social media, Gasser and Palfrey suggest there can be several challenges involved with virtual masking, which Digital Natives – but also older people, the so-called "Digital Immigrants" who had to adapt to this new reality – have to find ways to cope with:

Versions of these identities and interactions will likely be around for a long time. It's no secret that the digital medium is characterized by high degrees of accessibility and persistence. Negotiating various audiences and contexts is fairly straightforward in the physical world (the way a young woman represents herself at her part-time job, through clothes and patterns of speech, might be different from the way she represents herself with friends). But online, Digital Natives are managing their identity representations in a space where dynamics of visibility, context, and audience are much more complex (2008, 30).

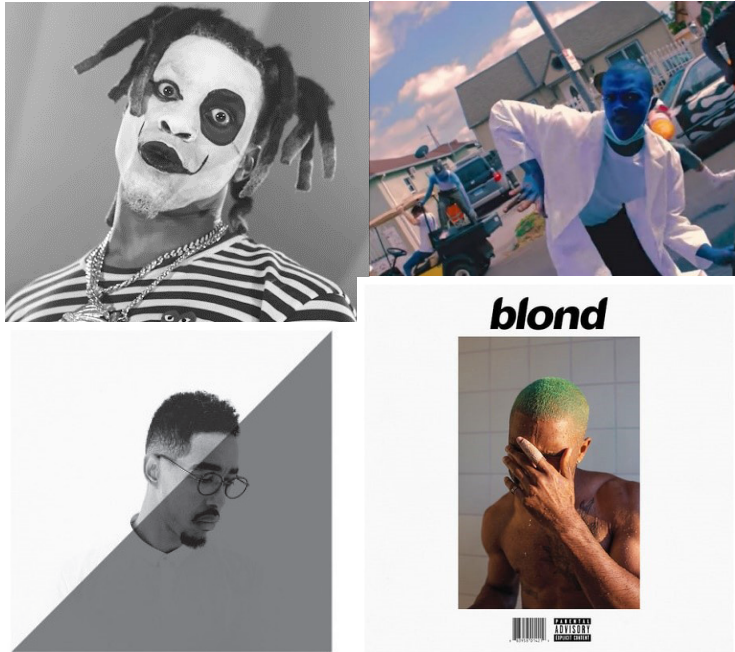
In this context, cross-racial performances and cultural appropriation might operate in subtler and more fluid ways than before. That is probably why Stevie Ryan was quite convincing in her Latina character and convinced Latina fans to identify with her persona, Cynthia. Similarly, Tyler, The Creator has used "white" identities and tropes such as skateboard culture, nerd stereotypes and web culture to develop his alternative personae in rap music and build a fanbase that is also interested in the subversion of these stereotypes.

Like Ryan, Tyler is not alone in his racial play. Various African American rappers have been playing with identity lately, via the concept of a white mask, in their musical releases. Examples include Angeleno rapper Schoolboy Q on the cover of his debut album *Oxymoron* (2014) and then with *Blank Face* (2016); Amine's music video "REDMERCEDES" (2017); Internet comic and rapper Ca-leon Fox with his straight-hair wig in diverse music videos and comedy sketches; Denzel Curry's music video "Clout Kobain"; the multi-racial hip-hop collective formed on the Internet BROCKHAMPTON with their bodies all painted in

blue, masking their racial difference; Oddisee's album *The Iceberg* (2017) and Frank Ocean's landmark album *Blond* (2016). Tyler, too, has done this in his album covers and in virtual fanzine artwork that he used to produce during his Odd Future days as I will show below.



**Figure 2.** The quoted examples resembling the concept of white mask in contemporary rap music in the order they were mentioned. From top left to bottom right: Schoolboy Q on the cover of his debut album *Oxymoron* (2014) and then with *Blank Face* (2016); Amine's music "REDMERCEDES" (2007) and Internet comic and rapper Calleon Fox with his straight-hair wig.



**Figure 3.** The other examples shown above from top left to right are: Denzel Curry’s music video “Clout Kobain”; multi-racial hip-hop collective, formed on the Internet, BROCKHAMPTON with their bodies all painted in blue, masking their racial difference; Oddisee’s album *The Iceberg* (2017) and Frank Ocean’s landmark album *Blond* (2016).



**Figure 4.** Here we see Tyler’s debut mixtape *Bastard* (2009) with a group of kindergarten white kids with their faces harshly distorted by Tyler who designed the cover himself. Then, in the right upper photo, we see his blonde-wig character from *IGOR* (2019) a Grammy award winning album. In the left bottom image there is his “Who Dat Boy” (2017) music video in which rapper A\$AP Rocky sews up a white mask over Tyler’s face. At last, some of his fanzine-like flyers, emulating advertisements on Tumblr for his comedy show *Loiter Squad* on Adult Swim which is broadcast with Odd Future emulating white personas.

Of all the examples shown here, the white mask stitched on Tyler's face certainly has special significance. The manner in which the white face mask is badly grafted onto his black skin – with its rough and uncanny needlework – conjures the reality that whiteness is forced upon blackness in Western society, creating a monstrous, Frankenstein-like aspect to Tyler's appearance. Indeed, the image is a chilling metaphor of the doubly-conscious and schizoid psychological condition forced upon black people in our racist world. The plot of the video, with its inspirations from movies like *Frankenstein* and with its references to Tyler's homosexuality – such as the looming Leonardo di Caprio poster in Tyler's room whilst he works on his white mask, or the manner he escapes the police with a white male passenger in his passenger seat – reinforce the idea of Tyler's awkwardness as a dark-skinned African American male rapper. Inevitably, all this context directly recalls Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952).

Fanon consistently exposes how the constructedness of race was built upon and readily imposed by the hegemonic group – in this the case, “white”, Western civilization – on African and non-white people in the colonies and peripheries of Europe. This socio-racial landscape, projected onto the oppressed, led to a discriminatory condition which Fanon defined as “the fact of blackness”. This means that a black person only becomes aware of his or her difference once subjected to the systemic racism of Western society. In this sense, what we understand as blackness only exists as an antithesis of whiteness's supposed superiority. This perverse dichotomy has worked to justify and legitimate all forms of atrocity towards non-white people across the world. Moreover, it created another issue elucidated by Fanon, a “dual narcissism” in which the white man is sure about his intellectual and moral superiority whilst the black man tries to prove at all costs his value to the white hegemony. In Fanon's words:

As long as the black man is among his own, he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience his being through others. There is of course the moment of “being for others,” of which Hegel speaks, but every ontology is made unattainable in a colonized and civilized society. It would seem that this fact has not given sufficient attention by those who have discussed the question. In the *Weltanschauung* of a colonized people there is an impurity, a flaw that outlaws any ontological explanation. [...] Ontology – once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside – does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. Not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some critics will take it on themselves to remind us that this proposition has a converse. I say that this is false. The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man. Overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself. His metaphysics, or, less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him (1952, 109–110).

Fanon's postulations are important not only to demystify any purist take on race but also to remind us that race is a hegemonic construction made to maintain the status quo of Western society and its expansionism. The constructedness of race masks its own fakery, hence when Tyler stresses in his musical work his resistance towards identifying with mainstream tropes of African American masculinity, he is also objecting and denouncing the white racist notions that created it. This duality of being a black man in (and for) a white world, but also not being sufficiently identified with blackness, nor whiteness, leads to the mental sickening expressed in Tyler's musical work which Fanon's scholarly work as a black man, an intellectual and a psychiatrist from Martinique was able to point out almost a century ago.

Fanon's theories, however, are not alone in denouncing this paradoxical condition of black people in Western society. His concept of the white mask dialogues with the theory of "double-consciousness" developed by renowned African American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois. The idea that black people in the US experience a psychological condition of "twoness" resembles most of Tyler's and Fanon's contentions which I have discussed so far. In DuBois's words:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, --a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (1903, 8).

DuBois also reminds us of how this context of imposed duplicity in a racist society leads to a sense of powerlessness which reflects the nihilistic and pessimistic dispositions reflected in part by the African American spirit, which certainly fits the scope of the musical work of Tyler, *The Creator*. Furthermore, DuBois utilizes the word "paradox" – as Tyler did to describe himself in the opening line of his most successful song and music video "Yonkers" (2011) – to describe this sociocultural context experienced by black people in America. DuBois writes:

In some such doubtful words and phrases can one perhaps most clearly picture the peculiar ethical paradox that faces the Negro of to-day and is tingeing and changing his religious life [...] Thus we have two great and hardly reconcilable streams of thought and ethical strivings; the danger of the one lies in anarchy, that of the other in hypocrisy. The

one type of Negro stands almost ready to curse God and die, and the other is too often found a traitor to right and a coward before force; the one is wedded to ideals remote, whimsical, perhaps impossible of realization; the other forgets that life is more than meat and the body more than raiment. But, after all, is not this simply the writhing of the age translated into black, – the triumph of the Lie which to-day, with its false culture, faces the hideousness of the anarchist assassin? (1903, 136–137).

DuBois's postulations on the spiritual and psycho-social crisis of African Americans during his time still resonate in contemporary times, as do the postulations and provocations of the anti-Christian, atheist and heterodox musical work and persona of Tyler, The Creator. Tyler's twoness – and its double denial of whiteness and blackness – suggests there is no “real” Tyler, despite the fact that racism is certainly complex, systemic and all too real.

Not by chance, the emergence of the white mask in rap music has never been as prevalent as in the 2010s. Hip-hop and the digital world came together quite naturally to produce a fitting space wherein one could expose this racial paradox at play ‘from a safe distance’ – as during the gangsta rap consumption in the MTV era of the 1990s – regarding the ease with which white suburban fans of hip-hop can now access a wide range of rap music production. Furthermore, the readiness with which one can enjoy the music they like and ease with which they can research the work and intimate personal life of an artist have never been so convenient.

Murray Forman pointed out this issue in his book *The ‘Hood Comes First: Race, Space and Place in Rap Music*:

Hip-hop's ubiquity, rate and volume of output, and incontestable commercial appeal have produced sometimes subtle indicators of its wider social impact. For example, as the term “the ‘hood” seeped up from “the underground,” having been through rap and the hip-hop media, it has entered into the standard vocabulary of social mainstream. Today is not uncommon to hear individuals who are quite distant from hip-hop as either fans or consuming audience members erroneously referring to their upscale or gentrified enclaves as “the ‘hood,” dipping into hip-hop's linguistic forms as a sly display of urban chic. This phenomenon and the curious cultural effects that can and do emerge through hip-hop's cross-cultural appeal also inform Marc Levin's 1999 feature film *White Boys* and the James Toback film *Black and White*, which was released in the spring of 2000 (2002, 343).

Moreover, the short-cut access to various data and resources contributes to a cultural context in which one can have the false idea that it is possible to know about everything through a one-click web research. Obviously, this situation

can easily lead to stereotyping of people and of things we do not really understand. As Long and Wall point out, having Tessa Perkins' article "Rethinking Stereotypes" (1997) as a main reference: "stereotypes are held about groups with whom 'we' have little or no social contact; by implication, therefore, they are not held about the group which 'we' belong" (2009, 84). This is why white fans can believe they now know "the ghetto" from a distance but also that black artists can formulate jokes on whiteness based on the similar separation that exists between the white and the black worlds. For a virtual field, such as the Internet, the comfort of being physically distant but at the same time connected to a person or place – especially from the perspective of whites socially disconnected to the context within which rap music emerges – complicates this situation even more. Not by chance, LA post-gangsta rapper Vince Staples exploits this issue in his music video "FUN!" (2018) in which a middle-class white boy searches for Vince's homeland area of Ramona Park in North Long Beach on Google Earth. The video shows a variety of situations that range from kids playing on the streets to gang-violence until it ends with the boy's mother suddenly calling him "Lucas" outside of his room making him scarred, evidencing the intrusive nature of his web search.

In the current socio-political climate, the revival of the debate on racial contradictions and social inequalities seems inevitable regarding the connection between stereotypes on the Internet and the historic stigmatization of black people since the colonial era of slave trade. The overloading of information can easily lead to stereotyping as the sheer volume of information necessitates the repackaging or compressing of complex ideas into smaller, more manageable memes and quotations. The advertising industry had been applying this tact long before the rise of our current virtual environment and the process of memeification seems to have been accepted as a standardised use of the Internet's resources. As Gasser and Palfrey pointed out:

One study of early Internet communities, called Usenet groups, has shown that users are more likely to respond to simpler messages in overload situations; they are more likely to end active participation if they receive too much information; and they are more likely to generate simpler messages as overload increases (2008, 194).

Put simply, people will tend to oversimplify things if they have too much to deal with (as generally happens in the informational age). It is not by chance that the popularity of memes and the success of fake news in political campaigns became so powerful with the ascension of the digital age. It is easier to deal with shorthand information than to explore it deeply; for this reason, cultural clichés and stereotypes have found a perfect place to prosper on the Internet in this context of information oversaturation and simplified content.

This is seen in the way some rap artists purposefully play on clichés and stereotypes in order to subvert them; a signature feature of Tyler’s musical career. Whilst they mock these racist projections, they also underline rich historical references in their lyrics and music videos which work as a source of discovery and exploration for die-hard fans. This intertextual nature of rap music and its similarity with web culture led to websites such as Rap Genius (now simply Genius) – specializing in the meaning behind lyrics – becoming one of the most culturally significant sites in the genre in the 2010s.<sup>5</sup> The Internet user is now the producer and consumer – also known as “prosumer” – which is both empowering and threatening due to the hurried manner in which things work in the virtual environment and the subtle manipulative ways digital conglomerates influence the apparent freedom of the digital arena (Tofler 1980, 30). This is seen in the manner these conglomerates work with algorithms, the collection of personal data and dubious privacy policies, as was the case with Facebook and the Cambridge Analytica political scandal (Biddle, 2019).

In other words, to discuss the musical work of rap artists such as Tyler, The Creator goes beyond the stereotypical idea of understanding hip-hop culture as an exclusive product from the streets. Indeed, one of Tyler’s main complexities is the fact his online work has been as important as his physical presence throughout his career. The digitalization of life has impacted in several ways the music industry and various music cultures; which hip-hop with its ever-changing ethos is not an exception to the rule. Digital culture also changed our relation with and perception of society at large, especially on the manner younger generations are dealing with their own bodies, desires and identities. Somehow, the musical work of Tyler, The Creator encompasses several of these contemporary issues making it relevant to be discussed in scholarly terms.

It is also noteworthy that his music video “Yonkers” certainly deserves an analysis apart from the overall context of his public persona due to its relation to digital intimacy, racial play/masking and the psychologizing aspects of such personal exposure. In my PhD dissertation on the musical work of Tyler, The Creator, I dedicated a whole chapter to analysing this ground-breaking music video which has the potential to become another article in the near future. The manner Tyler appropriated from somewhat “white” tropes such as web culture, indie culture and skateboard culture goes beyond his use of social media and appearance on the Internet which is an important component of some of his

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5 According to their own description: “Genius started as a platform for annotating clever rap lyrics – our original name was Rap Genius. Over the years, we’ve expanded our mission to include more than hip-hop, and more than just lyrics. Every song has a story that needs to be told, and the biggest names in music – including Travis Scott, Billie Eilish, and Ariana Grande – come to Genius to give the world insight into their art.” No date. <<https://genius.com/Genius-about-genius-annotated>> Accessed on 14/04/2020.



music videos. In this paper, I shared some of the conclusions on digital humanities I achieved in my dissertation which I hope will be discussed and elaborated further by other scholars interested in the topics I presented here.

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**FIGHTING FOR ATTENTION THROUGH RAP MUSIC:  
SHOCK-VALUE, RACIAL PLAY AND WEB CULTURE IN THE PERSONA OF  
TYLER, THE CREATOR  
(summary)**

This article is subdivided in three different parts consisting of Introduction, The Web as a Racial Mask and Branding the Self in which I discuss the strategies of Tyler, The Creator to build and maintain his fan base as an internet phenomenon. These strategies involve a series of racial and psychological dilemmas that are inherent to his musical work and persona. Furthermore, rap music has been quite present in the digital environment making it more than a mere “product from the streets” as it generally tends to be represented in hip-hop culture; especially in the subgenre of gangsta rap. Tyler’s success on the internet and his nerdish persona have been changing the scope on how rappers have been seen, heard and understood by the audience and music critics making it relevant to discuss his musical work through a scholarly approach.

However, Tyler is not alone in his endeavors of deconstructing long-term racial stereotypes related to gangsta rap. In this article, I also show and discuss the musical works of other African American artists who have been raising the issue of racial representation in America and how they relate with Tyler’s strategies in that sense. Some of them are Tyler’s Odd Future peer Frank Ocean, BROCKHAMPTON, Aminé, Schoolboy Q and many more. I hope that this publication serve as a source of research for those interest in the complex questions involving critical race theory and postmodernity.

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## **VISUAL MUSIC: K-POP'S 'CAWMAN' EFFECT ON A TRANSNATIONAL MUSIC SUBCULTURE<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** South Korean popular music or *K-Pop* has risen phenomenally in popular music industries around the globe in little under three decades through its unique production method of embracing a combination of both musical and visual artforms. Having gained mass international popularity, K-Pop has established the characteristics of a subculture. The visual emphasis K-Pop producers place in their productions lays particularly in the foreground to its transnational attraction. Primarily in the form of music videos, narratives and aesthetics becoming communicable beyond language mediation.

Using a semiotic theoretical analysis, this paper critically analyses the creation, sustainment and effects of 'visual music' as a foregrounding component of this transnational music subculture. To do so, the focus lies on K-Pop production company SM Entertainment's recently established *CAWMAN* genre, a method of producing music media based on **C**artoon, **A**nimation, **W**ebtoon, **M**otion Graphics, **A**vatar and **N**ovel. With K-Pop's central portal of communication and K-Popular practices being the Internet, this paper explores the effects and critical roles of this new genre of visual music in bringing people together across the globe.

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**Keywords:** ethnomusicology, online social musicking, popular music, visual music, transnational subculture, semiosis, K-Pop, Korean studies, SM Entertainment.

### **Glossary of Terms:**

Fan (n) – A person may consider themselves a fan if they have a particular love, interest or obsession for, in this case, a particular music or musician.

Fandom (n) – A collective group of fans, who share a love, interest or obsession for, in this case, a particular music or musician.

Idol (n) – The term used to describe an artist who performs ‘idol pop’ in K-Pop.

SNS (n) – ‘social networking site’; social media.

### **Introduction**

A picture is worth a thousand words. Particularly when accompanying song lyrics are incomprehensible due to foreign language barriers. Thus, subtle changes in colour, the placement of property, the camera angle, and the finely choreographed movements of an idol can speak and convey more to the analysing eyes of a fan than any translation or outside interpretation may realise. These signifiers are captured in the form of a music video, enriched from a dance routine and studio recording to the manifestation of a story, brought out through the intricate production methods of visual music.

Korean popular music has largely been defined as a “style of music” (Lie 2015, 96), striving away from the term genre, as Korean popular music encompasses an extensive variety of music types and genres within. The term K-Pop has popularised itself to portray an image of what more accurately is categorised as idol pop (Lie 2015, 103). Its rapid growth in popularity over the past three decades has caused other Korean popular forms of music, including trot, pop ballad, pop-rock, among others (Um 2017, 191), to fall into the shadows of idol pop. Thus, whilst the term K-Pop theoretically encompasses all of Korea’s popular music, the term has become significantly linked to idol pop and, thus, unless otherwise stated, will refer to idol pop for the duration of this paper.

K-Pop as an entity has also been thoroughly explored by Lie (2015) as a “music industry”, due to its rapid growth in popularity, domestically and internationally in the early 2000s, through Korea’s economic advancements in popular media and technology industries (Lie 2015, 96). The advancements made furthermore allowed K-Pop to develop its own significant qualities as a music type,

particularly in its creation of visuality in music. This took the form of the music video, which could be easily accessed internationally through online video sharing platforms. Fuhr (2016) thoroughly explored the ability for K-Pop music videos to enrapture international audiences through its visual attraction. Highly coordinated dance routines, appealing aesthetics and visual images, combined with the easy-to-listen-to melodic structures and genre hybridization of a popular music, meant that the music video quickly became K-Pop's "central media of transmission" (Fuhr 2016, 108-113).

Today, K-Pop continues to become more popularised internationally, with major idol groups, most notably BTS, entering and topping the Billboard Hot 100 five times in just over a year (Billboard n.d.). As technology and particularly social networking sites (SNS) continue to provide international audiences with access to K-Pop, the industry has significantly pushed beyond distributing music videos on platforms such as YouTube but furthermore has adapted its content distribution and promotion to suit fast-paced SNSs such as TikTok and Instagram. Thus, as Parc and Kim (2020) explored, K-Pop has taken the elements (including dance choreographies, charismatic interactions among idols and fans, and common live-concert attractions and rituals) and formatted these onto SNSs, thus attracting audiences to K-Pop's practices in new, digitalised, social and online ways, beyond the music video alone (Parc and Kim 2020, 09-10). Thus, whilst Holt (2011) argued of a considerable loss of value of live music, in aspects of social ritual and interaction through constant media consumption (Holt 2011, 55), the K-Pop industry has seemingly suited itself to these online forms of consumption to become inherently more social and interactive.

Undoubtable today, the leaders in K-Pop are influencers beyond the music, utilising technology and digitalised forms of production and products to appeal to mass audiences. Among these, production company SM Entertainment has further explored the bounds and abilities for *visuality* in music.

For fans of K-Pop, the music, and its forms of production, have become much more than a music type alone. Fans place extensive value and meaning into the music, with their musical and non-musical practices and deep passions for K-Pop, allowing this new form of visual music to function within the context of K-Pop as a musical subculture.

Thus, as I explore SM Entertainment's CAWMAN productions, I aim to portray the establishment of visual music in K-Pop, its production methods, its ability to bring understanding to its diverse audiences, and its effects on this transnational subculture.

## K-Pop as a Subculture

K-Pop, in its now recognised form of establishment, has acquired significant subcultural characteristics. Subcultures, according to sociologist Haenfler (2015), can be described as smaller sections of broader cultures but should by no means be seen as “static things” (Haenfler 2015, 15). “Subcultures are everchanging, [...] guiding and giving meaning to people’s beliefs, values, behaviours, and material things” (Haenfler 2014, 15) which are conceptualised through social experience. Subcultures develop and change as different people enter, exit, or remain within, and with its variable nature it is difficult to pin down to a static definition. Thus, I explore some of K-Pop’s “significant characteristics” of “sub-cultureness” (Haenfler 2015, 16).

Musical subcultures naturally form around a music type, comparable also to that of a music scene. K-Pop’s participants however are embracing much more than the music alone. It is the lived experiences, both individual and collective within their experiential contexts, which give deeper meanings to their actions, habits, and values. Whilst the societal reach of many modern subcultures or music scenes, as Bennett (2004) thoroughly explored, including K-Pop, transcend national boundaries and is home to a diverse set of cultures, backgrounds and ethnicities, the meanings and impressions created are very much collective.

An element which Bennett critiqued on the use of the term subculture, in the context of music, is the “impli[ed] relatively fixed relationship between specific aspects of [...] style and music” (Bennett 2004, 225). He argued that subcultures tend to involve people and youths who frequently shift from one group to another, thus the implied coherency of a subculture is inaccurate. He argued that the term *music scene* better describes youth and broader groupings who find collective values and practices through music (Bennett 1999, 605), without the implied coherency of a subculture.

Whilst I undoubtedly agree that the term *music scene* has similarities and crossovers to subcultures, I still adhere to using the term *subculture* in the context in which I explore K-Pop. Firstly, I acknowledge that the term subculture shouldn’t be seen as a fixed blueprint of a group, but rather a term to find a distinction between those who participate in K-Pop’s practices, styles, values, and beliefs, beyond defining oneself as a casual listener.

Furthermore, I can argue that there is a sense of a fixed coherency that is required among the K-Pop subculture. Whilst people may come and go between this and other subcultures, there is a requirement to remain coherent in one’s practices in K-Pop, in order to gain a fuller understanding of meanings in its productions. If one does not actively and frequently participate, whether in online or local ways, one becomes ‘out of the loop’. Particularly when exploring the



use of signifiers in a semiotic context, as will be further explored in this paper, the consistency of participation to build understanding is vital.

Naturally, not all subculturists (those who participate) can afford time to continuously participate, thus making K-Pop inherently more social, as they rely on content creators and social media platforms to inform them on inner happenings of the subculture. Thus, whilst the term *music scene*, particularly the *trans-local scene* and its understanding of the ways in which “young people appropriate music and stylistic resources in particular local [and globally connected] contexts” (Bennett 2004, 229), is undeniably closely related to the K-Pop subculture, as I further explore in this paper, I remain coherent to the term *sub-culture* here. Nevertheless, its complexities are an element to be further explored in detail, particularly in a context outside of semiotics.

Subcultures are often defined as being disconnected or unhitched from their parent culture or the culture subculturists originate from (Haenfler 2014, 10), as they frequently are an alternative to or escape from mainstream life for them. Undoubtedly, K-Pop has, in the past five years, grown to establish itself in a border area between being mainstream or alternative.

For some fans, the K-Pop they may come across, for example, on Western radio stations, including most notable idol group BTS and their English-lyric songs *Dynamite*, *Butter*, and *Permission to Dance*, as well as Psy’s 2012 viral song *Gangnam Style*, among artists such as BlackPink and Twice, would be considered mainstream, as these artists have notably entered the Billboard charts among other mainstream Western forms of popular music recognition.

However, discourses frequently emerge among fans on SNSs, who consider what seemingly authenticates a ‘real’ K-Pop fan. Commonly, distinctions are made between fans who solely engage with this considered mainstream K-Pop and those who listen to lesser-known idol groups, engage with niche fan practices, showcase extensive knowledge about the subculture and its participants as well as those who own fan paraphernalia. Likewise, it is not uncommon to find viral challenges across SNS TikTok, which aim to authenticate one as a “real K-Pop fan” by how many songs one can recognise in an audio collection. Notably, BTS, Psy, Twice, and BlackPink frequent the lowest or deemed “easiest” categories (see for example, #kpopsongchallenge on TikTok). Whilst content creators and consumers with whom I have spoken with largely aim to discard this judgement of this authenticity, they can’t deny the underlying status markers through specific fan practices among subculturists (Joshua N. 2021. Personal communication, June 02; Leah S. 2021. Personal communication, June 06).

Thus, K-Pop being mainstream or alternative largely depends on the perspective of the fan, the intensity of their fan practice and engagement, with which groups they engage with, and their geographical location. Nevertheless, it is not the fans’ socio-cultural backgrounds and parent cultures which establish

their *understandings* of K-Pop, but rather the intensity of their involvement. The more they interact with K-Pop through its various forms of engagement, the more they come to collectively understand its fan policies and practices.

Thus, within this subculture, the fans' passions and practices revolve around K-Pop as a community, a medium to identify with particularly through the meanings and messages of music videos and accompanying fan discussions across SNSs. K-Pop for many is a place to find a mutual sense of belonging. Through fan practices of analysing music videos, fans can discuss and translate their reception of K-Pop into social communication with people from across the world (Jenkins 2013, 278). Thus, collective ideologies, values and beliefs become established, creating a dynamic for social behaviour expectations, completely unhitched from any parent cultures.

Likewise, and most vital to the exploration of K-Pop's music videos, there is a shared lens or perspective of so-called visual signifiers. These signifiers refer to visual signs and material objects from which fans may establish narratives. Through a fan's active and consistent participation in this subculture and the disconnect from their mainstream lives, fans are able to read visual music video signifiers through their developed and collectively experienced subcultural practices.

I argue it is vital for K-Pop to function as a subculture in order for this understanding through visual signifiers to function, as without the collective experiences, beliefs, values, and consistent practices, a shared lens cannot be sufficiently established nor effectively utilised to gain meaning.

### **The Development of Music Videos in the K-Pop Subculture**

K-Pop's music videos begun gaining attention first within the J-Pop (Japanese popular music) industry, followed by Taiwanese and Indonesian audiences (Lie 2015, 101-102). As these popular music industries were much more nationally and internationally established at the time, Korean production companies took to developing K-Pop's music videos through surrounding Asian popular music industries.

Music videos largely featured young males and females, either in groups or as soloists, singing and rapping in Korean, English, or Japanese. The idols featured in the music videos then wore fashionable Western-influenced clothing, danced in synchrony, and explored themes of love, adolescence, anti-violence and pop-culture, attracting the attention primarily of youths across Asia. Over time, music videos began to include consistent storylines and placed an even stronger emphasis on narrating these visually, rather than relying on lyrics. Thus, music videos started to become conceptualised as visual narratives accompanied

by music, rather than the music being central to the attraction. Thus, idols' rap, song, and dance became tailored to narrate certain stories, ideas, and themes in accordance with the music video's broader concept (see also Um 2017).

Towards the latter half of the 2000s, K-Pop, now much more domestically established, started gaining attention from sparse audiences across North and South America, as well as Europe, with audiences taking greater interest through these visually narrated music videos. The shifted focus from lyrical narratives to visual narratives attracted international audiences, as a major part of the world's population (still today) do not speak Korean.

Whilst popular music videos were already largely established, with the USA's MTV and Korea's Mnet, internationally emerging Internet platform YouTube allowed audiences to constantly access music videos, whenever and how often they wished. An underlying shift could be recognised among the ways in which popular music could be consumed, particularly leaning beyond the ability to only listen, but to consume and experience music visually through these technological advancements, bringing new perspectives on visuality in popular music. Furthermore, this new form of distribution and consumption allowed fans to analyse and explore music videos in immense detail on demand and, furthermore, allowed fans to interact across the globe through comment sections. Music video streaming platforms thus not only became popular for their on-demand, algorithmic content, but also as a social platform, creating an environment for fans to communicate and share mutual passions. Today this is felt even more strongly due to a shift from video platforms showcasing entire music videos to SNSs in which the most important elements from larger videos (in the eyes of fans) are shared and discussed among subculturists in short, fast-paced segments.

Nevertheless, this seemingly solid production method of creating visual music video storylines could arguably be understood in different ways. The diverse socio-cultural backgrounds of fans evidently shape the understandings of signifiers according to Turino (1999). Yet, with K-Pop's subtle transformation into that of a subculture, fans established a method of reading music videos in the context of their subculture. Whilst certain symbols may not be "self-evident cross-culturally" (Turino 1999, 231), they can be read by this diverse audience, as the signifiers gain meaning through fans' collective subcultural experiences, unhitched from their parent cultures.

Thus, these highly manufactured music videos, created using in-depth visual signs of meaning, are highly informative to fans, to whom every expression, action, prop, or sign in music videos may have a completely different meaning to someone outside of the subculture. Music videos evidently become experiences for fans, in which they read, explore, and develop narratives from within and outside of a single music video, incorporating the entirety of their subcultural experience into their comprehension of a music video's story.

## Reading K-Pop Music Videos Through a Semiotic Lens of Analysis

Visual signifiers, being a dominant information source for international audiences of K-Pop's music videos, primarily function through a process of semiosis. Each visual signifier, whether in the form of a prop, clothing item, colour or choreographed movement, provides the viewer with information. Depending on the viewer's frame of context, the viewer may interpret a signifier as a certain type of sign, thus gaining understanding from the signifier.

A frame of context in K-Pop is firstly established in whether or not the viewer considers themselves a fan. How often a fan participates in subcultural practices, whether this is active or passive participation, whether this is within a SNS creator or consumer position, all contributes to one's understanding of a signifier. The intensity of one's participation as well as their knowledge of the Korean language, among other influencing factors, may contribute and alter one's individual understanding of a signifier.

Thus, it is vital to note that semiotics doesn't aim to obtain a common understanding of a signifier, but rather focuses on *how* a viewer may interpret, why and to what effect (Peirce in Turino 1999, 223). In the context of K-Pop as a subculture, meanings may cross over due to the shared experiences fans draw on to establish these meanings, however, due to the polysemous nature of popular music (Lie 2015, 152), we can draw on semiotics to explore the practices and effects of the visual emphasis in K-Pop's music videos.

Drawing on Peircean Semiotic Theory, first developed in the field of linguists, it is today actively used to explore visual and musical semiotics as well. According to Pierce, signs are representations of something (i.e. an object, whether abstract or concrete) to someone (the perceiver) who is able to comprehend or gain meaning in the form of an affect (e.g. an idea articulated and processed) (Turino 1999, 222-223). Signs, in their most basic structure, can be found in the form of an icon, index, or symbol, with semiotic analysis aiming to describe what effect this may have in the form of understanding.

*Icons* have directly established resemblance to objects (Turino 1999, 226). They can be understood literal in their form, with little for perceivers to interpret or derive unintended meaning from. Icons are understood intuitively. For example, in the context of a music video, a prop-vehicle is understood as a vehicle by the perceiver, as it has direct resemblance to vehicles surrounding many of us every day. Therefore, to have an iconic understanding of a sign is to understand its meaning through direct resemblance (Turino 1999, 227).

An *index* or several *indices* are understood through experiences of co-occurrences between object, sign and perceiver and are signs of experience, developed over time (Turino 1999, 227, 235). Through the consistent association of the object and sign, the perceiver develops an understanding of its meaning, whether

instinctively (e.g. when seeing smoke, we may associate fire), or simply through repetition, for example, repeated use of a visual motif in a music video may become an index of a greater storyline. Indices can develop within the context of a single music video, but also commonly across music videos, when a common motif is identified.

Finally, the *symbol* has no direct association to its object but is rather understood through language mediation within the perceiver's and object's socio-cultural environment. Symbols require an explanation of their (often) concrete meanings, or an explanation of why it may be interpreted otherwise (Turino 1999, 228). A symbol's meaning is bounded within certain social agreements, most commonly of cultures, religions and other socio-cultural groups of people, including many subcultures (Turino 1999, 228). In the context of a music video, a frequently repeated index may in fact transform into a symbol as it becomes meaningful to its audience or representative of something greater than its direct storyline association.

Using these three sign forms of analysis, I turn now to look at a recently established visual-music concept by K-Pop production company SM Entertainment. By exploring this so-called “new genre” (SMTOWNe 2021, 13:00) through a semiotic lens of analysis, we can firstly see how this leading production company is bringing visual music even further into the centre of K-Pop's prime production type, as well as explore the effects this visual music form has on its audiences' fan practices.

### **SM Entertainment & Its Construction of Visual Music Through CAWMAN**

Led by CEO Soo-Man Lee, SM Entertainment is a “media production company” which established itself in 1995 (SMTOWNe 2021, 28:12). This company is home to Korea's earliest and current top idol groups such as Girls' Generation, SHINee, Super Junior, NCT and Aespa, as well as solo idols BoA, Taemin, Taeyeon, and Baekhyun, among others.

K-Pop production companies recruit young potential artists, thoroughly train them in dance, song, social etiquette, media relations and language, and commonly after several years of training, may debut the artists as part of an idol group. Only few artists ever manage to debut and build a strong career as an idol, as this training system is known to be extremely intense, both physically and mentally, as production companies hold control over many aspects of a trainee's professional and personal life (Kong 2019).

Here, SM Entertainment established itself as a *media* production company, rather than music production company. Perhaps with their immediate focus on producing visually appealing music videos, among other unrelated-to-music

endeavours later invested in, (Parc and Kim 2020, 12), they strived to omit being labelled as solely a music production company.

Beginning with their earliest boy idol group H.O.T. (1996) and continuing to their most recently debuted girl idol group Aespa (2020), albums and singles are released every few months or years. A music video then frequently accompanies an album or single release. At SM Entertainment, music videos usually run for approximately 3 to 6 minutes, feature the idols dancing and singing in Korean, English, Japanese or Chinese, as well as incorporating a narrative or storyline to feature the idol group's concepts and messages. Idols appear well-manicured, in various costumes, a change in hairstyle and colour to suit the concept and, with no limit to special effects and post-production editing, music videos become an elaborate and highly dense set of signs for fans to experience and analyse (Beaster-Jones 2019, 42).

### **Introducing CAWMAN**

On June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2021, during the SM Congress, in which the company's idols and producers introduce their plans for the coming year, the idea of CAWMAN was first formally introduced. In an interview with idol group Aespa, member Giselle introduced this so-called "new genre", stating "[CAWMAN] stands for Cartoons, Animations, Webtoons, Motion Graphics, Avatar, and Novel" (SMTOWNe 2021, 13:00). It is defined as a "mixed content genre" that best describes the content which SM Entertainment aims to showcase (SMTOWNe 2021, 13:17). CAWMAN draws elements from each of these visual genres and incorporates them into productions, first and foremost within music videos. The production company thus invests extensively into special effects, animation, motion graphics and other tools of visual production in order to portray CAWMAN as a central technique to music video production. CAWMAN, however, should not only be considered a production technique, but rather also a metaphorical vessel for the shifted focus from the musical to visual in music videos. To further explore the development, examples, and outcomes of CAWMAN, I turn to SM Entertainment's idol group Aespa, later to NCT U, as well as to solo idols Key and Taeyeon.

SM Entertainment initially introduced this new genre alongside its newest debuting idol group Aespa, whose group concept or theme was to be heavily focused on avatars, motion graphics and animated content. Their group name *Aespa* is crafted through acronyms for 'avatar', 'experience', as well as 'aspect' (Bosch 2022). The term 'avatar' and 'experience' are to reflect this new CAWMAN genre as part of their concept, with the term 'aspect' aiming to represent the two sides of reality versus digital existence (Bosch 2022).

Aespa consists of four members, NingNing, Winter, Karina, and Giselle, however, commonly this idol group is also considered an eight-member group, as SM Entertainment incorporates the ‘avatar’ concept. Pictured below we see the four Aespa members alongside four avatar characters who each represent themselves in a digital universe. These four avatars, completely crafted through CGI technology, have appeared in all of Aespa’s music videos and largely are considered part of the group as well. This is the first idol group to feature both human and CGI idols and became the first concrete manifestation of CAWMAN through the creation of avatars.



**Figure 1.** Idol group Aespa alongside their Avatars (Bosch 2022).

Since their debut, Aespa has released five music videos as of April 2022, debuting with their first music video *Black Mamba* in November 2020. In early 2021, the group released *Forever*, followed by *Next Level* in May, and their fourth, *Savage*, in early October. Later in December 2021, the group also released a re-mastered version of S.E.S’ original *Dreams Come True*. *Black Mamba*, *Forever*, and *Next Level* were released as singles whilst *Savage* was released as part of Aespa’s first mini album and *Dreams Come True* as part of a company Christmas album.

Each of Aespa’s music videos are set between a real and digital universe. Throughout all music videos, the aforementioned avatars appear alongside their idol counterparts, to reflect this concept. The digital universe consists of extensive post-production editing, VFX, motion capture and includes almost every element of CAWMAN, from avatars and cartoons to webtoons and novel-like narratives with extensive animated backdrops and settings throughout. As Aespa’s concept draws on the experiential differences between digital universes and live, real-world experiences, the production budget to create a convincing concept was expectantly high in this regard (AWN 2021).

Thus, watching Aespa’s music videos emulates a cinematic experience, rather than the focus being placed on the music, as in a traditional music video production. Where traditionally the music is supported by the video, instead, Aespa’s releases are video productions supported by music.

As audiences watch these music videos, we can find narratives forming throughout, via the use of visual signifiers. Icons, indices and symbols are used to creatively portray Aespa’s narratives. Whilst there are many narratives and representing signifiers across Aespa’s music videos and SM Entertainment’s broader productions, the two I wish to focus on are the ‘butterfly motif’ and the ‘train motif’. Initially two icons, created in association with CAWMAN, these have, in the past two years, developed their meanings within and surrounding SM Entertainment, its idols, its audiences as well as broader subcultural practices.

### The Butterfly Motif

As the name suggests, this signifier is that of a six-legged insect with wings – a butterfly. In order to trace the development of this signifier, we must first return to SM Entertainment’s idol group NCT U, who in October 2020 released their music video *Make a Wish (Birthday Song)* on YouTube. This music video was released just over a month prior to Aespa’s debut.

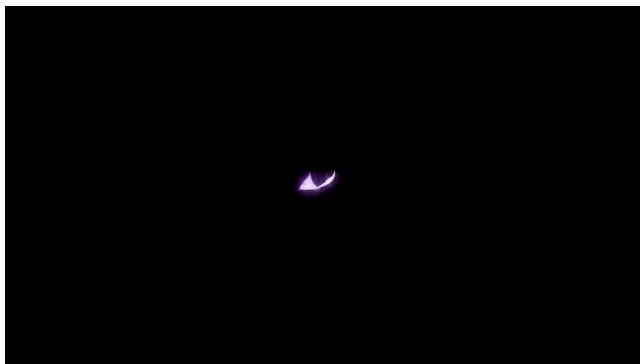
In the final seconds of *Make a Wish*, the viewer can observe the following scenes (Figures 2.0-2.2). We see a train carriage, filled with grass and various plants. Sunlight streams through the carriage windows and we can observe a purple glowing butterfly enter this scene and fly into the centre of the image. After four seconds, the screen goes dark, leaving only this animated purple butterfly in the centre of the screen, as the video ends. Here, this butterfly can be considered first and foremost an icon, as it is recognisable as being a small insect with wings, which we may frequent in everyday surroundings. Whilst this butterfly is clearly animated and glowing a bright purple colour, it is nevertheless recognisable as a butterfly, and thus an icon.



**Figure 2.0.** NCT U’s *Make A Wish* MV (SMTOWNb 2020, [04:03](#)).

**Figure 2.1.** NCT U’s *Make A Wish* MV (SMTOWNb 2020, [04:05](#)).





**Figure 2.2.** NCT U's Make A Wish MV (SMTOWNb 2020, [04:07](#))

As a common subcultural fan practice within K-Pop, any identifiable icon rarely remains as such when presented to the artist's fans. Jenkins (2013) is adamant about a fans' reception of content to involve many more thought processes, experience reflections and fan discussions in order for its meaning to become clear. As he stated, "for the fan, watching the [content] is the beginning, not the end, of the process of media consumption" (Jenkins 2013, 278). Thus an icon is rarely simply an icon in the eyes of fans.

Fans explore beyond the given content in search of deeper meaning, thus quickly transforming this icon into an index. As an index, this butterfly may gain new meaning over time, in relation to the experiences fans may have with this icon, its appearance contexts and the subcultural practices associated with it.

Focusing further on this butterfly scene, we see it appear in NCT U's video, however, this scene follows only after the main music video ends, following the company logos and credits. Thus we can assume the butterfly isn't part of, nor in reference to, the central music video narratives. Instead, this leans towards being a so-called teaser for something else.

Commonly among SM Entertainment's productions, the producers include hints or teasers towards upcoming content; usually limited to the group in which the teaser is featured. Instinctively, this butterfly signifier may hint towards an upcoming NCT U production, however, on November 17<sup>th</sup> 2020, we find similar butterfly motifs in Aespa's debut music video *Black Mamba*.

Firstly we see idol NingNing in a bright, purple coloured setting, already aligning with the colour schemes of the original butterfly icon. NingNing wears jewelled butterfly accessories in her hair and is surrounded by colourful, cartoon butterflies in this scene, as pictured below.



**Figure 3.0.** Black Mamba's animated butterflies surrounding NingNing (SMTOWNa 2020, [00:31](#)).

**Figure 3.1.** Black Mamba's digital butterfly (SMTOWNa 2020, [02:41](#)).

As the music video continues we find glimpses of other butterfly icons throughout, most prominently at [2:41](#) (Figure 3.1). Once again, the scene is set in the pink glowing room with idol NingNing. She is looking at a computer screen on which we see a purple glowing butterfly, identical to the original in *Make a Wish*. Here, the butterfly icon quickly disappears as the computer screen becomes infiltrated by virus-like icons. This is the final instance in which we see the butterfly motif for the entirety of this music video.

Through the butterfly's reappearance and consistent presence throughout this music video, a perceiver's understanding of the icon can develop. Firstly,

it can be confidently assumed that the butterfly's appearance in NCT U's music video was teasing at Aespa's debut, considering the near-to-identical signifier (and backdrop scenes, which will be discussed later). With the butterfly's frequent appearance throughout *Black Mamba*, perhaps it becomes an index of a greater narrative to Aespa's productions.

Alternatively it could be read more in depth in relation to *where* this motif appears. Firstly, the butterfly always appears alongside idol NingNing, thus perhaps the index is in relation to her. Perhaps, due to its appearance in a computer screen, being covered up by virus-like icons, the butterfly represents the digital versus reality universes in Aespa's narrative, possibly incorporating a good versus evil, as the butterfly motif disappears following this scene. Perhaps it could also be an indexical signifier of CAWMAN, as to reflect its development and content, as the butterfly is crafted in various forms, including avatar (Figure 2.0) and cartoon (Figure 3.0).

These, among other interpretations of the butterfly as an index, are possible, depending on the fans' subcultural experiences and knowledge. These suggestions are certainly not limited to the examples given; however, they aim to show how a fan may interpret an icon as an index within the context of a music video, its various appearances, its associations and its development of meaning.

**Figure 4.0.** Savage's digitalised butterfly (SMTOWNb 2021, [01:52](#)).

**Figure 4.1.** Savage's animated butterfly (SMTOWNb 2021, [03:15](#)).

**Figure 4.2.** Dreams Come True's CGI butterfly (SMTOWNa 2021, [00:36](#)).

**Figure 4.3.** Dreams Come True's butterfly embodiment (SMTOWNa 2021, [02:48](#)).



Aespa's music videos following *Black Mamba* each showcase this butterfly motif. During *Savage*, for example, we see the butterfly again, associated with technology and AI (Figure 4.0), as well as in an animated form (Figure 4.1). In *Dreams come True*, the idols themselves have animated butterfly wings (Figures 4.2, 4.3), they appear in similar flower bed scenes with animated glowing butterflies surrounding them.

The consistency of this motif thus may in fact also develop from being an index (to the viewers of several Aespa music videos) to becoming a symbol (particularly in the eyes of Aespa's fandom). The fact that Aespa physically embody the butterfly (Figures 4.2, 4.3), may reflect their symbolic embodiment of the butterfly as well.

Whilst the name and acronyms of Aespa seem not to have any direct or iconic relation to that of a butterfly, the consistency of the motif may transform the meaning of this butterfly into a symbol of Aespa. A symbol that often only Aespa's most consistent and passionate of fans may understand its entire meaning of. Perhaps the butterfly for some fans may even be a symbol for something greater than Aespa, beyond my own knowledge, but primarily it shows that this meaning is bounded through mediation, understood or arguable only by those who are actively involved in the socio-(sub)cultural environment of Aespa's fandom.

This example shows how meaning is developed and understood by fans through icons, indices and symbols in the context of a subculture. Through music videos alone, icons may extensively develop to incorporate indexical and symbolic meanings for fans. Through SM Entertainment's focused CAWMAN production methods, they clearly aim to narrate these themes and stories extensively through the use of visual signifiers. With Aespa being the first idol group, most prominently produced through CAWMAN, the company explores the bounds and extents to which this visual genre can function as a narrating tool across music videos, with the butterfly motif playing a central role in this.

Whilst butterfly motifs have notably frequented traditional Korean art as well as recent K-drama series, the meanings of the motif need not necessarily overlap. Here the motif becomes encapsulated within SM Entertainment's collection of artists and music videos, presented to be read within the close contexts of its appearance built through pieces of information released over time. Thus, whilst the butterfly appears as a popular signifier among other Korean productions, its individual contexts and meanings will vary. Overlaps might be further explored in relation to frequent motifs across traditional and modern K-culture creations using a semiotic lens of analysis, however, the scope of this research would be much broader than the range of this paper. Nevertheless, the frequent appearance of the butterfly is interesting to note among Korean productions.

## The Train Motif

Whilst CAWMAN originally aired alongside the debut of Aespa, the concept of CAWMAN is also beginning to infiltrate other SM Entertainment idol groups as well. This is particularly evident as icons, indices and symbols begin to become familiar not only among one or two idol groups (as with NCT U and Aespa) but become recognisable across company productions, drawing attention from various groups and fandoms. Fans may find similar visual features, styles and even intertwined narratives among a variety of SM Entertainment's groups. This is seen extensively through SM Entertainment's Train Motif.

Drawing yet again on the aforementioned scene which closes NCT U's *Make a Wish*, the butterfly is seen in what looks to be a train carriage (Figure 5.0). We see typical doors, information screens, lights and handles, as we find in a typical subway carriage. To viewers familiar with subways, this will likely function as an icon to the typical inside of this vehicle.

As we encounter this near-to-identical scene in Aespa's *Black Mamba* music video (Figure 5.1), the train begins to transform into an index. Whilst the storyline may not yet be strikingly clear for viewers, the repeated scene, and frequent use of this train carriage throughout the entire music video, leans towards the development of a deeper meaning, perhaps similarly so as the butterfly. The index becomes more intricate however when the carriage can be seen both as an idyllic scene with flowers and butterflies, and with a juxtaposing dark, ominous, digitalised aesthetic (Figure 5.2).



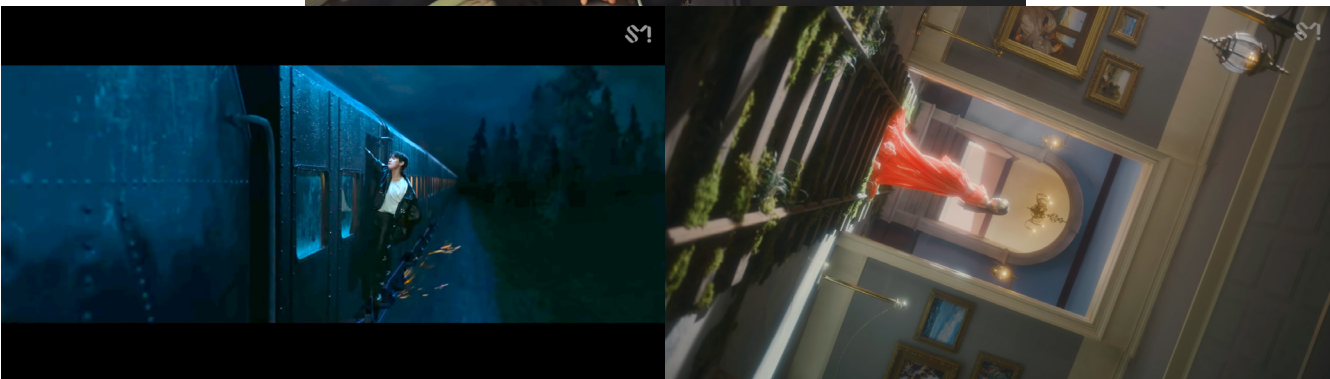
**Figure 5.0.** NCT U's *Make A Wish* Train Carriage (SMTOWNb 2020, [04:05](#)).

**Figure 5.1.** Aespa's *Black Mamba* Train Carriage (SMTOWNa 2020, [00:22](#)).

**Figure 5.2.** Aespa's *Black Mamba* Digital Train (SMTOWNa 2020, [03:25](#)).

Over time, the train carriage does not re-appear in Aespa's music videos, rather the focus being placed on developing the butterfly motif. However, in early 2021, the train motif seemed to frequent several other of SM Entertainment's top artists' music videos.

Starting with SHINee's *Don't Call Me* in late February, we see the boy idol group perform a large part of their music video in a subway setting, wherein which we see a CGI train in the background (Figure 6.0). Following this, solo artist Baekhyun in late March released *Bambi*, set entirely on a train (Figure 6.1). In April, soloist Wendy released *Like Water*, and yet again we see train-related motifs appear in this music video, primarily through the use of train tracks (Figure 6.2). Thus the train may transform into an index of greater meaning for fans who watch music videos company wide. Perhaps the index is connecting the artists and their music videos or, more abstractly, the train is heading for a synonymous destination, potentially related to the greater SM Entertainment company. As with any index, the perceiver's related experiences within the subculture and to these artists will vary the index's meanings.



**Figure 6.0.** SHINee's *Don't Call Me* Train Motif (SMTOWNd 2021, [03:51](#)).

**Figure 6.1.** Baekhyun's *Bambi* Train Motif (SMTOWNc 2021, [03:10](#)).

**Figure 6.2.** Wendy's *Like Water* Train Motif (SMTOWNf 2021, [00:12](#)).

In the latter half of 2021, SM Entertainment announced they would be holding a free virtual concert on New Year's Day which would feature a large selection of their artists and idol groups. This concert would have a concept entitled *SMCU Express – SM (Entertainment) Culture Universe Express* (train). After one year of featuring the train as an icon in a variety of artists' music videos, the train returns as an indexical theme for the company itself.

As a promotional concept, SM Entertainment crafted carriages identical to those first seen with NCT U and Aespa over one year prior, to reflect the various concepts of older and newer groups. The train carriage thus became a vessel to hold the concepts and aesthetics of different groups in a single visual setting. Thus, both older and newer artists, as well as their concepts, became connected and associated with one another through this unifying visual marker.

One promotional photo featuring Aespa (Figure 7.0), in a revised version of their original train carriage, pictured their consistent colour scheme with their original concept as well as the butterfly's colours. Members of NCT are also photographed below, with their own urban school-boy concept portrayed within their train vessel.



Figure 7.0. SMCU's Aespa (MusicPlaza n.d.).



Figure 7.1. SMCU's NCT (하나비라 2022).

During the virtual live concert, some of SM Entertainment's idols were featured singing in their respective train carriages as well. For example, member Key of idol group SHINee performed his recently released *Hate That...* which features member Taeyeon of idol group Girls' Generation. SHINee's train carriage (Figure 7.2) reflects the group's bold, bright, and innovative, characteristics as a leading boy idol group among K-Pop's earliest generations. Girls' Generation's carriage (Figure 7.3) features their signature colours and similarly reflects their elegant and feminine characteristics as a leading second-generation girl group of K-Pop. With the emphasis on this visual genre in production, the two

idols accurately reflect their group's concepts, appeal to their individual fan-doms, and simultaneously cross over in collaboration through song, and their identical vessel icons.



**Figure 7.2.** SMCU's SHINee & Key (Vitamint 2022)

**Figure 7.3.** SMCU's Girls' Generation & Taeyeon (Vitamint 2022)

As fans read into the connections and overlaps between the artists and their representing visuals, the train may develop indexical narratives, however, the consistent use of the train motif, without any relation directly to any particular artist, has only SM Entertainment as a company as a unifying concept. Thus, this icon or index might in fact develop even further into that of a symbol for SM Entertainment in the eyes of company-wide fans. The incorporation of CAWMAN's visual styles and effects, as well as the train's unlimited vessel-effect across idol groups, company-wide, allows this signifier to establish characteristics of a symbol.

This is furthermore confirmed as the train motif continues to appear in idols' music videos (such as Taeyeon's January 2022 release *Can't Control Myself* (Figure 8.0), thus reiterating the signifier's importance as not only being a motif to promote the concert, but to build itself as a symbol to represent SM Entertainment as a whole.



**Figure 8.0.** Taeyeon's *Can't Control Myself* Train Motif (SMTOWN 2022, 00:42).



## Moving Beyond Butterflies and Trains

This virtual concert, in my analysis of SM Entertainment's visual music concept with CAWMAN, marks several prominent key moments in its development and establishment.

Firstly, after more than a year, the train motif, first featured in NCT U's music video *Make A Wish* and constructed to tease Aespa's debut, has now developed into a symbol of SM Entertainment as a whole. The motif has come full circle, from being an icon, having developed into a symbol for K-Pop's most active and involved subculturists. This motif, then present in the music video concepts of various idol groups, manages to overlap and intrigue a variety of demographics. Older fans of older groups, such as SHINee and Girls' Generation, may find interest in newer groups such as NCT U and Aespa, as their concepts overlap through this train motif. Along with being featured in a company-wide concert, which was freely accessible to international audiences, it encourages fans to delve into and explore other idol groups within the same company.

Furthermore, as the train motif appeared and continues to appear in various SM Entertainment productions, fans will be encouraged to explore these overlapping motifs in order to gain a greater understanding of the motif itself. Being part of this subculture, motifs are frequently used to tell stories, however, the intricacies of these stories are often only revealed to those who actively and intensely explore K-Pop, company-wide productions, idol groups and music videos. Without a consistent subcultural participation, this motif may not reveal its symbolic nor indexical meanings to fans, and thus may only remain as an icon. SM Entertainment therefore actively encourages fan divergence (granted within one company) by uniting artists, generations, and motifs in music videos as well as events such as this concert, connected through CAWMAN's extensive visual manifestations.

SM Entertainment, as of April 2022, seems to be continuously developing its visual narratives. CAWMAN is becoming a central element to the company's entire concept, most recently even incorporating visual narratives of music videos into an experimental real-world art exhibition. Fans in South Korea could visit an exhibition of Taeyeon's *INVU* album and music video. Featuring large scale photographs, television screens, images, colours and light projections, as well as a variety of props to act as icons, indices and symbols of *INVU*. Once again, depending on the perceiver and their context of experiencing this live, in-person exhibition and re-creation of the album, they are able to read a variety of meanings. Whilst some explanations of the exhibition are provided (in both Korean and English), the setup seems to largely encourage a fans' immersive visual experience to provide understanding and thus the development of meaning through signifiers.

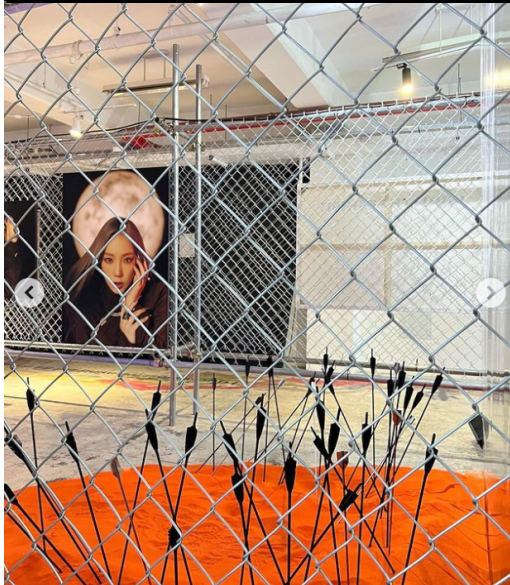
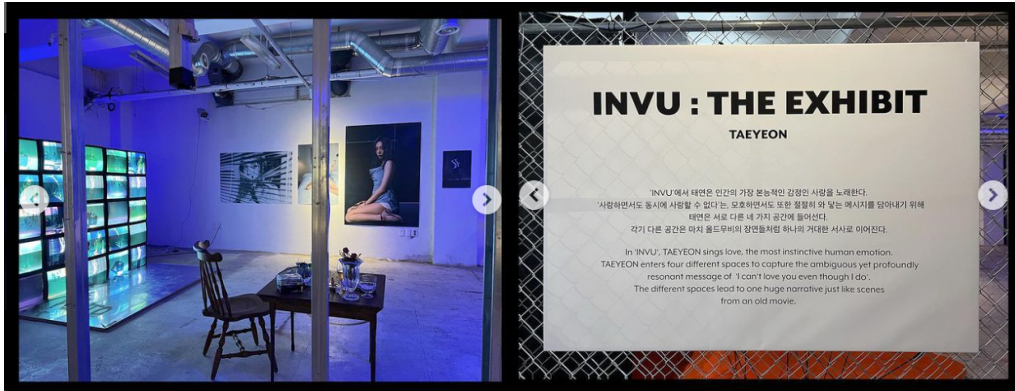


Figure 9.0. Taeyeon's INVU The Exhibition (@taeyeon, February 11, 2022).

Figure 9.1. Taeyeon's INVU The Exhibition (@taeyeon, February 11, 2022).

Figure 9.2. Taeyeon's INVU The Exhibition (@taeyeon, February 11, 2022).

Figure 9.3. Taeyeon's INVU The Exhibition (@taeyeon, February 11, 2022).

## Conclusions

K-Pop as a subculture has the ability to sustain its subculturists' interest and broaden their viewership, particularly within companies, through the use of visual signifiers. Visual signifiers are able to generate meaning with their consistent association to particular idol groups, music video concepts and broader themes. Icons, indices and symbols become meaningful vessels of information to fans, which continue to develop the more fans invest themselves into this subculture's practices.

Likewise, SM Entertainment's artists must not depend solely on language mediation to promote their work. Through the use of visual signifiers and their

elaborate construction through CAWMAN, interest and an eagerness to gain a complete understanding is generated, thus encouraging fans to diversify their K-Popular interests and practices. Visual signifiers now have the ability to connect not only the idols but the subculturists through their shared, exclusive understanding of these tropes within, in this case, a particular production company.

Whilst the music video is undoubtedly a central medium of manifestation for CAWMAN, visual signifiers can also be extensively found among other K-Pop productions and products. Thus it will be interesting to observe how SM Entertainment continues to develop CAWMAN and implement it in different creations, as well as the fan and idol responses to these. As a media production company, will SM Entertainment's musicians ultimately transform into actors? Will the visual mediums of production become so centralised as to dissolve any meaning written into its music? Or perhaps the musical elements will too find their own variations of CAWMAN, potentially utilising sound semiotics to co-create, spread attention and fan practices across SM Entertainment's artists and idol groups.

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## VISUAL MUSIC:

### K-POP'S 'CAWMAN' EFFECT ON A TRANSNATIONAL MUSIC SUBCULTURE

#### (summary)

CAWMAN – a 'new genre' of music – developed in one of K-Pop's leading production companies, SM Entertainment. As an acronym for Cartoon, Animation, Webtoon, Motion Graphic, Avatar and Novel, CAWMAN was first introduced in June 2021. Established as a technique to place *visuality* into the centre of K-Pop productions, CAWMAN also appears as a metaphorical vessel for the shifted focus from musical to visual production, primarily in K-Pop's music videos. This paper thus explores what *visual music* means in the context of K-Pop as well as the concrete functionality, concepts and effects of CAWMAN since its creation.

In order to trace and analyse the establishment of CAWMAN, I consider K-Pop's development as a subculture, its historical and current methods of music video production and, most prominently, its ability to provide understanding to its international, multi-cultural fandom, through semiotics. K-Pop has "significant characteristics of subculture-ness" (Haenfler 2015, 16), with fans sharing collective social values, mutual beliefs, and meanings, established collectively through their consistent involvement in K-Popular practices, as well as the meanings they read from K-Pop's productions. Collectively they police and celebrate K-Pop as something much more than a music type.

Thus, in the context of semiosis, fans have established a single lens of context to read signifiers. In order for perceivers to gain a collective and concrete understanding of, in this case, CAWMAN's visual signifiers, fans must learn to read signifiers within the socio-(sub)cultural context of K-Pop, disconnected from one's mainstream or parent cultures. As fans are then able to interpret icons, indices and symbols in the context of K-Pop, they can solidify understandings beyond language mediation, allowing the methods of CAWMAN to function.

CAWMAN, first introduced alongside newly debuting idol group Aespa, became and continues today to be a central mode of production. I explore the 'butterfly motif' as a concrete signifier which not only develops semiotically from an icon to a symbol, but also as a concept which explores the bounds and abilities for CAWMAN among Aespa's productions. Secondly, I explore the 'train motif' across the broader production company SM Entertainment itself. Here, this motif is analysed, once again as part of CAWMAN, looking at how it functions as a signifier itself for this shifted focus from musicality to visuality production. Through this motif we can realise the effects this focus on visuality has on its perceivers, contemplate the future directions CAWMAN may take within this company as well as what this may hold for fans and idols alike in the broader subculture of K-Pop.

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## **INSIDE OUT: OGLED IZ UMETNOSTI MIMOVA I MIMOVANJA UMETNOSTI**

**Sažetak:** Ovaj rad mimeve posmatra u dijalogu sa umetničkim delima. U njima traži i pronalazi „klasična/tradicionalna” dela „standardne/analogne” istorije umetnosti, odnosno, dela odabrana iz njenog ustanovljenog kanona. U toj potrazi i analizi, rad definiše poziciju „visoke umetnosti” i njenog značenja u haotičnom okruženju kakvo stvaraju alatke Web 3.0. Sa druge strane, kroz jedan uporedni pristup, rad mapira raznolike uticaje mim kulture na stvaranje savremenih crteža i slika, na osnovu nekoliko odabranih primera po pravilu ‘algoritam kulture’, na regionalnom i internacionalnom nivou. Kroz takvu analizu, rad predstavlja ogled u razmišljanju o „umetnosti mimova” i „mimovanja umetnosti”, odnosno nudi pogled na savremenu poziciju internet mima u istoriji umetnosti, i obratno, na poziciju istorije umetnosti u popularnoj kulturi mima.

**Ključne reči:** internet mim, istorija umetnosti, umetničko delo, umetnost, klasika, savremena umetnost.

Još od prvih dana WWW-a zapaženi su fenomeni sveautorstva, participativne kulture, netizena (engl. *netizen*), prosumera (engl. *prosumer*; vidi Bell 2004, 2007) i ostale inovacije u duhu tehnofilije i tehnofobije – polaganja vere i nade

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u našu novu mrežu, ili pak razvoja velikog straha od iste. Kreiranjem Web 2.0, koji je doneo izrazitu interaktivnost, razmenu fajlova i *social networking*, pomenuti pristupi tehnologiji i dalje su prisutni, mada nisu toliko dominantni, a uključenost „na mrežu” sve većeg broja ljudi probudila je potrebu za što snažnijim probijanjem, za osvajanjem pažnje. Konačno, sada smo u vremenu razvoja Web 3.0 koji teži blokčejn tehnologiji, decentralizaciji i token ekonomiji. Shodno tome, formira se prostor u kome je romantična ideja o „slobodnom internetu” kao mestu otpora i sajber prostoru bez cenzure izgubljena. Pre će biti da je reč o „prostoru koji su kolonizovale vlade i korporacije” (Morozov 2012). To je prostor koji je doneo možda najsnažniju fuziju *umetničkog dela* i *tržišta* u skorašnjoj pojavi NFT-a – nezamenljivih tokena, i u kome mašinerija *nadzornog kapitalizma* (Zubof 2021) radi punom parom.

U takvom jednom sajber okruženju, u kojem naš katkad dokoni, a neretko i radni *scroll* kroz *feed* društvenih mreža nasilno i po pravilu prekidaju reklame, preporuke i oglasi, redovno se stvaraju, dele, remiksuju i reinterpetiraju internet mimovi. Kako je već zapaženo „jedna od tužnih stvari u „mim studijama” jeste to što svaka analiza kao da je prinuđena da se otvori istim ponižavajućim ritualom distanciranja ovog koncepta od njegovog sociobiološkog prethodnika i imenjaka” (Lovnik and Tutters 2018). Zaista i jeste tako – gotovo sve analize mima počinju etimološkim razjašnjenjem, definicijom mima iz knjige Ričarda Dokinsa (Richard Dawkins) *The Selfish Gene* iz 1976. godine, a na našem jeziku bi se tom komentaru mogla dodati i opaska o sličnosti po zvučnosti sa imenicom „gen”, gde bi se očekivalo da prevlada „mem”, ili, kako se ranije govorilo – *mema*. Po običaju, nakon „obavezne vežbe pročišćavanja grla” i „prevazilaženja genetske zablude” mimovi se opisuju kao forme popularnih medija koji kruže mrežama, u kojima korisnici koriste humor kako bi prikazali sopstvenu poziciju u odnosu na druge (Lovnik and Tutters 2018), te da bi komentarisali najsvežije vesti, kritikovali ili pak slavili političke pokrete i odluke, ili jednostavno izrazili svoja svakodnevna osećanja. Sve te, i druge funkcije, mimovi neretko ostvaruju upravo putem aproprijacije i reinterpetacije umetničkih dela.

Ovaj rad mimove – te dominantne minijature digitalne kulture – posmatra u dijalogu sa umetničkim delima na nekoliko načina. U njima traži i pronalazi „klasična/tradicionalna/očekivana” dela „standardne/analogne” istorije umetnosti, odnosno, dela odabrana iz njenog ustanovljenog kanona. U toj potrazi i analizi, rad definiše poziciju „visoke umetnosti” i njenog značenja u haotičnom okruženju kakvo stvaraju alatke Web 3.0. Sa druge strane, kroz jedan uporedni pristup, rad mapira raznolike uticaje mim kulture na stvaranje savremenih crteža i slika, na osnovu nekoliko odabranih primera. I u jednom i u drugom slučaju, dakle – i odabrani mimovi tek su deo korpusa internet mima koji se izražavaju aproprijacijom istorijsko-umetničkih *klasika*, kao i što su izabrani umetnički radovi segment šire savremene tendencije umetnosti



ka izražavanju jezikom mima. Drugim rečima, kao i većina radova iz oblasti studija sajber kulture, i ovaj rad nastaje sa svešću da predmet istraživanja izdvaja iz jednog fluidnog vremena i prostora, koji su u permanentnom nastajanju, promenama i *nagomilavanju*.<sup>2</sup> Stoga je selektovano tek nekoliko primera po kriterijumu popularnosti (broj pratilaca), raznolikosti objava i tendenciji da se umetnička dela mimuju na regionalnom i internacionalnom nivou. Odabrani su oni primeri na osnovu kojih je moguće analizirati relaciju između „klasičnih dela istorije umetnosti” i mimova, kao i između mimova i savremene umetnosti, u cilju rasvetljavanja ovog dijaloga i njegovih karakteristika u internet kulturi. Po pravilima *algoritam kulture*, odnosno dostupnosti sadržaja na *feed*-u koji se kreira na osnovu pojedinačnih, ličnih pretraga i kretanja kroz društvene mreže, izdvojeni su oni primeri internet mimova koji na regionalnoj i internacionalnoj sceni komuniciraju sa istorijsko-umetničkim kanonom, a koji su, pored toga što su široko rasprostranjeni i popularni, dostupni i redovno prisutni u *feed*-u autorke, s obzirom na to da je selekcija predmeta istraživanja iz okvira društvenih mreža jedino tim putem i moguća. Stoga ovde predstavljene mim stranice i umetničke opuse treba shvatiti kao deo šire *kulture mimovanja umetnosti*, kao studije slučaja koje ilustruju karakteristike složenog odnosa između mimova i umetnosti u sajber prostoru danas.

### **Klasika u doba *overheating*-a ili šta su za mim „umetnost” i „klasično”**

„Ako je tačno da je čovečanstvo tokom poslednjih 30 godina proizvelo podjednako mnogo informacija kao u prethodnih 5.000 godina, onda govorimo o jednoj stvarno rastućoj krivulji!” konstatovao je Eriksen analizirajući brzinu u *Tiraniji trenutka* 2001. godine. Više od decenije kasnije, isti autor je primetio da smo „pregrejani” (engl. *overheating*) i to ne samo zbog klimatskih promena, već i zbog ubrzanja u domenu ekonomije i kulture, te pod pritiskom „ključanja” nisu jedino naša biološka, već i društvena bića i identiteti (Eriksen 2016).<sup>3</sup> Šta sa istorijom umetnosti u jednoj takvoj situaciji zagrevanja *gotovo do vrenja*?

Reč je o disciplini za koju bi se moglo reći da postoji od davnina, a njeni zvanični koreni u istorijama istorije umetnosti smeštaju se u 18. vek i legendarna

2 Pojam *nagomilavanje* uvis Tomas Hilan Eriksen (Thomas Hylland Eriksen) pozajmio je iz jedne knjige o *progroku*, a na ovom mestu termin se koristi u značenju kakvo je određeno u knjizi *Tiranija trenutka*: „...imam utisak da mi trenutno imamo sve odjedanput. Svi zamislivi retrotrendovi postoje jedan kraj drugoga, a istovremeno su „veliki” iz starih dana i dalje veliki, ili su ih [...] oživeli nostalgicari” (2003, 150).

3 Autor je analizu brzine predstavio i u sažetom obliku (14 minuta) kroz „We Are Overheating” dostupnom na linku: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivjXIRu\\_3aQ&ab\\_channel=TEDxTalks](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivjXIRu_3aQ&ab_channel=TEDxTalks) (pristup: 23.02.2022).

zapažanja Johana Joakima Winkelmana (Johann Joachim Winkelmann), kojima je on definisao njene obrise, i time izvršio izraziti uticaj na stvaranje sebi savremenih umetničkih dela i formiranje tadašnjeg ukusa.<sup>4</sup> Kao i za sve druge, i za ovu disciplinu potrebno je vreme – *sporo vreme*, vreme „hladne glave”, u kojem mozak nije *skuvan* i pred ključanjem. Iako se reklamiraju varijante za brzo savladavanje i postajanje istoričarem umetnosti u roku od 28 sati,<sup>5</sup> naravno da je u doba *overheating*-a ovakva jedna disciplina pod pretnjom da nestane, kako beleži

*The Art Newspaper* (Pryor 2020; Neuendorf 2016). Na stranu važne rasprave o statusu istorije umetnosti kao discipline neretko zatvorene za predmete proučavanja vizuelne kulture, studija medija ili sajber kulture, o kojima jeste neophodno razmisliti pomno na nekom drugom mestu. Ovde je pitanje šta uopšte znači „klasično delo” u jednom dobu akceleracije i do sada neviđenog ubrzanja? Ili, kako su odabrane mim stranice nazvane @classical\_art\_memes\_official i @classicalcringe označile ovaj pojam? Rečju i kolokvijalno – šta je danas uopšte *klasično*? I doslovce, kako se *klasika* razume u okvirima mim kulture?



**Slika 1.** Izbor četiri mima sa Instagram stranice @classical\_art\_memes\_official (screenshot i kolaž autorke).

4 Vidi: Dragojević 1997.

5 Vidi oglas koji nudi postajanje ekspertom iz oblasti istorije umetnosti za samo 28 sati, sa 20% popusta: [https://www.facebook.com/360inspirationTRENDS/photos/a.57630527577748/5589469717794587/?type=3&\\_rdr](https://www.facebook.com/360inspirationTRENDS/photos/a.57630527577748/5589469717794587/?type=3&_rdr) (pristup: 4. 4. 2022).

Sama reč *classicus* latinskog je porekla i označava onu/onog „koji pripada prvom (poreskom, društvenom) razredu, koji je prvorazredan, prvoklasan” (Živković i dr.1986, 332). Kako konstatuje *Rečnik književnih termina*, reč je o pojmu širokog značenja i odnosi se na: savršena ili veoma značajna i tipična dela umetnosti, na kulturu starih Grka i Rimljana, uzorna dela koja zavređuju da budu sačuvana, proučavana i podražavana. Posebnom značenju umetnosti stare Grčke i Rima dodata je i opšta, normativna vrednost, te se pod *klasičnim* misli i na karakteristike antičke umetnosti i njihovog odraza u novijim evropskim kulturama. To nije reč koja označava jedino uzor i savršenstvo, već i starinu ili drevnost, i po pravilu se tim izrazom u novijim evropskim jezicima ne obeležavaju savremeni i mlađi autori (Isto). Vinkelman je sintagmom „mirna veličina i plemenita jednostavnost” stvorio neku vrstu slogana *klasičnog*, koji je do danas poprimio još slojeva značenja, dok je neke od pređašnjih izgubilo.

Kada se pogleda korpus objava stranica @classical\_art\_memes\_official i @classicalcringe (koje mogu „autorski” pripadati navedenim stranicama, ali koje su takođe preuzete, kopirane i postavljene kao izbor ili preporuka drugih profila) u najvećem broju postova *klasično* je gotovo sve ono što *nije digital-born*, a ni konceptualno, premda ipak pripada *umetničkom svetu* (artworld) i domenu „visoke umetnosti”. U mim kulturi, *classical\_art* je, kako nas upućuju izabrane stranice, kišobran pojam koji može odjednom „pokriti” slike Karavađa, Rembranta, Rubensa, Goje, Renoara, zajedno sa primerima praistorijske egipatske umetnosti, stare Grčke i Rima, kao i portrete Napoleona, biste Julija Cezara, srednjevekovne freske, ili bilo koji skup remek-dela zapamćenih u opštim pregledima istorije umetnosti. Rečju, *classicus* tu nije ni oznaka za antičko doba, niti za njegov uticaj u poznijim periodima, mada se može odnositi na nešto drevno i staro, vredno čuvanja. Iz istorijsko-umetničke perspektive, ove stranice izgledaju kao skupovi nasumično „izvučenih” reprodukcija, neretko montiranih, i redovno preimenovanih u svrhu ispunjenja funkcije mima. To su *random art histories* koje dobro služe pojedinačnim ili kolektivnim, autorskim ili preuzetim pošalicama, opaskama, dosetkama, komentarima i zapažanjima dragim mimosferi. U procesu mimovanja umetničkim delima, „gotovo nikada nije važno odakle slika dolazi – ona je samo potencijalni pokretač komunikacije koji se pretvara u predložak da se kaže doslovno bilo šta” (Tanni, nav. prema Totaro 2021).

U novoj mim logici *klasično* upućuje na panoramu istorije umetnosti, na prvu misao, na stereotip, tu prečicu u mišljenju o samom pojmu „umetnost”, koji retko obuhvata prakse dematerijalizacije umetničkog dela, konceptualnu umetnost i uopšte uzev - istoriju umetnosti od druge polovine XX veka do danas. Klasično je prosto „umetnost”, a ponekad čak ni to, jer fluidnim sajber prostorom dominira fluidni rečnik. Zajedno sa primerima nasumice prenetih iz *art coffee table* knjiga kroz strukturu mima „provlače se” i opskurna, slučajna, „preskočena”, zaboravljena i marginalizovana dela koja su na isti način usmerena

na reinterpretaciju različitih problema svakodnevice ili osećanja. Odnosno, klasičnim delima u doba *overheating*-a postala su gotovo sva analogna dela, najčešće ona koja podražavaju prirodu, *sklona mimezisu*, ona koja oslikavaju ono što digitalnom svetu nedostaje – široko shvaćenu prirodu. Sasvim interesantno, za mimeve se uglavnom biraju mimetična umetnička dela.

Informacije o vremenu u kojem je „klasično” delo nastalo, ko je njegov autor, je li to original, da li uopšte vidimo delo u celini, ili je u pitanju *cut*, da li je reč o montaži i slično, nisu vidljive, izgubljene su, a zapravo za *misiju i viziju* mima nisu ni bitne. *Klasično* u ovom kontekstu može biti svako delo koje su u određenom periodu radili neki umetnici (premda to najčešće jesu oni „izvučeni” iz zapadnoevropskog kanona) u bilo kom stilu. Drugim rečima, postoji „tamo neka istorija umetnosti” i brzim prelistavanjem – *skrolovanjem* – pravi se selekcija po kriterijumu sličnosti sa trenutnim raspoloženjem mimer (mim umetnika) ili aktuelnom situacijom koja se želi komentarisati.

### **Klasičan mim u doba *overheating*-a: tri izabrana primera**

Pozicije visoke estetike, perfekcionizma i skrivanja procesa rada montiranja, skraćanja i kopiranja u mim kulturi bezvredne su i apsolutno nebitne. Čak se i „doterivanje” i ulepšavanje slike ogoljavaju i ostavljaju vidljivim, katkad u tolikoj meri da slika sama postaje „ružna” ili „loša”. Mim je zapravo pregrejana siromašna slika (*overheated poor image*) Hito Štajerl (Hito Steyerl), loša slika, dronjak ili poderotina, lumpenproleterka u klasnom društvu privida, nezakonito kopile izvorne slike u petoj generaciji koje se ruga obećanjima digitalne tehnologije (2020, 9). Umetnost mima je uličnoj umetnosti nalik: nastaje brzinski, ne mari za estetizam, ni za *l'art pour l'art*, niti za reprezentaciju, a javnosti se neretko obraća angažovanim rečnikom i tonom. U njoj su saznanja istorije umetnosti prevaziđena, skrajnuta i svedena na sliku samu, na reprodukciju, ali i na beskrajne potencijale posmatračevog pogleda: savremeni trenutak koji u toj *klasičnoj slici* vidim postaje njen sadržaj, otkriva značenje, prenosi poruku. Posredi je gotovo benjaminovski momenat: „Nije stvar u tome da prošlost baca svetlo na sadašnjost, niti da sadašnjost baca svetlo na prošlost, već je dijalektička slika ta u kojoj se, kao u munji, ono što je bilo i ono što jeste sreću u konstelaciji” (Benjamin 1927–1940, 15).

Tako, na primer, gužve i gurkanja na šesnaestovekovnim Brojgelovim (Peter Breughel) delima mogu biti upotrebljene da dočaraju oniomaniju današnjeg *Black Friday*-a, događaja koji se od polovine 20. veka na Zapadu organizuje u slavu božićnog šopinga i kupovine, a koji je u skorije vreme poprimio veliku popularnost (Slika 1). U ime popusta i akcija, uz Crni petak, tu su i *Cyber Monday*, *Singles Day* i drugi šoping-praznici. Valter Benjamin (Walter Benjamin)

takođe je pre više od jednog veka primetio da je kapitalizam religija, neprekidno trajanje kulta koji se izvodi obredima kupovine i potrošnje (Benjamin 1921), a užurbane gomile u ovom mimu oslikavaju religioznu pomamu i štovanje kulta i izvan svakodnevnog konteksta, sada i u prazničnom, dodatom datumu kojim se slavi kupoprodaja. Kult je kanonizovan, vreme štovanja je stalno, obredi kupovine i prodaje traju bez prekida, konstatovao bi u ovom slučaju Benjamin.

Sa druge strane, mnogobrojnim Napoleonovim autoportretima kojima je pomno građena njegova autoreprezentacija (Pirola 2019), marginalizovan je propagandni i istorijski kontekst, a prednost je data humorističkim potencijalima njegovog lika, poza i dela, koji vešto ilustruju savremeno anksiozno doba: noćne misli, letargične dane provedene u neprestanom radu, ozbiljnoj dokolici (*serious leisure*)<sup>6</sup> i skrolovanju. Poetika selfija neizostavna je asocijacija na najpoznatije „klasično” delo svih vremena – na Mona Lizu, te njen lik biva redovni motiv mim kulture, ali i komentar na opsesivnu potragu za savršenim autoportretom ili profilnom slikom. Klasični mimovi mogu biti i „slike koje čujemo”, kakva je pravoslavna freska i muzička interpretacija ikonografije Hrista sa jagnjetom (Slika 1).

*Classical art* mimovi, po svemu sudeći, uče nas više o savremenom dobu, nego o klasičnoj umetnosti, postajući time svedočanstva duha vremena koje živimo. Oni su slike koje teže da „uhvate” i „zamrznu” bar neke od trenutaka i aspekata naših *fluidnih života* (Bauman 2009). U delu najčešće vide njegove formalne karakteristike i analiziraju ih savremenim očima, bez istorijske potke, društveno-političke ili kakve druge kontekstualizacije. Gotovo da su te istorijsko-umetničke reprodukcije jednostavno „puštene” da lebde, laviraju i vrte se zajedno sa ogromnim brojem novih i brzih fotografija na „pametnim” telefonima. Njihova kontekstualizacija u mim kulturi postao je sam proces mimovanja, tj. prepoznavanja savremenog u prošlom, koliko god da je to „prošlo” vremenski od nas udaljeno. „Nihilistička je ona praksa koja nema čvrstog temelja, čvrste strukture na koju se može osloniti, zaštitničkih navika. (...) Reklo bi se: s jedne strane posao, a s druge privremenost i promjenjivost velegradskog života. Sada pak nihilizam (navika nemanja navika itd.) ulazi u proizvodnju, postaje profesionalno sredstvo, postaje *zaposlen*” (Virno 2004, 97).

Iz takve situacije *slobodnog pada bez tla* (Steyerl 2013, 13), Rafaelov *Mladić s jabukom* poluspušenih kapaka progovara: *An apple a day, you die anyway*. U istom kontekstu, scena blagosiljanja sa reljefa sarkofaga postaje novogodišnja rezolucija ostavljanja cigreta, a Beklinov (Arnold Böcklin) *Autoportret sa smrću*

6 *Ozbiljna dokolica* je termin koji je uveo Robert Stebins (Robert Stebbins) baveći se amaterizmom, hobistima i volonterima kojima sakupljanje ili izražavanje posebnih veština i znanja imaju gotovo poslovni karakter. U digitalnoj sferi, a naročito u vreme Web 3.0 *serious leisure* nije retka pojava i odnosi se na dokolicu koja poprima oblike posla, čak i neplaćenog (Spracklen 2015).



**Slika 2.** Izbor tri mima sa Instagram stranice @classicalcringe (screenshot i kolaž autorke).

koja tuče na violini potire i ukida *memento mori*, i to ne u ime *memento vivere*, već pre u ime koncentracije, odrađivanja posla, stavljanja smrti na *snooz* (slika 2). U ime onoga što savremenoj diktaturi trenutka redovno manjka, u ime pauze i predaha. Kao da smo umorni ne samo od života, već i od umiranja, od podsećanja na to da smo prolazni. U nihilističkoj praksi življenja, u stalnim promenama poslova i poslodavaca, u promenama stambenih adresa, država, pa i kontinenta stanovanja, u permanentnim izmenama i premeštanjima, mim kulturi ne godi ukus *vanitas*. Ta je kultura na prolaznost i *fleksigurnost* isuviše svikla. Mim kultura kao da se upinje i pokušava da zamisli bar nešto stabilno, stameno i stalno, da oživi ono čega nema: red, redolsed, postojanost, doslednost. U kretanju bez kompasa, u *scroll* vremenu, ona može izgledati kao da traži pravac i kurs istovremeno se upinjući da izmakne zadatom itinereru koji nam u sajber prostoru sve ubedljivije serviraju poluge *nadzornog kapitalizma* (Zubof 2021).

Nisu sva „klasična dela” u mimovima bez „lične karte” i priče o poreklu i značenju. Stranica @umetnostkaze, pored toga što je jedna od retkih lokalnih stranica koje su posvećene mim tretmanu umetničkih dela, takođe je usmerena na davanje osnovnih, a katkad i veoma detaljnih informacija o istoriji mimovanog dela. Dok @classical\_art\_memes\_official i @classicalcringe ne prave razliku ni između različitih kategorija klasike, niti umetnosti same, a ne nude ni faktografiju mim aproprijacije, @umetnostkaze pored „muzičke dosetke” iz ličnog ugla, u formi beležnice ili *dnevnika zabavnog učenja* predstavlja istorijsko-umetničke informacije o gotovo svakom upotrebljenom umetničkom delu.

Na primer, muzička parola *Samo da rata ne bude dopisana na čuvenom Sondiranju terena na Novom Beogradu* (1948) Bože Ilića, u vreme kada je počela invazija Rusije na Ukrajinu, pored toga što mimu daje angažovani glas, objašnjava i kontekst nastanka i delanja socijalističkog realizma, kao i značenje same slike. Beklinov pejzaž spojen je sa čuvenim stihom



**Slika 3.** Izbor 3 mima sa Instagram stranice @umetnostkaze (screenshot i kolaž autorke).

Tome Zdravkovića – *A more ko more, nemirno i plavo* – uz istorijsko-umetničke minijature o mračnom romantizmu i poziciji ovog slikara u tom kontekstu.

Zanimljivost predstavlja i inverzija kojom objašnjenje *Zanosa svete Tereze* počinje: ovo delo „sigurno znate po urnebesnom mimu gde jedna do druge stoje Tereza u ekstazi i Lindsy Lohan...”. Umetnost je u mimosferi poznata pre svega kao *nalepnica* na već postojećem mimu, a potom i možda i iz škole, nekog opšteg pregleda istorije umetnosti, sa putovanja. Ovoj reprodukciji Berninijeve (Gian Lorenzo Bernini) fascinantne barokne instalacije u Kornaro kapeli u Rimu na @umetnostkaze stranici dodat je muzički stih „Hajde da menjamo planetu” s porukom o životu u doba korona virusa i pojačanog zagađenja vazduha u Beogradu (Slika 3). *Povratak baroka* izvodi se ovde višestruko: na formalnom nivou ponavljanjem baroknog dela i slobodnim mu pripisivanjem nove, savremene uloge, a na eksplikatornom nivou, koji sedamnaestovekovno delo prepoznaje najpre iz skorašnjeg viralnog mima, barok se vratio punom snagom ilustrujući situaciju inverzije, *inside out* osećaj, prenatrpanost, fuziju medija i sadržaja, nedostatak vremena, te rasipanje pažnje na gomilu različitih segmenata. Kako je Gi Skarpeta (Guy Scarpetta) zapazio: „Paradoks današnjice je što se čini da gotovo neograničena raspoloživost svetske kulture (kroz knjige iz umetnosti), ne proizvodi, pre svega, osećanje slobode, već utisak zasićenosti i preopterećenosti” (Skarpeta 2003, 135). U neobaroknom *nagomilavanju slika*, ali i poslova i obaveza koje živimo, ne čudi spoznavanje Svete Tereze Avilske putem skorašnjeg mima, a otvaranje prostora za priču o samom umetničkom delu, kroz jedno paralelno mišljenje o svetu u kome živimo, optimistični je vid pripovedanja u *online* kulturnoj industriji, koju su korporacije trijumfalno anektirale Web 3.0 alatima.

## Umetničko delo u doba *overheating-a*: tri sasvim različita primera

Nisu retke rasprave o potencijalnoj umetnosti mima, sve češće su izložbe posvećene mimu kao svojevrsnom vizuelnom fenomenu, a ne izostaju ni mimovi koji se šale na račun elitne pozicije „visoke umetnosti” i velike popularnosti „umetnosti mima”.<sup>7</sup> Da je reč o ambivalentnom odnosu, vidljivo je i iz prethodnog poglavlja koje na izabranim studijama slučaja predstavlja pogled iz jednog ugla na temu relacije umetnost-mim. Mimovi u istoriji umetnosti pronalaze neiscrpan izvor inspiracije za upućivanje najrazličitijih poruka, naročito onih ekspresivnih, facijalnih, onih koje putem figure i lica, kroz mimetičnu, po uzoru na prirodu stvorenu predstavu, imaju potencijal da prenesu emociju, raspoloženje, komentar, šaljivu poruku. Sa druge strane, kada je reč o umetničkim delima, na ovom mestu razmišljamo o tri primera koja na različite načine tretiraju fenomen mima smeštanjem u *umetnički svet*.

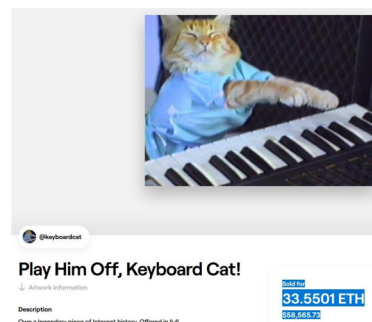
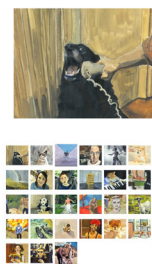
Kao „izgovor da slika internet”<sup>8</sup> Lauren Kelin (Lauren Kaelin) od 2013. godine razvija koncept Benjamima (*Benjameme*) – projekat koji je inspirisan čuvenim esejom Valtera Benjamina iz 1936. godine „Umetničko delo u veku svoje tehničke reprodukcije”. Pre gotovo čitavog stoleća on je zapazio da reprodukovanjem umetničko delo gubi svoju auru, a pokušavajući da tu misao rekontekstualizuje, Lauren Kelin stvara, iznova gradi auru na odabranim motivima, i to onim koji se najčešće kopiraju, dele i reprodukuju (Brooks 2017). Stilski se pozivajući na slikarsko nasleđe koje su za sobom ostavili Lusjen Frojd (Lucien Freud) i Dženi Savil (Jenny Saville) ona pokušava da omogući ljudima uživanje i osećaj zadovoljstva prilikom posmatranja mima, tog svakodnevnog i sveprisutnog fenomena obrađenog na umetnički način. Za nju su *Benjamimovi* predivna fuzija „visoke” i „niske” kulture (Isto). Mimove vide svi, ali ih upravo *Benjamimovi* upućuju na transfer sa opštepoznate slike na status umetničkog predmeta. Uspešan mim je po pravilu određen da bude reprodukovano, deljeno i prepoznatljivo. *Benjamimovima* Lauren Kelin stvara auru tamo gde ona, po njenom mišljenju, prethodno nije postojala. Mimove bira iz istog razloga kao i svi mi – zbog njihovog jedinstvenog humora, pokušavajući da iznova proizvede auru i da navede posmatrača da misle drugačije o onome što svakodnevno gledaju (Maes 2013), a upravo je drugačije viđenje svakodnevice bio i jedan od ciljeva samog Valtera Benjamina. Nismo uvereni u odsustvo aure internet mimova. Štaviše, mišljenja smo da je možda njihova aura upravo ta permanentna promena, konstantno putovanje i fleksibilni jezik stalno novog (is)kazivanja. Pa ipak, pitanje aure upravo po logici mim mišljenja neretko se postavlja u sajber prostoru.

7 Vidi na primer ovu stranicu na kojoj se periodično objavljuju mimovi posvećeni odnosu umetnosti i mima: [https://www.instagram.com/freeze\\_magazine/](https://www.instagram.com/freeze_magazine/) (pristup: 3.04.2022).

8 Vidi više na portfoliju umetnice: <http://www.laurenkaelin.com/benjameme-1/benjameme> (pristup: 3. 04.2022).



Benjameme



**Slika 4.** *Benjamimovi* Lauren Kelin i vest o *Keyboard Cat* mimu prodatom kao NFT (screenshot i kolaž autorke).

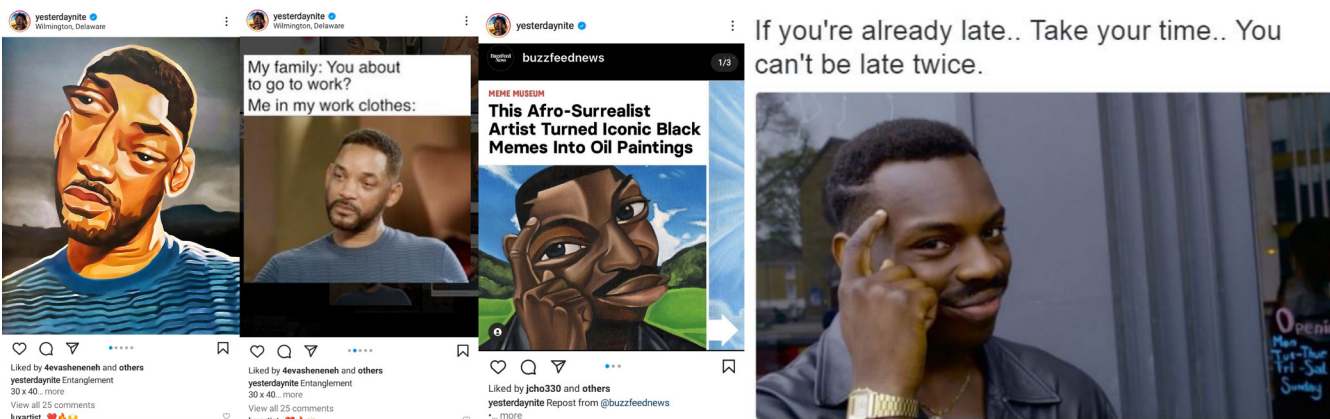
Stvara se utisak da ono što je Benjamin prepoznao kao auru pokušava da se vrati u digitalni svet na više načina. Sajber aurizacija nakon prepoznavanja, razbijanja, redefinisanja i različitih upotreba aure kroz čitav 20. vek poprima nove dimenzije, prisno vezane za tržišni sistem Web 3.0. *Benjamimovi* Lauren Kelin obuhvataju skup mimova koje je ona odabrala i prenela na slikarsko platno, izvlačeći iz sajber prostora mim i stvarajući od njega jednu ili više slika, dostupnih za prodaju u fizičkom prostoru (Slika 4). Među njima se nalazi, na primer, i motiv iz viralnog video snimka *Keyboard Cat* koji je nedavno prodat kao jedan od skupljih NFT-ova (Thomas 2022). I kada govorimo o NFT-u, govorimo o povratku aure originalnosti u digitalni svet.<sup>9</sup> Međutim, za razliku od *Benjamimova* koji teže da rukom stvore auru tamo gde je navodno nije bilo (i time je donekle razumeju doslovno, u bukvalnom smislu, jer možda je aura mimova upravo naša neizmerna pomama za njima i stalni *remix* istih), NFT kroz udruživanje logike kriptovaluta i umetničkih dela stvara *auru posedovanja*, auru originala čiji se dokaz jedinstvenosti krije u pozadini, u meta-podacima koji su vidljivi jedino vlasnicima, tj. prodavcu i kupcu. Ako NFT *sertifikatom autentičnosti* izvlači mim iz mora mimova, ne sprečavajući nas da i dalje plivamo ili se davimo u istom tom moru slika, slobodno šerujući, pohranjujući i menjajući mimove, *Benjamimovi* rukom preslikavaju i umetnički interpretiraju te male svakodnevne slike mašući nam sa obale i izvlačeći nam pogled, bar na sekund, iz nemirnog mora slika. Aura koju vraća NFT je fuzija umetnosti i kriptovaluta usmerena na mogućnost posedovanja jednog među mnogima, mnogobrojnim, dok je aura *Benjamima* jednostavno uzbuđenje zbog prenosa *online* popularne kulture na slikarsko platno i klasično shvaćenu sliku. U svemu tome, mimovi kao da uspešno izmiču, uživajući u auri koju zapravo stvaraju njihova neodoljivost, sveprisutnost, probijanje u oflajn svet, te permanentna promenljivost i neuhvatljivost.

9 Vidi Mergler 2021 (pristup: 3. 4. 2022).

Na jedan drugačiji način, umetnik Alim Smit (Alim Smith) na slikarsko platno prenosi ikonične crne mimeve (*Black Memes*)<sup>10</sup> stilski inspirisan, kako sam navodi, radovima Salvadora Dalija (Salvador Dali) i Morisa Kornelisa Ešera (Maurits Cornelis Escher). Počev od 2017. godine, ovaj umetnik u stilu koji bi se mogao nazvati afro-nadrealizmom ili pak *black pop art*-om daje omaž crnoj popularnoj kulturi prenoseći je iz kulture mima u umetnički svet. Kako Smit ističe, za motiv mimova se odlučio jer mu se dopada način na koji oni komuniciraju sa ljudima i zato što oni, iako govore u šiframa, direktno pogađaju naša osećanja. Za njega su mimovi ovaploćenje one stare izreke koja kaže da „slika vredi hiljadu reči”. Oni slikom prevode mnogo više sadržaja nego bilo šta drugo, a njegovi *mimovi na platnu* takođe postaju novi mimovi, svojevrsni *mim generatori*.<sup>11</sup> Povodom *pop-up* izložbe *Family Reunion* otvorene u okviru *Black History meseca* u Los Angelesu februara 2022. godine, Smit je misleći o tome kako nijedno umetničko delo njegovih prijatelja nije privuklo toliko pažnje na društvenim mrežama kao što to čine mimovi, izjavio: „Možda nikada neću uspeti da naslikam nešto tako moćno kao što je to mim” (Dahir 2022). Takođe je dodao da mu je iskustvo umetničke škole učinilo umetnost dosadnom, i da želi da ostavi pozitivniji utisak na ljude. Svestan da su „evolucija *Black mimova*, kao i kulminacija reakcija crnih ljudi odigrale važnu ulogu u *online* kulturi i na društvenim mrežama” (Jordan 2022), on stvara njihove nadrealne portrete u nameri da istraži identitet, prošlost, sadašnjost i budućnost (Slika 5).

10 Pored toga što se *crna boja* i reči *crna/ crn/crno* u ovom radu koriste u okviru citiranja izjava samog umetnika, one se takođe odnose na afroameričku/*Black* kulturu, kulturu Afrike i njene dijaspore. Odnosno, koristi se „crno” kao pojam koji ne dovodi do upotreba jezičkih konstrukcija, kakve je Džaret Kobek (Jarett Kobek), američki pisac turskog porekla u knjizi *Ja mrzim internet* duhovito definisao po količini prisustva „eumelanina u donjem sloju epiderma”, dodajući i: „Naravno, rasna komponenta društvenog ustrojstva bila je samo uopšteno sredstvo za skretanje pažnje s jedinog istinski bitnog faktora u uspostavljanju poretka. Drugim rečima, *s novca*” (Kobek 2017, 13). U ovom kontekstu, *crni mim*, *crni pop art*, *crni ljudi*, *crna kultura*, *digitalno crno lice* odnose se na segmente šire shvaćene kulture Afroamerikanaca, Afrikanaca koji žive na afričkom kontinentu i u dijaspori, koja podrazumeva i neželjeno/disonantno nasleđe rasizma, potlačenosti i kolonijalizma – tih gnusnih pojava, ali i nasleđe usmereno na njihovo ukidanje, kakvo je nasleđe borbe za oslobođenje, za prava, nasleđe antikolonijalizma i antirasizma. U digitalnoj kulturi, disonantno nasleđe *crne kulture* uvećava se kroz digitalnu isključenost, nejednakost, nedostupnost, i dominantnu zapadnocentričnost interneta.

11 Vidi intervju sa umetnikom na: <https://www.thefader.com/2017/04/20/alim-smith-interview> (pristup: 3. 4. 2022).



Slika 5. Primer transfera mimova na slike Alima Smita (screenshot i kolaž autorke).

Drugim rečima, njemu su u fokusu afroamerička zajednica, radost i emocije, kao i njihovo prisustvo u zapadnocentričnoj internet kulturi. Povodom fenomena digitalnog crnog lica (*digital blackface*),<sup>12</sup> tj. mimova i gifova čiji su glavni akteri crni ljudi, iznete su brojne kritike u prethodnoj deceniji. Uprkos nijansama u internet gifovima, mimovima i stikerima sa *selebritijima crne kulture*, korisnici moraju biti svesni sopstvene pozicije, rase i privilegije u društvu tako što će razumeti kako je upotreba *digitalnog crnog lica* neretko proizvod i nasleđe rasizma (Wong 2019, 18).<sup>13</sup> Shodno tome, u *hipermimetičnoj prirodi savremene kulture*, i *online kulturi društvenih mreža*, ovaj umetnik ne daje prednost razmišljanju o „digitalnoj eksploataciji crnih ljudi u medijima kojom se normalizuju nesvesne predrasude razvijene u konzumerističkom ponašanju, a koje rezultiraju nena-meravanim društvenim, ekonomskim i političkim posledicama po život crnih ljudi” (Isto), već se usmerava na predstavljanje afroameričke zajednice i isticanje prisustva crnih ljudi u popularnoj mim kulturi SAD-a.

Razmotrili smo dva slučaja prebacivanja mima iz mimosfere na slikarsko platno, i oba su ponikla na teritoriji SAD-a. Umetnica Laura Kelin stvara u Bruklinu, dok je Smit iz Delavera. U ovom transferu mima na platno, u prvom slučaju umetnica kao da bukvalno shvata Benjaminovu auru oličenu u materijalnom predmetu – slici (koja u njenom opusu i nije jedinstveni original, već je

12 Termin *digital blackface* popularizovala je feministkinja i doktorandkinja Univerziteta u Čikagu Lauren Mišel Džekson (Lauren Michele Jackson), pozivajući se na *high-tech blackface* analizu iz 1999. godine i prezentaciju crnih likova u kompjuterskim igrima. To je „prepakovana forma minstrel šoa koji vrši kulturnu aproprijaciju jezika i osećanja crnih ljudi zabave radi, dok propušta priliku da shvati ozbiljnost svakodnevnih posledica rasizma s kojim se crni ljudi susreću, poput policijske brutalnosti, diskriminacije na poslu, nejednakosti u obrazovanju” (Wong 2019, 5).

13 Vidi i kratak BBC video (BBC News 2017) koji skreće pažnju na to da je *digital blackface* po pravilu predstava crnih ljudi u izrazito dramatičnim situacijama.

takođe dostupna za multipliciranje), dok drugi umetnik doslovno prenosi *Black* mimeove na platno, nadrealističkim rečnikom, izuzimajući problematiku i potencijale kritičkog osvrta na njihovo poreklo i značenje u – ne treba zaboraviti – prevashodno *zapadnocentričnoj i beloj kulturi interneta*. U samom SAD-u, u kome umetnik dela i stvara, digitalni razdor i dalje je aktuelan, i digitalno su isključeni pre svega Afroamerikanci kako beleži izveštaj iz 2021. godine,<sup>14</sup> a kada govorimo o Globalnom Jugu i, posebice, afričkom kontinentu, korisnici interneta i dalje su u manjini, i to onoj koja uključuje i *netizene* koji funkcionišu u složenom sistemu *Free Basics* platformi ograničenog pristupa i sadržaja (vidi: Massimo and Gladkova 2020).

Pomenuti primeri tek su isečak iz jedne potencijalne „mimolike istorije umetnosti”, a među brojnim lokalnim primerima izdvajamo opus Jelene Milićević (@\_jelena\_milicevic\_) koja amblematsku strukturu mima implementira u umetnički crtež na sasvim drugačijem, simboličnom nivou. Ovde se umesto očitog prenosa mimosfere u umetnički svet poetika mima ugrađuje u rad na jedan veoma intiman i ličan način. Prostori svakodnevice, problemi i brige u



Slika 6.

14 Vidi izveštaj dostupan na linku: <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/digital-divide-black-americans/> (pristup: 3. 4. 2022).

kojima se većina nas može prepoznati motivi su koje Milićević saopštava stilizovanim crtežom na papiru ili pak računom za struju, internet, kablovsku (Slika 6). Siluete malih i običnih ljudi nemaju strogo definisana lica, pretpostavljamo, jer ona mogu predstavljati svakoga od nas. U njima prepoznavamo jučerašnji dan, sutrašnju brigu, nekadašnju uspomenu.

Crteži ljudi, njihovih priča, situacija koje je umetnica videla kao slučajna prolaznica ili pak bila njihov deo, uvek podrazumevaju i natpis. Zapravo, bez tog pisanog segmenta, scena koja je pred nama ili je nerazumljiva, ili previše hermetična. Kako sama umetnica kaže: „taj tekst uz rad je kao stub temeljac koji crtežu omogućava da bude stabilan uz svu težinu i pukotine koje poseduje” (Arsenović 2020). Slično tome, ni značenje mima ne može postojati bez tekstualne intervencije, bez dodavanja reference kao „stuba temeljca” značenja. Čini se da je mim kultura izvršila najsnažnije ujedinjenje reči i slike.

Milićević priča priču o „ultimativnom emotivnom paru” pravom *tumbler internet estetikom*,<sup>15</sup> ističući temu intimnosti koja nedostaje ovom instant vremenu, u kojem je čovek otuđen sam od sebe, i nema vremena za bliskost i nežnost (Isto). Upravo teme svakodnevice, problemi, dnevničke misli izvučene iz jedne potencijalne „beležnice generacije” zajedničke su opusu ove umetnice i šire shvaćenoj mim kulturi. Internet mimovi nisu pretrpeli doslovan transfer u umetnički crtež, već su oni idejni predložak, skicirana ideja, kroki *zeitgeist*-a na osnovu čije strukture nastaju „teze u crtežu” Jelene Milićević. Za razliku od prethodne dve studije slučaja, u kojima je granica između tzv. visoke umetnosti i tzv. niske/popularne kulture mima i dalje primetna, u ovom je slučaju izvršena simbioza poetike mima i crteža. Crtež je progovorio jezikom i porukom mima, umetnost je postala jasna i direktna. Stoga ne čudi velika popularnost i zapaženost crteža ove umetnice upravo na društvenim mrežama.

### **Za kraj: kratak zaključak o odnosu umetnosti i mimova**

Ovaj rad odista je ogled u razmišljanju o umetnosti mima i mimovanju umetnosti. U izazovnom okruženju gomila slika kakvo stvara Web 3.0, selekcija je težak zadatak, a samo pisanje o njima uvek je pod pretnjom da već u vreme čitanja bude *pase, krindž i lejm*. Nije isključen ni rizik od zaključaka hipotetičnog karaktera, koji se izvode na osnovu selektovanog predmeta istraživanja koji je izdvojen iz ogromnog korpusa slika i materijala. Od nečega se, međutim, mora početi, i možda ti počeci doprinesu „hlađenju” *overheating*-a u koje smo zapali.

15 Tumbler je blog platforma pokrenuta 2007. godine, na kojoj se jednostavno dele fotografije, citati, tekstovi, muzika, video i slično. Pozicionirana između društvene mreže i bloga, Tumbler je neka vrsta mikrobloga, te stoga adekvatna paralela ovde pomenutim crtežima. Vidi više: <https://www.webwise.ie/parents/explainer-what-is-tumblr-2/> (pristup: 03.07.2022).

Na ovom mestu analiziran je isečak stranica mim kulture koje koriste rečnik istorije umetnosti, vrlo i poznata remek-dela, u svrhu prenosa raznolikih poruka i komentara. Na njihovom primeru, primetno je proširenje značenja termina „klasično” u nagomilavanju slika koje živimo, a prostor za (o)čuvanje bar neke faktografske istorije umetnosti u mim kulturi retko i teško opstaje. Mimezis umetničkih dela koji mimovi neumorno ponavljaju delom su izraz nostalgije prema onome što *online* sferi nedostaje – prema prirodi, postojanosti, doslednosti, a delom reakcija na nedosledno, haotično i stalno promenljivo vreme koje živimo, nalik *permanentnom vanrednom stanju* (Agamben). Problemi su veliki i brojni, vremena je malo, a strmoglavu ubrzanje ostavlja trenutak tek, dovoljan za pogled, za razumevanje intertekstualne reference mima i njeno povezivanje sa onim „ovde i sada”. A onda se mora dalje. Fragmentarnost, rasparčavanje, uzimanje segmenta značenja – sveta ili slike, odlike su i uključivanja mima u svet umetnosti. Među brojnim tendencijama savremene umetnosti ka uključenju estetike i poetike mima u umetnički rad, izdvojeni su oni primeri u kojima je prepoznat potencijal problematizacije značenja koja se stvaraju u okviru popularne kulture mima, u jednom sajber prostoru koji pretenduje na sveprisutnost, demokratičnost i otvorenost, ali koji *de facto* to zapravo nije.

Očito je da je analiza više nego inspirativna, i da pokreće mnogobrojna pitanja, od kojih su neka u ovom radu postavljena, a na neka su ponuđeni i odgovori. Dat je kritički komentar na problem *sajber aurizacije* i pitanja koja se tiču odnosa Benjaminove definicije aure umetničkog dela i njenog prisustva (ili odsustva) u kulturi mima i nedavno uvedenog NFT-a. Takođe, skrenuta je pažnja na zapadocentričnost interneta i ulogu koju bi prelazak mimova u umetnički svet mogao da ima u kritici digitalnog razdora i perpetuiranju nejednakosti u okvirima onlajn sfere. Uspostavljena je razlika između prenosa internet mima u oflajn umetnički svet, i upotrebe mim jezika i logike u umetničkom svetu. Pored toga, otvorena su pitanja koja se tiču selekcije i odabira predmeta istraživanja u sajber prostoru, a zaključeno je da jedini mogući put izbora jeste zapravo prihvatanje algoritam logike i postepeno izdvajanje tema kao pojedinačnih studija slučaja iz ogromnog korpusa onlajn materijala. Samim tim, ovaj rad nudi ono što je u datoj situaciji bilo dostupno i što je omogućilo prepoznavanje različitih problema koji mogu doprineti analizi i razumevanju odnosa između umetnosti i mimova. Konačno, ponuđen je i komentar na redefinisavanje pojma *klasika* i *klasično* u doba mima, kao i na poziciju tradicionalne istorije umetnosti u ulozi mim generatora.

U prelomu *inside-out* pogleda, u izvrtanju umetnosti u mim i mima u umetnost, reč je o jednom složenom odnosu čija nam analiza, kako se pokazalo, otkriva i vizuelizuje duh vremena koji živimo. To vreme jeste vreme dominacije slika, neretko čak i njihovog obesmišljavanja kojim se one svode ili na svemoćne, ili pak na nemoćne predmete. Međutim, ovim ogledom pokazalo se da pogled

koji zastane i pažljivo analizira bar segment tih slika, o njima otkriva i to da su, iako egzistiraju u haotičnom i nestalnom prostoru, kadre da na svoj način misle o svedočanstvima prošlosti, kao i da su sposobne da kroz pošalice i dosetke ako ne sačuvaju, onda bar komentarišu nasleđe, provlačeći ga kroz „filter osećaja današnjice”, istovremeno stvarajući svojom amblematskom strukturom i smelim, a duhovitim tonom buduće nasleđe vizuelne kulture i istorije umetnosti.

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**INSIDE OUT:  
THE MEMING OF ART AND THE ART OF MEMING  
(summary)**

This paper aims to offer an analysis of complex relations between *memes in art*, and *the art of memes*. It is an *experiment in thinking* about a tremendous body of images present in the contemporary Internet culture, through selected examples and Instagram pages. Noticing that we are living in the age of “overheating” (Thomas Hylland Eriksen), in the time of accelerated change, this work asks questions about the position of images, memes, and “high art” within this chaotic environment. Making a selection from @classical\_art\_memes\_official and @classicalcringe Instagram pages, this work comments upon the usage of the terms *classic* and *classical* in cyberspace, as well as their extended meaning inside meme culture. Selected memes reveal the contemporary nature of the gaze directed from meme-makers to “classical” images. The meaning of classical images within meme culture is transformed, and dedicated to “now and here”, to the feeling of the contemporary world, problems and thoughts. The historical contextualization of the artwork is lost, and the context of these old objects now is their function in the transfer of updated, meme messages. On the other hand, in local, (post)Yugoslav space, Instagram page @umetnostkaze is seen in the form of *a diary of fun learning*, in which meming the art is done in agreement with the recording of chosen art history facts. In a search for memes in artworld, this paper makes a critical comment on selected examples of meme transformation in paintings, as well as on the implementation of meme poetics in artistic drawing. For this purpose, the work of Lauren Kaelin and her *Benjamemes* is presented and compared with the NFT phenomenon, with the “return of the aura” discourse, and the dialogue with Benjamin’s concept of the artwork aura. The recent exhibition “Family Reunion” of the artist Alim Smith, and his surrealistic treatment of *Black Memes*, opens questions about the condition of Black presence in Internet culture and creates a critical space and dialogue in relation to the usage of *digital blackface* and its heritage. Differently, in a local context, the popular drawings by Jelena Milićević are witnesses of the possibility to implement the poetics of Internet memes in the artworld, simultaneously making a symbiosis between art as “high culture” and memes as “popular culture”. This paper, as an experiment in thinking about the relations between memes and art, outlines this delicate and fresh space within contemporary visual culture, emphasizing that in the age of image domination, and their loss of meaning, there is a time-sensitive field where memes and art as images are able to express the *Zeitgeist* we are living, as well as to keep and comment upon our heritage in a witty and brave mode of thinking.

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Original scientific paper

# REVIEWS



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## OŠTRA SLIKA LJUDSKOG STANJA U NISKOJ REZOLUCIJI

*Slučaj siromašnih slika* grupna je izložba međunarodnog karaktera, održana između 14. aprila i 19. maja 2022. godine u galeriji Artget Kulturnog centra Beograd. Umetnička direktorka galerije za tekuću godinu, i sama umetnica i teoretičarka medija, Mia Ćuk, odabrala je sedamnaest radova kojima je publici ilustrovala koncept loših ili/tj. siromašnih slika, preuzet iz seminalnog teksta nemačke rediteljke, teoretičarke i spisateljice Hito Štajerl, objavljenog 2009. godine.<sup>1</sup> Sudeći po pozivnom tekstu za učestvovanje na izložbi, jedini uslovi za prijavu učešća bili su „rezonovanje autora sa pozivnim tekstom” i gajenje razumnih očekivanja kada je realizacija/prezentacija radova unutar galerijskog prostora u pitanju.<sup>2</sup> Ovakav (za interpretaciju) otvoren poziv rezultirao je antiinstitucionalnim okupljanjem pod kapom institucije. Izgrednici iz internet podzemlja, Instagram kustosi, iPhone fotografi i videografi, CCTV voajeri, pisci bez izdavača, izdavači sa margine, propovednici kraja nove ere vizuelnog opštenja glasom generacije koja se formirala uporedo sa razvojem teorije novih medija obratili su se u slaboj rezoluciji posmatračima sa deficitom pažnje – i savršen krug post-modernog simulakruma je doveden do svoje krajnje perverzije<sup>3</sup> – zatvoren, a izložba otvorena.

„Granice mog jezika su granice mog sveta” tvrdio je Vitgenštajn u *Traktatu*,<sup>4</sup> a o nasilju unutar samog jezika posredstvom prevođenja i intimnoj odbrani od istog prilikom tumačenja izvornih tekstova, ne možemo a da se ne zamislimo već kod naslova izložbe i, posledično, naslova eseja koji ga je inspirisao. Bib-

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1 Hito Steyerl, „In Defense of the Poor Image”, *e-flux Journal* no. 10, November 2009.

2 <https://www.kcb.org.rs/2022/02/poziv-za-ucisce-na-izlozbi-u-galeriji-artget/>.

3 Rozi Brajdoti, *Posthumano*, Beograd: Fakultet za medije i komunikacije, 2016, 106.

4 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2002, 68.

lioteka *0 Općenito*, koja je u okviru izložbe dobila prostor za delovanje, objavila je prevod Štajerlinog eseja 2020, naslovivši ga „U obranu loše slike” (istakla M.G). Napomena prevodioca na samom početku teksta<sup>5</sup> saopštava čitaocima da doslovan prevod sa engleskog glasi „siromašna ili sirota slika” te nas nagoni da se zapitamo zašto ovde kvalitativni sud odnosi prevagu u pretežno moralnom pitanju. Izjednačavajući siromaštvo sa deficitom vrlina, upadamo u problem, a strah od druge najpopularnije vrste terora prikrada nam se s leđa kako rečenice odmiču pred očima. Hoćemo li se načelnim slaganjem sa standardima srpskog tj. hrvatskog jezika svrstati u red politički nekorektnih subjekata? Da li je čitanje dalje od naslova pristajanje i prećutna afirmacija koju naši sopstveni, iz kolektivne paranoje rođeni, autocenzori željno čekaju da bi nas proglasili fašistima? Kakav to svet terorizam jezika ograničava?

„(L)umpen proletarka u klasnom društvu privida, ocjenjivana i vrednovana prema rezoluciji”<sup>6</sup> loša slika je objektivno loša, ako se na umu ima diktatura standarda proizvođača *infotainment* sistema, koji bi danas, bez razmišljanja, vaš monitor ili televizor iz vremena kada je esej izvorno objavljen proglasili komadom smeća a vas siromašnim. Bivanje nedovoljnim, nedostojnim, nekvalitetnim uvek je za salonske moraliste išlo ruku pod ruku sa bivanjem kategorički lošim.<sup>7</sup> Siromašne slike, pa i poigravanje jezikom onih koji ih definišu, ironično pristaju na ovo izjednačavanje, usvajaju ga, te, ultimativno pokoravaju. Napuštena čeda napredne tehnologije, naličja kvaliteta digitalne kopije, one afirmaciju nalaze u drugom sistemu vrednosti. Like, share, subscribe. Download, edit, reshare. Nestalne, u stanju večne promene, rastu zahvaljujući ubrzanju. U sopstvenom agregatnom stanju, nalik na plazmu (plazma je energetski najviše agregatno stanje) te „sirote” slike nude nam preobilje informacija komprimovano na najmanji moguć digitalni prostor. Krađu dragocene trenutke pažnje od posmatrača koji su zauzeti zauzetošću. Savršenstvo je krajnji stepen dosade. Loše slike nam nude nešto drugo.

U radu s kojim se posetioci prvo susreću po ulasku u galerijski prostor, Šejma Fere prikazuje, u analognom formatu, strip tj. digitalni kolaž *Slučaj plagijarizma* – svedočanstvo njene minule pravne borbe sa Muzejem afričke umetnosti. Umetnica je 2016. godine bila angažovana od strane imenovane institucije da izradi crtež mape Afrike. Jasan zadatak, dogovorena nadoknada, zacrtani rokovi. Šta se od trenutka angažovanja umetnice do angažovanja dizajnera koji je „inspirisan” njenim radom i brzom isplatom otuđio, *de facto*, sud će reći, Šejminu intelektualnu svojinu, poznato je stranama uključenim u ovaj slučaj. O tome koji je status

5 Hito Steyerl, *U obranu loše slike*, Zagreb: Studio Pangolin, svibanj 2020, 9.

6 Ibid.

7 Za kompletnu definiciju pojma *loš* vidi: Milica Vujanić i dr. *Rečnik srpskoga jezika*, Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 2007, 655.



Slika 1. Fotografija: autorka teksta.

autorstva u eri Photo-shop-a, da li zvanični organi kulture u ovoj ili bilo kojoj drugoj zemlji mogu da prođu nekažnjeno za „malo popravljanja” i, očit, malo prisvajanja tuđeg dela jer nemilosrdi sat kapitalizma kuca pet do dvanaest do isteka kratkog roka, ovaj rad gromoglasno govori. Forma stripa savršeno paše sadržaju ovog rada. Neočekivana po-

bednica neverovatnog spora, umetnica je heroina svoje priče danas. Sutra će biti avangarda ili neko kome se prosto posrećilo da iz žrvnja država-muzej-pravosuđe izađe (nesamleven) kao David iz borbe sa Golijatom.

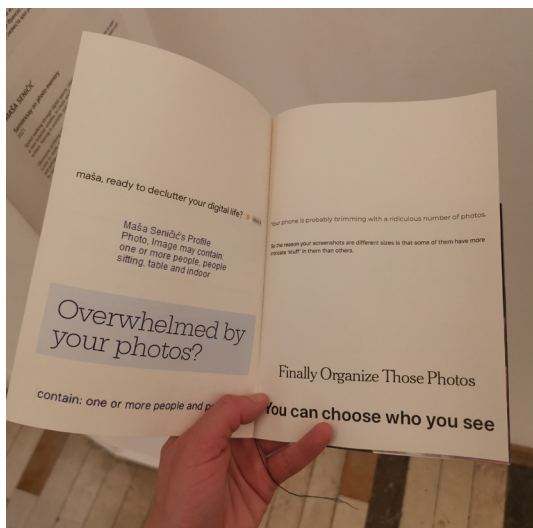
Kolekcija gifova *Bez naziva* Borislava Stanića bombarduje gledaoce vizuelnim prikazima koji evociraju uspomene na poslednju deceniju minulog veka. Ličnosti iz javnog života ređaju se jedna za drugom izobličene posredstvom reprodukcione greške – gliča, izazivajući tako čas osećanje krajnje nelagode, čas prasak u smeh. Sveukupan utisak je svojevrsna mešavina egzistencijalne jeze i ozbiljnog razmatranja realnosti realnog i pouzdanosti informacija, što je, u svetu koji je izgubio mogućnost da se vrati offline, jedno te isto. Drugu vrstu bombardovanja susrećemo u fotogramima Katrin Keler *Spomenici*. Sekvence od 24 kadra u sekundi kombinovane u jedinstvenu sliku prikazuju zamrznute, zgusnute eksplozije koje su korisnici, izvorno u formi videa, postavili na YouTube. Nanovo stiskajući eksplozijom oslobođenu energiju nasilja na hladan i solidan, statičan format, umetnica vraća poredak u svet koji gori pred našim očima. Stojeći u nultoj tački ona nam saopštava da smo nemoćni da bilo šta promenimo. Svaki trenutak u kojem postajemo svesni sopstvenog bivstvovanja je post festum bezimene tragedije.

Maša Seničić i Boris Burić se u svojim radovima bave metastazama lične vizuelne baštine. *Poluesej o foto-sećanju* prikazuje autorkinu borbu sa bujicom fotografija koja se iz hardvera njenog telefona i kompjutera, preko prostora na klaudu, konačno preliva u štampano izdanje, čime se diže spomenik narcizmu i panici naših generacija. „Obrisati, to je neizvodljivo” – apsolutna je istina; naučeni smo da sve što je ikada postojalo onlajn, u ovoj ili onoj formi, na površins-

kom nivou vanila<sup>8</sup> interneta ili u mračnom podzemlju dark veba, postoji i dalje i postojaće dok poslednji optički kabl ne bude iskopan iz zemlje. Emotivna vezanost za podsetnike komorbidna je našoj nesposobnosti da bilo šta zapamtimo, te je pohranjivanje informacija od presudnog značaja za očuvanje mentalnog zdravlja. Onoliko koliko nas akt čišćenja oslobađa od taloga neke od faza naše ličnosti, toliko nam i otkida od intimne istorije. „Sačuvati, to je norma”.

Prikazati, to je takođe norma. Kustosirani Instagram profil koji Boris Burić uređuje, te na izložbi prikazuje u formi videa *Mrtvo more* obiluje scenama beogradske svakodnevnice. Naizgled javan dnevnik umetnika, ipak je rezervisan za odabranu publiku – ukoliko ga ne vidite u Artgetu, moraćete da se ugrate u uzak krug od 3 pratioca kojima je sadržaj profila dostupan za gledanje. Pojam oversharing Urban dictionary definiše kao pružanje više informacija nego što je neophodno.<sup>9</sup> U ovom slučaju u pitanju je duhovito, naizgled uzgredno zabeleženo parče umetnikove intimne realnosti. Jasno koketirajući sa voajerizmom, on nas uvodi u splet komičnih realnosti slučajnih protagonista njegovih kratkih foto/video priča.

Sledeći korak ka voajerizmu pravi Dejan Golić serijom digitalnih fotografija *Kroz batisferu*. U pokušaju da prevaziđe otuđenje od rodnog grada, Golić se upušta u ličnu terapeutsku reportažu; izlazi na ulice, fotografiše, zatim pomno analizira promene u duhu mesta i na licima svojih sugrađana. Nedugo zatim, pukim slučajem, nalazi na TV prijemniku kanal koji prikazuje prenos sa CCTV kamere na interfonu ulaza svoje zgrade. Tu, prvi put od povratka u Beograd, oseća prisnost i povezanost sa prizorima na ekranu. Ulaz funkcioniše kao portal, granica između javnog i privatnog, poznatog i nepoznatog, našeg i tuđeg. Kroz ovu metaforičku membranu umetnik propušta delove svog izgubljenog života, poznanstva sa komšijama postaju veza sa prošlošću koja određuje sadašnjost. Nalik na ploču sa natpisom COINTIDENTIA OPPOSITORVM u filmu *Sabirni centar* (1989) Gorana Markovića, interfonska kamera predstavlja prolaz između ovog i onog sveta.



Slika 2. Fotografija: autorka teksta.

8 <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=vanilla>.

9 <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=oversharing>.

Proizvodi i nusproizvodi pop kulture, prisvojeni, prepravljani, kolažirani dati su u novim kontekstima u radovima umetničkog dvojca Doplenger, Rastka Novakovića i Amine Zubir. Jednoipominutni video *Padeži* remiks je isečaka iz serije *Bolji život* na kojima glumci izgovaraju reči novac, pare, lova. Fokus ovog rada je, kako promena na planu jezika u burnim vremenima raspada Jugoslavije, tako i ocrtavanje zenita društvenih vrednosti naroda koji je seriju masovno gledao i koji je kroz istu prikazan. *Džudi četiri puta* služi se scenama iz filma *Zvezda je rođena* (1954). Ispod prikaza raspevane dive Džudi Garland, titlovi ispisuju tekst filozofskog eseja „Radnik” Ernsta Jingera (1932), ujedinjujući dimenziju prostora proizvodnje sa prostorom konzumacije, holivudskog glamura, lake zabave. Iako se objektivno društveno-političko nasilje vrši separacijom ovih dvaju sfera života, utisak koji spojene ostavljaju je gorak lek za nenaviknutog posmatrača-konzumenta. Gorak je i ukus koji ostavlja video rad Amine Zubir. *Voli sve žene kao što voliš svoju majku* prikazuje alžirske novinarku iz šezdesetih godina prošlog veka praćene tupim zvukom udaranja čekića. Svedočanstvo sistematskog uništavanja ženskog tela, ukidanja sloboda, uopšte tretmana žena u javnom prostoru, poprima nadnacionalne dimenzije i služi kao opomena svim društvima koja su zaboravila na poštovanje prema sopstvenim majkama, a kamoli drugim ženama.

Krasimira Butseva, Đorđa Pifareti i Ana Čavić nude rešenja koja se protive ubrzavanju *ad absurdum*. Njihove radove povezuje suptilna naracija intimne video-esejistike. Pokretna slika *Moskovska no. 5+* govori o istorijskom nasilju izvršenom nad slobodnomislećom mladeži u Sofiji 1958. Zgrada Državne bezbednosti u koju su omladnici pritvoreni da bi, zatim, bili deportovani u logor Belene, objekat je umetničinog istraživanja i subjekat u ovoj priči-slici. Da li zidovi pamte ono što ljudi zaboravljaju? Reči ispisane preko prizora uništenih fotografija pomenutog zdanja pričaju nam jezivu priču u kojoj su režimske žrtve namerno izostavljene. Nema potrebe videti da bi se poverovalo. U ovom radu odsustvo uspeva da ispuni čitav galerijski prostor.

Arhitektonski objekat tema je i dvokanalne video projekcije *In Between*. Novinski kiosk na švajcarsko-italijanskoj granici uzet je kao opservatorija, arhiv. Posmatrajući promene u životu kioska zaključujemo da je on paradoksalan u svojoj fizičkoj istoričnosti a sadržajnoj aktuelnosti. Psi laju, vozovi prolaze, novosti ima svakoga dana. Ukusi ljudi koji kupuju časopise se menjaju, prodavci stare, EU donosi nova pravila za granične prelaze. Samo ovaj objekat ostaje istovremeno isti i nov svakoga dana. Đorđa Pifareti nam ovim radom pokazuje kako sami izgledamo u odrazu onoga što posmatramo.

Anu Čavić i Bojana Jankovića spaja problem, ili pre, prevazilaženje problema umetničkog i književnog izdavaštva. *Nit bez kraja III čin* dokumentuje seriju performansa u kojima umetnica iznalazi nove načine pripovedanja svog originalnog mita o postanku služeći se nizom analognih i digitalnih sredstava. Rezu-



ltat je bogata vizuelna odiseja putevima zaboravljenih umetničkih formi (poput papirnog pozorišta), dostupna u video formatu i sačuvana od zaborava.

*Grozli nokat – neštampano izdanje*, interaktivna zbirka eksperimentalne poezije Bojana Jankovića koketira sa zaostavštinom mejl-arta pozivajući publiku da prosledi sebi čitavu zbirku ili pojedinačne delove na licu mesta. Galerija postaje izdavač, autorstvo postaje ponovo upitno (Fere) ako se na umu ima jednostavna mogućnost prepravljanja imena u zaglavlju mejla i aproprijacije umetnikovog rada. Čitajući Bojanovu poeziju povedeni smo u ćoškovu interneta, nasmejani do suza i edukovani o krajnje neočekivanim temama. Viralni karakter njegovih stihova poništava potrebu za izdavačem i u ovom slučaju zaista – *it sells itself*.

*Ritam knjiga* Ane Letić bavi se performativnim karakterom akta čitanja. Pedeset književnih dela u PDF formatu „prelistana” su brzinom video zapisa od oko 25 stranica u sekundi. Krećući se od verbalne ka vizuelnoj funkciji jezika, sadržaj ustupa mesto ritmu, a smisao čitanja/gledanja biva izmešten u domen estetike, ako ne trajno izgubljen. U radu *Hiljade selfija* Miloša Bojovića susrećemo srodno preispitivanje mogućnosti medija da saopšte umetnikove namere. Upuštajući se u dijalog sa sopstvenom umetničkom praksom, Bojović nam nudi razmišljanja umesto očekivanih fotografija. Tragajući za slikom, on pronalazi suštinsko ne-mesto u kojem caruje nemogućnost mehaničkog beleženja prostora i duha mesta. Jedino što ostaje je uspomena i pokušaj da se osećaj ovekoveči u jeziku.

Instalacija u javnom prostoru *Svet posmatra* Darije Radaković deo je izložbe ali ne i radnog vremena galerije Artget. Postavljena u kancelariji Kulturnog centra Beograd i okrenuta ka Knez Mihailovoj ulici, vidljiva je isključivo noću. Njena publika nisu putnici-namernici umetničkog sveta, nego slučajni prolaznici – ljudi najčešće nesvesni da su se našli pred umetničkim delom. Umetnica se upravo njima obraća rečima: SVET (NAS) POSMATRA. Reči se ponavljaju i množe dok se ne rastoče u poznati sivi šum televizijskog ekrana koji označava gubitak signala i prekid programa. Svojevrsan PSA<sup>10</sup> deluje kao prepad i opomena uspavanoj masi – stvari u koje gledate već su videle vas.

Biblioteka *0 Općenito* i Kolhoz kolektiv dobili su u okviru izložbe posebno mesto za prezentaciju i istraživanja u domenu samizdata i mikro izdavaštva.

Već je rečeno da je savršenstvo dosadno. *Slučaj siromašnih slika* je sve osim toga. Dubok uvid u ljudsko stanje u eri kolektivnog straha od napretka tehnologije, globalne špijunaže, gubitka ličnog identiteta, sunovrata svih vrednosti, pružen nam je kondenzovan u formi za koju rezolucija nije parametar kvaliteta. Ova izložba ne prodaje ništa. Potpuno je irelevantno za sadržaj bremenit smis-

10 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public\\_service\\_announcement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_service_announcement).

lom da li je crna stvarno crna<sup>11</sup> i da li se pikseli otežu na ekranu nakon smene sekvenci u frekvenciji od 120Hz. Skrenuta nam je pažnja na probleme pamćenja i zaborava, sve tanje granice između privatnog i javnog, limitirane mogućnosti tehnologije, u koju se svakoga dana sve više integrišemo, da zabeleži i prenese ono ljudsko u nama. Ukazano je na talente koji ostaju marginalizovani u poplavi đubreta koje volšebno nalazi svoj put do centra glavne matrice, na društvene grupe kojima je oduzet glas, na odnose koji nestaju u lutanjima između servera. Viđeni su talenti koji nikoga ne zanimaju, obesmišljeni kontemplativni činovi koji postaju poza, anahronizam ili ništa, isečci iz života nenamernih glumaca u teatru apsurdna socijanih mreža. Društvu je ovde data prilika da sebe posmatra u kristalno čistom odrazu sopstvene realnosti. Ne postoji rezolucija kojom se to može izmeriti.

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11 <https://www.techopedia.com/definition/15864/black-level>.

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**Pascal Gielen** (1970) is full professor of sociology of culture and politics at the Antwerp Research Institute for the Arts (Antwerp University – Belgium) where he leads the Culture Commons Quest Office (CCQO). Gielen is editor of the international book series *Antennae – Arts in Society* (Valiz). In 2016 he became laureate of the Odysseus grant for excellent international scientific research of the Fund for Scientific Research Flanders in Belgium.

Gielen has published many books which are translated in Chinese, English, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Turkish and Ukrainian. His research focuses on creative labour, the common, cultural and aesthetic politics.

[www.ccqo.eu](http://www.ccqo.eu);

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**Elina Haessler** is a recent MA graduate of University Limerick, Ireland and BAMUS graduate of University College Cork, Ireland. Having been a fan of K-Pop since 2013, it was a popular music seminar at the University of Göttingen, Germany, which drew her interest to this academic field, later leading to an undergraduate dissertation which critically engaged with K-Pop's production industry of so-called 'idols'. During her MA in Ethnomusicology, she engaged with this music in various areas including ritual studies, fandom and subcultural studies and semiotics, leading to a dissertation exploring the multidimensional 'concept' of K-Pop.

As Elina prepares to enter a near-future PhD programme, her focus continues to lie in that of popular music with particular interest in exploring topics of female idolism in the 'K-industry', as well as investigating the boundaries and particularities of K-Rock in relation to its highly successful K-Pop competitor.

**Taran Harris** is a PhD candidate at the University of Liverpool studying the impact of manipulation effects on the reception of the human voice. His research questions the conflation of normalisation and enculturation and seeks to distinguish manipulation effects as separate from the umbrella term of staging effects due to their ability to change core content of audio rather than simply present it in a different space or context. The ultimate impact of Taran's thesis is to assess the cumulative effect of technology, presentation and reception on vocal pedagogy for the learner and how the industry can support transparency of process. He is also a classical tenor, composer and music technologist.

**Yvonne Ile** is a Programme Leader at The Institute of Contemporary Music Performance and a doctoral student at the University of Oxford, researching the impact of and connection between Blackface Minstrelsy and cultural appropriation on the Popular Music Industry. She received a first-class honours

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**Ana Knežević** (1993), art historian, PhD candidate of Museology and Heritage Studies at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade, curator in The Museum of African Art in Belgrade.

She was a part of the organizational team of the regional student conference *Literature and Art in Yugoslavia: (dis)continuity (1918–1992)* during 2016 and of the *NAM Talks* (2021) conference, and a member of the editorial board of the magazine for art history *Artum* (2015–2016). She participated in several conferences and seminars dedicated to art history, education, heritology and museology. As a curator of the Museum of African Art in Belgrade she was part of the curatorial team of exhibitions “Unprotected Witness no.1: Afodisiac” (2019), “Reflect – Namibia after 30 years of independence” (2020), and “Unprotected Witness no. 2: MMM” (2020), “Non-Aligned World” (2021), “This is not a War – The Liberation of Mind and Land, in Ink and In Action” (2021), and “Reflect #2 – fragments, fragilities, memories” (2022). Her published papers are dedicated to museums in the age of cyberculture, art history methodology in cyberspace, as well as to architecture, pop culture, and contemporary art and visual culture (papers and articles available on academia.edu profile). She is the author of heritage online map <https://nesvrstani.rs/> and critical online museum <https://um.edu.rs/html/> Currently, she is PhD candidate of Museology and Heritology with PhD thesis dedicated to the analysis of Internet Memes within culture of remembrance and heritage studies.

**Gustavo Souza Marques**, also known by his stage names Gusmão and Gusashi, is a hip-hop scholar and music producer from Brazil who has been developing an international career intersecting the experiences and studies of African diaspora. From his MA on *Duelo de MCs – Brazil's biggest hip-hop street battle* which is held in his hometown of Belo Horizonte – developing an ethnographical and musicological research on Brazilian street culture, freestyling and rap music to carrying out a PhD dissertation on the musical work of Tyler, The Creator; an avant-garde African American rapper, music producer and entrepreneur, Marques has shown an exhilarating intellectual engagement with the racial and societal challenges we are facing globally today. Now, Marques is looking

forward to publish his dissertation as a monograph and developing a postdoc on Afro-Asian studies; expanding his work and interests in Africana studies toward Asia.

**Thomas R. Moore** (1980) studied music performance at Indiana University (1998-2002) and the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp (2004-2007). He is currently a member of Nadar Ensemble and works as a researcher and brass department chair at both the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp and the University of Antwerp.

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**Ferran Planas Pla** studied classical saxophone at the Conservatori Superior de Música del Liceu (Barcelona) with Professor Albert Julià and Historical Musicology and Ethnomusicology at the Escola Superior de Música de Catalunya (Barcelona). He recently completed his master's degree in Musicology and Music Education at the Hanover University of Music, Drama and Media in the specialties of Historical Musicology, Music and Gender and Sociology. His master's thesis, with an excellent qualification, is entitled "Androgyny in Olga Neuwirth's Orlando between corporeality and cybernetics" in which he explores the aesthetics of the Austrian composer from a posthumanist perspective. He has been awarded various scholarships such as the Segimon Serrallonga Scholarship and the Deutschlandstipendium of the German Ministry of Education and Research. His fields of research are contemporary music and music theatre, music aesthetics, music sociology, gender studies and performance studies.

# GUIDELINES FOR AUTHORS



## Guidelines for authors

Authors must submit original, unpublished articles.

All the manuscripts should be accompanied by author's name, affiliation, e-mail address, and a short biography (up to 150 words per author). Articles can be submitted in English (preferably) and Bosnian.

Manuscripts should be written in .doc or .docx format, in Times New Roman font, font size 12 with 1.5 line-spacing.

Original scholarly paper intended for sections The Main Theme and Beyond the Main Theme should include a short abstract (100-200 words), 5-10 keywords, as well as the summary (500 words). For articles in Bosnian, summary must be written in English. Do not include citations in the abstract. Keywords must be chosen appropriately in order to be relevant to the subject and content of the paper.

Regarding the citations, authors should use the author-date system with the separate bibliography, following the guidelines given in Chicago Manual of Style (The Chicago Manual of Style, 17<sup>th</sup> ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017; [http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools\\_citationguide.html](http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html)). Please note that the list of references (bibliography) given at the end of the article must only include works that are cited in text.

Book, conference, and festival reviews should bring to attention relevant and valuable contributions or events that are in interest scope of our Journal. Reviews must contain a dose of critical appraisal instead of being written merely as summary. The title of the book review should include necessary information regarding the volume, as in following example:

- William Myers, *Bio Art – Altered Realities*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2015, 256 pp., ISBN 9780500239322
- *Margins, Futures and Tasks of Aesthetics*, Conference of the IAA, Helsinki, Finland, July 5–7, 2018.
- Sonemus Fest, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, April 16–21, 2018.



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Em dash is used in years, page numbers or as a continuation of sentence: 112–35. 2000–2006. En dash is used in compound nouns: *mail-art*.

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