Personas, Popular Music, and Stardom in Transmedia

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Special Issue – Editors: Steffen Just & Pascal Rudolph

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STREAMED, SHARED, LIKED: POP MUSICIANS, PERSONAS, AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN TRANSMEDIA

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MUSICAL PERSONAS IN TRANSMEDIA WORLDS

The performance, marketing, and staging of pop musicians are intricately intertwined with the creation of images and personas across a wide variety of media platforms. Whether on TikTok, Instagram, in film, on television, on music streaming and (live) video platforms, (micro)blogs, or in magazines, 21st century popular music makes use of a densely saturated landscape of media genres and formats that facilitate this phenomenon. The interconnectivity of today's media through the internet and digital devices arguably binds these diverse media formats closer together than ever before. Consequently, pop musicians frequently appear or are heard across multiple genres or formats. Undoubtedly, cross-media marketing and staging of musicians have been integral to the modern star system since the first half of the twentieth century (Dyer 1979), but the connectivity inherent in today's digital media has imparted a new dimension to these processes. Contemporary media and music scholars discuss this development under the term "transmedia" (Jenkins 2006; Ryan & Thon 2014; Ryan 2015; Thon 2016; Boni 2017; Schiller 2018; Summers 2018; Burns 2019; Freeman & Rampazzo Gambarato 2019; Hansen 2019; Mendes & Perrott 2019; Chaplin 2020; Tosca & Klastrup 2020; Vernallis, Rogers & Perrott 2020; Watson 2022; Dalby & Freeman 2024).

The use of the prefix "trans" is intended to underscore the interconnectedness and fluidity of contemporary media. In detail, however, its meanings fluctuate in various directions. A closer examination of the field of transmedia studies reveals that the concept of "transmediality" is approached through various disciplinary lenses, leading to a situation where "the very definition of transmediality might remain decidedly in flux, meaning different things to different people at different times" (Freeman & Rampazzo Gambarato 2019, p. 2). In the realm of music research, transmedia is similarly broadly defined, but as Paola Brembilla argues, a "key requirement for music to be transmedia is that a music project must become a spreadable concept" (Brembilla 2019, p. 83), allowing the music project (such as an album, a song, a music video, or a persona) to operate across multiple media formats and platforms. In this Special Issue, we adopt this broad and inclusive conceptualization of transmedia as a general phenomenon involving the crossing of boundaries between conventionally distinct media. Transmedial phenomena emerge when multiple media contents converge within a common frame of reference. In popular culture, songs or personas frequently establish such a frame. As the individual contributions to this Special Issue demonstrate, transmediality may be better understood as a method rather than a theory, specifically as a perspective that looks at the

connections between different media artifacts while acknowledging their unique media characteristics.

Throughout the 20th century, musicians crafted their images and personas across various audiovisual media. They might have featured in films, on radio broadcasts, on records, on television, whilst also gracing the pages of magazines and other print media. However, the development of their images and personas did not necessarily involve cohesive methods of storytelling, marketing, or world-building. Transitions between these different media platforms were often abrupt, and marked by distinct boundaries. Transmedia theory asserts that these boundaries between different media have become increasingly permeable, affecting both the production and reception sides of media cultures. Platforms like YouTube, Spotify, Instagram, and TikTok are typically just a click or tap away from each other since they can be accessed on the same digital devices such as smartphones, smart TVs, tablets, and laptops. For media producers or content creators, moving between different media platforms, products, and applications has become a fundamental and sometimes obligatory practice to succeed in the internet's attention economy. Media users, in turn, derive pleasure from navigating through diverse and seemingly endless streams of digital content, often closely interconnected with one another via hyperlinks, hashtags, or feeds. It is important to note that transmedia effects are not limited to digital platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok; rather, "new" digital media also influence "old" media and vice versa (Evans 2015). Given that all types of audiovisual media in the 21st century, including traditional television and magazines, are interconnected, transmediality emerges as a significant analytical concept and a valuable heuristic.

In transmedia contexts, it is often challenging to pinpoint where meanings, contents, and forms of specific pop cultural products first originated, or as Henry Jenkins puts it: transmedia has no "single source" (Jenkins 2007). Because transmediality flourishes in a (hyper)connected world or "networked society", the emergence of meanings, contents, and forms, including personas and star images, cannot be attributed to one specific origin. From a historical perspective, the evolution of such transmedia staging might be described as a mix of technological and cultural transformations. Since the 1980s, transmedia phenomena have shaped the media-saturated postmodern pop culture. A notable example is Madonna, who reproduced her music videos during her live tours, merging the TV screen with the concert stage (Auslander 2008, p. 34). With this in mind, transmedia staging and performance should not be solely viewed as an expression of the "digital age", although on a technological level, digital media have certainly facilitated the spotlighting of transmedia effects. It could even be argued that transmedia effects are inherently "built" into the architectures and interfaces of digital media. Audiovisual web platforms and the devices used by audiences and creators to navigate them enable and amplify modes of media perception that are constantly evolving: they have no clear beginning or end. Practices of browsing through social media and the internet generally lack a uniform route. Instead, these practices are shaped through various hyperlinks, hashtags, memes, clips, texts, images, and sounds, presenting a world abundant with references. Each encountered reference has the potential to pave a new path. This mix of cultural and technological ingredients has inspired scholars in recent decades to increasingly draw on concepts related to transmedia.

This Special Issue aims to scrutinize these assumptions by examining various transmedia contexts to elucidate how the transmedia staging of personas and star images operates and how it impacts media audiences. The articles delve into specific cases of contemporary pop culture and artists, exploring the phenomena that unfold when musicians appear in Hollywood movies, take on avatars in video games, or act and perform in clips on YouTube or TikTok. How can the relationships and dynamics between different audiovisual

media products be comprehended? How do transmedia performances in a TV show, a movie, on YouTube, or in a TikTok clip differ from one another? The authors demonstrate how the two pivotal concepts of persona and image can serve as innovative lenses through which to understand the central dynamics and processes of transmedia. By contextualizing their findings within broader cultural and social issues, the authors also reflect on how the exploration of pop personas and star images in transmedia realms offers valuable insights into the construction and negotiation of cultural identities, as well as the role of affect, meaning, power, and desire in contemporary society.

IN THIS ISSUE

The Special Issue commences with Kai Arne Hansen's contribution, which combines transmedia narratology and musicology. Through an examination of Justin Bieber, Hansen explores pop personas as continually reconstructed and renegotiated entities. According to Hansen, this process is transmedial, involving materials such as music videos, interviews, promotions, and social media posts. To illuminate these transformations, he introduces the concept of a "personal storyworld", characterizing it as "expansive networks of interrelated narrative and aesthetic elements that are generated through and across multiple points of contact between artists and audiences" (in this issue, p. 8). As a transmedial phenomenon, these storyworlds emerge when numerous texts from different media converge within a unified frame of reference. Using this concept, Hansen analyses how Justin Bieber's past was leveraged during the release of his album *Justice* (2021) to reshape the present, thereby demonstrating how pop personas are shaped through various cultural artifacts, discourses, and narratives.

While Hansen explores the comprehensive array of artifacts contributing to a pop persona, Pascal Rudolph sheds light on the interplay between music, cinema, and artists' on-screen personas. Due to their off-screen musical persona, pop musicians in narrative cinema frequently evoke a pronounced transmedial network. Rudolph analyses the distinctions between film acting and musical performance while exploring the defining characteristics of pop musicians' performances within the narrative cinema context. Drawing upon ideas from performance studies, media studies, literary studies, and film studies, Rudolph introduces the novel concepts of "metaperformance" and "intramedial transmediality". "Metaperformance" refers to the doubling of the act of performance, whereas "intramedial transmediality" is characterized by the coexistence of diverse media texts within a single media text. In comparison to film actors, music stars in films often engage in metaperformances, embodying not only fictional characters but also performing their "real" musical persona within them. Through the examination of pop performances in three films – The Beatles in Richard Lester's *Help!* (1965), the Spice Girls in Bob Spiers's *Spice World* (1997), and Ed Sheeran in Danny Boyle's *Yesterday* (2019) – Rudolph's article not only provides an analytical toolkit but also presents distinct case studies showcasing the potential of his analytical concepts.

Transitioning from film to video game culture, Andra Ivănescu explores the virtual pop group K/DA in the next contribution. Comprising four characters from the world's largest esports game, *League of Legends*, this girl group is a creation of game developer Riot Games, which has established a complex transmedia ecosystem around this multiplayer online game. This ecosystem includes a TV series, webcomics, additional games, and music. Notably, K/DA's virtual band members performed at the *League of Legends* World Championship Finals in 2018. Ivănescu illustrates how K/DA draws significant inspiration from K-pop girl bands such as Blackpink. Her analysis of the opening ceremony unveils a complex interplay of performers, personas, and characters, where fictional figures perform alongside real performers. By critically examining the relationship between virtual stars and the real performers behind their personas, Ivănescu raises concerns about the commercial and political interests of transnational corporations such as Riot Games and Tencent, which wield control over these virtual stars and influencers.

Rudolph and Ivănescu concentrate on pop stars within specific media contexts, such as narrative cinema and video games. In contrast, Christoph Jacke adopts a broader perspective. According to Jacke, stars "cannot be viewed in isolation but are always the focus of different highly complex transmedia systems of reference" (in this issue, p. 64). In his article, he delves into transmedia stardom in pop music culture by developing a typology of different types of popular music and media culture personalities: "stars" who achieve economic success, "anti-stars" who lack economic success and challenge existing values, and "anti-star stars" who achieve economic success despite violating societal norms. His article illustrates how celebrities can be understood as "seismographs" of socio-cultural change.

Barbara Hornberger shifts the focus to the transformative impacts of "new" digital media on "old" established genres and formats. In her article on the German 2021 ESC participant Jendrik Sigwart, she discusses how contemporary television shows attempt to integrate or adapt to aesthetics and formats that have flourished on the internet, particularly on social media and video platforms. However, as Hornberger elucidates, in Sigwart's case, the transition from TikTok to television encountered difficulties. His TikTok video clip aesthetics – and thus his TikTok persona – did not seamlessly translate to the ESC stage. She argues that the connectivity of today's media does not guarantee smooth transitions between different media platforms and/or formats. Transmedia transitions can also serve as "potential breaking points" (in this issue, p. 82). Thus, transmedia effects do not occur spontaneously. To be successful, they must be subject to meticulously crafted strategies.

These strategies are investigated in the article by Christofer Jost. In his case study on YouTube drummers, Jost explores the phenomenon of drum performances to playback versions of well-known songs. Through their play-along practices – which are not traditional song covers but rather re-enactments or imitations of historical drumming styles – YouTube drummers have established a popular format that typifies the internet's proliferation of user-generated audiovisual content. By closely examining the case of German YouTube drummer Sina Doehring, who curates the channel "sina drums", Jost illustrates how persona construction within the YouTube microcosm of drumming channels is shaped by distinct media strategies in terms of "expertise and self-presentation", "repertoire", and "audiovisual production". These strategies establish specific rules for authenticating oneself as a YouTube drummer. Jost contends that, unlike YouTube influencers or other non-music-related YouTube personalities, YouTube drummers serve as musical intermediaries and experts who specialize in curating and presenting materials from the history of popular music to a broader audience. By performing and re-enacting the songs and styles of renowned drummers, they publicly embody and mediate specific forms of knowledge about popular music.

The final article of this Special Issue explores how transmediality can have specific effects on entire genres and the types of stars represented within these genres. Investigating pop-punk, Nicolas Ruth and Christoph Jacke trace the evolution of this genre from the 1990s to the 2020s to demonstrate how the industry and marketing of pop-punk have increasingly shifted media attention from bands to solo artists. While bands such as Green Day or Blink-182 dominated the genre in the 1990s, social media platforms such as Instagram or TikTok have now propelled solo artists like Machine Gun Kelly and Youngblud into the spotlight. Ruth and Jacke observe that solo artists significantly benefit from the rise of newer internet platforms and cultures, as social media logics streamline the focus on individuals. The attention economies of Instagram and TikTok enable individual stars to establish direct connections with their audiences, which explains the recent upsurge of solo acts in pop-punk. In contrast to bands, solo artists have the advantage of capitalizing on the desire of social media users to constantly and directly engage with their idols.

With its seven contributions, this Special Issue aims to address a gap in existing scholarship. It builds upon previous studies that have analysed the construction of personas and images in popular music (Meyers 2009; Fairchild & Marshall 2019; Auslander 2021) and

extends these analyses through a transmedia perspective. To date, there has been limited effort in popular music and (trans)media studies to integrate transmediality with persona/image construction in (popular) music. By bringing together multiple perspectives from various authors, we hope this Special Issue serves as an insightful resource for those interested in gaining an overview of specific research paradigms, identifying differences, and drawing connections between different cases and approaches. Through combining persona studies, popular music studies, and transmedia studies, we also aim to contribute to the establishment of new epistemic focal points for future research in related directions.

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PERSONAL STORYWORLDS: RETROSPECTION, REINVENTION, AND TRANSMEDIALITY IN POP MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

By combining perspectives from transmedial narratology and musicology, this article explores how the notion of a "personal storyworld" can offer new opportunities for understanding the transmedial processes whereby pop artists' personas are continually (re-)constructed and (re-)negotiated through and across myriad points of contact between artists and audiences. Emphasis is placed on the performative potential of audiovisual aesthetics and public posturing, on the one hand, and on audiences' interpretive flexibility, on the other. These related themes are addressed through a case study of an artist who aptly exemplifies the continual transfiguration of pop personas, namely Justin Bieber. The main part of the case study concerns how Bieber's sixth studio album, Justice *(2021), and associated material (music videos, live performances, interviews, promotional material, social media posts) related to and formed part of his broader personal storyworld. This sets up an exploration of how the dynamics between retrospection and reinvention shape the reframing of personas, which raises a series of questions concerning the dialectic between continuity and change, artist-audience dynamics, and transmedial processes of interpretation.*

KEY WORDS

Popular Music; Persona; Personal Storyworlds; Transmediality; Narrativity; Justin Bieber

INTRODUCTION

The artist persona represents a principal focal point of popular music culture. As a growing body of scholarship has demonstrated (see Auslander 2021; Gracyk 2017; Hansen 2019; Hawkins 2020), our perceptions of artists inform our aesthetic experiences, interpretations of songs' meanings, and ethical evaluations of musical performances. Personas are flexible and dynamic, even if they are often seen to provide a relatively stable representation of an artist's subjectivity over time and in different contexts. This duality points to the intricate ways in which our perceptions of pop personas are shaped by musical aesthetics and visual style, lyrical sentiments, the characters artists portray in songs and music videos, how artists present themselves in interviews and live performances, album artwork and promotional images, glimpses of artists' private lives on social media, and many other elements. Overall, the myriad points of contact between artists and audiences give rise to complex personal storyworlds that unfold across disparate media channels and contexts.

In this article, I discuss how the notion of a "personal storyworld" can offer new opportunities for understanding the transmedial processes whereby pop artists' personas are (re-)constructed and (re-)negotiated in different ways and over time. By building on scholarship in transmedial narratology (Herman 2009; Ryan 2015; Ryan and Thon 2014; Thon 2016) and musicology (Burns 2019; Hawkins 2020), I advocate a conception of artists' personal

storyworlds as expansive networks of interrelated narratives, symbols, and signs, generated through and across multiple points of contact between artists and audiences. Extending Keith Negus' compelling argument that "the application of narrative theory to popular music must inevitably and fruitfully move beyond the world of the text and allied media to a much wider universe" (2012, p. 369), I grapple with how pop personas gain their significance in relation to a broad range of intersecting aesthetic, gestural, and discursive dimensions. Placing emphasis on the performative potential of audiovisual aesthetics and public posturing, on the one hand, and on interpretive expansiveness, on the other, provides fruitful focal points for navigating the wealth of material that comprises pop personas.

While it can be argued that all of us present personas to the world around us, the degree to which the personal and professional lives of famous musicians (and other celebrities) are documented and scrutinised intensifies the multifaceted performative and interpretive processes by which artists' personas are constructed and circulated across different media channels and contexts. For the purposes of this article, I define the pop persona as a complex of ideas about "who an artist is" (see Hansen 2019). These ideas are co-created on the performance and reception ends of popular music, in the interplay between the wealth of material that artists present to the public and audiences' flexible interpretations of this material. I approach and understand this interplay in light of Paul Ricoeur's suggestion that there is significant "complementarity between fictional and empirical narratives" (1983, p. 4), a point that underscores my discussions throughout.

Musicians with successful careers and certain "star qualities" that garner global attention arguably provide the richest case studies of how pop personas arise, evolve, and are negotiated. Music scholar and cultural theorist Richard Elliott has addressed this issue:

> Popular musicians with long careers provide rich source material for the study of persona, authenticity, endurance and the maintenance (and reinvention) of significant bodies of work. Successful artists' songs create a soundtrack not only to their own lives, but also to those of their audiences, and to the times in which they were created and to which they bore witness. (2019, p. 19)

Elliott's argument concerns ageing artists who continue to perform after several decades, and he views the retrospection that is allowed for by these artists' long careers as integral to how artists and audiences construct, de-construct, and re-construct the persona (ibid.). While taking inspiration from Elliott's interest in the multiplicity afforded by veteran performers' diverse catalogues and eventful biographies, I would suggest that the prosperous careers of younger artists too can allow for elements of retrospection, experience, and re-construction to inform the performance and reception of musical personas in intriguing ways.

Many of the twenty-first century's most prominent pop stars had their international breakthroughs in their teens. Examples include Adele, Justin Bieber, Miley Cyrus, Billie Eilish, Rihanna, Harry Styles, Taylor Swift, Zayn, and many others. These artists' careers and lives have been widely documented, given the proliferation of social media and expansion of online fan discourse in the late 2000s and 2010s. Tyler Bickford (2020, pp. 18–20, p. 28) has addressed this issue in his work on tween pop, noting that changes in the dynamics of the music industry and emerging forms of public intimacy in the twenty-first century introduced a shift in how young artists were positioned in mainstream pop culture. As Bickford (ibid., p. 141, pp. 159–166) suggests, new mutual influences between social media and public culture both impacted how artists engaged their audiences and greatly increased audiences' access to their favourite artists, creative output and (ostensibly) private lives.[1] The point I am arriving at is this: the career trajectories of contemporary pop stars differ in certain ways from those of previous

generations of artists, in the sense that their participation in an intensified online public culture from the outset of their careers has proliferated and diversified audiences' points of access to their personas. Far from affirming the democratisation of culture in the digital era,[2] I raise this point in order to call attention to the multiplicity that characterises the creative oeuvres and personas of many present-day pop stars – even if the longevity of their careers does not rival that of older artists. One notable dimension of this multiplicity relates to the aesthetic plurality that flourishes in pop music (see Hansen 2022, p. 9, p. 127), which feeds into the continual transfiguration of artists' personas and prompts consideration of the dialectic between theatricality and authenticity that tends to characterise pop performances.[3]

My discussions in this article revolve around a case study of an artist who aptly exemplifies this, namely Justin Bieber. The focus falls partly on how Bieber's sixth studio album, *Justice* (2021), and associated material (music videos, live performances, interviews, promotional material, social media posts) related to and formed part of what I conceive of as his broader personal storyworld. This sets up an exploration of how the dynamics between retrospection and reinvention shape the reframing of personas, which raises a series of questions concerning the dialectic between continuity and change, artist-audience dynamics, and transmedial processes of interpretation. To prepare the ground for addressing the significance of these themes for Bieber's persona, I begin by unpacking some theoretical and methodological considerations for investigating how pop artists' personal storyworlds are shaped by, for example, musical and visual aesthetics, biographical details, and public discourse.

Personal Storyworlds as Transmedial Phenomena

The term "storyworld" has been popularised in narratology and media studies over the past few decades, where it has generally been used to refer to how various narrative elements evoke broader fictional worlds. David Herman elaborates:

> Storyworlds are global mental representations enabling interpreters to frame inferences about the situations, characters, and occurences either explicitly mentioned in or implied by a narrative text or discourse. As such, storyworlds are mental models of the situations and events being recounted – of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why and in what manner. Reciprocally, narrative artifacts (texts, films, etc.) provide blueprints for the creation and modification of such mentally configured storyworlds. (2009, pp. 106–107)

Pointing out that different types of cultural texts offer distinct contributions to narrative forms of worldmaking, Herman (ibid., pp. 107–108) identifies multiplicity as a key element of the narrative processes that shape storyworlds. Books, photographs, movies, music, and other cultural texts tell stories in disparate ways and add unique dimensions to our experiences and understandings of complex storyworlds.

Emphasising the flexible relationships between multiple texts, Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan Noël Thon have directed attention to "the expansion of transmedial storyworlds across multiple media" (Ryan and Thon 2014, p. 1). From a transmedial perspective, we can understand storyworlds as emerging when numerous texts from different media (and these texts' myriad narrative and symbolic gestures) are grouped together within a single frame of reference. This places world-building at least partly in the hands of the interpreter (reader, listener, viewer). As Ryan and Thon suggest, while authors, musicians, filmmakers, and other creative agents contribute to the creation of "the storyworld through the production of signs, it is the reader, spectator, listener, or player who uses the blueprint of a finished text to construct a mental image of this world" (ibid., p. 2; see also Herman 2009, pp. 106–107). This points to the

flexibility with which audiences infer the potential meanings afforded by individual cultural texts and navigate systems of interrelated texts. Given that storyworlds can be navigated in myriad ways, they should not be understood as simply representing the dispersion of a single, coherent, and linear story across multiple media. Rather, as Ryan has argued, transmedial storyworlds encompass "a variety of autonomous stories, or episodes, contained in various documents. What holds these stories together is that they take place in the same storyworld" (2015, p. 4). The unfolding of stories across media can involve both continuity and multiplicity/discontinuity (see Jenkins 2011), which entails that the meanings afforded by individual texts can either disrupt or support an interpreter's understanding of the broader storyworld. As such, storyworlds can comprise a conglomerate of non-chronological, non-linear, and open-ended narratives, as well as a range of mutually supportive and/or contradictory symbols and signs.

Against this conceptual and theoretical background, I want to propose that we can approach the multiple cultural narratives and social significances associated with pop personas through the notion of the "personal storyworld". I have briefly touched on this idea in my previous work (Hansen 2019), which forms the basis for my attempt to develop it more fully here. My starting point is that pop personas are multiply constructed through songs, music videos, live performances, artwork, promotional material, interview statements, and other public material, shaped by the complex interrelations between these different cultural artifacts and the innumerable discourses and narratives they activate for audiences. Given this complexity, pop personas are unfixed and changeable. Unlike some prominent scholars working in the field of popular music and personas (e.g., Auslander 2021, pp. 10–14; Moore 2012, pp. 179–184), I am less concerned with how the persona is articulated through various performance settings and more concerned with how the full breadth of artists' public activities feed into ideas about "who they are" as people. As such, I endorse Stan Hawkins' argument that "[e]ngaging with personas involves accessing specific social spaces and places; personas revolve around social politics, directly from the inter(con)textual circumstances of a specific genre and period" (2020, p. 250). From this perspective, understanding pop personas involves investigating the intricate interrelationships between musical and visual aesthetics, personal narrativity,[4] and social politics.

A transmedial approach aptly accommodates such a task. As Lori Burns has suggested, music scholars are now increasingly "recognizing tremendous potential for transmedia approaches to popular music" (2019, p. 332) – something that is further demonstrated by the current special issue. Focusing on the diverse materials (musical and otherwise) produced in the popular music sphere, Burns asserts that "[t]hese materials have the potential to build powerful stories about human experience that play out in our textual, sonic and visual imaginations" (ibid., p. 333). Such powerful stories, I would suggest, often revolve around and/or influence perceptions of the artist persona – granted that the star appeal of artists is among popular music's core commodities (see Baym 2018, p. 25; Meier 2017, pp. 32–34, pp. 74–84). From this perspective, the transmedial processes of popular music performance and reception tend to centre artists and their representations of identity. The multilayered nature of these processes challenge music scholars to "develop new analytic modalities in order to understand and interpret the compelling stories of human experience and subjectivity that emerge" (Burns 2019, p. 348), which is part of the impetus for the current article.

Through my conceptualisation of the "personal storyworld", I home in on audiences' investment in the personal identities and life experiences of artists and explore the ways in which these are gleaned from disparate texts and contexts. As such, the concept of a personal storyworld refers to how multiple points of contact between artists and audiences provide

opportunities for constructing and re-constructing the persona. The notion of the personal storyworld is especially useful for contemplating the unfixed, changeable nature of personas, because it directs attention to the multiplicity of symbols and signs that influence our perceptions of pop artists. Ryan's suggestion that "[p]eople are willing to look for information in many documents and across multiple platforms because they are so in love with the storyworld that they cannot get enough information about it" (2015, p. 4) holds relevance also for audiences' interest in the personal lives and identities of stars (however we define the criteria for stardom). But songs, music videos, interviews, and other individual elements all give incomplete information about "who an artist is". As with encounters of fictional storyworlds, then, audiences need to "use their (actual as well as fictional) world knowledge to 'fill in the gaps,' to infer aspects of the storyworld that are only implicitly represented" (Thon 2016, p. 46). When immersing themselves in artists' personal storyworlds, audiences "fill in the gaps" by relying on their knowledge of various musical genres, artist biographies, cultural contexts, social discourses, and so on – thereby co-constructing the persona through their inferences.

This brief discussion brings me to the following point, which is simple yet necessary to make: studying artists' personal storyworlds simultaneously involves both "working out the *strategies* invested by performers as they present themselves to the world" (Hawkins 2020, p. 240, original emphasis) and being attentive to the flexibility with which audiences navigate the wealth of material that is available to them and ascribe meaning to their experiences. This premise guides the following exploration of Justin Bieber's personal storyworld. A primary strand of inquiry concerns how the dynamics between retrospection and reinvention shape both the performance and reception of his persona. While the abbreviated analysis presented here cannot adequately account for the myriad elements that factor into how pop personas are constructed and understood, I nonetheless hope to demonstrate how the concept of the "personal storyworld" offers new opportunities for contemplating these processes.

Repurposing the Past: Retrospection and Maturation

Now at the onset of his thirties, Justin Bieber (born 1994) has been an international pop star for half of his life. Every single one of his six studio albums to date have debuted atop the *Billboard* 200 chart and he is the youngest artist in history to have had more than 100 songs on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart. Rising to fame when he was only fifteen years old with the release of the hit single *Baby* (2010), Bieber's early career became tinged by long-standing prejudices that connect young male singers, pop music, and inauthenticity. The pathologizing rhetoric of "Bieber fever" denigrated and infantilised both Bieber himself and his predominantly female fans, contributing to a career trajectory that saw Bieber oppose notions of childishness through scandalous behaviour and the introduction of more adult-oriented themes in his lyrics and videos (Hansen 2022, pp. 102–106). Following a period characterised by various controversies and several run-ins with the law, Bieber cancelled the final dates of his Purpose World Tour in July 2017 and alluded to personal struggles and mental health issues as the main causes for this decision (Beaumont-Thomas 2017). The incident precipitated a two-and-a-half-year period in which Bieber largely stayed out of the public eye. When he returned with a new album in 2020, aptly titled *Changes*, this signalled the rehabilitation of his persona and an emphasis on themes of personal growth, religious faith, and his relationship with his wife (Hansen 2022, pp. 107–109, pp. 126–127). As Bieber's personal storyworld expanded with the release of his sixth studio album, *Justice* (2021), these three themes were extended in ways that continued to highlight Bieber's maturation both as an artist and as a man – even as past events in his career and personal life still loomed large.

The notion of maturation that was foregrounded in Bieber's self-presentation in the early 2020s gained its significance in relation to his professional and personal history, to the extent that these had been made available to the public. Many fans would surely be familiar with Bieber's early career as a teen star and the controversies that characterised the following period of his life, both of which provided frames of reference for understanding how he rehabilitated his persona after returning to the spotlight in 2020. Further supporting Bieber's rehabilitated image, *Justice* ostensibly signalled a shift in his approach to musicmaking. Promoting the album on the social media platform Instagram, Bieber asserted:

> In a time when there's so much wrong with this broken planet we all crave healing and justice for humanity. In creating this album my goal is to make music that will provide comfort, to make songs that people can relate to and connect to so they feel less alone. […] I know that I cannot simply solve injustice by making music but I do know that if we all do our part by using our gifts to serve this planet and each other that we are that much closer to being united. This is me doing a small part. My part.[5]

Through the title of the album and the way it was promoted via social media, Bieber claimed social responsibility and put himself in a position to help resolve cultural tensions. Even as he acknowledged the limited capacity of music to "solve injustice", he asserted the social significance of his artistry and challenged the common accusation that his music (and pop music more generally) is trivial.

The expansion of Bieber's storyworld indicated by his new-found support of social justice causes was accentuated by how the sentiment of maturation circulated in the media discourse surrounding the album, with critics describing *Justice* as "the most mature thing in Bieber's catalogue" (Jenkins 2021) and representing "a new and mature outlook on life" (O'Connor 2021). The significance of the album for Bieber's persona was explicitly addressed by some commenters, as in Keith Harris' review for *Rolling Stone*: "The message of *Justice*, then, is that Justin Bieber is an adult" (Harris 2021). Notably, these three reviews (and several others) all highlighted a retrospective view of Bieber's career and focused as much on what the album revealed about his personal transformation as on its musical qualities. The two – Bieber's personal transformation and his musical material – have frequently been connected, as when Roisin O'Connor suggested that Bieber "has grown up" and that "[t]he musicianship in these new songs holds a mirror to this newfound maturity" (O'Connor 2021). Many responses to the aforementioned Instagram post likewise celebrated "the new Justin" and the social justice messaging of the new album,[6] which shows how Bieber's fans also participated in ascribing maturity to his persona. Overall, the public reception of *Justice* illustrated both the tendency of critics and audiences to seek out connections between artists' music and their personal lives and the common strategy on artists' part of teasing or even explicitly promoting such connections.

Rarely has the strategy of highlighting connections between musical material and the artist's biography been illustrated more clearly than in the case of *Lonely*, which was released in October of 2020 as the second single from *Justice*. The song was written by Bieber in collaboration with well-known producers benny blanco and Finneas, who also co-produced the song. *Lonely* can be described as a pop ballad with a minimalist arrangement consisting mainly of vocals and an electric piano accompaniment. This minimalist arrangement allows the lyrics to claim the listener's attention.

The lyrics seem to describe Bieber's personal struggles with fame and especially his troubled adolescence: "And everybody saw me sick / And it felt like no one gave a shit / They

criticized the things I did as an idiot kid". The seemingly autobiographical nature of the lyrics prompts careful consideration of the tendency to interpret pop lyrics as expressions of artists' personal experiences and beliefs:

> Perhaps one of the defining traits of the popular music persona, in contrast to the personas of other stars and celebrities, is the ingrained tendency in popular song to conflate the "I" of the singer with the "I" of the lyric. The processes whereby the opinions, desires, and intentions of lyrical protagonists are confused with those of the composers and performers who bring them to life is part of the authenticating work done by popular musicians and their fans. (Elliott 2019, p. 22)

The conflation and confusion that Elliott describes, I would argue, are often encouraged by artists and their teams. This happens in diverse ways. For one, impressions about the relationship between song lyrics and the artist's personal life are regulated at least partly by musical aesthetics. The point that song lyrics are experienced and understood not simply as words on a page but rather in light of their articulation as part of a multifaceted musical event might seem self-evident, but musical aesthetics remain overlooked in many discussions of lyrics' meanings. In the case of *Lonely*, the minimalist arrangement affords a sense of intimacy similar to that associated with the singer-songwriter tradition of "confessional" and "emotionally authentic" modes of performance (see Hansen 2019, p. 520; Negus 2011, p. 623). The emotional authenticity is heightened in the choruses when Bieber sings "I'm so lo-o-o-o-o-o-onely" in a prolonged howl (approx. 00:59). His vocals are compressed and placed front and centre in the mix, so that the listener can tune in to the most minute details of his mournful cry. The descending melody accentuates the sentiment of sadness, and there is a loss of momentum during this part of the song (which occurs when the piano abandons its steady rhythmic motif to create even more space for Bieber's voice) that musically reinforces the sentiment of loneliness. By heightening the sense of intimacy and emotional intensity of Bieber's vocal performance, these musical details contribute to further blurring the line between the protagonist of the song and the artist himself.

This blurring extends beyond the sound recording to the material that accompanied and framed *Lonely*. The single artwork depicts Canadian actor Jason Tremblay as a young version of Bieber, dressed in the iconic white and purple outfit worn by Bieber in his early career and with his signature hairstyle. The picture is taken from the song's music video, directed by Jake Schreier, in which Tremblay re-enacts a young Bieber's experiences as a teen star. Shot in one continuous take, the video follows Tremblay on the uncomfortable walk from an empty dressing room to an empty concert hall. The one-shot visual narrative indicates the apparent absence of editing trickery and thus reinforces the sense of emotional authenticity that is afforded by the lyrics and musical elements. At the end of the video, the camera zooms out to reveal the "real", adult Bieber as the only person in the audience. The camera pans around to a close-up of him, as the video ends with the artist staring contemplatively at the younger version of himself. The juxtaposition of the two Biebers (see Figure 1) opens up a discursive space wherein the past is repurposed in service of reframing the present. By reflecting on and narrating Bieber's experiences during his early career, the video reveals new areas of his personal storyworld and thus reframes his present-day persona.

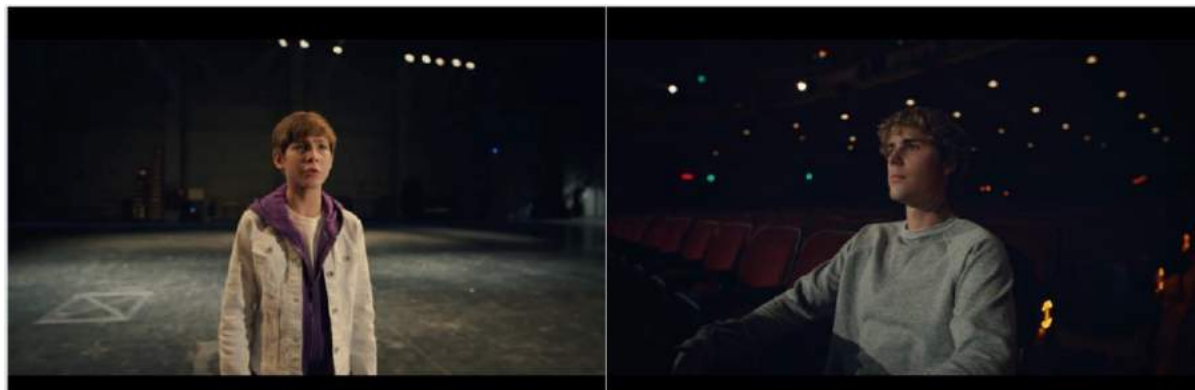

Figure 1. Screenshots from *Lonely* (2020, dir. Jake Schreier).

The multiple forms in which songs tend to exist – sound recordings, remixes, music videos, live performances, and so on – can inform the reframing of an artist's persona in varied (overlapping or contradictory) ways.[7] When Bieber performed *Lonely* on *Saturday Night Live* in October 2020,[8] fans who had already seen the music video would recognise that Bieber was re-enacting its visual narrative. This could add a layer to the emotional impact of the live performance, but those who had not seen the video would still register the emotional intensity with which Bieber addressed his struggles with the past. When he sang "Everybody knows my past now / Like my house was always made of glass / Maybe that's the price you pay for the money and fame at an early age" at the start of the second verse, his singing took on a more urgent quality, his body language changed to indicate emotional distress, and his face contorted in a pained expression. In contrast to the music video, wherein Bieber himself only appears at the end and remains near expressionless, the live performance shows Bieber embody the emotional pain he sings about – both vocally and physically. From this perspective, the live performance could serve to further authenticate the sentiment of the lyrics vis-á-vis his present-day persona by showcasing his supposed emotional earnestness.[9]

How Bieber's past was used as a resource for reframing his persona in the early 2020s is further illustrated by two documentary films released in connection with the *Justice* album, *Justin Bieber: Next Chapter* (2020) and *Justin Bieber: Our World* (2021),[10] both of which dwell heavily on Bieber's previous struggles and personal growth. Parts of *Justin Bieber: Next Chapter*, especially, address the unique significance of *Lonely* as a personal song for Bieber. In a scene where Bieber watches the music video, he notes that "I was so surrounded, millions of people in the audience, but I still felt lonely, I still felt misunderstood, I still felt hurt. I actually teared up in that video when I was watching Jacob Tremblay […] play me" (approx. 13:45–14:03). This discussion of *Lonely* becomes a point of entry for Bieber to open up about how public criticism and denigration affected him negatively and led to suicidal thoughts (approx. 15:55). It is made clear that this part of his past still affects him: a retelling of how Bieber broke down crying when attempting to record the song is accompanied by candid photographs that show him in the studio, hiding his face (approx. 15:38–15:46). The candid nature of the photographs, seemingly taken spontaneously without Bieber knowing, reinforces the idea that they offer viewers a raw glimpse into Bieber's personal experience of recording the song. The studio incident is also recounted in a feature article in *Billboard* magazine, in which it provides context for producer benny blanco's description of Bieber's performance on *Lonely* as "the most honest Justin you're going to get" (Bain 2021). This illustrates how certain elements of artists' personal storyworlds are dispersed across multiple different channels and serve as navigational beacons that guide audiences' interpretations. The main emphasis of the narratives presented in *Justin Bieber: Next*

Chapter and the *Billboard* article was on Bieber overcoming personal challenges. Arguably, this tied in with the primary message afforded by the visual juxtaposition of two Biebers in the music video: present-day Bieber is able to confront his past struggles and learn something from them.

A similar idea features in another scene of *Justin Bieber: Next Chapter*, when Bieber muses, “[n]ow we can hopefully tell this story and make a difference in somebody else’s world” (18:42–18:46). The statement is followed by a concrete example of how Bieber might make a difference for others, namely by being a mentor for young artists and helping them navigate the music industry and deal with impending fame. In a segment that shows Bieber playing music and talking with Eddie Benjamin, an Australian singer-songwriter at the cusp of international success, the conversation turns towards the pressures of stardom. As Bieber takes on the role of mentor, he recounts his own personal struggles in the hope that Benjamin might learn from his mistakes (approx. 20:13–21:25). Through this interaction, Bieber’s transformation from unruly teen star to matured pop veteran is placed on full display. Benjamin has also been outspoken about the support he has received from Bieber, noting in one interview that Bieber “really cares […] He’s given me lots of great advice” (Campbell 2021). When Benjamin supported Bieber on his Justice World Tour in 2022, one news article equated this with “getting a masterclass [from Bieber] in being a pop star” (Shafer 2022). While the public attention given to the close relationship between Benjamin and Bieber might have served to increase Benjamin’ visibility and credibility in the pop mainstream, it simultaneously buttressed Bieber’s status as a mentor and called further attention to his personal maturation.

These brief examples show how, in the early 2020s, revisiting the past served as a step for Bieber towards shaping a legible persona in the present. His broader storyworld, with narrative strands extending back to his early life and career, provided rich material for both Bieber and his fans to contend with and make sense of “the changes that are wrought upon artists’ personas as they encounter shifts in fame and fortune” (Elliott 2019, p. 21). While the selective curation of glimpses into Bieber’s biography and personal experiences regulated audiences’ access to his personal life and thereby informed perceptions of his persona, these are not straightforward or uncomplicated processes. Quite the opposite, artists’ personas are continuously re-framed and re-negotiated as audiences “fill in the gaps” (Thon 2016, p. 46) of artists’ personal storyworlds in varied and unpredictable ways. Understanding these processes requires careful consideration of the changeable relationships between the many elements and circumstances that play their part in shaping our perceptions of pop personas.

Reframing and Reinventing Personas: Layers, Shifts, and Tensions

Granted that our perceptions of pop personas are subject to change as artists continue to release music and we encounter new elements of their personal storyworlds, the temporal dimensions of artist-audience relationships represent a significant influence on fan cultures in popular music. Directing attention to the “waxing, waning and second comings of pop careers across the life courses of artists and their audiences”, Elliott suggests that certain artists “are notable for reinventing and reframing their careers” (2019, p. 19). One aspect of this concerns artists’ play with different musical styles, visual expressions, and lyrical themes, and developments in artists’ creative output or expressive gestures can either disrupt or support our existing impressions of their personas. Mainstream pop music, especially, represents an arena wherein a pronounced stylistic plurality has been conventionalised to the point that artists’ continuous reinvention has come to be expected.

Bieber is one artist who exemplifies this tendency well. Ever since his emergence as a teen star at the onset of the 2010s, Bieber's integration of traditionally Black musical traditions (R&B; hip hop; soul) within a broader pop aesthetic has been both controversial and bound up with a range of discourses related to, for example, age, gender, and musical ability (Bickford 2020, pp. 142–144; Hansen 2022, pp. 103–104). Over the course of his career, Bieber has shown a willingness to traverse diverse stylistic landscapes and experiment with different aesthetic expressions. One might go as far as suggesting that stylistic diversity has become one of Bieber's musical trademarks, a sentiment that has been embraced by the music press – as exemplified by reviews of *Justice* (Lipshutz 2021; O'Connor 2021). This discourse created space for Bieber's distinctive vocal performance and (seemingly) personal lyrics to be understood as particularly compelling points of access to his persona: "Consistent amid the hairpin shifts in style that *Justice* throws the listener from song to song are Bieber's slick vocals and earnest, honest lyricism. […] He is coming to terms with who he once was, who he is now, and who he wants to become" (Jenkins 2021). From this perspective, the musical eclecticism of *Justice* can be understood to have added colour and nuance to Bieber's artistic expression in ways that supported rather than disrupted the perceived stability of his persona.

Bieber's musical eclecticism has been mirrored by his wilful exploration of different visual styles, lyrical themes, and expressions of identity, which is exemplified by the music videos released alongside the *Justice* album. Whereas *Lonely* is framed as a personal reflection on his past struggles, *Anyone* (2021, dir. Colin Tilley) shows Bieber covering up all of his tattoos and playing the part of a professional boxer. In *Holy* (2020, dir. Colin Tilley), the video for a pop-gospel song in which Bieber seemingly professes both his love for his wife and his devotion to God,[11] he portrays a working-class man who loses his job. In *Ghost* (2021, dir. Colin Tilley), Bieber plays the role of someone mourning the death of his father. These videos hold the potential – both individually and collectively – to influence impressions of Bieber's personal life and identity, his positioning within aesthetic traditions and musical genre conventions, his star power, and much more. Through their encounters with Bieber's vivid portrayals of different characters, as well as his lyrical engagement with and visual representation of diverse themes, critics and fans are offered new opportunities for contemplating the relationship between the art and the artist.

Just like he assumes many different characters and addresses a range of themes in his songs and music videos, Bieber expresses diverse opinions, beliefs, and values in interviews, public statements, and social media posts – each of which can be taken to foreground or downplay certain aspects of his personal storyworld. However, Bieber's oscillation between theatrical playfulness and (ostensibly) authentic self-expression does not necessarily disrupt audiences' impressions of his persona. Rather, it signals the *elasticity* of personas – their capacity to simultaneously comprise reinvention and constancy.

In his discussion of the personas of popular musicians with extended careers, Elliott suggests that these artists tend to be understood either as "shapeshifters" or as curating a "consistent, layered self":

> It would be a mistake, however, to think of these categories as exclusive binaries; the shape-shifting aspect of a star might be the most consistent thing about them, while the seeming consistency of the gradually layered self relies on the accumulation of multiple selves, some of which might be as varied as the shifting light across a landscape. We should instead consider a dynamic or dialectic tension between shape-shifting and layering […] (Elliott 2019, p. 20)

As Elliott argues, shapeshifting and layering are not mutually exclusive. In the case of Bieber's display of mentorship in *Justin Bieber: Next Chapter*, for example, he took on a new role that clearly separated his present-day persona from the negative discourse of immaturity that surrounded his early career. At the same time, it was exactly the experiences he gained from tackling that discourse that were seen to qualify him to mentor younger artists. The shift in Bieber's self-presentation from irresponsible troublemaker to trustworthy mentor was made legible (and plausible) because of the retrospective narrative that mapped out his path to personal growth. The extent to which this particular element of Bieber's self-presentation impacts audiences' perceptions of his persona will inevitably vary, however. The core argument here is bound up with the premise that audiences co-create artists' personas through their interpretations of songs, music videos, and other texts (ibid., p. 19; Hansen 2019, pp. 513–515), and the concept of the personal storyworld opens onto the transmedial processes by which audiences navigate the dialectic between shapeshifting and layering. As Ryan and Thon argue, the "convergence of media around a common center that we may call 'narrativity' – a center that is itself organized around a storyworld – will serve as an opportunity to capture their distinctive narrative resources" (2014, p. 2). While it is possible to assess how different elements are likely to shape artists' personas, then, any attempt to say something about the relations between different elements and their significance for the broader personal storyworld must move beyond a consideration of individual texts and toward the complex social and cultural circumstances within which artist-audience relationships develop.

Emphasising the intersubjective and intercontextual aspects of popular music culture, Negus asserts that there is a plurality of "complex narrative meanings that are emergent in and articulated to many single pop songs, due to their embedding in a broader social and cultural context" (2012, p. 370). He suggests that our search for deeper meanings and narratives in songs and associated material inevitably "disrupts the stability of a text and points outward at the real drama of performative actions (rather than the perceived drama of the music), toward the 'social and cultural' tensions of the human world" (ibid.). The artist persona is a central point of mediation between individual texts and the social and cultural tensions of the human world, I would suggest, however tacitly this is manifested. This perspective is aligned to Hawkins' argument that "[p]ersonas come replete with pleasures, anxieties, and politics […] Their effect is to get us to reflect on the significance of gender, race, class, sexuality, and many other qualities of identity" (2020, p. 250). It is arguably in relation to notions of identity and social politics that the interrelationships between artists and audiences are simultaneously the most enthralling and the most fraught.

There are evident tensions between artists' desires to narrate their own experiences (or determine the significance of their music) and audiences' capacity for subjective interpretation. Even as artists' active reframing of their careers and personas through retrospection impacts how we navigate their sprawling personal storyworlds, then, audiences are not restricted to following the paths of interpretation that are mapped out by artists and their teams of collaborators. For example, some reviewers found Bieber's claim of taking social responsibility on *Justice* less than convincing, seeing this as "a gesture best left unmade" (Magan 2021) and describing the album as demonstrating a "poor understanding of struggle [that] feels like little more than a marketing tool" (Solomon 2021).[12] While dismissals of Bieber's capacity to address social issues might reflect common views of mainstream pop music as unimportant and long-standing suspicions of socially conscious pop artists' motives (see Hansen 2022, p. 120), they also indicate a gap between Bieber's self-presentation and the reviewers' perceptions of him. In contrast, other reviewers of *Justice* circumvented Bieber's claim of taking social responsibility altogether to focus on how the album reflected his musical and personal growth (Lipshutz 2021; O'Connor 2021), which demonstrates attentiveness to one specific dimension of Bieber's

personal storyworld and disinterest in another. Surveying the comments sections of Bieber's YouTube videos or social media posts reveals similarly diverse responses to the album and associated material, further illustrating the flexibility with which audiences determine the significance of individual elements for their broader impressions of the persona (and how their impressions of the persona influence their opinions about these individual elements).

The dialectic tension between shapeshifting and layering identified by Elliott (2019, p. 20) is intrinsic to how personas appeal to audiences, proliferating opportunities for (dis)identification and (dis)connection. As Thon argues, audiences "routinely 'ignore' some aspects of narrative representations in order to intersubjectively construct the represented storyworlds" (2016, p. 61). This point holds a unique relevance for popular music culture. Indeed, audiences' ability to embrace or reject specific aspects of their many encounters with artists across multiple media and contexts is integral to how they draw up their own maps of artists' personal storyworlds. It is as pop personas emerge and evolve in the intersubjective spaces generated by the multiple points of contact between artists and audiences, then, that the significances of popular music's affective forces and social politics are negotiated and experienced in the most compelling ways.

Concluding Thoughts

In this article, I have explored the notion of an artist's personal storyworld as a useful point of entry for thinking through the transmedial processes by which audiences encounter, co-construct, and re-construct artists' personas over time and in relation to diverse cultural artifacts and expressive gestures. Seeking out new connections between perspectives from transmedial narratology and popular music studies holds potential to reveal novel possibilities for (re)considering how the dynamic relations between performative gestures and (inter)subjective interpretation inform perceptions of pop personas. Working from a definition of personas as a complex of ideas about "who an artist is", I have sought to shed some light on the multiplicity of potential meanings afforded by artists' diverse creative output and eventful lives and careers, on the one hand, and audiences' interpretive flexibility, on the other. The concept of the personal storyworld is useful in this regard because it alludes to how the multiplicity of symbols and signs that influence our perceptions of pop artists are grouped together within a single frame of reference (tenuous as this frame may be).

The evolving career of Justin Bieber provides opportunities for contemplating the retrospective dimensions of how pop personas are performed and understood. In the early 2020s, his self-presentation across various channels – songs, music videos, live performances, documentary clips, and more – resonated with his widely known personal and professional history. As Bieber's storyworld expanded with the release of *Justice* in 2021, his past became a resource for reframing and reinventing his persona – both for him and his collaborators and for audiences. Even as songs, music videos, and other material afforded diverse impressions of Bieber and alluded to a plurality of cultural and social meanings, some interpretive pathways were mapped out more clearly than others. Most notably, there was an emphasis on Bieber's personal growth and social responsibility. His self-reinvention garnered mixed responses, however, which points to the flexibility with which audiences interpret artists' music, statements, and actions. The diverse narratives surrounding pop personas are as easily rejected as they are accepted.

The lives and careers of present-day pop stars are widely documented. As such, vast and easily accessible collections of songs, music videos, live clips, artwork, interview statements, social media posts, and other material proliferate points of contact between artists and

audiences. An artist's personal storyworld is ever-expanding, comprising countless elements that can both support and contradict each other and which open onto complex historical, cultural, and social discourses. The rich and expansive storyworlds associated with pop artists simultaneously complicate the idea of an "authentic" persona and serve as resources for audiences' construction of their own multifaceted images of their favourite stars. These processes, I would argue, are integral to how we – listeners, critics, scholars – use popular music as a resource for narrating our own experiences and exploring our relationships to the world. The blurred boundaries between fact and fiction, art and reality, and the public and the personal make these explorations all the more enticing and contentious.

End Notes

[1] For critical discussions about stardom, public personas, and imagined intimacy, see Marshall (2016) and Rojek (2016).

[2] See, for example, Prior (2018, pp. 86–91) for a critique of this idea.

[3] Auslander (2021, pp. 95–97) provides a more detailed account of the dynamics between theatricality and authenticity in relation to musical personas. Like Auslander (ibid., p. 96), I apply theatricality as a descriptive term rather than as an analytical category.

[4] See Hansen (2017) and Hawkins (2020) on personal narrativity in context of popular music.

[5] The post is available here <https://www.instagram.com/p/CLw1Raunz-z/> (accessed 25 October, 2023).

[6] Note that the post has over 40,000 comments and fans express a broad range of opinions and reactions. This illustrates the flexibility with which audiences respond to the same material, even if some common tendencies can be identified.

[7] For one, musical changes related to instrumentation, style, tempo, or overall energy can drastically impact listeners' experience of a song (and, by extension, the song's impact on listeners' perceptions of the persona). Similarly, different performance contexts offer distinct conditions for artist-audience encounters and carry varied cultural associations. Both these points might seem self-evident, but they are seldom addressed in discussions about musical performance and personas.

[8] A video of the performance is available here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jlppEPjJQWs> (accessed 25 October, 2023).

[9] Dibben (2009) discusses musical performance and emotional authenticity in more detail.

[10] *Justin Bieber: Next Chapter* was directed by Michael D. Ratner and released on YouTube on 30 October, 2020. It detailed Bieber's life in quarantine following the global COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020 and the recording of *Justice*. *Justin Bieber: Our World* was also directed by Ratner and released on Amazon Prime on 8 October, 2021. The film follows Bieber's preparations for his first solo concert in over three years. *Justin Bieber: Next Chapter* anticipated and promoted the *Justice* album, while *Justin Bieber: Our World* was released on the same day as *Justice: The Complete Edition* (an extended version of the album). The films follow a series of previous documentaries from Bieber, which illustrates a striking continuity in his use of behind-the-scenes documentaries to narrate his personal experiences and professional developments. See Bickford (2020, pp. 149–164) for a detailed discussion of how Bieber's concert film, *Never Say*

Never (2010), simultaneously bolstered his status as a child prodigy and couched his commercial success in comfortable family domesticity.

[11] See Hansen (2022, pp. 116–126) for a more detailed analysis of the song and music video.

[12] Similar criticisms abounded on online forums and discussion websites, such as Reddit, which contains several posts about the *Justice* album. Relevant threads are easily searchable on the Reddit website: <www.reddit.com> (accessed 30 October, 2023).

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"AND ALL I GOTTA DO IS ACT NATURALLY": TRANSMEDIA POP STARS, MUSICAL PERFORMANCE, AND METAREFERENCE IN NARRATIVE CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses musicians' performances on film, using the iconic Beatles film Help! *(Richard Lester 1965) as a foundational case study. The study investigates distinctions between film acting and musical performance while exploring the defining characteristics of musicians' performances within the context of cinema. Building upon established concepts of persona (Auslander 2021), metafiction and metareference (Waugh 1984; Wolf 2009), the author introduces novel conceptual frameworks of "metaperformance" and "intramedial transmediality". "Metaperformance" refers to the doubling of the act of performance, whereas "intramedial transmediality" describes the coexistence of diverse media texts within a single media text. Due to their off-screen musical persona, musical stars in films often provoke a pronounced transtextual and transmedial network and convey an implicit claim to reality. Compared to film actors, musical stars on film frequently provide metaperformances, embodying not only (fictional) characters but also performing their ("real") musical persona within them. Additional case studies of Ed Sheeran's performance in Danny Boyle's* Yesterday *(2019) and the Spice Girls' performance in Bob Spiers's* Spice World *(1997) further clarify these theoretical insights. Working deductively, these films serve as contemporary illustrations of the theoretical concepts under examination. The findings of this essay contribute to an enriched understanding of the intricacies in musicians' performances on film and shed light on the interplay between music, cinema, and artists' on-screen personas.*

KEY WORDS

Transmediality; Intermedia; Identity Construction; Screen Fiction; Popular Culture

INTRODUCTION

In 1965, The Beatles released their second film, *Help!*, following the success of the previous year's *A Hard Day's Night*, both directed by Richard Lester.[1] *Help!* features seven songs from their eponymous album and revolves around the band's struggles with their new studio recording. In the film *Help!*, The Beatles produce the album *Help!*, with its songs forming the film's soundtrack, each text thereby promoting the other.[2] Additionally, in the film, the musicians must protect their drummer Ringo Starr from a sinister cult and two crazy scientists who all have their eyes set on a sacrificial ring gifted to Starr by a fan.[3] The plot travels from the Alps to the Bahamas, and features everything from Paul McCartney shrinking to a fight between Ringo Starr and a tiger who can only be calmed by whistling Beethoven's *9th Symphony*. In the documentary *The Beatles in Help!* (Ferguson 2007), Lester described the approach to throwing The Beatles into this absurd plot:

> We didn't want The Beatles to just make a colour version of *A Hard Day's Night*. Not another fictionalised documentary. We couldn't show their private life, which would be the next thing, because that was, by then, certainly X-rated. Or at least what X-ratings were in those days! So if we can't show their working life, or private life, they have to become, if you like, passive recipients of an outside plot or an outside threat, brought on by a weakness within themselves. That led to the idea of *Help!* (Lester in Ferguson 2007, from 01:30)[4]

Elsewhere, Lester emphasised that he and the production team "had to make certain that they [The Beatles] still played themselves" (in Carr 1996, p. 61). "While the movie still retains the notion of The Beatles being themselves," according to Reiter (2008, p. 66), "the makers of *Help!* had no intention of attempting to construct an illusion of reality." The interplay between absurdity and authenticity becomes palpable at the beginning of the film (from 0:04:10).[5] The four musicians drive up in a car outside their home. It appears as though each member owns their own townhouse, with all four situated side by side. Across the street, two elderly women observe them. The woman on the right remarks, "Lovely lads, and so natural. Adoration hasn't gone to their heads. You know what I mean, success." The four Beatles then simultaneously walk towards their own individually coloured front doors. Meanwhile, the woman on the left agrees: "So natural," then adds, "and still the same as they was before they was." The next scene reveals that the four townhouses are in reality one luxurious, eccentrically furnished space where the four Beatles live together. Their absurd residence includes an organ that rises out of the floor with comic books on the music stand, drink and snack dispensers built into the walls, and an indoor lawn manicured by a man with chattering teeth. Rather than pretending to show the "real" private lives of the musicians, the film presents an overtly fictionalized version:

> The relationship of the working-class boys making it was something that we wanted to have some fun with, so we invented "the house", which was a group of ordinary terraced houses from the outside, and inside was total lunacy – one room with grass in it, one with a pit for a bed. We wanted that sense of the public thinking, "Are they just these good working-class Liverpool lads trying to earn a living?" (Lester in Ferguson 2007, from 07:50)

The musical album also evinces an ironic approach to the distinction between frontstage and backstage, as well as between public and private spheres: *Help!* includes a cover of "Act Naturally", written by Johnny Russell and originally recorded by Buck Owens (1963). The Beatles' cover appeared on the B-side of the original release, while in North America, they released their version as the B-side to *Yesterday* (1965). Here Ringo Starr sings about becoming a successful film actor, without understanding anything about acting, because he can simply play himself as a "sad and lonely" man:

> They're gonna put me in the movies
> They're gonna make a big star out of me
> We'll make a film about a man that's sad and lonely
> And all I gotta do is act naturally
>
> Well, I'll bet you I'm gonna be a big star
> Might win an Oscar you can never tell
> The movie's gonna make me a big star,
> 'Cause I can play the part so well
>
> Well I hope you come and see me in the movies
> Then I know that you will plainly see

> The biggest fool that's ever hit the big time
> And all I gotta do is act naturally
>
> "Act Naturally", Capitol (US) & Parlophone (UK) 1965, Songwriter: Johnny Russel

On the one hand, the film is about The Beatles, supposedly playing themselves. On the other, its infused absurdity serves to highlight the fictional nature of the events (see Figure 1). This article specifically analyses the performances of "real" pop musicians in fictional films by adopting a deductive and theoretically oriented approach.[6] In order to better understand these performances, I draw on the music-related performance theory of persona, along with the concepts of metafiction and metareference. This synthesis brings together key concepts in performance studies, media studies, literary studies, and film studies. Building on this synthesis and working in dialogue with performances by the Spice Girls in *Spice World* (Bob Spiers 1997) and Ed Sheeran in *Yesterday* (Danny Boyle 2019), I develop the concepts of *metaperformance* (the doubling of the act of performance) and *intramedial transmediality* (the coexistence of different media texts within one media text), then return to The Beatles' example in the concluding summary. Table 2 (see below) provides a summary overview of the key concepts in this paper.

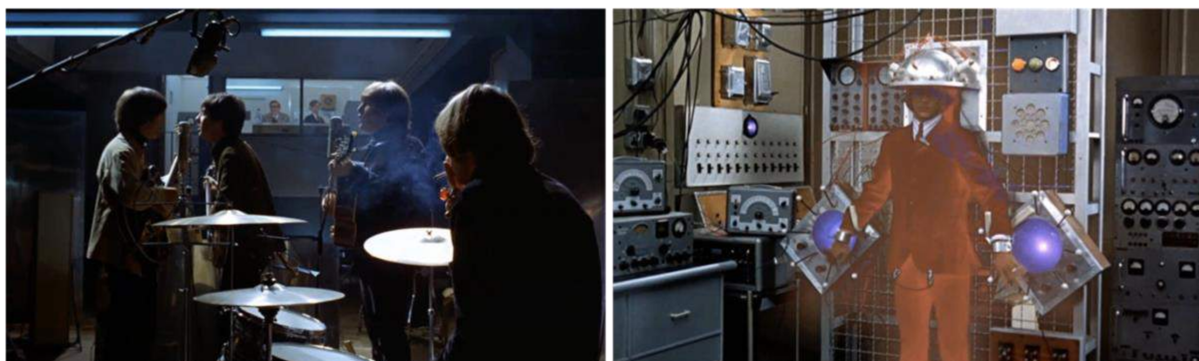

Figure 1. Stills from *Help!* (Richard Lester 1965).
The Beatles recording "You're Going to Lose That Girl" in the studio (left, 0:13:02);
two mad scientists attempting to snatch the ring off Ringo Starr's finger (right, 0:25:53).

Persona and Metareference

Two concepts, persona and metareference, prove helpful in better understanding the performance of musicians in film. These concepts are explored through three questions: What do musicians perform? How does film acting differ from musical performance? What characterises film performances by musicians?

Commotion at Shea Stadium: What do musicians perform?

In the same year as the release of the film *Help!*, a legendary Beatles concert took place at New York's Shea Stadium, marking the first major stadium concert in the history of popular music.[7] At the pinnacle of Beatlemania, with over 55,000 fans in attendance, their euphoria was so overwhelming and their screams so loud that it was nearly impossible to hold a musical performance. The live recordings mainly capture the audience's screaming, with the recording of "Act Naturally" of such poor quality that for the documentary *The Beatles at Shea Stadium*

(Robert Precht 1966) they utilised the studio recording, sped up slightly to attempt some synchronization between the sound and visuals. This example leads to the question of what musicians actually perform. The obvious answer seems like it should be music, but there is more to it. If those fans were solely interested in the music, then their behaviour, which nearly sabotaged the musical performance, would be completely incomprehensible. Instead, it appears more likely that the audience was more interested in attending the musicians themselves, and so, part of the impetus for screaming may have stemmed from attempts to gain their attention. For many audiences, musicians not only perform music, but also their identity as musicians.[8]

The identity performed by musicians is referred to as "persona" in music-related performance studies. The word's origins evoke a sense of role-playing, firstly because it can be linked to the masks of ancient Greek theatre (from the Greek, πρόσωπον "prosopon"). Secondly, the term is derived from the Latin "per-sonare", understood as "sounding through" the mask. Alongside Edward T. Cone (1974, pp. 20–40), Simon Frith (1996, p. 186, 212), and Allan F. Moore (2005), Philip Auslander stands out as a researcher who has significantly shaped the use of this concept.[9] His theory of musical persona represents one of the most influential in music-related performance studies, bringing together the two dimensions of theatre and vocal sound. His theory is not about music as performance (Cook 2014) but rather concerns musicians, centring their role as performers instead of focusing on musical texts. Drawing on Erving Goffman's sociological work, Auslander understands musical performance as a social interaction. In building on Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), he sees persona as a form of self-presentation that contrasts with the portrayal of overtly fictional roles in acting, as will be discussed shortly.

Auslander's approach establishes the importance of three key concepts within his performer-centric theory: frame, genre, and persona. By frame, again following Goffman (1974), he means the fundamental contextualisation that enables social interaction and structures expectations (Auslander 2021, pp. 5–6); genre, then, is a categorisation, the most important frame for musical performances (ibid., pp. 9–10);[10] and persona, for Auslander, is the musical identity musicians perform (ibid., pp. 10–12). Musicians and audiences therefore understand and negotiate the persona in relation to frames and genres. Within this framework, two additional concepts prove crucial, serving to define, effectively *ex negativo*, what constitutes a persona: persona is neither the "real person", or the performer's offstage personality (ibid., p. 10), nor their "character", the performed entity that musicians portray through their lyrics (ibid., p. 11).

Persona	performed identity as a musician, often perceived as a form of self-presentation
Character	performed entity through the lyrics, often perceived as (overtly) fictional
Real Person	concept of the artist as a "real" human being (backstage personality), often constructed by audiences transtextually and transmedially

Table 1. Persona, Character, Real Person (Overview).

Earlier, I mentioned that the fans at Shea Stadium were not primarily focused on hearing the music. To avoid any misunderstandings, allow me to clarify: music was and is important. However, it formed *one* aspect of performance. "What musicians perform first and foremost is not music," states Auslander (2021, p. 88), "but their own identities as musicians, their musical

personae." Drawing on examples of physical co-presence, Auslander theorises that "both the musical work and its execution serve the musician's performance of a persona" (ibid., p. 88). Music, in turn, serves this persona.

This perspective emphasises the importance of further performative factors. What does the stage look like? Who is (not) visible, and what lighting effects are employed? What is the person wearing, and (how) do they deploy makeup? How do they move on stage? How is the body of the star presented, and through what gestures? Does the performer play an instrument? If so, what does it look like, and how do they appear to interact with it?

Given Auslander's understanding of musical performances as a form of self-presentation, he adopts Goffman's taxonomy to articulate the manner in which individuals perform their personas (see Auslander 2006, pp. 103–118). Goffman (1956, p. 13) employs the term "front" to denote "that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance." He identifies three integral components to the front:

(1) *setting*, encompassing "furniture, décor, physical lay-out, and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the space of human action played out before, within, or upon it" (ibid., p. 13);

(2) *appearance*, describing "stimuli which function at the time to tell us of the performer's social statuses" (ibid., p. 15);

(3) and *manner*, referring to "those stimuli that function at the time to warn us of the interaction role the performer will expect to play in the on-coming situation" (ibid., p. 15).

In the following scheme (see Figure 2), these aspects are subsumed under "Means of Expression".

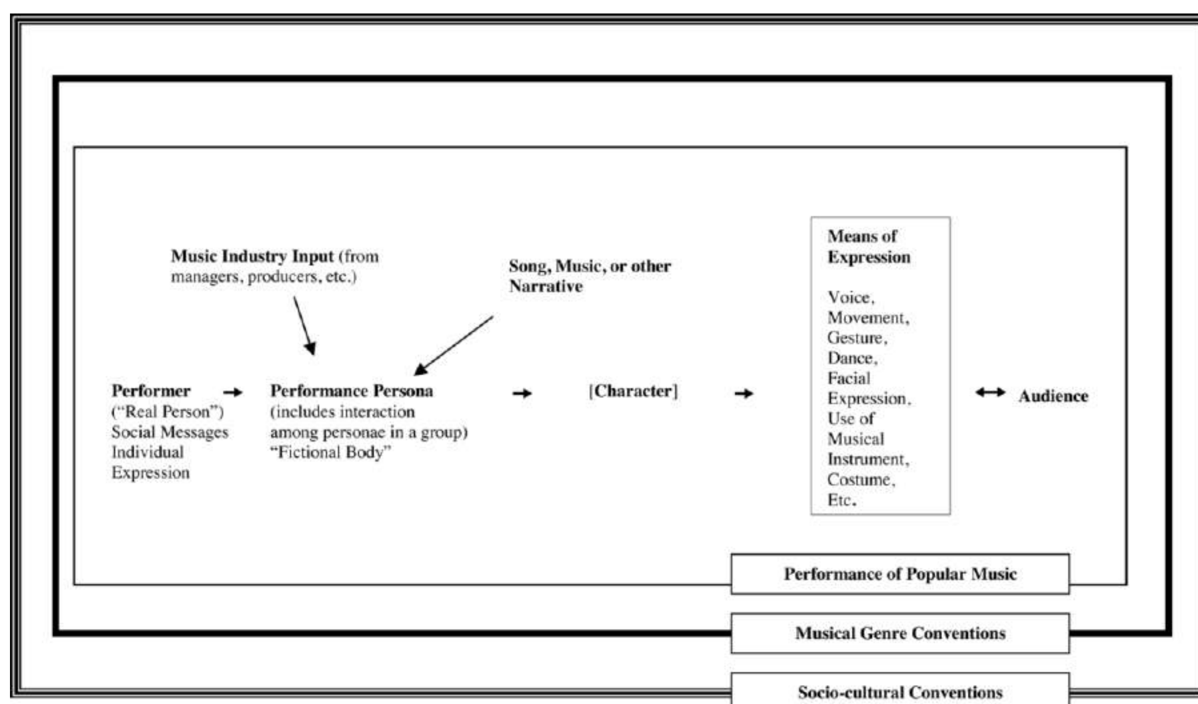

Figure 2. Auslander's Model of Popular Music Performance (Auslander 2021, p. 32).

The double arrow between "Means of Expression" and "Audience" in this illustration represents the mutual relationship between star and audience. Audiences also contribute to the performance of the persona by utilising similar means of expression. Phenomena such as Beatlemania require fans who utilise those very means. In other words, the enthusiastic, fainting audience at Shea Stadium actively participated in the communal process of creation for The Beatles' personas. This co-creative aspect of personas proves especially relevant in moments of physical co-presence, such as concerts, and in the contexts of social media.

The shortest possible answer to the question of what musicians perform can then be summarised as follows*: Musicians perform their personas, which means their identities as musicians; this is often perceived as a form of self-presentation*.

"We all play-act": What distinguishes film acting from musical performance?

The brackets surrounding the word "Character" in Auslander's model (see Figure 2) draw attention to the question of the relationship between film acting and musical performance. According to sociologist Andreas Reckwitz, pop music and film are the two most important arenas for establishing the modern star system. The significance of film actors and pop musicians as iconic embodiments of 20th-century stars stems from their aesthetics of presence; unlike authors, painters, or composers who remain "behind" their work, film actors and musicians are physically present for the audience during the enactment of their "work", albeit usually conveyed through media (see Reckwitz 2019, pp. 252–253).

Pop music and film acting share an aesthetic focal point in the body of the star. However, nominal actors do not portray themselves, but rather an overtly fictional role. The brackets in Auslander's illustration indicate this distinction. While the fictional character is central in acting, it is an optional element in performing music. Sometimes, the character is clearly present and unequivocally fictional, while at other times, it can be difficult to determine whether the character simply reflects the persona. In an earlier essay, Auslander (2015, p. 76) defines the persona as "a performed identity that is not a fictional character such as those portrayed by actors. It is presentational rather than representational (or at least is perceived that way) and often takes the form of a self-presentation on the part of the performer."

When Ringo Starr sings at Shea Stadium, "[I] might win an Oscar, you can't never tell", it is reasonable to interpret this statement in terms of a fictional character. On closer inspection, this distinction quickly turns problematic. What about pop stars like Lady Gaga or David Bowie who clearly portray fictional roles? What about actors who engage in "method acting", pretending to play themselves or immersing themselves fully in a role? Self-presentation and fiction do not exist as strict binary oppositions composed of categorically opposed terms, but rather represent poles on a spectrum, with numerous gradations existing between them. Pop music tends to lean more towards self-presentation, while film acting leans more towards fiction. Yet while Auslander relies on Goffmann's taxonomy, juxtaposition of fiction and self-presentation is not in line with Goffman's perspective. Goffman's central argument in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956) is that we all perform ourselves in every social interaction (the German translation of the book's title is, fittingly, "Wir alle spielen Theater" ["We all play-act"]). According to Goffman, self-presentation can involve both genuine expressions of emotions as well as partial or completely false representations. For an illustration, consider how people commonly respond when someone asks how they are doing: their answers may vary greatly depending on the context. The response given to a therapist may be different than the one given to a supermarket cashier. However, if I tell a cashier that I am fine, even when that is not the case, that social interaction remains a form of self-presentation.

Auslander later revised his own distinction between persona as self-presentation and character as fiction:

> I arrived at detailed description of the musical persona as the performance of a social role. Over time, however, I came to realize two limitations to my formulation. The first is that it did not account for those instances in which musicians do perform fictional characters as their persona. […] The other limitation of my initial formulation of musical persona is closely related to the first. I found that I had placed too much emphasis on the self/other distinction in differentiating what musicians do from what actors do, resulting in a too-easy contrast between actors as purveyors of fiction and musicians as representing aspects of themselves in performance. I had lost sight of a crucially important point that is central to Goffman: actors and musicians are completely alike in the sense that both groups are engaged in performing a social identity. (Auslander 2021, p. 84–85)

In this way, Auslander integrates the concept of theatricality as a "histrionic mode of communication" (ibid., p. 96). Now the question is no longer whether my "yes" to the cashier is right or wrong. Instead, we can consider the degree of theatricality in my reaction and the expressive means utilised. Auslander's heuristic update is also more consistent with Goffman's concept of self-presentation (ibid., p. 95). This change provides space to analyse the construction of varied musical personas, ranging from "real", sincere or authentic, to completely fictitious identities.

The key difference between acting and musical performance can then be summarised as follows: *While the personas of musicians often lean towards self-presentation performed with a low degree of theatricality, film acting usually exhibits a higher degree of theatricality, as the characters portrayed are commonly perceived as (overtly) fictional.*

"La vache qui rit": What characterises film performances by musicians?

When looking at the justifications given by directors for why they wanted a musician to star in their films, two main categories emerge. Take the influential director Christopher Nolan for one example: when casting actors for his war drama *Dunkirk* (2017), Nolan caused a stir before its release, because he cast British singer Harry Styles for a leading role, driving speculation about how the former One Direction member would perform. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Nolan claimed that Styles went through the casting process like any other actor and prevailed against multiple competitors:

> When we put the cast together, we had some established names: Kenneth Branagh, Mark Rylance, Tom Hardy, Cillian Murphy. But for the guys on the beach, we really wanted young unknowns. He's not that unknown, but he'd never done anything as an actor before. So he auditioned. I auditioned literally thousands of young men with different combinations of young men. And he had it. (Nolan in Kaufman 2017)

According to another interview, Nolan was unaware of Styles's fame, or at least the extent of his fame, especially among younger people:

> I was new to Harry. I mean, I've heard his name from my kids, but I wasn't really familiar with him… What I was seeing [when he auditioned] was a very charismatic guy who clearly had a truthfulness and a subtlety in his ability to perform as a film actor. (Nolan in Seemayer 2017)

By stating that he was not familiar with Styles's fame, Nolan emphasizes further that he was interested in his acting abilities rather than his star image. Interestingly, Nolan's assessment of Styles's acting skills revolves around attributes such as "truthfulness" and "realness": "What I'm hoping for, when people see the film, is I'm hopeful that they won't miss what he's [Styles] done, because it's very subtle, very truthful and real" (Nolan in Seemayer 2017). Although Nolan underscores the insignificance of Styles's musical persona, self-presentation with a low degree of theatricality presents more commonly as a characteristic of musical personas, as previously observed.

For Nolan's *The Prestige* (2006), the opposite argumentation emerged. In this film, inventor Nikola Tesla appears in a supporting role for about ten minutes. Nolan tried to cast superstar David Bowie for the role (see Glynn 2022, pp. 179–184). After Bowie initially declined, Nolan tried again and pleaded for his acceptance: "In total honesty, I told him [Bowie] if he didn't agree to do the part, I had no idea where I would go from there. I would say I begged him" (Nolan in Vain 2016). In an interview shortly after Bowie's death in 2016, Nolan recalls why this casting was so important to him:

> When we were casting *The Prestige*, we had gotten very stuck on the character of Nikola Tesla. Tesla was this other-worldly, ahead-of-his-time figure, and at some point it occurred to me he was the original Man Who Fell to Earth. As someone who was the biggest Bowie fan in the world, once I made that connection, he seemed to be the only actor capable of playing the part. He had that requisite iconic status, and he was a figure as mysterious as Tesla needed to be. (Nolan in Vain 2016)

According to Nolan, only a world-famous rock star like David Bowie could do justice to the uniquely fantastical aura of Nikola Tesla. "As indicated by Bowie's supporting role in *The Prestige*," as stated by Landon Palmer (2020, p. 2), "rock stardom has influenced film casting and performance beyond the onscreen presence of rock music and has offered potential uses in film that are distinctive from conventional film stardom." In contrast to Styles in *Dunkirk*, Nolan did not emphasise acting abilities here, but rather Bowie's extra-filmic presence as an enigmatic star musician; Nolan wanted Bowie not in spite of his persona as a superstar, but because of it. Nolan's dramaturgical strategy for portraying Tesla sought to integrate Bowie's image and the resulting transmedial network of specific associations

These two films reveal dual particularities in the phenomenon of musical stars on film. Firstly, their film performances, in line with their off-screen musical personas, can create an impression of reality and authenticity, but equally, the musical persona can evoke a multitude of associations that imbue the character portrayed with meaning (and vice versa). However, a third particularity also exists from beyond these two examples: often, along with musical stars in films, there comes not only an illusion of reality and a transmedial network, but also, as in *Help!*, musical performance within the film itself.

In his book *Music, Performance, and the Realities of Film*, Ben Winters describes the peculiarity of "classical" musicians in narrative cinema as follows:

> more often than not, the on-screen musical performer [i.e., the classical musician in a narrative film] is functioning differently from his/her fellow actors. Unlike them, s/he may not even be playing a fictional character, but a version of themselves […] and, as such, s/he is often engaging in the very activity that defines their "star" quality, namely musical performance. (Winters 2014, p. 18)

Winters's phrase, "version of themselves", appears remarkably compatible with Auslander's definition of the musical persona. Following Auslander's framework, one could also argue that, unlike actors, on-screen musical performers are not playing fictional characters, but their musical personas. Any screen presence of a star (whether music or film) undoubtedly triggers a wave of transtextual activities. But as Winters notes, "actors rarely perform *as actors* in an [sic] metafictional way in the same way as musicians or musical stars" (ibid., p. 34; emphasis Winters's). The term metafiction highlights perhaps the most significant characteristic of musical stars in film.

Literary scholar Patricia Waugh established the term "metafiction" in the 1980s. In her comprehensive work, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, she defines the term as "the construction of a fictional illusion [...] and the laying bare of that illusion" (Waugh 1984, p. 6). A case in point is the packaging for the famous cheese brand "La vache qui rit", which depicts a laughing cow wearing earrings with the same packaging design (see Figure 3). The inclusion of an image's miniature within the image itself exemplifies the metafictional technique known as *mise en abyme*. As per Werner Wolf (2009, p. 56), the *mise en abyme* "designates a special relationship within an embedding structure, namely – with reference to the media – the 'mirroring' of parts or the totality of a framing or embedding higher level of a semiotic complex (text, work, performance) in a discernible unit located on an embedded, lower level." Such metafictional techniques, like the picture-within-a-picture structure, can emphasise the constructed nature or artificiality of an object. The broader principle of self-referentiality is as old as literature itself. This *mise en abyme* structure is already present in Homer's *Odyssey*, when Odysseus recounts his own wanderings in the epic's central section (Books 9–12), thus reflecting the act of storytelling within the narrative (see Hutcheon 1984, p. 40).

Figure 3. The Packaging of the "La vache qui rit" cheese,
<http://www.lavachequirit.ch/fr/produits/la-vache-qui-rit>.

Metafictional art raises questions about the relationships between fiction and reality by highlighting its own status as a crafted artwork and the process of its creation. Metafictional techniques construct and deconstruct illusion (and reality) simultaneously:

> What [metafiction] does is to re-examine the conventions of realism in order to discover – through its own self-reflection – a fictional form that is culturally relevant and comprehensible to contemporary readers. […] [M]etafiction helps us to understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed, simply "written". (Waugh 1984, p. 18)

Along with Waugh, Werner Wolf also shaped the concept significantly. Wolf (2009) uses the term "metareference" as an umbrella term in his conception of metafiction in order to replace the focus on literature with a transmedial perspective:

> [Metareference] *is a special, transmedial form of usually nonaccidental self-reference produced by signs or sign configurations which are (felt to be) located on a logically higher level, a "metalevel", within an artefact or performance; this self-reference, which can extend from this artefact to the entire system of the media, forms or implies a statement about an object-level, namely on (aspects of) the medium/system referred to. Where metareference is properly understood, an at least minimal corresponding "meta-awareness" is elicited in the recipient*, who thus becomes conscious of both the medial (or "fictional" in the sense of artificial and, sometimes in addition, "invented") status of the work under discussion and the fact that media-related phenomena are at issue, rather than (hetero-)references to the world outside the media. (Wolf 2009, p. 31; emphasis Wolf's)

According to Wolf, metareference describes a form of self-reference in combination with a meta level, from which artworks comment explicitly or implicitly on the medial nature of the work in question. He distinguishes between intracompositional and extracompositional metareference:

> *intracompositional* metareference operates within the work under discussion as the "system" in the narrow sense within which this special form of self-reference occurs, while *extracompositional* metareference denotes all other forms of metareference that go beyond the confines of this work (without, however, leaving the media as the self-referential system in the broad sense), be it by referring to a specific other work, or group of works, be it by making a general aesthetic comment on one or more media. (ibid., p. 38; emphasis Wolf's)

While the *mise en abyme* is a form of intracompositional self-reference, because it "is based on a similarity within a work" (ibid., p. 57), intermedial reference to media texts that exist outside of the film would constitute a form of extracompositional metareference.

By combining the concept of metafictionality or metareference with the preceding theoretical considerations, we can attribute the term "metaperformance" to musical stars in film. I contend that this concept allows for a better understanding of pop stars' doubling of the act of performance in narrative cinema. By metaperformance, I refer here to a frequently observed peculiarity of musical stars in film, namely, the dual nature of their performance when a musical star takes on the role of a filmic character who, in turn, performs music, thereby embodying both the filmic (fictional) character and the star's ("real") musical persona.[11] This configuration functions both as a form of intracompositional self-reference and extracompositional metareference. On the one hand, their musical performance corresponds to the structure of a *mise en abyme*, as a performance within a performance (intracompositional self-reference). On the other hand, this performance within a performance refers to the extra-

filmic musical persona of the star and their pre-existing music (extracompositional metareference).

The shortest possible answer to our final question could thereby be summarised as follows: *Due to their off-screen musical persona, musical stars in film often provoke a pronounced transmedial network and convey an implicit claim to reality. Compared to film actors, musical stars in films frequently engage in metaperformances, embodying not only (fictional) characters but also performing their ("real") musical persona within them. This performative configuration mirrors the structure of a* mise en abyme *(intracompositional self-reference). Simultaneously, this performance within the performance often alludes to the musician's off-screen musical persona (extracompositional metareference).*

<table>
<tr><td rowspan="6">IDENTITY</td><td>Persona</td><td colspan="2">performed identity as a musician, often perceived as a form of self-presentation</td></tr>
<tr><td>Character</td><td colspan="2">performed entity through the lyrics, often perceived as (overtly) fictional</td></tr>
<tr><td>Real Person</td><td colspan="2">concept of the artist as a "real" human being (backstage personality), often constructed by audiences transtextually and transmedially</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Front</td><td>Setting</td><td>environment and arrangement that forms the backdrop for the performance</td></tr>
<tr><td>Appearance</td><td>stimuli that convey information about the performer's social status</td></tr>
<tr><td>Manner</td><td>stimuli that convey information about the interaction role of the performer</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="7">TRANSMEDIA</td><td rowspan="3">Metareference</td><td colspan="2">a form of self-reference in combination with a meta level from which the artwork comments explicitly or implicitly on the medial nature of the work in question</td></tr>
<tr><td>Explicit</td><td>involves explicit metareferential devices that reflect on the media text as a composed product</td></tr>
<tr><td>Implicit</td><td>involves more implicit metareferential devices that highlight the medium and status of the media text as a composed product</td></tr>
<tr><td>Intracompositional Self-reference</td><td colspan="2">self-reference within the media text such as a mise en abyme structure</td></tr>
<tr><td>Extracompositional Metareference</td><td colspan="2">reference that extends beyond the boundaries of the media text such as references to specific other media texts or personas</td></tr>
<tr><td>Metaperformance</td><td colspan="2">doubling of the act of performance such as a music star who performs both a fictional character and their "real" musical persona</td></tr>
<tr><td>Intramedial Transmediality</td><td colspan="2">simulation of another medium within a media text that gives the impression of the coexistence of diverse media texts within a single media text</td></tr>
</table>

Table 2. Analytical Toolkit (Overview).

The table summarizes the key concepts for analysing musical performances by pop stars in narrative cinema. Having established these categories, the subsequent sections of this article refine this approach by delineating "explicit" and "implicit" metareference, along with "intramedial transmediality". With these in hand, we may proceed with two concise illustrative analyses that offer additional insights into these theoretical concepts.

ED SHEERAN IN DANNY BOYLE'S *YESTERDAY* (2019)

What if The Beatles were suddenly erased from cultural memory? That's exactly what happens in *Yesterday* (2019). After a mysterious global blackout, struggling musician Jack Malik (Himesh Patel) realizes that everyone seems to have forgotten the Fab Four. There's no trace of the band and their songs anywhere, not even on the internet. Malik sees his chance, re-records the songs, and becomes famous. Ed Sheeran, playing pop star Ed Sheeran, invites Malik to perform as his opening act at a concert in Moscow. After the concert, the musicians gather in a bar. Sheeran suggests they hold a spontaneous songwriting competition to determine who the better songwriter is: "So here's the plan: I'm gonna go out that door, Jack's gonna go out this door, and whoever writes the best song in 10 minutes wins."[12] Malik reluctantly agrees. Soon after, Sheeran performs his song in front of the audience, singing a love song while accompanying himself with fingerpicking-style guitar. Then, Malik takes the stage, sits at the piano, and plays Paul McCartney's song "The Long and Winding Road", visibly moving the audience. When Malik's friend calls for a vote, Sheeran interrupts him. He refuses to vote because Malik's ostensibly spontaneous composition is one of the best songs Sheeran has ever heard in his life. "You're definitely Mozart, mate," Sheeran says, "and I'm definitely Salieri."

Two years later, Sheeran releases his song under the title "Penguins" (2021). This film's exceptional performative constellation combines an actor (Patel) playing the fictional role of Malik and a pop star (Sheeran) playing himself, in a songwriting contest with both pre-existing ("The Long and Winding Road") and allegedly spontaneous music ("Penguins"), highlighting the specific tension between reality and fiction that runs throughout this entire study. While Ed Sheeran can be described as a "real" musician performing in a fictional universe, Jack Malik is a fictional musician playing "real" music, namely the pre-existing music of The Beatles.[13]

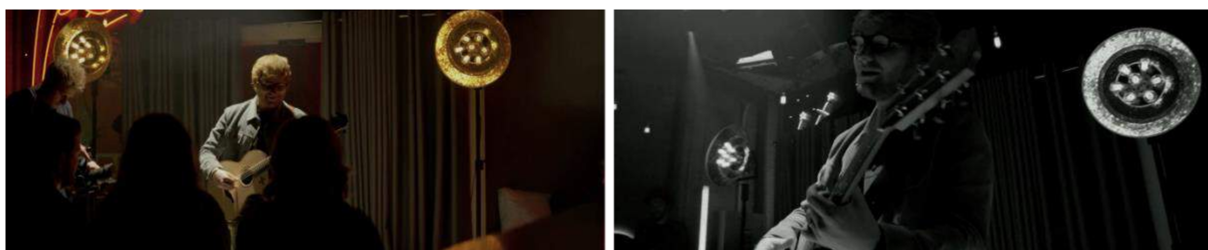

Figure 4. Stills from *Yesterday* (Danny Boyle 2019).
Ed Sheeran performs "Penguins" (03:07 & 03:11).[14]

Sheeran's song performance in *Yesterday* lasts only a few seconds, while Malik's performance extends considerably longer. Multiple reaction shots to Malik's performance expose Sheeran's captivated listening. However, unlike during Malik's song, there is a man on stage with a camera during Sheeran's performance, evidently filming him. Shortly thereafter, the film transitions to a black-and-white handheld camera shot, suggesting that the current shot depicts the footage being simultaneously recorded by the onstage cameraman (see Figure 4).

Many of Ed Sheeran's music videos feature this same aesthetic. In addition to "I See Fire" (2013) and "I Don't Care (Live At Abbey Road)" (2019), the music video for "One" (2014) offers especially noticeable similarities to *Yesterday*'s performance. "One" features Sheeran on stage at Wembley Arena without an audience, and continues with the following similar aspects: his *appearance*, with a tousled hairstyle and casual streetwear; Sheeran's *manner*, largely ignoring the camera and avoiding eye contact, creating the impression that he is performing for himself and not for an audience, quite literally absent in the Wembley Arena of the music video; furthermore, he sings alone and accompanies himself on the guitar, resulting in a song consisting solely of his vocals and a fingerpicking guitar-driven sound. Both the music video and the performance video within the film clearly emphasize Sheeran and his guitar. However, the *setting* differs significantly in scope, an empty Wembley Arena versus a small bar. Nevertheless, the suggestion of a live recording in *Yesterday* and the music video share filmic aesthetics in that both "One" and the film's pseudo-video play in black and white with anthropomorphic camera movements that suggest a handheld camera.

In the musical performances of Sheeran and Malik, we can observe intracompositional self-reference in the form of *mise en abyme* structures, as well as extracompositional metareferences. Both performances involve a performance within a performance, and while Malik's song refers to the pre-existing Beatles song, Ed Sheeran performs his extra-filmic musical persona. As a result, both performances can be described as metaperformances, although the meta level is more overtly pronounced in Sheeran's musical performance when compared to the integration of a pre-existing Beatles track in Malik's.

The impression that Ed Sheeran appears in *Yesterday* as the "real" pop star Ed Sheeran (rather than as an actor or fictional character) arises not only from the fact that Ed Sheeran performs music, but also from the filmic language and use of expressive elements that simulate the aesthetics of Sheeran's music videos. In *Yesterday*, the audience witnesses not only a self-presentation of pop star Ed Sheeran in a fictional universe, but also a portrayal of how Sheeran's media texts are produced, or some staging thereof. This scenario of a media text (the music video) within a media text (the film) corresponds to the laughing cow packaging. The inclusion of the cameraman producing the music video shown further elevates the level of metareferentiality on display. I term this phenomenon *intramedial transmediality*. When transmediality is explored intramedially, it often creates the impression that *different* media texts coexist within a single media text. This is particularly explicit just before the songwriting competition, during Malik's concert in Moscow, when the film screen suddenly splits into three sections, each displaying various mobile phone screens that show Malik going viral on social media (see Figure 5). In this way, intramedial transmediality evokes the simulation of another medium altogether.

Figure 5. Stills from *Yesterday* (Danny Boyle 2019).
Jack Malik performs "Back in the USSR" (00:43 & 00:49).

THE SPICE GIRLS IN BOB SPIERS'S *SPICE WORLD* (1997)

An even more pronounced level of metareference appears in the film *Spice World*, released at the height of the Spice Girls' worldwide fame. Similar to *Help!*, the narrative in *Spice World* functions as part of a marketing strategy for the band, absorbing criticism by integrating it into their marketing machinery (see Fuchs 2002; Leach 2002, pp. 157–162). The film depicts a week in the life of the Spice Girls as they embark on a completely absurd adventure with their Union Jack-emblazoned double-decker tour bus. Right from the start, the film makes clear that it rejects realism, as seen in the unrealistic proportions between their bus's ordinary exterior and oversized interior. In a way, the film is also about the making of films. The Spice Girls are accompanied by a film crew producing a documentary about the band, aiming to showcase the "real" Spice Girls. Additionally, two overzealous Hollywood writers pitch film ideas to the (fictional) manager of the Spice Girls. In the end, the film's storyline and the screenwriters' storyline within the film converge into one narrative. During the screenwriters' pitch for a finale to the manager, the film simultaneously shows that same finale taking place; the film the audience is watching turns out to be the film written by the screenwriters within the film. Essentially, the audience is watching a film where the film itself is conceived within its fictional universe. In terms of metareference, the film highlights the process of creation and production, where the film within the film can be understood as "explicit metareference" (see Wolf 2009, pp. 35–49) because it is clearly situated on a meta level. *Spice World* demonstratively verbalizes and comments on media-related questions that, in turn, refer to the medium being consumed and remind the audience of that medium in itself. All of this underscores the constructed nature of the film and reinforces its status as fiction.

Spice World begins with a performance of the song "Too Much" in the Top of the Pops studios, a venue where the girl band had actually performed multiple times. This opening scene resembles a commonplace television performance by the Spice Girls. The singers seem to portray themselves, or versions of themselves, similar to how they performed in other media texts. They perform their musical personas, appearing as the Spice Girls in a performative context (Top of the Pops) already closely associated with the band. Various clothing and staged details likewise evoke their musical personas and their star image. The film not only uses the same nicknames (Sporty Spice, Ginger Spice, Baby Spice, Posh Spice, Scary Spice) created for them by the Top of the Pops that played a key role in their marketability, but also incorporates set designs and props referencing the members' musical personas. The performance of their musical personas, including the *setting*, *appearance*, and *manner*, constitutes extracompositional metareference in referring to the Spice Girls' extra-filmic live performances. It may not be surprising, then, that the musicians subsequently emphasized that their performances *are* self-presentations during interviews:

> If I'd been playing someone else, I suppose I would have done loads of research into how my character would walk or talk, but because I was playing myself, I just had to go into work and be me. (Emma – Baby Spice, DVD interview)
>
> The character I play is quite close to the real me. [...] A lot of the stories in the film were translated from events that actually happened to us. (Mel B – Scary Spice, DVD Interview)

However, at the same time, the film presents a manifestly fictional narrative. Apart from unrealistic aspects, such as encountering aliens who ask for concert tickets, photos, and autographs, the apparent clarity of the narrative's conspicuously fictitious quality derives from its extreme level of metareferentiality.

Already the film's opening at the Top of the Pops exhibits metareference. The camera switches between shots that one would expect from a television performance and shots demonstrating how this television performance is supposedly being produced. In comparison to the film's finale, this can be considered more of an "implicit metareference", which Wolf explains as follows:

> In contrast to this [explicit metareference], there are more covert devices which may also establish a meta-level and elicit reflections on the ontological status of the text as a medium or artefact without, however, using explicitly metareferential expressions or signs. Rather, they operate on the basis of a salient foregrounding of the medium as such and/or of aspects of given works as artefacts (their production, reception, function etc.). (Wolf 2009, p. 40)

In implicit metareference, the focus is not explicitly on commenting and discussing its own artificiality, but rather on highlighting the medium and the status of the media text as a composed product. One close-up shot of Geri Halliwell (Ginger Spice) offers a case in point. The presence of a moiré pattern over the image indicates that this shot captures not only the picture of the singer but also a screen displaying the image (see Figure 6, left). This recurring *mise en abyme* structure (image/screen within an image/screen) reemphasises the medium itself. Likewise, an additional shot captures the movement of a camera crane, while giving the impression that the shot itself is a result of a camera crane's motion. The scene transitions to a control room, filled with video monitors, and offering glimpses over the shoulders and heads of producers and sound mixers (see Figure 6, right). Indeed, the film sequence transcends a typical Top of the Pops broadcast, delving into the production process of just such a performance within the realm of mass media. Of course, this production itself is likewise staged. Similar to the famous laughing cow on the "La vache qui rit" packaging, the text foregrounds the medium and its status as a composed product, emphasizing its own constructed nature. In this regard, the media text evidences an intramedial transmediality comparable to the example furnished by Ed Sheeran's portrayal in *Yesterday*. The film simulates a TV performance by the band right at the beginning, while the simultaneous opening credits frame the metaperformance as part of a feature film. Along with intracompositional self-reference, there is once again extracompositional metareference at play, the performance within the performance alluding to the band's extra-filmic television appearances.

Figure 6. Stills from *Spice World* (Bob Spiers 1997).
The Spice Girls perform "Too Much" in the Top of the Pops studios (0:02:09 & 0:02:32).[15]

CONCLUSION

Now we can revisit the film *Help!* and bring things full circle. While *Help!* could not match the commercial success of its predecessor, *A Hard Day's Night*, it proved to be culturally significant in paving the way for subsequent aesthetic developments in music video productions (Coppa 2022, pp. 67–92). In one famous scene from the film, John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr are seen skiing in the Austrian Alps while "Ticket to Ride" plays. Lester employs techniques from experimental cinema here, such as rapid cuts, blurriness, peculiarly juxtaposed images, and surreal settings. In contrast to prevalent performance videos of the time, this sequence is not about creating the impression of a believable musical performance. For instance, another shot depicts a grand piano on a snowy mountaintop, with John playing chords at random, while Ringo plays drums in the air (see Figure 7, left). Lester's innovative filmic language and departure from imitating realistic musical performances had such a significant impact on how pop music went on to be filmed that MTV dubbed him "the Father of Music Video". Lester responded with a request for a paternity test (Frenay 2008).

A conventional performance video, the aesthetics of which were also significantly influenced by Lester, appears as part of the opening credits. Here, The Beatles perform the titular song as a televised performance in black and white. The aesthetics resemble musical scenes in *A Hard Day's Night*, with the musical performance captured from multiple camera perspectives simultaneously, then shown in sequence. This performance was televised as a standalone promotional film on the ABC and BBC television networks (Palmer 2020, p. 72). The cinematic integration of an extratextual media text is revealed after a few seconds by colourful darts thrown at The Beatles, exposing the images as existing on a screen within the film (see Figure 7, right). A little later, the film showcases the screen and the projector displayed in the rooms of the antagonistic cult. In this way, the opening highlights the interplay between intracompositional self-reference and extracompositional metareference. Firstly, the performative configuration, as a form of *mise en abyme*, refers to itself (in intracompositional self-reference). If we were sitting in the cinema, we would see a screen on which a projector projects The Beatles' film, which shows a room in which people see a screen on which a projector projects The Beatles' performance. Secondly, The Beatles' musical performance in the film refers to the extratextual TV performances of the band and their musical personas (in extracompositional metareference). Furthermore, we can observe what I have referred to as intramedial transmediality. Initially, the film simulates a Beatles TV performance, only to signal the coexistence of different media texts through the use of colourful darts shortly thereafter.

Figure 7. Stills from *Help!* (Richard Lester 1965).
The performance of the song "Ticket to Ride" (left, 0:40:45);
the TV performance of the song "Help!" (right, 0:03:23).

In his book *Occult Aesthetics*, Kevin Donnelly asserts that sonic and visual synchronization is the essence of sound film – an artificial mechanism that guides the perception of reality:

> The illusion of cinema, and its fundamental perception as something closely related to the real world, has undoubtedly been one of the most fundamental characteristics of the medium. […] The overwhelming majority of films exploit the illusory characteristics of the medium to present a world that on some level is taken to be reality by its audience. The combination of sound and image is a mechanical operation that appears to render a perceptual reality. (Donnelly 2014, p. 4, 7)

By employing the term "occult" to describe the synchronization of sound and image, Donnelly underscores the concealed nature of this mechanical operation. Rick Altman has labelled this implication, that images generate sound, as "sound film's fundamental lie" (Altman 1980, p. 6). The on-screen musical performances by pop stars actively contribute to concealing this artifice, suggesting that the depiction of the human body generates the sounds we hear, akin to these stars' extra-filmic (and typically, well-established) stage performances. These presentations encourage the belief that what is shown relates closely to the "real" world. Simultaneously, they invite us to peer behind the illusionary veils of cinema and the music industry by claiming to reveal what is typically kept hidden – or, *occult*.

As this article demonstrates, the concepts of persona and metareference can be effectively applied within the context of musical performance and transmediality. The selected films serve as diverse examples, yet all exhibit constant oscillation between acknowledging their manufactured nature and asserting their authenticity. Through their setting, appearance, and manner, the musicians appear to perform versions of themselves – their musical personas – while the media presentation of their performances simultaneously and metafictionally (or "metafictitiously") showcase how this self is constructed. These metaperformances exist in a realm that is neither entirely authentic nor purely artificial. Instead, they convey an appearance of authenticity while exposing the artificiality and constructed nature inherent in the purportedly binary relationship between commercialism and authenticity. This complex interplay already presents itself in this study's initial musical example, "And All I Gotta Do Is Act Naturally", where the verbs "do" and "act" intertwine with the concept of "natural" (as opposed to simply "*being* natural"). Pop stars in narrative films captivate audiences in part because of this underlying tension between authentic artificiality and artificial authenticity. Their performances offer us glimpses into both the constructive and deconstructive processes behind illusion and identity. Unlike performances of conventional acting, pop musicians on film demonstrate that playing a role and being oneself do not reflect strictly discrete concepts.

END NOTES

[1] For a comparison of both films and their pop cultural relevance, see Donnelly (2015, pp. 19–30).

[2] See Palmer (2015, pp. 58–95) for the importance of United Artists and Apple Corps as transmedia production companies for The Beatles.

[3] The sinister cult is meant to be funny, but invokes a deeply racist portrayal of South Asians performed by white actors (c.f. Doyle 2019).

[4] The documentary can be found in the Blu-ray edition of *Help!* (Subafilms Ltd. 2007).

[5] The timestamps throughout this article refer to the Blu-ray edition (Subafilms Ltd. 2007).

[6] For a more historical perspective, see Forman (2014) and James (2013). My approach excludes short cameo appearances, e.g., per Palmer's (2023) economic and cultural logic of deliberately brief on-screen appearances by rock stars such as Iggy Pop.

[7] Journalist Dave Schwensen (2014) devotes an entire book to the discussion of this one concert; Philip Auslander also analysed the same (2021, pp. 169–182).

[8] For an analysis of the "screamscape" of Beatlemania in context of gender and cultural rebellion, see Rohr (2017).

[9] For a concise overview of how persona has been employed in music research, see Fairchild & Marshall (2019).

[10] For the concept of genre in popular music, see especially Holt (2007).

[11] By expanding upon this idea, we arrive at the concept of "metametaperformance", or, when a musical pop star acts as a filmic character involving the performance of a song that conveys their musical persona, wherein that song portrays a character through the lyrics. A case in point: in *Dancer in the Dark* (Lars von Trier 2000), Björk plays the fictional character of Selma, and within that filmic character, Björk performs her music and her musical persona while simultaneously embodying a fictional entity through song lyrics that refer to the fictional Selma (see Rudolph 2020).

[12] The sequence can be viewed at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=McP9HNGtfMw>.

[13] For more on pre-existing music in film, see Rudolph (2023; 2022).

[14] The time references in Figure 4 and 5 refer to the official clip on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=McP9HNGtfMw>.

[15] The time references refer to the DVD edition by Universal Studios (2000).

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"POP/STARS": THE PERSONAS OF K/DA, TRANSMEDIA MARKETING, AND RIOT GAMES MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

In 2018, American developer Riot Games introduced their new musical venture – K-pop virtual band K/DA – through a live augmented reality performance opening the League of Legends World Championship Finals. The band's first single – POP/STARS – quickly became a hit even outside of gaming circles, leading the developers to stage a follow-up in 2020, when the band released a full EP titled ALL OUT*. This article examines the evolution of the virtual band and its members as virtual characters, personas, and performers, at the intersection of discourses surrounding popular music, videogames, and hallyu.*

KEY WORDS

Videogames; League Of Legends; Persona; K-pop; Virtual Band

INTRODUCTION

Ahri is seen turning on the camera and sitting down to talk to her fans directly in an Instagram Reel: "Hi everyone!" she says, waving and looking directly into the camera. She is wearing a black ensemble of what appears to be a short skirt, and a long puff sleeve shirt with sheer detail, and a high collar with a bow. Her ears (she is a fox-like vastaya[1]) are poking out of her blonde hair with dip-dyed pink tips, and she is wearing three lines of shimmering make-up on each cheek, suggesting whiskers. "I hope you're enjoying the record and I hope you connected with *I'll Show You*," she says affably. She is referring to her most recent single from K/DA's 2020 *ALL OUT* EP. "Keep showing the world what you're made of and keep showing us those beautiful voices of yours. Love you all!" (kda_music 2020) She makes a hand heart and blows a kiss to the Blades (the collective name for K/DA fans). The moment feels equally warm and calculated – it is animated, after all. This brief social media video is only a small part of the content constructing the personas of the virtual band's members at the time of their return, a complex transmedia machine devised by game developer Riot Games to promote and complement the *League of Legends* universe as it has expanded beyond a wildly successful free-to-play MOBA (multiplayer online battle arena) videogame into a multimedia empire including additional games, a Netflix television series, online comics, and of course music. This article explores the evolution of virtual band K/DA from their 2018 debut at the Opening Ceremony of the *League of Legends* World Championship Finals to their 2020 follow-up EP, and how they both complicate and illuminate ideas surrounding musical personas and performance.

RIOT GAMES, *LEAGUE OF LEGENDS*, AND RIOT GAMES MUSIC

League of Legends was originally launched in 2009 as a free-to-play MOBA, and has since gained significant popularity and become one of the largest global competitive scenes, culminating in annual World Championships. Game studies scholars Consalvo and Paul note that *League of Legends* "was envisioned as a continually growing and changing online game that would be free for everyone, and entirely funded by optional microtransactions." (2019, p. 102) The model proved remarkably successful, and as they note, the game became "possibly one of the most influential titles in normalizing the free-to-play game model for core gamers and the games media." (Consalvo & Paul 2019, p. 101). Beyond the legitimacy that *League of Legends* bestowed on free-to-play games that Consalvo and Paul rightly note, the game's popularity and commercial success are also inextricably linked to its constant evolution and Riot's particularly savvy approach to monetisation and marketing.

Although constantly evolving and developing new content, 2014 marked a shift in Riot's strategy for the game, as the team announced a narrative turn in *League of Legends*'s storytelling. As Tommy Gnox explains in a development blog titled "Exploring Runeterra":

> At a very broad level, we've decided to push League's story beyond its original focus on explaining in-game action and forge a new narrative path for Runeterra – a world in which the factions and champions we all know and love have full freedom to grow, travel, and kick *** on a worldwide scale. From champion interactions to bios to events (and beyond), we aim to expand the scope of League's story and pursue a more dynamic and wide-ranging world fit for the outsized capabilities and personalities of our champions. (2014)

Arguably, this move had really already begun musically in 2013, when Toa Dunn, who would become Head of Riot Games Music & Entertainment, began his role as Producer (Music Development), and would spearhead a number of areas of musical development, including music videos and live performances. In the same year, Riot's first music video – *Get Jinxed* – launched, introducing the eponymous new champion who would also become a central character in the Riot Games co-produced Netflix series *Arcane* (2021). It is clear from these developments that the growth and associated marketing focused specifically on the game's champions – playable characters with associated roles and skills – and their "outsized capabilities and personalities". It is also clear that music becomes an important part of these transmedia marketing endeavours, both in terms of music videos and live performances, with Imagine Dragons providing a notable video for, and live performance at, the 2014 World Championships.

From 2013 onwards, music videos become an important means of dissemination and promotion of *League of Legends*. The champion-focused videos produced can focus on a number of different aspects of the promotional machine: they can promote the World Championships (particularly the World Championship Finals), like 2018's *RISE*, they can promote particular champions and events, like 2013's *Get Jinxed*,[2] or they can promote particular champions and associated music, like 2023's *HEARTSTEEL – PARANOIA*. Additionally, Riot Games Music has produced long-form video playlists titled 'Sessions' of what they describe as 'creator-safe' music which contain a large number of tracks that can be streamed over platforms like Twitch without the fear of copyright infringement. These are also centred around specific champions but generally feature much more minimal animation. Overall, these music videos are distinct from other trailers and cinematics in that they focus on individual champions, and feature songs that are (at least originally) not featured in the game itself. At the same time, these videos fulfil the same function of promoting the game, and specifically champions and skins (in-game

customization options that change the appearance, movements, and sound design of champions), the primary means of monetisation for the game.

In the case of K/DA and other musical endeavours, the music itself provides a transmedial bridge between the videos and the game through the sound effects of the band-themed skins – an ideal monetisation tool. Here, authenticity needs to be translated into its game form, which is “much more about how gameplay matches the player’s expectations” and can often be about the “hard-to-describe feeling of whether the various components of the game appear to form a coherent, integrated whole” (Lind 2023, p. 5). Erika Haas describes how in the case of *League of Legends,* this means that the sound design should fulfil the following functions: “It should tell you how abilities work. Hard hitting spells and attacks should sound hard. Stuns should make players feel like they’ve been caught in a bear trap. More importantly, they shouldn’t detract from gameplay” (Riot Cashmiir 2020). The translation of the music into sound effects thus entails a variety of considerations – it doesn’t need to just reflect and at times directly cite the music, but it also requires design cohesion across the champions that are part of the event, cohesion in terms of previous iterations of the sound effects in terms of previous skins, context of gameplay and the champions themselves, and even playstyle, as sounds that were “really satisfying… in isolation” may become “overwhelming” when examining how players main (play as their primary/most used character) these champions in an actual play session (Riot Cashmiir 2020).

Ultimately, music acts as a throughline from the extensive marketing ventures to the gameplay itself, and balancing authenticity as part of all of these domains and discourses is crucial.

HALLYU AND K/DA

By 2018, Riot Games Music had experimented with a variety of virtual bands and artists, including metal band Pentakill and DJ Sona, as well as AR performances like the 2017 World Championship Finals in the “Bird’s Nest” stadium in Beijing, in which an Elder Dragon graced the screens of millions of online viewers as an AR addition to the performance taking place live on stage. It was, however, the combination of all of these elements with the added cultural capital of Hallyu (the Korean Wave) that would expand the developers’ reach far beyond gaming culture through the first live appearance of K/DA at the 2018 Opening Ceremony of the League of Legends World Championships Finals in Incheon, South Korea.

The host country – South Korea – plays an important part in the success of both this initial K/DA performance, and the band overall. On the one hand, it has historically played an important role in the development and popularisation of esports. As Taylor notes:

> When you talk to North Americans and Europeans involved in pro gaming about the development of e-sports, it does not take long for South Korea to come up in conversation. […] South Korea is seen as a kind of promised pro gaming land. Quite often infused with a utopic-inflected "techno-Orientalism": tales are told about young men who have ascended to the level of national hero by playing computer games. The stories circle around the rise of a professional scene whose players have fan bases comparable to that of American mainstream sports stars. They hold contracts and sponsorship deals, wear the latest in sport gear from Nike and Adidas, and play in competitions that regularly draw thousands and are broadcast on major television channels. (Taylor 2012, p. 17)

Jin argues that this is at least in part because esports specifically, defined by a mass spectatorship, is a phenomenon that began in South Korea (Jin 2020). Both Jin and Rea credit some of this popularisation to the early development and adoption of high-speed internet, as well as early institutionalisation and mainstream broadcasting (Jin 2020). Furthermore, through the growth of PC bangs (Internet cafés), formation of professional leagues as early as 1997, and the launch of StarCraft (Blizzard 1998), esports became a cultural phenomenon in South Korea and beyond (Jin 2020). As Rea notes, "not only have esports had a significant impact on Korean popular culture, Korea has also influenced the development of global esports" (2016, p. 22). *League of Legends* itself has a large following in South Korea as an esport and the latter is home to one of four franchised regional leagues across the globe (League of Legends Champions Korea).

At the same time, South Korea is of course the homeland of K-pop. Itself a global phenomenon, K-pop is a significant cultural touchstone. As Lee argues, the term K-pop "cannot be considered a symbol that captures the substance of Korean popular music in its full dimensions" but has "essentially meant idol groups' dance music in the global topography" (2017, p. 172). *The Cambridge Companion to K-Pop* similarly focuses on 'idol-centered pop music that has emerged since the 1990s, primarily featuring young performers for multimedia entertainment catering to the younger generation of fans and consumers (Kim 2023, p.4). In other words, the term is used here not to refer to the entirety of Korean popular music, but to a specific genre that has gained international popularity and can be defined not only musically, but also in terms of specific industrial practices, as well as specific target audiences. Koo and Sung argue that the global rise of K-pop as we know it "is easily traceable to origins in Taiwan, from which it spread to other Chinese-speaking areas" (2016, p. 208). While it is undoubtedly a transnational sensation and a form of soft power supported by governmental policies in the same way as esports, Lee does caution that "it would be an exaggeration to say that K-pop has had a presence substantial enough to create an upheaval in the international pop music market" (2016, p. 171). Jung-Min Mina Lee, however, argues that 2017 ushered in a new phase in which "K-pop has experienced a heightened level of global attention and popularity," marked by BTS winning the Billboard Social Artists Award (Lee 2023, p. 62). The genre is thus more popular than ever.

The two phenomena – esports and K-pop – stand under the broader banner of Hallyu or the "Korean wave." Originally, Hallyu was "a term coined by Chinese journalists in the late 1990s that punned the pronunciation of two characters for Korea (韓) and wave (流) with another compound expression, 'cold current' (寒流)" (Kim 2011, p. 1) and described the popularity of K-drama and later other Korean cultural products in China. In 1999, the term begins to be used by the Korean government, whereby "Korea's Ministry of Culture and Tourism produced and distributed a music album entitled 'Hallyu-Songs from Korea' to promote Korean popular music overseas" (Hong et al. 2019, p. 113). It has since grown to encapsulate many aspects of Korean culture, including film, skincare, foods, and of course, both esports and K-pop. The glocal nature of the phenomena, their transnational popularity, and their wide audiences made it both natural and exceptionally shrewd for Riot Games to draw on the cultural capital of Hallyu in the development and launch of K/DA as a virtual K-pop group in 2018, building both on their existing esports fanbase, and potentially drawing in new audiences from K-pop fandom.

VIRTUALITY AND K-POP

Virtual pop stars and pop groups are not in themselves a novelty. While Zaborowski argues that "in the digital music age, it could be argued that all idols are virtual" (2016, p. 111), Conner

looks at those performers that are more explicitly virtual, arguing that they have been a staple of popular culture since at least the 1950s, whereby:

> the first virtual pop star many North Americans encountered was a squeaky-voiced, animated rodent trio – an audio gimmick that, coupled with some cartoon imagery on a series of record covers and a resulting prime-time television show, evolved into a global and long-lasting animated music brand: Alvin and the Chipmunks. (2016, p. 132)

K/DA can thus be situated within a long-standing tradition of virtual popstars, from the carefully curated world of *Gorillaz*, created as a critique of manufactured pop music, to the crowdsourced embrace of artificiality that vocaloids like Hatsune Miku represent. K/DA have a team of artists and musicians behind them – many of whom discuss their work publicly in promotional development material (like Dev Doodles and blog posts) – as well as an interchangeable array of performers lending them their voices and movements, aligning them with other virtual idol bands (e.g. Eternity). Their identities are constructed through transmedia storytelling, whereby “a transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole” (Jenkins 2006, pp. 97–98), and can also be seen as drawing from the Japanese practice of “media mix” which entails “creating, marketing, circulating and engaging with cultural goods serially across media types” (Steinberg 2023, p. 1). The creation and evolution of K/DA occurs across these various media, each of which offers “a point of entry into the franchise as a whole” (Jenkins 2006, p. 98) while also ultimately shaping their pop personas through “a vast network of meaningful texts and events” that “operate in relation to each other in a complex interplay” (Hansen 2019, pp. 524–525).

Furthermore, the development of the band draws on the K-pop band model and broader Japanese and Korean idol traditions. Zaborowski describes Japanese idols as follows:

> Although there seems to be no set definition of aidoru, the lines between “idols” and “non-idols” are most frequently drawn around the portrayed persona (idols are pure, down-to-earth, and easy to relate to), affiliated agency and management style (idols often form groups and are banned from dating, and their image remains heavily controlled), music style (idols sing mostly bubbly pop) and abilities (idols often possess no special singing talents; more valued is the effort they put in, and their proximity to the audience). (Zaborowski 2016, p. 114)

While Korean idols diverge somewhat from this definition, including in terms of musical style, sometimes they exacerbate elements of the Japanese idol tradition, particularly in their infamous regimented training before groups are launched by their agencies. As Lee argues, the “exclusive entertainment production system” of K-pop idols is one of the main mechanisms through which cultural capital is reproduced (Lee 2017, p. 176). The importance of the band structure in K-pop also cannot be underestimated; while fulfilling different roles and providing different sources of appeal is typical of many manufactured pop bands, K-pop appears to be particularly regimented, with performers selected to play specific roles within a band structure based on specific skills (vocal abilities, dancing skills, and language proficiency for instance). The development of K/DA follows many of these generic conventions, including the crafting of their portrayed personas, the musical style, and the band structure.

In a “Dev Doodles” video, Riot Games staff explain that they started the development of the band with the K-pop genre in mind specifically because of the location of the 2018 World Championships. They also drew on a previous skin that was previously created for champion

Ahri, titled 'Pop Star', which led to her becoming the leader of a a girl band. The rest of the champions who would become band members were then picked to fit the genre and feel of the music, but also to fulfil certain roles within both the band and the game. As creative lead for the POP/STARS video Patrick Morales describes, "one of the things people love about pop groups is that the well-defined archetypes make it easy for people to find a favorite" (in Won and Oak 2018).[3] In K-Pop, these personas are carefully constructed both individually and in putting together idol groups. On an individual level, Choi describes how performing techniques are honed through training regimens, and how, "based on each trainee's personality and talents, the company assigns them a role as a vocalist, rapper, or dancer." (Choi, 2023, p. 143) Then, in the creation of groups, a 'concept' is set by the producers (Choi, 2023, p. 143) and this dictates musical and dance style, costuming, and the general creative direction of the new group. The characteristics of idol trainees are then taken into consideration in the selection of the best personas to fill the roles within a specific concept (Choi 2023, p. 150). In the case of K/DA, as Laura 'Nusliful' Die (K/DA Brand Manager) explains, they moved away from the more 'bubble-gum' style and drew on what she describes at the "trend in empowered women that all feel really strong" in K-pop (League of Legends 2019). Known as 'girl crush,' this particular concept features young women who "present a fierce, strong, sexy, independent, trendy 'badass' image" and "are known for their ferocity and individualistic characters who empower and inspire female fans across the globe" (Oh 2023, p. 104). Therefore, four virtual personas were created as alternate versions of in-game champions: Ahri, Akali, Evelynn, and Kai'SA. Within the band, they perform traditional roles: Ahri is the leader and main vocalist, Evelynn is the lead vocal and offers a contrasting personality (mysterious and dark to counterbalance Ahri's relatability and optimism), Akali is the main rapper, and Kai'Sa is the main dancer. This is similar to other K-pop bands; in BLACKPINK, for instance, Jennie is the main rapper, Rosé is the main vocalist, Lisa is the main dancer, and Jisoo is lead vocalist. The musicians that play K/DA in this original 2018 incarnation also represent the world of K-pop through Soyeon (소연) and Miyeon (미연), of the at the time relatively new band (G)I-dle ((여자)아이들), but combine it with the world of American pop through the addition of Madison Beer and Jaira Burns. The music draws on 'girl crush' K-pop girl bands like BLACKPINK and ITZY and features lyrics in English and Korean, with a K-pop inspired choreography.

The development of the band, the members' personas, and later their individual narratives, are thus deeply rooted in generic conventions and build clear musical (in terms of the 'girl crush' sound and lyrical content, for instance), institutional (in terms of both the institutional practices used, and employing artists from the K-pop idol system), and socio-cultural (in terms of the narratives employed and relationship to fandom) connections to K-pop as a genre. Ultimately, as Auslander notes, "our social experience of music is radically incomplete if we do not have a sense of what kind of music we are experiencing" (Auslander, 2006, pp. 105–106). The signifiers of K-pop – not only the music itself, but numerous elements from the launch of an accompanying dance video to the branding of official light sticks (a staple of idol pop groups) – therefore play an important part in how the band is perceived by its audience and how the music is experienced. Furthermore, as Fairchild and Marshall note:

> Genre and music clearly inform our conceptualization of what a musical performance means. It provides context and socially built signifying structures that identify what might be called a persona range; but genre indexically points to the way that music is also a commodity form in its capacity to identify why an audience would be drawn to a performance or purchase, download or stream a recording. (Fairchild & Marshall 2019, p. 8)

Ultimately, K-pop provides the context and structures that frame K/DA/s performances, acts as an important factor in their commercial success, and is particularly significant in their further development as virtual performers, starting with the band's debut in 2018.

THE PERSONAS AND PERFORMERS OF K/DA

The band's launch entailed the live performance of their first single POP/STARS at the *League of Legends* World Championship finals, the simultaneous release of the video for the song, and a choreography video launched three days later. The live online performance featured the four physically present musicians performing alongside the AR (Augmented Reality) versions of the characters they were playing on a large outdoor stage. The countdown already introduced the four characters and their new incarnations before the real-life performers joined the stage. Throughout the performance itself, the two K/DAs mirror each others' choreography, with the AR characters centre stage and demonstrating their supernatural abilities as they teleport and spark, while also wearing visible microphone headsets. They are thus not simply characters on a screen, not simple visual accompaniment, but foregrounded as performers who are singing and dancing in front of an audience of millions.

In contrast, the music video features the characters performing in real-life everyday locations that diverge from the original fantasy setting of the game. As head of Riot Girl Music Toa Dunn describes it:

> Looking at pop music, artists often tap into this element of fantasy to elevate the aesthetic and storytelling of their art, right? It's what gives musicians this very sort of mythic quality, right, it makes them feel mysterious, special, and timeless. K/DA is unique in the sense that we already come from a place of fantasy, they're characters from a game – these are ninjas, demons, and assassins – so where do you go there? The answer was actually pretty simple – you go the other direction. You find ways to root them in reality. You find ways to make them feel believable as an actual pop group. (Dunn in Purslow 2021)

Such instances include assassin Akali on a subway train and nine-tailed fox Ahri in a laundromat. They are not stripped of their supernatural powers, but they are also grounded in a version of reality – not ours, nor that of Runeterra, in which *League of Legends* is set – but that of what Dunn would describe as the Riot "music universe" (Purslow 2021). This is the universe of personas made literal, albeit virtual. In other words, what Dunn does not acknowledge is that rooting the larger-than-life persona of a pop star in some kind of reality, of conferring authenticity and relatability, is in fact an essential touchstone of all popular music (if not all music). As Moore argues, authenticity is "ascribed, not inscribed" and this process occurs "from within a cultural and, thus, historicised position." (2002, p. 210) He also acknowledges that it can, and has been ascribed to a wide variety of genres beyond his specific focus of largely rock and contemporary folk (2002). Here, what Moore describes as "authenticity of execution," or succeeding in "accurately representing the ideas of another, embedded within a tradition of performance" (2002, p. 218) is developed through the multiple connections built to K-pop as a genre, while grounding the characters in 'reality' and then developing them as personas can be seen as an important step in conferring both "authenticity of expression," whereby "an originator (composer, performer) succeeds in conveying the impression that his/ her utterance is one of integrity, that it represents an attempt to communicate in an unmediated form with an audience" (ibid., p. 214) as well as "authenticity of experience," which entails "conveying the impression to a listener that that listener's experience of life is being validated, that the music is 'telling it like it is' for them." (ibid., p. 220) In other words, as these characters become personas, they are also able to confer the impression of both expressing themselves and connecting to

others, both contributing to the perception of their performances as authentic. Moreover, the work of developing these personas and the sense of authenticity is made explicit as the band evolves, as exemplified in the band's 2020 return.

The 2020 campaign developed over social media channels and a series of webcomics titled *K/DA Harmonies*, each focusing on one of the virtual performers as well as guest Seraphine, before the launch of the band's first EP *ALL OUT* in November 2020. Following the pre-release of single *The Baddest*, the EP included the single *More*, featuring all members of the group as well as three singles attributed to individual members – Evelynn's *Villain*, Ahri's *I'll Show You*, and Akali's *Drum Go Dum*.

Each performer is developed both individually and in relation to the other performers in the band. Ahri is portrayed as a strong and tough leader. In the first issue of the comics (Yichao and HD of Rainforest Culture 2020a), we see the band in the recording studio, and Ahri – ever the perfectionist – is making the group record the chorus of one of their tracks over and over again. It is heavily implied that this has been going on for quite some time. The fifth issue of the comics (Yichao and HD of Rainforest Culture 2020e) cuts back to this moment before going into a flashback to 2015, where Ahri is already a pop star (referencing her earlier skin), but unhappy with the lack of control she has over her music and her image. It then shows her meeting with Evelynn in 2016 and planning to break her contract to start her own group. *I'll Show You*, her single from the EP also builds on this narrative of finding her voice and becoming a leader. Authenticity and strength are central themes in this track, as she sings "I'll show you what I'm made of/ Rise to the occasion/ Got fears but I'll face them." The video plays with imagery of mirrors and glass – of seeing oneself and breaking through – while also using a significant amounts of photographs from Ahri's past. As Moore notes, this "commercial/authentic polarity is illusory, since all mass-mediated music is subject to commercial imperatives, but what matters to listeners is whether such subjection appears to be accepted, resisted, or negotiated with, by those to whom they are listening" (2002, p. 218). Thus, the video positions Ahri as an ambitious artist holding on to her authentic self (represented by the image of her as a schoolgirl) despite the self-doubt and the pressures of the music industry, resisting these 'commercial imperatives.'

Evelynn remains mysterious in both her comic and her video, and her appearances outside of the two are minimal. Her issue of the comics (Yichao and HD of Rainforest Culture 2020c) actually follows one of her fans waiting for a new K/DA single. The readers see Evelynn from the perspective of her fan, experiencing their 2018 debut, then reading paparazzi snippets about her, and finally seeing her sports car (license plate DIVA) and following it to a night club. Evelynn and the fan then have a brief moment together after the former is seen to refuse an offer to leave the band. The idea of authenticity is once again reinforced: she is both an artist who refuses to prioritise commercial gain, and truly loyal to the other members of the band, as well as their fans. This is not only "authenticity of expression," in that her integrity and her support of other women are emphasised, but also "authenticity of experience" in that the comic emphasises this "place of belonging" created for the Blades (the fans of K/DA) (Moore, 2002, p. 2019). On the other hand, her single 'Villain' and accompanying video are the least rooted in real-world (or persona-world) narratives. As she sings "Imma straight up villain/ Straight up villain/ Yeah not feeling/ Yeah no feeling" the imagery of the video plays into traditional tropes suggesting danger including writhing snakes, flames and enveloping smoke, and dark, distorted spaces devoid of any human presence.

Kai'Sa's comic (Yichao and HD of Rainforest Culture 2020d) focuses on her passion for dance. It explores her loneliness as a child who travels a lot due to her father's work and finds

refuge in dance. When she chooses to forego a place at a prestigious ballet institute to form her own studio, she is also discovered by the rest of the band, and she finds a home in K/DA where she can both find her own way and be part of something. Her track – *Drum Go Dum* – is also accompanied by the only live action video from K/DA's catalogue (that is not explicitly a choreography video). With an onomatopoeic chorus reminiscent of BLACKPINK's *뚜두뚜두 (DDU-DU DDU-DU)*, the song also features a video that focuses almost entirely on the performance of Korean-American dancer Bailey Sok, interspersed with flashes of Kai'Sa's face, suggesting her presence throughout.

Akali is perhaps the least developed of the virtual performers. Her comic (Yichao and HD of Rainforest Culture 2020a) focuses on her support of Seraphine as well as her relationship with both the other members of K/DA and True Damage – Riot Games's follow-up band for the 2019 World Championship Finals, of which Akali was also a member. While she doesn't have a dedicated solo song, she is credited as one of the main producers of the music, and she also features in a Genius video explaining the lyrics to the main single from the EP – *More* (Genius 2020). Here, Akali deconstructs lyrics like "Akali that girl/ Kali go grr", explaining how she channels her feelings into her flow. Confident but also self-conscious, she leans into the same narrative of self-assurance, authenticity, and striving for success.

The narratives here clearly follow a neoliberal fantasy of pop success while simultaneously drawing on what Epstein and Turnbull describe as the "ambivalent empowerment" of K-Pop gender ideologies (2013, p. 315) explicitly referenced by Die in relation to the development of the group, as well as a 'girlboss' version of the American Dream. The original four performers who played K/DA in 2018 themselves embody the duality of American and Korean pop music narratives: both Madison Beer and Jaira Burns began their careers by uploading covers to YouTube before finding mainstream fame, while Soyeon and Miyeon are members of Korean pop group (G)I-dle formed by talent agency Cube Entertainment, and are known for their involvement in the writing and production of their own music in a way that is uncommon for K-pop groups. The ambivalence (and perhaps irony) here is in no way hidden: the real performers are women ostensibly in control of their own careers and artistic visions, and so are the virtual performers of K/DA; at the same time, K/DA remains a manufactured virtual band, representing the vision and corporate interests of Riot Games, a transnational corporation with a history of gender discrimination and sexual harassment allegations (McCracken and Negron 2018). Like other aspects of K/DA, however, this is just a more exaggerated version of relationships and contradictions that are inevitable at the intersection of two creative industries – music and videogames – that are historically exploitative, and particularly exploitative of women. These complex industrial and socio-cultural issues underpin the development of the virtual characters, personas and performers at play, revealing the relationships between their construction (or rather deconstruction) and broader contexts.

Character – Persona – Performer

The combined virtual and pre-existing nature of the four members of K/DA result in a unique deconstruction of the relationship between characters, personas, and performers. In other words, each K/DA band member is explicitly crafted as a persona from the start, as "a performed presence that is neither an overtly fictional character nor simply equivalent to the performer's 'real' identity." (Auslander 2006, p. 102) Auslander's description is literally realised in the development of the band as fictional characters are refashioned into explicit personas – musical personalities fitting into a clear K-pop mould – before real performers are chosen to fit

the personas, often with additional performers to elaborate on the multiple facets of the personas.

The 2018 live performance already presents a complex layering of performers, personas, and characters. The real-life artists and virtual characters on one side, and twin sets of personas on the other (the personas of the real-life performers, and those of the virtual ones), or rather at the intersection of the two – two iterations drawing on a web of cultural capital spanning K-pop, American pop, videogames, and esports. Although Frith argues that "*all* live performance involves both spontaneous action and the playing of a role" (1999, p. 207) it is evident that because of the nature of the performance and its pre-recorded elements, the playing of a role is foregrounded here. The 2020 follow-up, however, extrapolates virtual performers from the virtual personas. Auslander argues that "musical performance […] is a form of self-presentation, again with the understanding that some presentations of self may be perceived as personally expressive while others may not" (Auslander 2016, p. 103). In this context, however, the self that is being presented is itself manufactured *from* the persona and thus is entirely "personally expressive" in a way that is perhaps more coherent than with traditional forms of performance.

This evolution in which virtual performers and then virtual personas are extrapolated from and added to the initial *League of Legends* characters for a complex layering effect also required the involvement of an audience. Auslander focuses significantly on audience's investment in personas, going so far as to describe audiences as cocreators of personas in general (Auslander 2006, p. 115). The 2020 campaign reflects not only the importance of audiences in this process, but particularly that of fandom as participatory culture (Jenkins 2006). Much of the preparatory campaign before the launch of the *ALL OUT* EP focuses on fan-produced covers of K/DA's POP/STARS, cosplay, and dance videos, shared all over the band's social media accounts with appropriate hashtags. The importance of fans is also emphasised throughout the band's own transmedia marketing materials, from Ahri's address to the fans explored at the beginning of this paper, to Evelynn's comic and its explicit focus on a fictional fan and their relationship to her. Moreover, the guest star on single *More*, Seraphine, is herself initially depicted as a fan of the band playing covers of their music, building into convergence narratives relevant both to contemporary music discourses and videogame discourses.

At the same time, the campaign also includes what Auslander (drawing on Goffman) describes as "dramatization":

> making visible work which goes into a particular routine that the audience would not otherwise see, so that the performer can get credit for it; and also with presenting an idealized image to the audience (in this context, idealized means conforming to the audience's existing expectations of a certain kind of person). (Auslander 2006, p. 111)

The work of both real and fictional performers is made visible in this way in every performance, but labour is also further emphasised throughout social media, as well as the *K/DA Harmonies* series of webcomics. In the latter, the framing device for the series shows the K/DA members literally at work in the recording studio, while Instagram and Twitter posts, for instance, show them physically training, making appearances at fashion shows, posing for advertising campaigns (including the Riot-Louis Vuitton collaboration) or tired in the dance studio. As Frith notes, "far from wanting the means of production to be concealed, the popular audience wants to see how much has gone into its entertainment. Performance as labor is a necessary part of the popular aesthetic." (1999, p. 207) This clearly remains true of relatable virtual performers

as much as real-life ones, and working hard to get to the top is an essential part of each of the members' narratives.

Furthermore, the foregrounding of labour also plays into discourses surrounding authenticity, which nearly all of the marketing material emphasises, particularly the comic series. Setting aside the irony of manufactured performers always discussing the importance of being their true selves, this particular flavour of authenticity is also complicated by the contemporary blurring of the lines between public and private. As Hansen notes, "the mobility of pop artists across various spheres of popular culture highlights their role as celebrities – public figures – as much as musicians" (2019, p. 511) where "public personae are commonly characterized by, and promoted as, a display of the private" (ibid., p. 512). Discourses surrounding K-pop specifically focus on both labour and authenticity as exemplified through the importance of talent shows to the idol industry, in which it is not only the elements of competition and effort that are emphasised, but also the contestants' backstories as displays of the private which "serve as evidence of [their] authenticity." (Maliangkay 2023, p. 12) The personas of idols are carefully constructed even outside of talent shows, where "it is common for companies to control the idols' behavior, relationships, and online activities, especially in their early career before they have a fan base" (Choi, 2023, p. 149). Fairchild and Marshall describe the "transformation of the public self" as a "central impetus behind the emergence of persona studies" (2019, p. 8) and thus these converging registers are integral to the discussion of K/DA as both virtual performers and virtual personas, especially in the context of K-pop.

Overall, the journey from character to performer reveals important aspects of contemporary discourses surrounding popular music, from the fashionable but potentially problematic female empowerment discourses in contemporary pop, to the traditional importance of discourses surrounding authenticity as well as labour.

Conclusion: Seraphine

K/DA were gradually developed into fully realised performer-persona constructs over a number of years, themselves representing the same evolutionary principle as *League of Legends* itself. Virtual performer Seraphine, however, appears fully realised as she joins the group for their 2020 single *More*.

Seraphine was initially launched as a Chinese-American virtual influencer with a presence on social media platforms including Twitter and Instagram. Here she primarily shared covers of a variety of artists including K/DA themselves, but also shared selfies and other images, reshared the music of others, and talked about her mental health struggles. In her issue of the *Harmonies* series of comics (Yichao and HD of Rainforest Culture 2020b), she is presented as working in café while recording music in her bedroom when she is discovered by K/DA and invited to collaborate on the single. Developed as a virtual influencer and performer before revealed as persona and character, Seraphine takes the virtual pop star even further, synthesising all of the narratives of the other members of K/DA. Played primarily by Chinese pop star Lexie Liu, she made her first live appearance at the 2020 *League of Legends* World Championship Final in Shanghai.

As in previous live appearances for the finals, the song included lyrics in Mandarin as a nod to the event's host country that also happens to be a savvy marketing decision that can potentially expand the reach of the band's music. China, like South Korea, also plays an important, albeit more controversial role in contemporary esports, not only as a "contender" as Taylor notes (2012, p. 17), but as the home of Riot Games' parent company Tencent, the largest videogame producer in the world and a stakeholder in a large number of transnational game

companies. Furthermore, the conglomerate has also been the focus of a variety of controversies, perhaps most notably a number of controversies surrounding censorship (outside of their Chinese operation) and surveillance (as described in the complaint filed by Citizen Power Initiatives for China v. Tencent America, 2021). In this context, the fact that Seraphine is explicitly described as Chinese-American rather than Chinese raises questions about not only what virtual performers reveal, but what they can obscure.

Ultimately, virtual pop stars controlled by transnational corporations inevitably represent those corporations' interests and not necessarily those of their audiences or those of the real-life artists contributing to the art that those virtual pop stars put out. At the intersection of commercial and political interests, it is difficult not to question what can happen when real-life performers are interchangeable behind the personas of virtual stars.

END NOTES

[1] A chimeric species in the universe of League of Legends.

[2] Thompson notes that World Championship promotional videos are distinct in the landscape of Riot Games Music videos in that they feature well-known esports players as well as in-game champions, illustrating what he describes as a 'projective identity' (2019). Drawing on the work of James Paul Gee (2003), Thompson examines how these 'projective identities,' which exist between the esports athletes' 'real-life identities' and their chosen in-game champions (the champions they 'main' or primarily choose to play), the 'virtual identities,' are depicted in videos like *RISE* (2018).

[3] Product lead for the K/DA Skins Janelle Jimenez also noted that their roles in the game were also important "from a product perspective," as ultimately the specific skins that are part of the project are an important part of the monetisation of the game, and multiple roles mean that they can be sold to a wider variety of players.

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STARS, ANTI-STARS, ANTI-STAR-STARS: TRANSMEDIA TEXTS AND CONTEXTS OF POPULAR MUSIC AND MEDIA. SOME THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of stars and celebrities in media cultures – and especially in popular music cultures – seems to be omnipresent. At the same time, there is an astounding lack of analysis and research on these media personalities and personas, and international celebrity studies only recently a developing new field. Similarly, these kinds of observations are still very rare especially in German sociology as well as communication, media, culture and popular music studies. In this article, I therefore want to concentrate on the foundations of studying stars and celebrities within the attention economies by undertaking a theoretical transmedia-cultural framing of media personas and suggesting a typology. This ensuing typology of stars, anti-stars, and anti-star stars – especially within popular music cultures – demonstrates how stars and celebrities and their quantities and qualities of success and peer-group specific values coming form programs of (media and music) culture can serve as persona-seismographs of socio-cultural change between tradition and innovation.

KEY WORDS

Stars; Celebrities; Popular Music; Transmedia Culture; Personas

INTRODUCTION

“[There is] no culture that does not live from – and in – the regard of its members.” (Franck 2005, p. 12)[1]

It begins on an amateur level and yet it is often highly ritualised in private, interpersonal communication. It is then translated into the professionalised, public social networks and mass communications transmedia and particularly advertising. We are speaking of promotion, regard, vying for attention – captured succinctly in the quotation above by Georg Franck, the Viennese theorist of architecture and spatial planning. But Franck’s observation provides far more than just an “eye catcher” for an academic discussion about “eye catching”. Apart from the regard for regard, the attention for attention, Franck’s words encompass clearly a central link between culture and society: culture operates on the members of a society. At the same time, these individuals are dependent on culture in order to orient themselves in society. This reciprocal connection is increasingly directed by those media and platforms which increasingly control the attention of the public. In addition to issues, priorities and events, the media spotlight always falls back on people or persons or personalities i.e., public personas. Analysing these transmedia protagonists following Auslander (2004; 2021) and Jacke (2018) and in

drawing on the work of Simon Frith (1998), one has to differentiate between real persons, star personas and characters: "I argue that when we see a musician perform, we are not simply seeing the "real person" playing; as with actors, there is an entity that mediates between musicians and the act of performance" (Auslander 2021, p. 88).[2] This complex and dynamic entity, one could add, has been entirely extended by including the different stages of transmedia production, distribution, reception, and re-production (post-processing) what makes adequate analyses being very elaborate.

Whoever opens up a newspaper, checks the latest news and postings online, or turns on the television or radio news, does research on the internet or surfs on the homepage of a music magazine, they will immediately notice that the transmedia coverage of whatever shade (Jenkins 2007; 2020) is oriented to people(s) and faces i.e., public masks in the form of personas. No matter what social domain is being addressed – sports, politics, academia, literature, arts or especially popular music – journalism and (social) communication in general need heads and faces to attach their stories to, and vice versa. Hence, it is all the more astounding that these particular media personalities are still so rarely discussed particularly in German popular music studies[3], media studies, communications studies or musicology, if we disregard the research on news values and its factor of personalisation or the still very few preliminary studies on various characteristics of media personalities. A closer look at some introductions to media and communication studies discloses very few entries or chapters on media people / celebrities / stars – and only recently at that. And even in the realm of international scholarship and the relevant research disciplines, we have only seen the first journals, readers and anthologies published in recent years (see Holmes & Redmond 2006; Marshall 2006a; 2006b; 2021; Redmond & Holmes 2007; Turner 2006; 2010). Despite the ubiquitous media phenomenon, the cultural studies of stardom and celebrity are apparently just gaining more and multiperspectival traction.

On the basis of this assessment of the growing international research, I would like to propose in the present contribution a theory of media culture pointing toward (a future) empirical observation of famous popular music and media culture stars and celebrities as real persons, personas and characters. To begin with, I depict and define the context of various cultural levels and media (section 2). Then, in the main part of my considerations, I will undertake a definition (and explanation) of popular music and media celebrities and stars while also developing a typology of stars using the example of popular music stars as a component of popular culture (section 3). Having proposed a typology and spiral of popular music stars and celebrities, I will make some suggestions in the conclusion (section 4) what kind of research might be able to apply these basic considerations (see Ruth & Jacke in this issue).

Culture – Subculture – Popular Culture as Program

The aforementioned discourses on regard and attention in a media society do not proceed in a purely interpersonal or a purely mass- or social-mediated way. Franck himself coined (the meanwhile much cited) keywords of *attention economy* and *mental capitalism* (see Franck 1998; 2005; and, focusing on popular music stars and celebrities, Marshall 2021). Actants are clearly informed by the media about a society that is in large part inaccessible to them personally and are still very participatory and active parts of the communication process of popular music cultures. Here I will refer to media as the complex and dynamic interconnection between communication instruments (like languages, notations etc.), socio-systematical, professionalised and institutionalised organisations (like publishers, agencies, labels, editorial staff etc.), media technologies (like TV, film, radio, computer, internet, online etc.) and concrete media offers (like articles, features, posts, blogs, broadcastings, reports, contributions etc.) and

to "actants" in order to emphasize their active role in the communication process while attempting to gain some distance from loaded terms such as actor, individual or subject – following Schmidt's proposals (1994; 2007; 2011). Similarly, the media respond to actants and their needs. It ultimately comes down to the actants' regard for something and their readiness to participate in (or purchase) something. For the time being, it does not matter if we are talking about private or public broadcasting, editorial or advertising media.

For a conception of culture and its levels as a part of research on stars, celebrities, or general media and popular music personas and personalities, Siegfried J. Schmidt's socio-cultural, constructivist theory of media culture and histories and discourses lends itself well to subculture and popular culture.[4] In contrast to Critical Theory, this theory is argued less normatively. In contrast to much of Cultural Studies, which often take a case-study approach and are less conceptually grounded, it is more precise theoretically and more differentiated in its construction. And, in contrast to Systems Theory, the actants are themselves specifically considered. The basics of this media-cultural theory that will form the framework for observations on popular music and media personas, celebrities, and stars in societies of media culture will be presented in reasonable brevity in what follows.

According to Schmidt, actants operate on the basis of reality models and cultural programs. At the same time, models of reality form a society's system of options that orient meaning. This system consists of the collective knowledge of a society about itself, which is by no means to be regarded as information assets in thesaurus form. Instead, this knowledge is an operative fiction of mutual assumptions. Therefore following Schmidt, I define culture as a dynamical orientation mode featuring a constant basic mechanism between suppositions and presuppositions. Only on that basis are we cognitively able to act and communicate at all. This collective knowledge is defined by central domains of action and reference in social interactions: how to deal with surroundings, with other actants, with forms of socialisation, or with emotions and moral orientations. These areas are closely intertwined and constitute the identity constructions of actants, groups and even societies. Although models of reality are being constantly re-balanced in society, they are nonetheless relatively stable.

A key aspect in accounting for the concept of culture in these reality models is their function as a static semantic network of possible distinctions. These distinctions have been inscribed into the collective knowledge on establishing culture. They occupy the central categories of reality models and their differences, such as the category "gender" and its inscribed distinction of "female / male", changing to "female / male / diverse / queer", the category "politics" and its options for differentiation "left / middle / right", etc. If we follow Schmidt in observing these reality models as the (almost) essential framework of social perception and orientation, the framings of the respective perceptions are filled with affect, assessed morally and explained as permissible (or not). This individually constructed and socially oriented program of interpretation is labelled "culture" by Schmidt. Culture as an cognitively, morally, and affectively interpretative foil pervades all areas of life (political culture, educational culture, sport culture, etc., all the way to the culture of culture). For one thing, such a concept of culture permits us to better recognize individual problem areas (such as corporate culture) while also juxtaposing those domains (synchronicity). But the concept likewise helps us analyse differences in segmented domains of society (again: a synchronicity) as well as historically. Thus, Schmidt talks about cultural segments such as law, sports, art, etc. If a society's culture is seen as the crucial program that is influenced (culturally as well) by other societal programs, then the other domains identified are segmented programs in which main and sub-levels can be observed (hierarchy). The dynamic dialectic between these "main" and "sub" programs moves and modifies the relevant crucial societal program in a latent and usually

only nuanced manner. At the same time, it is particularly important that a transformation of culture (programs) is occurring only in culture (programs) itself and that there is nothing outside of culture. To take up the example of the category of gender once more: "male / female / diverse / queer" can be filled and evaluated in different (cultural) ways, as we have seen (for instance) in the women's movement or in queer cultures. It is much more difficult to change the possibilities for differentiation within the category "gender" or even place the entire category in question. In general, popular culture is a social field of serious play where variations of these categories – and thus this cultural change – are being tried out very early and playful.

I understand popular (music) culture as the commercialised social domain where themes are industrially produced and conveyed in the mass media. These are used and processed (for pleasure) by numerically predominant populations.[5] Within this popular culture, there are likewise sub- and main levels. Their actants ultimately act and make decisions normatively and decide what good and bad mean for them. The provision of subject matter is largely guaranteed by the media, which are permanently offering proposals for reality models and interpretations. Cultural programs of societies are strongly influenced by media and influence media (transmedia culture) in turn.[6]

The frequent effective character of actions is striking as part of the mass and social communication process of popular culture, i.e. of its production, distribution, reception / usage, and (further) processing. The very "elective" character of popular culture as a kind of compulsory voting leaves options open which themselves take place on the basis of cultural programs. The field of popular culture is particularly dependent on certain trends. And it operates as a veritable "attention-economic" barometer or seismograph for overall societal developments, the reason why the field seems so interesting in research and education. Popular-cultural actants usually know quite well how tentative their own strategies are. Hence, they take into account claims of unending change that Rötzer confirms generally for media societies: "In a free market of attention nothing is permanent. Nothing can be done in the long term that is not constantly subjected to updating" (Rötzer 1999, p. 52). This latent updating is well-known especially to those actants of popular culture who qua position and as professionals have recourse to the market of media attention: popular music and media stars and celebrities. They are particularly important for the production level of the communication process and thus for the production and presentation of popular music and media products. Both these stars and the reporters require that there be change. This cannot be observed better in any media sector than in advertising, where (if necessary) the static becomes transformed. If everything is always in motion and the images only flicker past, a void of sound and image in a commercial spot can generate absolute attention. "Not the truth or the good, law or objectivity, are the standards of ludic culture but what is interesting, the interruption of continuity, the improbable, the divergent, the fatal chain of events, and the novel – as terrible as it might sound" (Rötzer 1998, p. 169). Precisely in the field of popular (music) culture, there is the "primacy of a permanent topicality based on constantly going one better in the present micro-domain – jumping from one attraction to another, from hit to hit – and on economic dependency" (Ullmaier 1995, p. 7). Moreover, this does not seem to be unusual at all within the transmedia and cultural his- and herstories of popular music cultures: "Music history usually is about things that were new in their own time. They were radical, unusual in some sense, breaking with tradition. Most things we think of now as classic were actually innovative in their time." (Reynolds in Reynolds & Jacke 2022, p. 386).

The cycle of paying attention and acquiring regard (see Franck 2005, p. 7) can be substantiated in the interpersonal realm. In the domain of mass and social media and platforms, it is measured para-socially using big audience share (quantity) or credible popularity

(emotional quality). It seems to be part of the cultural program not only of advertising but also of every single media actant – not to speak of non-media actants – in order to enter into this cycle. "Humanity lives with its actor-ego in the permanent staging of the self. Displaying one's ego to others cannot be avoided" (Bianchi 2006, p. 47). For this purpose, art theorist Paolo Bianchi uses the concept of self-culture that can be easily incorporated as well as David P. Marshall's concept of the production of the self within celebrity culture (see Marshall 2010) into the considerations of Schmidt and Jacke. There is an increasing focus on the self apparently, so that it can be depicted impersonally. In this way, the media and social networks are regarded as a way of training attention economies. The commercialisation of this phenomenon has already been impressively achieved, as demonstrated by the container and casting shows on television. In addition to television, the possibilities of the internet and especially its platforms for media technology lend themselves well to increasing self-culturalization in the public sphere:

> Celebrities express in the most extreme form the commodification of the individual; but, as opposed to a representation of the removal of the human subject and their capacity to express, they are its opposite. In all sorts of domains, celebrities articulate activity and agency at a super-individual level. Because of their visibility, celebrities do more than enact agency: they exemplify the exact and valued way that agency operates in contemporary culture. This form of commodified agency that celebrities both embody and express may appear to be abnormal – and it is in terms of its oversize dimensions; but, generally, it is not. What has occurred in our culture is a normalization of the commodification of the individual over more than a century of consumer capitalism. (Marshall 2021, p. 168)

At the same time, it should not be forgotten that even self-culture is carried out in light of established cultural programs. These provide the benchmark data for the reality mode and can be changed by the smallest displacements: "The art of self-representation is not found in the act of provocation and subversion but relies on the (small) deviation, the *abversion*" (Bianchi 2006, p. 47). Let us now go into greater detail concerning the actants of the media and music production side, the celebrities and stars. Let us see how they (constantly attempt to) distinguish themselves qua "abversion", i.e. by a slight variation or homeopathic subversion.

Actants Using Cultural Programs: Celebrities and Stars and Their Persons, Personas and Characters

For the time being, the nevertheless very important side of the recipients have to be neglected for research economical reasons. In the context of reception, usage, participation and (further) processing, they very much play a decisive role in the (re-)construction, communication and consumption of media personalities and popular music cultures in general, e.g. in the form of fan cultures, in social networks, as customers, consumers, produsers etc.: "Consumers become hunters and gatherers moving back across the various narratives trying to stitch together a coherent picture from the dispersed information." (Jenkins 2007). Instead, we will now primarily discuss the production and distribution side of the media and especially popular music persons, personas and characters. Media and popular music celebrities and stars focusing on personas in the dimension of production can be seen as public representatives, markers, and seismographs for styles, scenes and trends in visually dominated cultures. When analysing these kinds of popular music and media protagonists following Auslander (2004; 2021; Holt 2011) one has to differentiate between the real person, the star persona and the character. These protagonists are to some extent the mediatised (and thus broadcast) embodiments of personalised applications of cultural programs on the sub- and main levels: "Persona is a very

mutable concept. Perhaps its mutability is no more prominently displayed than in its intersection and integration into music and musical culture." (Fairchild & Marshall 2019, p. 1). They are therefore particularly well-suited for analysing the levels of the transmedia change between "main" and "sub" in all areas of society, particularly those social experimental practice labs of popular music cultures.

The active domain of popular music and media production culturally includes various roles and job descriptions, such as (in the case of popular music) producers, event managers, A&Rs (artist and repertoire managers), label managers, streaming platform agents, merchandisers, or road crew members. If one filters out of these roles what is primarily observed in the public and social media and is therefore well-known, then one inevitably ends up with renowned popular music personas in the form of celebrities and stars – apart from "the proliferation of online micro-celebrities" (Marshall 2021, p. 174). If one then distinguishes between celebrities and stars, designating celebrities as famous and stars as additionally popular, then *stars* might be designated as the elite of the celebrities. This all begs the question of who decides what is famous or popular and what is micro, meso or macro. In the process, fame is easier to measure since it is a quantitative parameter that can then be transferred to the levels of the communication process. Put differently: it can be asked how many actants are familiar with someone at the level of the production and reception of certain popular music and media products or how many clicks these celebrities and stars receive. This relationship is even described by Frank as cyclical: "One must not only be generally familiar but also known for being familiar to everyone" (Franck 2005, p. 135). The vehicle or (for Franck) the "creditor" of this renown are the mass and social media. In such an instance, there is certainly a qualitative difference between those with regard for opinion leaders and those with regard for normal people, even if they might be regarded as micro-celebrities. That is something known, for example, by every employee of a popular music promotion agency. Compared with fame, popularity is a priori a qualitative criterion that can turn celebrities into stars and that is much more difficult to measure. For instance: A student in the pedestrian zone being asked about her eating habits by a camera crew is a media personality in the moment the interview is being broadcast or posted prominently. She only becomes a celebrity more generally when large parts of the population know her, when she (literally) "stands out" among the surplus of media personalities – same with social networks where it is the quantity, quality, and length of time of the five-minutes-fame that might lead to being an influencer or becoming a celebrity. Yet she is not yet a star because such a personality must stand out from those who stand out already and has to develop a star persona as a quality. Celebrities can become stars (as a mixture of real persons, star personas and characters e.g. in a song, on stage, online), but stars are those who have already been celebrities. Franck doubts the causal direction of this process: "Do we pay attention to what we value, or do we place value on what we pay attention to?" (Franck 2005, p. 11). Yet in terms of perceptual logic, we can only place value on something that we have previously regarded (highly). The gradation between celebrities and stars in this sense appears to be comprehensible. The star persona as the crucial part of stars, following Auslander, can be conceptualized "in music as constructing a chain of signification to and from music/composition to performer/performance" (Fairchild & Marshall 2019, p. 3). This chain nowadays can be understood as transmedia using different media, platforms, formats, roles, and contents (Jenkins 2007; 2020). Even as popular music stars, all their different real persons, especially their personas and their characters in lyrics, on albums, in performances etc. are permanently transmediated – and still full of secrets and gaps to be filled by recipients end especially fans.

Drawing on concrete objects of study from media and popular music culture, we will be evaluating whether the hypothesis applies that there is a generally productive dialectic between "main" and "sub" on an "abstract plateau" for the personalised "area of actants" within popular

music cultures. In other words, we will now be attempting to personalise and specify overall social and pop-cultural mechanisms between "sub" and "main" on the basis of outstanding persons, personas, and characters. Obviously the "stories" that are being produced, distributed, received, and re-produced by and about such stars are operating on all three dimensions, which, in the case of popular music stars, makes a differentiation very hard. On the one hand, all levels have to fit systematically and historically to build up a congruent image (tradition) and, on the other hand, should vary at least slightly, to show permanent change (innovation) to keep attention at a high level. Most famous examples from pop music her- and histories, of course, seem to be David Bowie, Madonna, Lady Gaga, and, most recently, Billie Eilish and Taylor Swift, where a constant change within the images of the "real person", the star persona, and the characters can be seen as a crucial part of the whole image and its different layers and aspects.[7] Within the communication process of popular music cultures and stars in-between production/construction, distribution/re-construction and reception/re-production/post-processing/re-re-construction one can observe multiple ways of mutual sense- and nonsense-makings (see Figure 1 below).

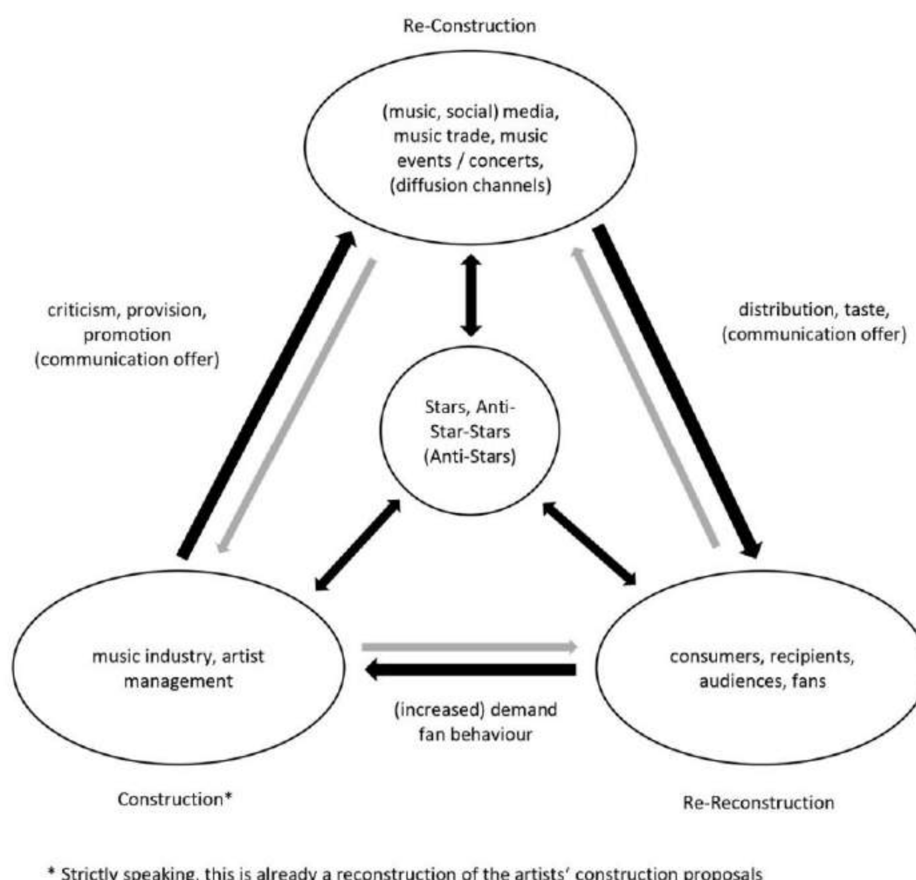

Figure 1. Spiral of transmedia pop music culture stardom.

This figure is not meant to be a proper circle, but more a kind of open spiral showing the ongoing processes of star constructions, re-constructions, re-re-constructions etc. Still, and even in social media, a certain communicative hierarchy can be seen which is here indicated by the

black and grey arrows. The complete and still open (for interpretation) image of a star therefore is constructed on all levels and in all mutual structures of communication within culture.

Stars

Our focus here should be directed to the field of stars in popular music since they can be assessed as seismographs of the zeitgeist within differing social domains and through transmedia. After all: especially popular music is under constant compulsion to innovate, to produce new things and – at least and as mentioned above – ab- und subversions, to process and shape developments in and between the "mains" and "subs" of a variety of program segments.

Within the recent decades, some new developments can be observed within the area of popular music stars. First, the disc jockeys who contributed to the depersonalisation, anonymisation, and white labelling of the music itself, have themselves started becoming stars (Westbam, Marusha, David Guetta etc.). Second – and by comparison – there is a living "classic" pop star scene with all of its associated manifestations between the Rolling Stones and Billy Eilish. Third, there is a tendency toward constructing virtual or (even) self-producible stars or mixtures (Hatsune Miku, Gorillaz). Fourth – and probably the most observable and successful media and music phenomenon – there is the trend to mediatise and commercialise the genesis of stars itself (see Kelly 2007; Tessler 2008). If there is not enough to report in the case of established stars or if their stories are already obsolete, the media companies produce their own and narrate their stories in the form of a kind of perfect star simulations. *Popstars* and *Deutschland sucht den Superstar*, the very successful German equivalent to *Pop Idol*, were only just the beginning of countless talent shows. As if it were a self-fulfilling prophecy, these individuals are becoming successful, genuine stars in a few cases. In the case of the last trend, it should not be ignored that the phenomenon of "celebrity for everyone" incorporates simultaneously spectators in its concept before they can possibly become fans – same with online micro-celebrities. At the same time, people often overlook that it is easier to become a celebrity than a star. If an entire broadcasting or tech company with all its concentrated production and distribution power stands behind the marketing of a person/persona/character, thereby guaranteeing to stimulate attention, then it stands to reason how unproblematic it is to promote the average man or woman. These media companies do not only have at their disposal the necessary money but also all the hardware (technology, people, etc.) and software (broadcast slots) in order to generate sufficient attention through transmedia. Someone who cannot at least become a celebrity under these conditions, thereby fulfilling the prerequisites for possible stardom, has in some sense failed from the perspective of the producers – not just within the talent show itself but also on the public square of programming slots (see Grindstaff 2009).

If one examines more closely the charisma of the stars and consults Roland Barthes' reflections on myth (1972), it can be explained why particular star simulations can never be myths of everyday life. Anyone who professes stardom so obviously and predictably, even though he or she is only participating in a "star" game show, is destroying that myth yet again (from Barthes' standpoint). Star simulations would therefore be without mythic content, mostly without secrets, gaps, open ends – which is what makes them so rapidly unattractive as subject material for the mass and social media. However, it should be noted once more that these star simulations lead to very few successes in the attention (or general) economy.

Nevertheless, even within these shows and concepts, in the meantime, producers have started to artificially construct and tell stories which show these characteristics of myth or star cult: "The current configuration of the entertainment industry makes transmedia expansion an

economic imperative, yet the most gifted transmedia artists also surf these marketplace pressures to create a more expansive and immersive story than would have been possible otherwise" (Jenkins 2007).

Evidently, the concept of the star operates under many names as a media character on the level of the main cultural program. The important thing: stars cannot be viewed in isolation but are always the focus of different highly complex transmedia systems of reference, texts, contexts and universal societal conditions. As pointed out by the Italian sociologist Francesco Alberoni more than sixty years ago: "[S]tardom appears as a phenomenon appropriate to a certain moment in the development of industrial societies, in which it fulfils certain variable functions which depend on the socio-political configuration of the society. stardom carries a time dimension, which enables us to make a dynamic study of it" (Alberoni 1962, p. 95).

In addition to this relational dimension, stardom has a functional level. The expression "relational" means that different things were (and are) understood by the term "star", at different times by different individuals in divergent segments of systems. The terms idol, icon, hero, role model or advertising medium can be understood as functions, for instance. As noted already, basically anyone can become an online micro-celebrity (at least temporarily). A real star, however, never stops being one (see Turner 2006). Even popular music stars, of course, achieve different degrees of publicity concerning real person, star persona and character, each of them different in length and intensity – even and very often especially posthumously when becoming immortal. Publicity is here understood as the publishing and (social) media coverage of aspects of the stars and as a crucial criterion for stars (see Table 1 below in the summary); concerning aspects of produced, distributed, sold, consumed, clicked, read offers and editions, global, glocal, local, peer-group range, reputation (within music and media industries, social media, fan groups, opinion leader groups, algorithms). "As media such as newspapers or television are less adept at garnering audiences, celebrities migrate into online spaces as points of visible recognition – the element that legacy media continues to try to sustain even as these celebrities are no longer dependent on the legacy media to sustain their value" (Marshall 2021, p. 167). Their transmedia compatibility makes especially stars being an ideal person, persona, and character mediator between different spheres, scenes, fields, and times. "This capacity of celebrities to move across fields and to be deployed strategically in these various platforms and domains of contemporary life and society points to their convertible value. Businesses and industries attempt to quantify that value and use it for specific purposes" (Marshall 2021, p. 167).

At the same time, such musicians become celebrities or stars both by the fame and the popularity bestowed on them. The degree of their renown and success is measured by publicity and economic breakthrough, specifically and thus synchronously (quantity) as well as diachronically (continuity).

An academic analysis of the star cult phenomenon is made more difficult by the mystification produced by restricting personal contact between star and audience in the case of most stars. Erving Goffman (1959), whose observations on (self-)presentation as part of studying the cult of celebrity still receive far too little attention, denotes this limitation – the maintaining of social distance – as a method for stars to enhance the audience's regard for them. Since fans are usually anonymous in relation to the stars, even online, thus making interpersonal interaction highly unlikely, the recipients have to rely either on media coverage for (para-social) contact with "their stars" – or on gossip and rumour, at least stories, in social networks – or both ("Did I text with Taylor Swift or with one of her agents or bots?"). What is undeniable is the role of stars and fans in sustaining the mystification and the cult of celebrity

through different levels of persona, modifying Auslander's (2004; 2021) differentiation between character, persona and real person: the public person on different stages like playing live, in music video clips, at interviews, in TV shows, on their websites, in blogs etc., in films, in games; the public private person when being focussed as a private person publicly, and, of course, the most important level for mystification and constructions of authenticity as a constant criterion of pop music evolution (see Jacke 2018), the "private-private" person and all his or her secrets as a blank space within the complex transcultural contextual and textual (images, sounds, lyrics, performances etc.) constructions and narratives. The latter being kind of the creative engine of star constructions (production), re-constructions (distribution), and re-re-constructions (reception and re-production) through myths (see Figure 1). The fundamental dichotomy between stars and fans is the basis for any kind of myth or cult. Having constructed personal myths, *ergo* "stars", the fans are now able to interact with the star and to identify with their cult. In the end, "pop-communication is [...] always a mixture of myths, myth-construction and deconstruction" (Diederichsen 1993, p. 277) and seems to be transmedia in a wider and in a narrow sense. In this mixture – no matter how confused and transmediated – the fans seem to be constantly seeking plausibility, wanting to constantly verify their stars and thus constitute what is a very dubious notion (in the domain of the popular): a myth of authenticity in sense of credibility (see Moore 2002).

The representation of a person, seemingly paradoxically even the persona and character of a popular music star, through the media is largely a form that is perceived as "real" – which makes the popular music star differ from fictional film, games or literature stars (see Moore 2002). The recognised and interpreted characteristics develop into supports of an individual construction of relevant wishes and ideas of a corresponding fantasy image through the star persona. Thus, the interaction between a fan and a star using media and music products is rather a kind of para-social interaction of the recipient with characteristics attributed to the media character or to the construction of stars. The cult serves as an orientation for the individual to structure his/her/their value system. The stars therefore (co-)structure the applications of the fans' cultural programs. Often this can result in the fan internalising socially desirable or undesirable values by means of identification. These values are then frequently negotiated in communicative fashion at real as well as (nowadays) virtual sites. Still, the fans are not naïve with respect to the cultural program but link their decisions for certain cults of celebrity to their own social experiences and expectations. The mass and social media at the same time weaken (traditionally) firmly imprinted distinctions between high and low culture, essential and superficial, good and bad taste. "Depending on their 'cultural capital' [...] groups enjoy media products based on their perception of meanings, with each one expressing and promoting its own interests" (Schmidt 1994, p. 308). Ritual and symbolic processes thus constitute systems of meaning, able to form the scaffolding of collective and individual knowledge on which individuals might orient themselves, a scaffolding consisting of reality models and cultural programs.

The cult surrounding the stars is a guarantee for economic success. The expression of uniqueness, the originality of this personality, must be produced in any form and transmedia – e.g. through extraordinary achievements that are system-specific. Such accomplishments are certainly more measurable in sports than in popular music. Whoever throws a discus sixty meters is more highly regarded than someone who throws it forty-five meters. To a certain extent, the popular music charts and media have been functioning as generators of attention – moreover awards, lists, fan clubs, websites, blogs and clicks. Yet the criteria for getting into them are far more complex than "simple" range in the discus throw. It is particularly problematic when these areas are now coupled with the (social) media since that shifts the criteria once more. To stick with our example: while one does not receive any special

recognition for poor performances in sports / the discus throw, the media would be very aware of an actant throwing the discus forty-five meters if this person were prominent according to media rules and had thrown the discus in the wrong direction or injured spectators. This aspect plays, to my mind, an important role in the formats of the star simulations. In *Popstars* or *Pop Idol*, having a good voice is not as important as the media suitability of the actants. The most striking characters are sometimes eliminated in the semi-finals in as much as they operate according to the terms of the economy of attention: even the second-place finisher can become famous and possibly popular and marketable anyway, this tournament seems to mostly be a media and not only a popular music competition.

Regardless of whether the media focuses on popular music or an entirely different social subsystem, stars serve on the public stage as representatives, markers, seismographs and especially suppliers of quite specific applications of cultural programs. These applications are generally responsive to large numbers of recipients but do not violate the rules of cultural programs – these aspects are mutually conditioning. They also carry out system-specific services – even if it is only in order to achieve a quota in the popular music and/or media system and thus be able to proceed on the "main" program level. These aspects are mutually conditioning.

Anti-Stars

Although the term "anti-star" is often used in the media and popular music industries to refer to defiant, confrontational stars (such as especially in popular music, e.g., Kurt Cobain), precisely this term appears semantically insufficient and contradictory. There cannot be anti-stars, particularly in the mainstream music and media or (in that connection) as a topic in large public spheres. When discussing popular heroes already in 1948, economist Orrin E. Klapp interestingly spoke of anti-heroic roles and features – such as weakness, betrayal, or persecution – or of possessing the character traits of a clown or of fools. Consequently, the term "anti-star" often is used to designate those anonymous musicians or other artists who do not make it into the media in the first place because they are completely resistant or only appear in face-to-face groups (family, relatives, friends, neighbourhood, peer group, etc.), possibly experiencing the least publicity in the smallest segments of the public or special media (fanzines, niche or underground shows, etc.), without getting any attention in the "main" media and major music industries.

Or the anti-star is to be viewed conceptually as a temporary measure for distinguishing between a main-level star – someone who is well-established and upholds the values of a social system (and thus the parameters of a cultural program) – and the rebellious (anti-star-)star who switches from the sub- to the main level. Accordingly, anti-star designates the stage of the resistant, (progressively or regressively) protesting musicians in the application of a subcultural program, i.e. before they become economically very successful and – irrevocably linked to that – experience increased publicity in the media and music industries. Musicians who play in front of a quantitatively small audience are therefore anti-stars on the sub-level. Musicians playing before a large audience, who do not interfere with the established value system but also garner economic success and (social) media publicity, are stars on the main level. And those musicians can be designated as "anti-star-stars" who perform in front of large audiences and who likewise defy, provoke, or protest in some way while also garnering economic success and media publicity through their transmediated real persons, star personas, and characters (see section "Anti-star-stars" below).

The relatively variable and flexible expectations of the audiences and media are central to the category of the anti-star. This structure of relationships has by and large become evident

in the form of mutual, pre-communicative expectations and expectations of expectations (mutual expectations) in the case of the anti-star-star (who is successful and entirely part of the marketing process). In such cases, the audience and the media are already expecting there to be a breach of expectations on the part of the anti-star-star. He / she in turn can no longer avoid this process, whereas the "anti-star" is faced with less stable attitudes of expectation and is therefore not yet integrated into a compact structure of expectation-expectations: "There are only "the masses", on the one hand, and the outsider as hero, on the other – the outsider who merely by standing outside becomes a hero. For the ability not to be tempted to integrate oneself requires the greatest power in a mass (media) compliant society" (Früchtl 2004, p. 112).

The sociologist Rolf Schwendter (see 1993, pp. 185–191) within his theory of subculture of the early 1970s concludes that the complete social de-integration of public actants is not possible. If someone is not integrated, then they have done so at the cost of becoming isolated such that it is as good as impossible that they will effect fundamental change in the overall society. The total resister is not suited for changing society. There are numerous small stars or just anti-stars operating progressively or regressively on the basis of sub-levels of cultural programs. They are famous and popular in their specific scenes and domains, and they are thus successful in their own way there, principally by re-coding basic social differences. Some of these anti-stars come into the public eye at their particular main level (e.g. popular music).

Anti-Star-Stars

So, what happens when representative or seismographic users of cultural programs among the "subs" (anti-stars) step into the limelight of the "main" media themselves, as media and music productions? If we take up Barthes' concept of myth once more, it is clear that program change drivers (the willingness to learn) are highly suspicious of myth on the basis of already operative programs (unwillingness to learn). Barthes (1972) ascribes to myth the power of being able to achieve as well as corrupt anything – even when it is fleeing from itself. Even the greatest resistance is integrated into it, according to Barthes.

Consequently: if users, e.g. those in popular music, re-code program segments out of a "sub" and publish or represent the results of their usage in smaller segments of the public, they will sooner or later be able to attract the attention of the main media and music industries. If these program users then act as (social) media or music opinion leaders, the former anti-stars can certainly become those "pivot personalities" – as Schwendter labels them (see 1993, pp. 62–63 and 193–194) – who "stand" at the threshold between "main" and "sub". One could label them within popular music cultures as pivot stars. At the same time, what is particularly interesting is the moment of displacement in media and social network coverage. Well known examples of such pivot stars, "anti-star-stars" or "meta-rock stars" are Kurt Cobain of Nirvana (see Jacke 1998), Shane MacGowan, Patti Smith, Peaches, Chilly Ganozales and Nick Cave of The Boys Next Door, The Birthday Party, The Bad Seeds, Grinderman and most of all solo. Together with his band Grinderman, Cave, some years ago, seemed to be seeking a path back into the niche while playing with his own image on the level of real person, star persona, and character, moreover (see Jones 2009). In the tension between "main" and "sub", these pivot persons are behaving in a (veritable and credible) state of cognitive and communicative dissonance. As surfers between program levels, they are potential "losers" but can be successful in one respect: they can succeed synthetically, making interpretations and applications of sub programs credibly popular and thereby contributing to the transformation of the cultural programs.

In the following, let us examine once more – and more closely – this group of stars of the anti-stars who are popular in the "main" since they are specific instances of the dialectics of cultural program levels in media society. At the same time, we should focus again on popular

music, for the aforementioned reasons concerning indicators. The anti-star-stars who are successful musicians in the "main" are those who use subcultural programs and which meet four conditions: evidence of an audience (renown and popularity), resistant behaviour (change of the cultural program), economic success and continual (social) media and network publicity. In this way, those generally designated "losers" – or better, "resisters" – do not only become credible ("authentic")[8] and renowned in the subcultural music scene but also in sports, the cinema or politics. Accordingly, the difference between star and anti-star-star is constituted using the criterion of "resistant behaviour" – be it progressively or regressively. It entails more of a re-coding, change or even questioning of categories based on the foregoing considerations about the concept of culture. Resistant behaviour implies a violation of the existing societal system of values and norms. In making the transition into the "main" level from the other users of a subprogram, anti-star-stars are therefore both eminent (acknowledged as being established) and controversial (alleged to have "sold out" or betrayed themselves). From the environmental perspective of the "main" program segment, anti-star-stars are often appreciated little or not at all compared to stars.

Anti-star-stars and stars alike are subject to constant pressure once in the "main". They have to deliver subject matter to the media and especially to the attention (online) economies, so they do not disappear from their reporting agenda and become unsuccessful (in media and social network terms). By contrast, however, to those stars who fulfil more traditional newsworthiness criteria and conduct active image-maintenance in the form of constant media presence and self-expression, a particularly significant role (consciously or unconsciously) is played by negativity (scandals), surprise and norm violations when dealing with rebellious musicians (anti-star-stars). Furthermore, such musicians, seem to wish to escape media and audience expectations although doing so is practically impossible once they have become anti-star-stars.[9] Topics as attitudes toward life, particularly of the young, create a subcultural (music) scene. It is then (as the case may be) addressed, tagged, and promoted by certain media as well as marketed by the music industry – e.g., the slacker, the loser or the Gen x type of person/persona/character.

In this way, diverging interpretations and applications of program on the part of (anti-) stars provoke journalistic and social media reporting. The diverging events are evaluated on the expectations formed from the "main"; they are also visible as a disruption, provoking a reaction. Deviation from the norm is surprising: it attracts attention and stays in one's memory, especially in popular retro cultures (see Reynolds & Jacke 2022). Producers, distributors, and consumers – of popular music, for instance – all introduce and assume expectations. Consequently, expectation-expectations can be formed along with structures suspicious of communication as deviations from what is expected, breakthroughs in expectations and surprises are – in being registered – an initial spark for entire chains of linked thoughts.

In the form of differences or surprises, these unexpected changes stand out in the everyday life of the recipient. Hence, they must initially be recognised by (social) media editors. The strategy of "distraction via attention" in public relations – live performances, press conferences and media coverage work this way for a band or solo artist of popular music – can be applied or even reversed to the strategy of "attention via distraction" in the case of anti-star-stars. Many behaviours and claims of anti-star-stars in a subculture certainly distract us (out the outset) from the fact that they are also situated in the marketing mechanism of the music industry. Yet it can happen that they become even more interesting for media and fans through distraction or distancing. One can see the following as manifestations of such violations in the cultural movements especially of young adults: the repudiation of established rituals and a migration to speechlessness, provocation and dismantling of basic rules. In the end, these

represent all the uses of distinction in cultural programs that involve re-coding, re-editing or re-evaluating. This dismantling can counter not only the so-called dominant culture ("main") in the case of sub-cultural phenomena but also lead to a recontextualization or reorganisation in the form of bricolage. Likewise, it should not be ignored that even subcultural deconstructions are themselves constructions. This, too, demonstrates the impossibility of escaping these media and music market mechanisms.

The resolution of the paradox of success and total resistance is ultimately one of the reasons for social change. Although subcultural phenomena – such as punk, techno, hip-hop or grunge – are often trying at first to destroy the myth of popular culture, they are nonetheless an ultimately undeniable theme of cultural program applications. As a result, there is no difference between a cult of stardom and cult of anti-stardom in their processual aspects. The process is the same. That is, the cult of celebrity is just a creation of myths, and the anti-star cult of celebrity forms myths about anti-star-stars who (incidentally) seem to be particularly well-suited to being the subject of myths regardless of whether they take part in pop music or sports.

Star categories and their traits	Star	Anti-star	Anti-star-star
economic success	+	–	+
large audiences	+	–	+
Media/social network publicity	+	–	+
value violations / resistance	–	+	+
system-related achievement	+	+/–	+
popularity/fans	+	+	+

+ = criterion fulfilled +/–= undecided – = criterion not fulfilled

Table 1. Star categories and their criteria.

Conclusion

Consequently, the observational grid of the different levels of cultural programs, media and communication can also be transferred to the research area of media and popular music persona, personas, characters and especially celebrities and (particularly) stars. These public actants operate on the basis of their own cultural programs embedded in cultural programs of the media societies and music industries. These actants can be divided into three subgroups titled "star", "anti-star", and "anti-star-star", thereby illustrating (as it were) the dialectics of (popular) culture (see Table 1).

Using the introduced typology and spiral of transmedia pop music culture stardom and its underlying observational grid of culture as a program comprising various dialectically-operating segments of domains and programs, the few theoretical reflections (to date) about stars, celebrities and especially personas (not neglecting the roles of real persons and

characters) can be made productive through a broad concept of culture, one with the potential for observations of (especially) popular music and multiple transmedia cultural phenomena (see Figure 1): in-between the dimensions of stars, in-between different communication instruments, socio-systemic organisations and institutions, media and music technologies, and music and media offers and in-between cultural programs. In addition, such an approach lets us tie together previous analyses in sociology, (media) cultural studies, communication studies, and musicology in transdisciplinary projects like in popular music studies (see all contributions in Flath, Jacke & Troike 2022). Auslander (2004, pp. 6–7; 2021) has introduced the already mentioned (see above) distinction between real person, star persona and character in the case of stars and celebrities, i.e. public media characters. Particularly in the case of popular musicians, this distinction seems to be matching with my analytical suggestion of private-private (which is very important to keep the mysteries and histories running), public-private, and public person and clarifies the (concurrently operative) levels of the character, from her allegedly private role to her public one, all the way to her role in her lyrics, thus making the complex, multilevel character of the phenomenon even more apparent, even in credible transmedia and transcultural storytelling in a wider sense. All communication offers by popular music stars and celebrities are constructed by themselves, the music industries and artists' managements and agencies, then re-constructed by the music (social) media in a transmedia way through trade, events, awards etc. and then re-re-constructed by the audiences in social and analogue media and direct contact at shows, concerts etc. This (still very reductionistic) spiral of different layers of "construction" shows how complex, dynamic, and ambiguous the communicative process of popular music cultures and its stars and celebrities is. In this sense, we have now arrived at the beginnings of something like the "cultural, media and popular music studies of stardom or celebrity" in all its transcultural and transmedia complexity and dynamics as presented in Figure 1 (see above).[10] On a meta-level this model allows to integrate the (self-)reflexivity of analyses and cultures: As the analyses of cultures are dependent on the cultures of analyses (see Schmidt 2007).

In addition, my observations hopefully demonstrate how difficult it is for the stars themselves to escape the media and social networks' searchlights once they have been captured in them. on the one hand. Therefore, on the other hand, popular music personas will never be analysed completely neither by researchers nor by fans, as those important operational voids of mystery and secret are the basic impetus of all of the media, business, fan, and, of course, research (re-)constructions of star cult. Even those who destroy idols, an extreme form of stars, can in fact become the role models whom they once rejected. Or as the French Situationist and theorist Guy Debord and his colleagues at information bulletin *Lettrist International* already put it more than seventy years ago (2002, p. 22): "We believe that the most urgent exercise of freedom consists in the destruction of the idols, especially when they themselves appeal to freedom."

End Notes

[1] All translations from German to English by myself.

[2] Auslander is using the plural term "personae".

[3] For overviews on German Popular Music Studies, see Ahlers & Jacke 2017; Jacke 2013.

[4] See Schmidt 1994; 2007; 2011 with some modifications especially focusing on popular music and culture, see Jacke 2004; 2018.

[5] See also Jacke 2004, pp. 19–26; 2018.

[6] See Schmidt 2011; Jacke 2004; for aspects of transformations of and in popular music culture see all contributions in Flath, Jacke & Troike 2022; for aspects of transmedia see Jenkins 2007, 2020.

[7] Here, a further analysis and case studies of gender aspects concerning the range of change (innovation) or constancy (tradition) would be very inspiring as a first impression when looking at superstars hints at the fact that maybe male stars tend to not vary their images as much (see Bob Dylan, Johnny Cash, John Lennon, Michael Jackson, Kurt Cobain, Robbie Williams, Till Lindemann, Ed Sheeran) as female superstars which might have to do with the specific degrees of the transmedia, contexts and genres where these stars take place.

[8] For a discussion of different modes of authenticity and authentification within media and popular music cultures see Moore 2002.

[9] This topic could be empirically shown very clearly in my own content and discourse analysis of the media coverage of Nirvana and Kurt Cobain (Jacke 1998).

[10] Further research should concentrate on multiperspectival, phenomenolgical and empirical case studies (see Ruth & Jacke in this issue).

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"I DON'T FEEL HATE": A LONG SHORT TIKTOK JOURNEY TO THE ESC 2021

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ABSTRACT

In (media) popular music, "personas" are usually media personalities. They mainly appear in mass media. As the media landscape has changed over the last 150 years, so have the media appearances of these musician-personalities - from sheet music to radio, records, film, television, music videos and finally YouTube, Instagram and TikTok. Popular music is dominated by stars, media personalities who present a musical performance - but the way this performance is presented has varied historically. In "old" media, record companies had considerable power with regard to access to markets, but also regarding production, marketing and perpetuation of star images. This has changed dramatically with the rise of the internet and various social media platforms. Now potentially everyone has access, everyone can present oneself publicly, everyone can have his or her "15 minutes of fame" (Andy Warhol). The article describes these transformations to the principle of stardom using a case study: the creation of the German entry for the Eurovision Song Contest in Rotterdam 2021. The previously unknown singer Jendrik Sigwart talks about his application on TikTok and in particular about the production of a music video for it. His application on TikTok for one of Europe's oldest TV events is an interesting moment in media history, in which old narrative strategies mix with new ones.

KEY WORDS

Stardom; Post-digital; Eurovision Song Contest; TikTok; Media History

INTRODUCTION

It hardly needs to be emphasised that digitalisation, and in particular Web 2.0 and social platforms, have changed the everyday lives of most people enormously. When analogue, non-media practices mix with digital (social) networks as Twitter/X, Instagram or TikTok, apps and algorithms, we speak of post-digitality. This term does not describe a world that has already mastered the processes of digitalisation, but rather that the analogue and the digital are closely linked. The digital is no longer perceived as such, or the changes induced by the digital, such as the establishment of the smartphone, appear as a change in everyday life. Smartphones, in particular, have become "portable meta-media machines" (Gunkel 2019, p. 18) with which the boundary between the analogue and digital worlds can be easily crossed. Smartphones enable post-digital modes of action in an ideal way because they allow analogue and digital spaces to interact with and within each other regardless of time and place and offer different modes of reception, interaction, and production.

> Smartphones have little in common with previous mobile phones. Instead, they function as a portable version of the location-based personal computer, helping to realise Turing's vision of a now portable and therefore ubiquitous universal machine. Due to their open application, they can combine an almost infinite

> number of functions in a single device and thus go far beyond the possibilities of verbal or text-based communication via classic mobile phones as well as the limited possibilities of many previous devices. (Gunkel 2019, pp. 18–19)[1]

In the age of post-digitality, the technological and media conditions for popular music, for example, its staging and performativity, the creation and emergence of stardom and participation and fandom have changed. Transmedia transitions between various media stages are more frequent and more dynamic. They are less influenced by traditional cultural-industrial gatekeeping. As a result, they firstly enable different forms of participation and reception, and secondly open up new stages for self-presentation. Thirdly, they open up new, easier and more independent ways of becoming a star.

This article discusses how self-presentation on social platforms provides access to stardom and shows how different media structures and formats come together. The first part of the text provides an overview of (self-)presentation and stardom on social platforms. The second part offers a case study, focusing on the example of Jendrik Sigwart's application for the Eurovision Song Contest, which was prepared with a TikTok story. I show how new (TikTok) and old (TV) media are combined with each other in terms of staging and dramaturgy, and how Sigwart picks up on contemporary issues with his TikTok videos and his music video clip.

Self-presentation and Stardom in Social Networks

In "old" Hollywood, from the 1920s to the 1950s, star images were largely conceived and carefully controlled by the publicity departments of film studios (see Lowry 2003; Dyer 1979). Actors and musicians themselves often had little control over how they were portrayed and as what "type" they were marketed. In the early 20th century, stars were 'made' by film, music studios and the press, but the various transformations of the media landscape up to the present day have brought about fundamental changes. Stardom itself has developed in various directions, first by television, which has produced its own TV stars, but also so-called reality stars as well as "celebrities", and finally by YouTube and various social media platforms. Sovereignty over the image and careers of stars is less and less in the hands of the cultural-industrial production companies. Madonna has already secured more influence on her image than it had previously been the case (see for example Levine 2018), and Adele is also known to assert her autonomy.[2] Stars like Justin Bieber, Billie Eilish, and Jacob Collier started their careers without major labels. Also, over the last 10 years, social media platforms such as YouTube and streaming services such as Spotify have shifted the balance of power in the music and film industry and gained market share against the "old", pre-digital culture industry. Artists have more opportunities than before to influence their image via their own channels such as Instagram or TikTok, even at the beginning of their career. Gatekeeping for actual public access no longer rests unilaterally with the culture industry but is accompanied as well as countered by the well-kept secret of algorithms that can lead to more or less distribution. Nevertheless, in the digital world of Instagram and TikTok, Warhol's statement that in a media society everyone could have "15 minutes of fame" seems easier than ever to realise – even if in many cases the 15 minutes may turn out to be only 15 seconds.[3] As passionate and engaged as people are in following, liking and sharing on social networking platforms, it usually doesn't take long for the next thing to be followed, liked and shared just as passionately. Few trends, excitements, and scandals last more than a few months in the never-ending stream of new ideas, challenges, and trends.

The appeal of social media platforms is in the presence of their communication, more than in its duration or depth. It is in the availability of communication and exchange, and in the coexistence of analogue and digital spaces. In the post-digital age, social media platforms function like a revolving door between the analogue and digital world through which one can pass over and over again – location-independent caused by the mobile internet. Networking and maintaining contacts, self-expression, and – essentially – entertainment[4] are simultaneously

organised by various digital platforms. For many so-called digital natives, the analogue and the digital are no longer separate spheres. The Internet, especially the mobile Internet, is simply a normal part of their everyday life: it offers stages of self-presentation as well as occasions and places of communication, and as work equipment and work environment it is equally analogue and digital, and in this sense also transmedially organised.

The desire for a "media" profession that offers attention and fame, which for more than a hundred years has led young people to dream of a career in entertainment, as a revue girl, film star, pop singer, rock, or pop star, can now potentially be realised faster and easier. In the twenty-first century, the internet offers access to publicity and self-promotion to everyone. Instagram in particular has made it possible, in addition to the established technical or performing media professions, to engage in other income-generating activities such as influencing. Unlike "classical" stars (see Lowry 2003), influencers are not known because they are good at a particular publicly visible activity (acting, sports, music), but because they show and represent something mundane, such as a lifestyle or a hobby. "Influencers have made it their business to understand the algorithms that govern visibility on social media as a means of growing their follower-base" (Cotter 2019, p. 896). They try to reach a large number of followers and, if successful, frequently use this social capital to gain access to financial resources (Abidin 2015): they monetise their online content by sponsoring, so-called affiliate units, classic advertising and sometimes with their own shops. Their personal life becomes – at least in part – the content, they are known for being, not for a specific work. Influencers are therefore not real stars in Lowry's sense, i.e. media personalities whose image and work are received together but are visible as separate spheres. They are more like the successors of celebrities, who have no "work" but primarily market a once-acquired media fame (for example, the Kardashians). Celebrities, however, are still TV phenomena; they still need TV formats and channels to establish a kind of fame. Influencers organise this part themselves via social networks.

A career goal such as becoming an influencer is a consequence of the post-digital media experience: some people, especially young ones, no longer want to go through the revolving door between analogue and digital only by means of social media. They want to organise and design the revolving door. For such forms of public self-presentation, the concept of staging – originally a term used in theatre studies for the "planning, testing and determining of strategies" according to which a performance is produced (Fischer-Lichte 2005, p. 146) – needs to be modified and expanded. Staging is then to be understood as a basic category of modern media societies. It is no coincidence that Marin Jurga and Herbert Willems speak of a "staging society"[5] (Willems & Jurga 1998). In this sense, staging describes a strategy of production and representation that can refer to media contexts, as well as to everyday life-world contexts. The anthropological dimension of the term is reinforced in this new modification: "[m]an has to stage oneself in order to appear" (Fischer-Lichte 2005, p. 153). In this sense, enactments and self-enactments are a ubiquitous part of everyday life – "the presentation of self in everyday life" (Goffman 2022). In the course of digital media production, and especially by the presence of social media, both dimensions – the aesthetic-medial and the everyday-anthropological – are increasingly blurred and decreasingly distinguishable. The manifold possibilities of digital editing but also falsification of images, texts, and data make the staging processes themselves more difficult to assess. What is staged, by whom, to what extent and with what means, and what is "real" – and what is the difference between the two – is becoming increasingly intransparent.

Even in so-called scripted reality or factual entertainment formats (programs such as "Big Brother", "I'm a Celebrity … Get Me Out of Here!" or the "backstage" narratives of "XYs Next Top Model"), the degree of media staging was no longer equally apparent to all recipients (cf. Doeveling et al. 2007 or Klug 2016). Although Instagram and TikTok undoubtedly serve as prominent platforms for staging and self-staging, such staging processes are often hardly marked as such. The technological possibilities of digital editing rather serve to create effects of "naturalness" and "authenticity" and thus to reduce the media distance. Even what is obviously

staged and edited – cut, with small images and effects – serves to stage spontaneity, and the more imperfect it appears, the more "real" the game is.

The production of seemingly "real" glimpses of everyday life on Instagram or TikTok (along with "closeness" or "intimacy") allows for something like an everyday relationship that is, by far, more intense than it used to be in traditional media. Influencers and stars who appear on Instagram or TikTok are part of the private sphere to an even greater extent. They appear as instantly and "spontaneous" on the personal timeline as messages from real friends, presenting their food, their leg stubble, but also their feelings of anger, happiness, or even mental health issues. In this way, these media figures become part of the personal environment. Where the stars of traditional media (cinema, TV) were merely projection surfaces, social media figures appear as "friends" and thus no longer merely as projection figures, but also as representations of one's own life. This life can be shared which enables the recipients, in turn, to stage themselves and their own media experience. This has also expanded the experience of "pleasure" in the sense of cultural studies: part of the "pleasure"[6] still takes place during the concert and in music itself. Another part is in the processing and communicative reworking of the event, in which one can be both narrator and protagonist at the same time.

Moments in which the new digital social and the old analogue media meet, and thus also their technologies, mechanisms, narrative modes, and forms of reception, are of interest for media history. This also shows that "new" media use the old ones like a media-aesthetic archive: narrative conventions, strategies of self-staging, genre references are often quoted or adopted and adapted to new formats (for a discussion of differences and continuities between old and new media, see, for example, Manovitch 2001).Within the post-digital age, analogue and digital are no longer opposites: just as the new digital narratives refer to the old ones, the "old" media take up the impulses of Internet productions. TV events have long been the subject of transmedia accompaniment, whether it is a debate on Twitter, the "second screen" with live coverage of sporting events such as the Olympic Games, the re-use of TV material in media libraries or the consistent promotion of series formats aimed at young audiences on the internet.

Case Study: Jendrik Sigwart's TikTok Video Story

The post-digital interplay of "old" and "new" media creates new media moments and offer new access to the public as well as new forms of fame or stardom, however fleeting. An example of this is the bid for the German entry for the 2021 Eurovision Song Contest, in which the organising broadcaster NDR chose a previously relatively unknown singer, Jendrik Sigwart, who had been showing the genesis of his entry on TikTok for months.

This is how it began: on the 28th of June 2020, a video was released on TikTok entitled: "How to make a music video when you have virtually no money, but a cheesy song, and would love to apply to the Eurovision Song Contest, because you really want to perform on this stage, Part 1." This video has been produced and uploaded by Sigwart, a by then unknown 26-year-old musical performer from Hamburg. The video embodies the start of a series showing the conception and preparation of a music video as well as a making-off, in 27 parts. On the 26th of February 2021, the German contribution to the ESC was presented: Sigwart was chosen with his song "I Don't Feel Hate". On the same day the music video, which had been "prepared" on TikTok for months, was released. Eight months had passed between these two media events, in which 38 more TikTok videos were shared online. This chain of events represents an interesting moment of media AND popular culture history because of the appearance on one of the most current and hottest media platforms in the world was aiming for an appearance on one of the oldest audiovisual media in the world: television. Both come together in one song and music video, which, in turn, cannot be watched on TikTok neither was it shown on the final – televised ESC-stage and yet can be understood as being the essence of both.

This might be a good example to raise and discuss some questions relevant for popular music in general, e.g., for its production, its reception and also its research. These questions concern the technological and media conditions for popular music and take on issues of staging and performativity as well as stardom, fandom, scenes, and their codes. They also pertain to popular music's cultural significance and relevance for the present. All of these aspects have always been relevant to popular music. The creation and presentation of the star persona is influenced by technological possibilities, but also by economic factors. It is influenced by the access artists have to mass media and the influence they can have on their own marketing. The participation of fans in popular culture, as well as the agency of stars, is changing and expanding using the new possibilities opened up by digital media environments. Finally, popular culture always correlates, although to varying degrees, with the society and the present from which it emerges. This forms the attractive and productive possibilities allowing it/social media forms to capture moments of contemporary history.

Since it is not possible to explore all these different aspects in detail, I will briefly highlight some in the form of a research overview:

1) The application story of Jendrik Sigwart as a moment of media history.

2) The aesthetic strategies of the song and the music video.

3) The reception and meanings offered for the audience.

4) The TikTok narrative and its relation to the present.

1) A Moment of Media History

The Eurovision Song Contest is not merely another TV occasion, but a kind of "TV dinosaur". Since 1956, the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) has been hosting a live musical showcasing which brings together the entire European region; the show's format has stayed mostly unchanged through the years: a composer's contest, conceptualised and presented as a live television program.

However, this TV spectacle has undergone some changes over the years including the number of participating countries as well as the rules of participation. Additionally, the requirements and ideas of taste, decency, and national representation have shifted over time, as has the reception of the contest. Originally, the contest was a highly serious platform for nations' self-presentation. Elements of high culture permeated the hall, the audience, and the staging with rows of chairs, evening attire, and national dignitaries as guests of honour (cf. Dreyer & Triebel 2011; Feddersen 2010; Pajala 2012 and 2013; Raykoff & Tobin 2007; Scherer & Schlütz 2003; Tragaki 2013; Wolther 2006 and 2012). Initially, there was no intention to associate it with popular music contemporary to its time. In its early decades, the "Grand Prix" (this also and especially applies to the German entries) was a somewhat outdated Schlager show, far away from youth culture and international pop trends. However, a fan culture emerged, primarily amongst the gay and queer communities which watched this TV event with adoration and fascination, so that it eventually took on a campy attitude. Particularly in this regard, the ESC gained increasing significance throughout Europe, which is why the competition, since the likes of Dana International (1998) or Conchita Wurst (2014), is now commonly regarded as a major European event for the queer scenes. In 2020, participating in this competition is Sigwart's declared dream and goal as he launches his video series on TikTok. The question is: why had it to be on TikTok of all places? Does TikTok really fit the ESC and its fan base?

TikTok is one of the most successful apps in recent media history. It is the social media platform of the moment. It originated from the Chinese/American start-up Musical.ly, which mainly featured lip-sync clips, but has significantly expanded its portfolio. Today, TikTok is available in 75 languages and unites 1.2 billion monthly active users, two-thirds of whom are

under the age of 25. TikTok's content consists of short mobile phone videos that used to be 15 or 60 seconds long, which has been extended to 3 and now 10 minutes. The videos are usually motivated by a line of text or a snippet of a melody. The focus is on quick gags, games, or challenges (cf. Zeh 2020 regarding TikTok in the recent history of audiovisual media). However, a more diverse aesthetic as well as new narrative forms have emerged on TikTok (cf. Albrecht 2021) such as serialised stories or even documentary-style videos. In 2021, TikTok stories were nominated for the first time for Germany's prestigious "Grimme Preis" for television and won the Grimme Online Award.

Sigwart's aesthetic is characteristic of TikTok. His videos have a performative, sometimes theatrical and always self-reflexive style. Text panels depict dialogues in a way known from silent films, voice-overs provide insights into his thoughts and emotional world. (cf. Albrecht 2021) Thus, the videos refer to established forms (such as the silent film) and take on a diary-like character by allowing a seemingly intimate insight into Jendrik's mind. In addition, there are meta-narrative, ironic comments on the level of image and sound. The videos contain frame stories and stories within stories as well as recurring narrative motifs: the desire to participate in the ESC, the idea of making a music video, the lack of money and the do-it-yourself approach, as well as the "launderette" setting.

A recurring motif – both in the videos and in the header – is Sigwart's doubt about whether he has taken on too much. He repeatedly establishes a direct relationship with the audience by breaking the so-called fourth wall and interacting directly with the camera – a strategy that has long been a rare exception in fictional cinema and television but is now an established self-reflexive tool. In music videos, it is actually quite normal to directly address the viewers. The ironic self-reflexivity and theatrical gesture simultaneously protect the performance and Sigwart himself from becoming too "private" and turning the audience into voyeurs.

Sigwart follows the technological and performance requirements of TikTok and reaches a relevant number of users there: his third video received 250.000 clicks. The videos are also published on Instagram and partly on Facebook. The narrative purpose or vanishing point, however, is still the ESC in the "old" medium of television. Thus, old and new media are constantly in relation to each other. Sigwart shows a use of media that is characteristic of his generation: he differentiates between different media and platforms in terms of their format, content, and performative quality, and moves confidently between them. In the aesthetics of TikTok, he documents the work on the music video that will eventually be released on YouTube, while the goal of all his efforts remains the TV show. The TikTok series creates an emotional connection with the fans. On the one hand, the ESC-event on television can build on this closeness, while it creates distance and glamour on the other. It is precisely this tension between closeness and distance that is constitutive of pop – and of Stardom in particular.

With the serial, Sigwart's choice fell on the dominant pop culture genre of the last twenty years. In doing so, he picks up on generational viewing habits and a central promise of the serial: the best is yet to come!

2) The Aesthetic Strategies of the Song and the Music Video

The song and music video are also characterised by a mixture of traditional and new elements. The song is a catchy up-tempo "good energy" number containing a simple but ESC-compatible message: "I don't feel hate. I just feel sorry". The song speaks out against hate and discrimination towards marginalised groups, as we experience it especially in social networks. The lyrics are more playful than complex, the song does not seem to be dedicated to the theme of hate but to its opposite. This is supported by the arrangement and the sound: the verse and especially the chorus are reminiscent of electro swing, including tenor saxophone, rhythmic doo-wop vocals, and some light whistling. Contributing to this is the wah-wah swing trumpet within the instrumental section. The dominant acoustic and visual element is the ukulele as an

uncomplicated feel-good instrument and a kind of hipster accessory. In addition to this, the German audience associates it with Stefan Raab (and his ukulele-played "Raabigrams"), a very successful ESC personality. The counterpart to this swinging pop is the post-chorus, a remix melange of rock guitar and synthesiser in the style of the 80s.

On the one hand, the contrasts are reminiscent of musicals – and since Sigwart himself is a musical singer and performer, this is hardly surprising. But such aesthetic breaks are also typical of Music used in TikTok videos. In terms of form, however, the song follows the rules that have emerged algorithmically for Spotify and TikTok: it has to show its character and potential in the first 20 seconds. Recognition is essential for going viral on TikTok as well as for the ESC (cf. Léveillé Gauvin 2018). Hence, it is a logical decision to start the song with its central motif and to skip an intro. However, this intro is somehow moved to the video and really celebrated there without any music at all.

The music video begins as a silent, theatrical performance: we see a line of people waiting. In the following scene, they change from people being watched (by us) to spectators – in other words, the audience – when a sofa with the performer is pushed into the room and placed opposite them. The symbolic middle finger is theatrical as well. It is not technically animated and inserted via a green screen, but "naturally" shown by a performer in costume.

After this deliberately theatrical start, Sigwart makes use of a broad aesthetic repertoire in the music video. Typical elements of musicals are cited (tap dancing, precisely choreographed sequences such as the opening high five). We are further confronted with entertaining slapstick and comedy elements, video clip classics like text cards (Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues" comes to mind), slow-motion parts or split screens. Also, there are show elements such as the closing credits included, in which the convention of the pop singer meets that of the show master. In its visual density and the lightness of its colours, the video constantly offers numerous anchor points for the production of meanings and the licence to take pleasure in doing so (cf. Fiske, 1989).

This pleasure is enhanced by the skilful staging of the imperfect: the tedious pushing of the sofa takes three attempts to get it where it needs to be placed, the scenery is cheap but, like the washing machines (which are turned into stage props) show, often multifunctional. Even the glamour elements are DIY, such as the ukulele covered in 4,000 rhinestones – a reference to the history of popular music (Elvis Presley) as well as to ESC's famous bling. This DIY aesthetic fits the playfulness of the song and confirms Sigwart's TikTok story: it's about someone doing something with little money, a bit of cheek and a lot of friends that actually has little chance of success – just because it's fun. Hence, the self-reflexive demonstration of the imperfect is not a detriment to the overall narrative. On the contrary: because Sigwart acts "naturally" in this sense, because he seems to be "just himself", he actually authenticates himself and his story.

3) The Reception and Meanings Offered to the Audience

The musical nature of the music video is of course due to Sigwart's musical background. But it also fits – and many "react videos" from ESC fans show – the aesthetic preferences of a queer fan community to whom the message means much more than to non-queer people, because people with non-conforming gender identities or non-heterosexual orientations are significantly the target of homophobic, anti-queer, and anti-trans sentiments and hate comments online. But they are also familiar with different aesthetic codes of queer communities. In his TikTok narrative, Sigwart already uses a more or less offensively queer sign apparatus. The most obvious is probably the rainbow as a pride flag. It appears repeatedly in the TikTok videos, and its colour dramaturgy also forms the colour concept for the scenes in the music video.

The rainbow colours are used as a Holi explosion, as patterns and as single colours. The rainbow is a diverse but always positively charged symbol that can be used in any way to emphasise the song's message of "I Don't Feel Hate". In the queer scene, and therefore in an

important fan community of ESC, the rainbow colours are the symbol of pride and diversity, known as the “pride flag”. The rainbow appears frequently in Sigwart’s TikTok videos. He himself describes his use of the pride flag colours in the music video in a dramatic way by linking them to certain forms of discrimination:

1) Bodyshaming: yellow ≙ light / optimism.

2) Discrimination based on class, political views: green ≙ nature.

3) Hate towards the LGBTQI+ community: red ≙ life.

4) Discrimination based on faith: purple ≙ spirituality.

5) Public pressure and hate speech: blue ≙ harmony

6) Sexism: orange ≙ healing

Based on the colour concept and the musical elements, Sigwart offers an opportunity to produce meaning and empowerment for the LGBTQI+ community, but also for people who show solidarity with this community.

However, the rainbow and its colours are not exclusively queer symbols, but also appear regularly in other contexts. To name just two: in spring of 2020, the “Rainbow against Corona” campaign was launched: children painted colourful rainbows and hung them on windows and doors. In April 2021, Apple presented its new product range using the 7 colours of the rainbow revisiting one of its own advertising symbols from the 1980s. In the music video, the bright and colourful colour scheme, the costumes, and props such as the chessboard floor, combined with the guitar sound and the children’s birthday party attitude reminiscent of Neue Deutsche Welle (German new wave) evoke the 1980s and thus appeal to a wider audience. In Sigwart’s performance in the final show of the ESC, however, only the Holi colour explosions are taken up, while the rainbow is not shown on stage.

4) The TikTok Narrative and Its Relation to the Present

All of Sigwart’s storytelling, including the music video, is situated at an interesting point in media history because it combines different media: old mass media like television, which are still familiar and relevant, and new social media in the digital space, which allow for a different form of participation and self-presentation. The storytelling strategy is cross-media and serial, linking different media eras and demonstrating a pop cultural sensibility. “Anyone competing for attention in the profession needs a new form of pop sensibility” (Gerhardt, 2020).

If one looks at the online reactions to the music video, it becomes clear that this is a classic Marmite song: people either love it or hate it. Those who love it describe the video using the adjectives: crazy, uplifting, pure fun, cute and just “what we need” (Hill-Brown, 2021). There is a feel-good factor that should not be underestimated, and I think it is particularly noticeable against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic in Europe. Even non-Germans seem to be feeling it. Possibly therein lies the relevance of this narrative for those who have followed the TikTok journey in light of the contemporary and cultural-historical background. Sigwart’s TikTok videos as well as his song and music video convey a feel-good moment, which, as reactions on the internet show, is particularly appreciated in times of an ongoing pandemic crisis. In addition, his TikTok story is a self-fulfilling fairy tale: a young man has a dream and no money, hence he relies on improvisation, creativity, and, most importantly, friends to make his dream come true. The videos are about socially successful relationships and a sense of ease – it is the summer of 2020, after the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. For most recipients, however, autumn marked the beginning of another phase, in which a seemingly endless lockdown and a leaden period of frozen social activities swept the country, and in which the harshness of the debate on social networks – and not only there – regarding Covid-19 increased. In keeping with the logic of the song’s title, “I Don't Feel Hate”, the music video and the TikTok series retain their

lightness even during this period. They show a moment of successful life in which stagnation, exhaustion, loneliness or hate otherwise dominated. Sigwart offers a narrative that counters the "racing standstill" (Virilio 1999) with a movement that actually takes place, transcending the limits, severity and social fractures of the pandemic. As the "Honest Vocal Coach" Georgina Hill-Brown, who did YouTube Videos on all ESC contributions of 2021, puts it: "It's just fun. Which is what we need" (Hill-Brown, 2021).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

While Sigwart's TikTok story and music video were quite successful, the transfer of their characteristic aesthetic elements to the stage of the ESC final was not. The (seemingly) unfinished, spontaneous, and self-deprecating music video, which unfolded its charm on the small screen of a smartphone, seemed rather powerless and lost on the big TV stage. The media transfer was unconvincing. The reasons for this lack of success are not clear. For example, it is difficult to say why NDR, the broadcaster in charge, replaced the cheeky but no longer scandalous middle finger with a victory sign. While the music video fulfilled the requirements and framework of TikTok, the television event failed to do so: the performance could not fill the stage, it lost the quirky charm of the DIY music video without creating anything new and interesting for the big TV stage.

Transmedia transitions are no longer exceptional nowadays, but as Sigwart's case shows, they are also potential breaking points. Media are never homogeneous, they have their own formats, requirements, audiences, and transmedia transitions are only successful where the content is suitable for the new media environment. An example of a successful media transfer in the opposite direction – from a series to TikTok – is Kate Bush's song "Running Up That Hill (A Deal With God)" (1986) being used in the fourth season of the Netflix series Stranger Things (2021). The scene, in which the song accompanies the character Maxine's escape from Vecna and the Upside Down, so aptly links the original song to the narrative that the moment was subsequently shared millions of times on TikTok, including various new adaptations.

In the post-digital age, transitions between media, but also between analogue and digital, have become more frequent and common. This does not mean that they are always successful. It is still up to the people to decide whether popular artefacts become a resource for producing meaning. By watching, buying, and talking about cultural content, and increasingly by producing their own. Sigwart's example also shows that it is possible to develop a star persona on social media platforms and to have a surprise hit. But it is by no means a matter of course that this success can also be transferred and continued in a transmedial way.

END NOTES

[1] My translation.

[2] George Michael and Prince had long legal battles with their record companies over their autonomy.

[3] Videos uploaded to TikTok were initially limited to 15 seconds, but the limit was quickly extended to 1 minute, then 3 minutes, and now 10 minutes.

[4] Here, I am referring to "Unterhaltung" ("entertainment") as a concept that is used to describe a process of communication (mostly in the mass media) in the field of popular culture. Entertainment in the sense used here has been theorised in particular by Hans-Otto Hügel. He

describes it as aesthetically ambiguous, oscillating between seriousness and non-seriousness (cf. Hügel 2007).

[5] My translation of the German expression "Inszenierungsgesellschaft".

[6] In cultural studies, the term "pleasure" stands for the enjoyment of popular culture, which always contains moments of meaning production, identity production and, potentials for resistance. "Pleasure" is not to be understood as an escapist moment, but as an active and productive process (cf. Fiske 1989).

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"THANK YOU FOR SHARING THIS FANTASTIC PERFORMANCE": MEANING AND FORM IN TRANSMEDIA PERSONA CONSTRUCTION OF YOUTUBE DRUMMERS

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ABSTRACT

YouTube is one of the most important music media in the world today. Musical practice is reflected there in a variety of forms, from sound recordings to music videos to tutorials. The media environment that YouTube creates as a platform inscribes itself – to some degree – in the actions of those who use it. This is also the case with the YouTube drummer phenomenon, which this article examines in more detail in terms of the interplay between persona construction, music-making, media presentation, and transmedia content concatenation. The thesis is pursued that the practice of YouTube drummers creates a singular interference space of conventions, modes of action, and social roles, which in some places has novelty value with regard to music-related persona constructions and their implementation in platform-based audiovisual media, and which transcends media boundaries. The specificity of the persona construction essentially results from the mediating position of the drum-playing actors: they are not only performers who, like social media influencers, push into the light of publicity, but at the same time musical experts and instructors, quasi-curatorial music communicators who select, prepare, and present music of the past, and intermediaries of the corporeality of popular music. The analyses presented are based on exploratory investigations of the YouTube drummer field itself and a case study.

KEY WORDS

Musical Persona; Drumming; YouTube; Popular Music; Transmediality; Audiovisual Media; Rock Culture

INTRODUCTION

YouTube has undoubtedly become a central music medium in the nearly 20 years since its inception. This has been made possible by the range of functionality provided on the platform – from the simple uploading of clips to interaction options to personalised recommendation chains based on algorithms and AI – but also by agreements with traditional music market institutions such as record labels and collecting societies. In the interdisciplinary field of music, media, and cultural studies, hardly any researcher today will deny that YouTube, alongside other platforms such as Spotify and TikTok, has significantly shaped the creation, distribution, and perception of music worldwide. It is probably not far-fetched to argue that the profound incision online media have made in relation to music cultures is not so much along the introduction and social establishment of browser-based applications in the mid-1990s, but along the triumph of social media starting in the mid-2000s.

In this article, I want to look at the phenomenon of YouTube drummers and explore the question of how a specific kind of persona construction emerges in the interplay of music-making, media presentation format, and transmedia content concatenation. The term "YouTube drummer" seems to be at best vaguely defined in musical practice itself, in the field of journalism, and in academia; rather, it triggers a bundle of associations, which is not uncommon for terms that originate in and are mainly used in areas of everyday life communication.[1] Thus, in the sense of a working definition, I propose to understand YouTube drummers as people playing drums who use YouTube with some consistency and align their activities with prevailing trends and behaviours there (setting up a channel including concise and salient titling, regularly uploading clips, adopting styles of audiovisual composition, etc.). This definition does not preclude the relevant individuals from consistently pursuing their drumming on other platforms as well as offline.

Alongside the YouTube drummers, there is an almost unmanageable number of musicians active on the various platforms who put other instruments typical of pop music (especially electric guitar and electric bass) at the very centre. By focusing on drumming videos, it was possible to narrow down the field of investigation. However, practical considerations were not entirely decisive. Drumming videos are particularly interesting from an analytical perspective, since they highlight an instrument that tends to operate in the background in both the sonic worlds and the visual worlds of popular music and make it become the protagonist, if you will, which implies an interesting disruption of perceptual patterns.

The analyses I present are exploratory and are intended to capture the field of YouTube drummers itself in its multifacetedness, which also seeks to make it distinguishable from other fields of music practice on YouTube; this is combined with a case study. Central to my reflections is the thesis that the practice of YouTube drummers creates a singular interference space of conventions, modes of action, and social roles, which has novelty value in some places regarding music-related persona constructions and their realization in platform-based audiovisual media. Given that a cultural field is itself being staked out, it seems sensible to me to link my reflections to fundamental questions of meaning and form, interpreting the former as the meaning potentials of the products (videos) that spring from this practice, and the latter as formal aspects of the products derived from the media used. This is structurally reflected in the analysis section via three thematic areas: expertise and self-presentation, repertoire, and audiovisual production.

Pop Star Persona, Transmediality, and YouTube as Music Medium

The nexus of music and persona has been the subject of lively discussion in the humanities and cultural studies for some time. Important preliminary work in this field deals with questions of how personal qualities are inscribed in musical performances and products and in which economic, technological, and socio-cultural contexts and dynamics they are embedded (Fiske 1989; Shuker 1994). One of the first contributions to deal decisively and in a comprehensive manner with the role of personality both in the musical creation process and in the reception situation is by Simon Frith; however, he uses the concept of persona rather *en passant*. Frith construes performance as something intended for the eyes and ears of others: thus, what is perceived by the audience as a personal quality (of the performance) is often a result of a deliberate performance choice by the performer. In terms of the musical event, Frith (1996, p. 212) speaks of a double enactment: the performers enact their star personality (or image) and a song personality.

This model was further elaborated by Philip Auslander, who introduces the concept of musical persona. Auslander (2009, p. 303) takes up Frith's double enactment theorem and fundamentally distinguishes three layers of performance: the real person, the performance persona, and the character. Elsewhere, he highlights the epistemological consequences of a persona perspective, which specifically consist of turning away from the traditional (musicological) understanding of music as a work or text: "the direct object of the verb to perform need not be something – it can also be someone, an identity rather than a text (Auslander 2006, p. 101)". In his view, there are thus similarities to the film medium, and musical personas would therefore operate in ways that are similar to those of movie stars, in the sense that the audience's perception of the music is mediated by its conception of the performer as persona (Auslander 2006, p. 102).

What can be distilled from Frith's and Auslander's work is that in the areas where (popular) music is actually created, the actions of all those involved (musicians, producers, A&R managers, etc.) are aimed at initiating and establishing a (star) narrative in which the respective artist or band can be read as interesting, exceptional, unique, etc. This sort of "star branding" serves as a guide for the sale of the corresponding products. In other words, it is a central motif in the production fields of popular music to establish an identity construct for the public space that conveys a coherent and plausible, but not necessarily true, image of the (private/real) person.

A large number of works start from this theoretical core and shed light on different facets of music-related persona constructions or outline new relevant areas of investigation in this field. Allan Moore (2012, pp. 179–181), for example, following on from Auslander as well as developing his approach in musicological terms, distinguishes three levels in the sonic object itself (the song), performer, persona, and protagonist, and claims that these are always identifiable, even if their relationship to each other is not necessarily obvious. Philip Tagg (2012) takes a similar perspective, locating persona constructions at the sound level. He is particularly interested in vocal performance, for the analysis of which he introduces the notion of "vocal persona" (Tagg 2012, p. 344), which he argues may at times take the form of (theatrical) role-playing, but in any case, should be understood as any aspect of personality as shown to or perceived by others through the medium of prosody or the singing voice. Tom Cochrane (2011, p. 211), in turn, uses the concept to explore ways in which complex emotions in music can be analysed, concluding that whenever a listener gains direct access to the qualitative nature of an emotional feeling, the persona acts as a frame that unifies or endorses the emotional feeling. Giovanni Formilan and David Stark (2021, p. 39) also build on the frame idea in their empirical study of DJs and producers in electronic dance music by assuming that personas have an autonomous reality, that is, that they exist independently of the person. The relational structure in which identity work takes place thus consists of a third variable in addition to the person and the audience.

In a rather comprehensive way, Charles Fairchild and David Marshall (2019) approach the nexus of music and persona, which is also reflected in the editing of a thematic issue on this very nexus in this journal.[2] In relation to the topic of my article, their following claim is significant:

> We will need an expansion of the kinds of sources from which we might draw our understandings of the existing discursive formations, material forms of mediation, and symbolic content of contemporary musical persona. These might include: websites, magazines, fanzines, social media feeds, trade publications, specialist blogs, museum displays, brand associations, product sponsorships, curated playlists, awards shows, and the many forms of popular

> narrative non-fiction written by journalists, historians, artists, industry executives, managers, and producers reflecting on the entities, events, and social relationships we call the 'music industry'. (Fairchild & Marshall 2019, p. 11)

What is made clear here is that the processes through which a persona is constructed are embedded in a complex field of institutions, organizations, media types and genres, and semiotic resources, and that figuring out how these domains interact in persona construction is a central analytic task.

Kai Arne Hansen (2019) takes up this idea and raises the question of how, in the case of pop stars, the various elements of a persona can be held together in the interplay of media and, above all, presented effectively. In a sense, this is where the concept of transmediality connects to that of the persona. By now lively discussed among cultural researchers, two trends in the definition of transmediality can be distinguished. The first trend reflects a rather broad perspective and entails an effort to designate related processes in the media and to point out their affinity. Following this understanding, different types of media may share basic characteristics capable of producing similar effects on the part of media users (Elleström 2019). The second trend is expressed in a rather narrow definition that refers to the appearance of a particular theme, aesthetic, or discourse in different types of media, without the need or ability to identify a particular source medium (Rajewsky 2002). "Transmediality" thus characterises the migration of aesthetic elements across media or the coupling of these. Hansen argues in line with the former trend, concluding that pop personas are a genuine transmedia phenomenon, and that the analysis must be concerned with working out how multiple texts and narratives combine to form a larger whole, the persona (Hansen 2019, p. 502). This conflicts with the second definitional approach, which would instead suggest viewing pop personas as a cross-media phenomenon and tracing the specific aesthetic orientation or discursive framing of the individual persona construct.

In the research practice on music and personas, the transmediality approach seems to be still significantly underexposed, which underlines the importance of this thematic issue, but also studies on the nexus of transmediality and persona without reference to music are only available in a manageable number so far. With some frequency, topics from the field of political communication (cf. Hernández-Santaolalla 2020) and marketing or branding (cf. Bengtsson & Edlom 2023) are addressed. The transmedia angle is also sometimes taken up in celebrity studies (cf. Chaplin 2020; Mendes & Perrot 2019). Another tendency that is currently emerging is to relate the "wandering" of persons and personas in the media to a specific aspect of media present, namely the major platforms: YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and the like (cf. Masanet, Márquez, Pires & Lanzeni 2020; Löwe 2019). This is a commendable approach, as these very platforms and the technology companies operating them form widely networked sociotechnical ecosystems that organise larger social contexts on the Web (Dolata & Schrape 2022, p.12). In turn, this calls for a comprehensive investigation of the competencies, strategies, and behaviours of users that are adapted to these media environments in terms of "platform practices" (Duffy, Poell & Nieborg 2019).

This leads me to the platform that constitutes my object of investigation: YouTube (already the term "YouTube drummer" indicates that media environment and human action are somehow intertwined). YouTube has rapidly developed into a highly frequented communication and self-presentation environment and subsequently into an indispensable link in the value chains of popular culture. Treated today as a kind of universal medium in which just about anything can be found, from instruction manuals to historical film documents, it is by its original conception a video platform. The original motto, broadcast yourself, got to the heart of the idea that the platform should offer a kind of habitat for user-generated content and DIY practices (Burgess & Green 2009). However, it is part of YouTube's (still short) history that professional providers were also able to place their products, which followed classic

commercial interests and led to the establishment of an asymmetrical relationship between users and the industries involved, which was exactly the intention of YouTube's founders from the very beginning (Vonderau 2016). YouTube has thus also functioned as a kind of mass medium with a feedback channel (meaning the comment section) and, of course, with a kind of integrated machine market observation tool (Dolata 2021).

YouTube quickly developed into a music medium, probably one of the most important of our time, and the reasons for this are firstly the communicative reach that the platform offers content creators, secondly the degree of use worldwide, and thirdly the variety of forms in which musical practice manifests itself. As mentioned at the beginning, the prerequisite for this was that various legal agreements were reached with established institutions of musical and cultural life. Varieties of musical practice include sound recordings, music videos, cover versions, parodies, tutorials, and more. In a way, most of these clip categories play a role in the YouTube drummer phenomenon, in the sense that partial aspects of them can be found in the corresponding videos, but none of them may quite serve as a model or prominent interpretive framework. Appearing as a drummer on YouTube thus seems to be determined to a markedly high degree by a hybridity of form, which corresponds with the basic premise that hybridization is a fundamental feature of YouTube aesthetics (cf. Vernallis 2013). The construction of personas in this field is correspondingly complex.

YouTube Drummers' Personas and the Blurring of Media Genre Boundaries

The YouTube drummer phenomenon has its origins in the creation of non-corporate user-generated content. To what extent this accurately reflects contemporary practice is difficult to verify. One can assume that, as in other creative practices tailored to YouTube, the transitions between user-generated content (or DIY) and professionally organised, commercially oriented activity with industrial actors pulling the strings are fluid. For better orientation, I will briefly outline characteristic features of drumming intended for the eyes and ears of YouTube users.

The object of consideration are videos in which individual instrumentalists play well-known songs with the help of a playback track in which the drum part is missing or has been turned down by filters; as mentioned above, similar videos can be found in the field of playing guitar or bass. The instrumentalists shown are most likely also active offline as musicians. At the same time, their actions are noticeably adapted to the forms of presentation prevalent on YouTube or in social media, which – in one way or another – is transferred to their overall image as musicians and leads to them being perceived as "YouTube drummers". In other words, the focus is not on music tutorials, music videos, or videos with cover versions of popular songs, but rather videos, usually elaborately produced, that show a musical performance, but performed by a single person and usually filmed in a rather "untheatrical" setting, often a rehearsal room or a (home) recording studio, in other words, in places that mirror the day-to-day activities of musicians.

When producing such videos, drummers have to adapt their learned role portfolio (rehearsing, performing, recording, teaching, etc.) to a "new" constellation of requirements (selecting a song, performing, filming, editing the video, uploading it, and responding to user comments). Another requirement may be to effectively present one's own actions in a transmedia context. This can refer, as noted above, to the coupling of activities transported across different platform accounts/channels, but can equally encompass presence in more traditional media forms such as sound recordings, music videos, live recordings, and paratexts such as interviews (audiovisual and text-based).

In what follows, I reflect on persona construction in light of the phenomenal abundance of drumming on YouTube and the cultural dynamics in which it is embedded and connect this to descriptions and interpretations of a specific case: the YouTube channel "sina-drums". Behind

this is Cologne-based musician Sina Doering (*1999), who is active as a professional drummer in various formations. This approach via a case study, like all methodological approaches, is able to shed light on certain aspects, but not on others, which is why I also name facets of the addressed phenomenon for which the chosen example cannot apply and refer to alternative analytical approaches. In order to illustrate the scope of the YouTube drummer phenomenon and the regularities that occur, I will cite other channels and videos as examples in a few places.

Expertise and Self-Presentation

YouTube drumming videos enjoy great popularity, which is expressed in high view numbers that are frequently in the high seven-digit range. One reason for this success is the expertise of the people performing. You watch "experts" at work and can enjoy their special skill or expressiveness. They are also the ones who create a new visual approach to the performance of a song, while the sonic structure changes only marginally compared to the original recording. Thus, for the actors, i.e. the drummers, the core challenge seems to be to come as close as possible to the original drum part in an all-encompassing way, that is to say, in terms of the notes played and the sound. And as a spectator, you are in the comfortable situation of being able to observe whether the respective person succeeds in doing this or not.

By expertise I mean the range of performative musical skills and the ability to activate them in public. The videos present people who have obviously already gained some experience in playing drums. In addition to the particularly complicated movements and beat combinations, this is evident from the timing. Everyone who plays or has played in a band knows from personal experience that timing is an unmistakable sign that you are approaching or have internalized professional standards. On the one hand, correct or incorrect timing is subliminally noticeable – it can be defined as a micro rhythmic phenomenon – and on the other hand, it permeates the entire sound layering or sound texture of a song. In popular music culture, an often-quoted expression – and widely held sentiment amongst musicians – is that "a band is only as good as its drummer". For the performers in question, correct timing doesn't seem to be a challenge at all, nor are many notes played in rapid succession or acrobatic combinations of beats. All of this catapults them into the world of professional popular music, even though they are framed as peers or at least as approachable individuals by their personal YouTube channel and cannot be considered famous in the traditional sense like pop stars. So already on the level of expertise an interesting clash of different cultural patterns of orientation becomes apparent, which is not without consequences for the way the actors in this field work on their personas and which suggests that they act at a certain distance from culturally ingrained modes of representation.

The sina-drums channel is indeed exemplary in this respect. In addition to the actual play-along videos, there are also self-produced clips that give insights into the "private life" of the channel owner, for example, her career or current events (such as the relocation of her home studio), as well as drum tutorials and clips that show collaborations with other musicians; taken together, the latter give the impression of a scene or a network of friends. All of these clips ultimately revolve around Sina's advanced drumming and the various roles associated with it, and yet they present a person who constantly acts in a gesture of informality and in this respect makes no discernible effort to come up with a set of salient and distinctive personality traits typical of pop star and social media influencer images. Like many YouTube drummers, Sina presents herself as an accessible, down-to-earth master of her craft.[3] This too can be read as impression management that attempts to conform to certain conventions and expectations, in the sense of deliberately avoiding appearing aloof. From the clearly visible absence of conventional star behaviour (or star appeal), it can be read that the actors have a kind of media sensitivity. No matter how good their playing skills are, no matter how good their reputation is in the music scene and in the user community, as long as the main way or one of the main ways to get public attention is YouTube, they will take in the mode of the musician next door.[4]

In terms of habitual aspects, another point stands out. Most of the actors are dressed very casually and many tie in with clothing styles and vestimentary practices that are generally associated with pop culture and its representatives. In this context, it is noticeable that the practice behind the term "Youtube drummer" is almost exclusively in the hands of adolescents and young adults. This may or may not be surprising, depending on one's point of view. On the one hand, one could object that there are probably many older musicians with an affinity for media-based self-presentation. On the other hand, one can refer to the findings of youth studies, according to which young people, compared to other social groups, tend to use media primarily as a training ground for identity work (cf. Lange & Xyländer 2008). Whichever argument one chooses, decisive for my topic is the effect that comes from the accumulation of young drummers. For, according to this view, self-presentation can be read as a link to the embodiment of a key cultural concept, namely that of juvenility. Many of the now familiar body practices of popular music developed in the youth cultural movements of the 1960s, which stood in opposition to existing notions of morality and decency, or at least sought to articulate an alternative to them. The fact that popular music performance became an art form in its own right had much to do with a normative framework centred on the premise of appearing as cool, relaxed, spontaneous, and accessible as possible. It can be argued with Milton Singer (1972, p. 71) that these qualities have merged over time and now form the core of a collective, meaning *cultural performance* of juvenile informality. The videos at issue confirm this normative horizon, but with regard to their potentials of meaning (see fundamentally Smith 2021), it can be seen that they link this horizon to the representation of musical expertness.

This results in an interesting cultural re-alignment: the activity spectrum of popular music actors who are not stars or celebrities has been theorised and described in the past using concepts such as consumption, fandom, appropriation, or everyday life (cf. DeNora 2000). The everyday performance of popular music now takes on a form that accentuates epistemic structures, bringing them to the surface, as it were, and making them an element of the aesthetic experience. This can be seen in many videos (including "sina-drums"). For example, quite often, all physical activities, meaning the movements of the feet and hands, are depicted with the help of a split screen or picture-in-picture effect.[5] The individual song is thus re-framed as manifestation of a specific knowledge culture, which can be read as an enhancement of popular music's standing in society. The knowledge orientation of the videos should thus be understood not only as an aesthetic feature that draws its appeal from its novelty value, but also as a mirroring of a profound change in cultural values. By handing down the epistemic foundations of popular music on a broad social basis, its legitimacy is plausibilised and reinforced to a considerable degree; this, of course, takes place alongside an ongoing institutionalization of popular music in the form of exhibitions, collections, courses of study, and conferences (Bennett 2022). From this I would conclude that YouTube drummers are not only young, amicable, and down-to-earth masters of their craft, but also act in a mediating role similar to that of a curator. They select, prepare and present popular music of the past, and the quasi-curatorial activities become part of individual persona construction.

And the latter is not necessarily limited to the "YouTube" communication channel but fits into a transmedia concatenation of media content. The case studied is an impressive example of this. In 2018, Sina Doering was asked to be an expert on Keith Moon's drumming style as part of the British media company Sky's series *The Art of Drumming*. The reason for this invitation was surely the already great response to her drumming videos, especially to a video in which she replays the drumming part of *Pinball Wizard* by The Who.[6] In the short feature, she performs this very song and is interviewed. She gives profound information about specific characteristics of Keith Moon's style and the depth of her reflections indicates that she fulfils her expert role very conscientiously. The situation seems to convey that here is a person who, despite her relatively young age (Sina Doering must have been 18 or 19 at the time of recording), knows how to decipher the manifold creative paths that individual pop musicians have taken in the past. Something similar is transmitted by way of an interview feature in the

German-language specialist magazine for drums and percussion *Sticks* from 2020. In addition to statements about personal role models and famous representatives of the percussion profession, there are also profound reflections on questions of preparation and presentation of the selected pieces.[7] In a sense, she reflects on her own role as somehow singled out pop music mediator.

Repertoire

The meaning potentials attached to the actions of YouTube drummers are essentially related to the question of which pieces are performed. The concept of repertoire addresses the social and cultural mechanisms that lead to certain pieces of music being played more often than others at a certain time and place. The question of how repertoires form and solidify over time is closely tied to the constitution, development, spread, and acceptance of music genres, which refer to communities of memory that ensure that individual musicians and bands as well as certain forms of music-making are held up through a variety of communication channels; this occurs in a multi-layered interplay with other cultural forms of articulation and social practices (Jost 2018).

The quasi-curatorial "interventions" of the YouTube drummers are part of this musical-cultural memory landscape. In a first, rough interpretation, one could say that the majority of the artists represented in the performed songs can be found in most recent written histories of post-war Western popular music. The general direction becomes clear: the focus is on rock music (large subsections are "classic rock", hard rock and heavy metal). This insight is based, however, on a rather unsystematic observation of the (virtual) field; larger sample-based evaluations are still pending. Moreover, the "rock" focus does not exclude the possibility that current hits or songs that stem from or reference electronic pop music genres are also played and that individual performers specialize in these areas. Regardless, it seems that gender or background of the performers do not or not significantly affect the selection of bands and songs. Thus, I would conclude that a large number of YouTube drummers help to reproduce rather than undermine existing patterns of cultural orientation. The orientation pattern at issue here is clearly rock culture, more precisely white, male, Anglo-American rock music.

Given the history of Western popular music, this may not seem overly surprising. Most of the international superstars and cultural icons come from English-speaking countries, and most of them are male. Collective notions of how to perform with a drum set (or electric guitar or electric bass) are largely associated with masculine agency (Leonard 2007, pp. 23–42); only in the singing field is the situation different. As for the Anglo-American aspect, it is crucial to note that the influence of rock music from the U.S. and the U.K. was once far-reaching and went beyond the realm of aesthetics (Regev 1997, pp. 131–132). In the late 1950s to early 1970s, the music also stood for modernity and social liberalisation. In the course of the following decades, rock music and the experiences connected with it have become part of the collective memory work worldwide, participating in the formation of cultural identities. In contemporary popular music culture, there seems to be something like a topos of the "Anglo-American", which can be considered exceedingly powerful because of its position in identity-forming processes.

The case study raises a number of questions against the backdrop of the aforementioned cultural orientation pattern and, more specifically, the aspect of masculine agency. Sina Doering is a young person read as female who is involved in creating images of rock performance that stand in difference to the collectively remembered imageries of rock (on the gender imbalance in popular music drumming see Brennan 2020, pp. 222–242). In this respect, her actions can be linked to the question of whether and in what way she addresses this difference; emphasis is given to this question by the fact that there are already platform networks dedicated exclusively to women drummers (MacAulay & Andrisani 2021). Consequently, it seems relevant to investigate in which way the work of female drummers (or other instrumentalists) in the history of popular music is represented by her song selection. The observations in this regard

can be summarized in a few words: her videos are consistent, gender aspects do not seem to play a major role. However, for the sake of completeness, it should be mentioned that the URL of her official artist website does refer to gender aspects, and in a way that can be read as emancipatory: girls-got-groove.com. Also, it cannot be ruled out that the videos, which exist in exuberant numbers on her various platform channels, occasionally refer to the role of women in the production of popular music.

But regardless of this, it seems that she primarily counters the prevailing memory patterns with her own agency, and a look into the field reveals that many other drummers who are read as female do the same. In this context, the interview that *Sticks* magazine conducted with her is also informative. In it, she describes how her choice of music is largely based on her music-related childhood memories, which were shaped by the musical preferences of her father, himself a professional musician. Her own positioning as a drummer on the basis of gendered self-attribution and attribution to others thus remains a blank space, incidentally one that is not closed by the interviewer either. This may certainly be due above all to the topic of the conversation and its dynamics. Nevertheless, a repertoire like hers and the non-thematisation of gender inequality perpetuate the idea of a music scene in which male instrumentalists naturally set the tone, as it were (cf. Davies 2019). So, in this and other cases, persona construction operates in a peculiar field of tension between the reproduction of cultural orientation patterns and disruptive image production. While it cannot be verified for this particular case, it can be surmised in general with regard to the performance of women on YouTube that their peculiar reticence in dealing with questions of representation of gender and identity is due to self-made or passed-on experiences with sexist hostility by male users (cf. Döring & Rohangis Mohseni 2019).

Audiovisual Production

YouTube, as mentioned above, has been of great interest to musicians with a wide variety of skills and professional goals from the beginning. A large and important sector that emerged in this context, and which was also partly responsible for the cultural impetus of YouTube as a participatory medium, was non-corporate practice. From today's perspective, two phases of this practice can be distinguished. Characteristic of the first is that the clips were mostly produced with the help of a digital camera or a cell phone; the forms with the highest degree of dissemination at the time were cover song videos, tutorials, and parodies. In the majority of cases, the people making the music were in private surroundings and the most common means of sound production were vocals, guitar, piano or keyboard.

This kind of self-documentation anchored in everyday life is subject to some changes in the second phase, which is adequately described by the term professionalisation and basically includes the entire field of non-corporate video production on YouTube; the phenomenon of YouTube drummers can be placed in this phase (however, some clips are still produced with cell phones). Now sound, performance, and image composition are visibly oriented toward qualitative standards and aesthetic figurations that have emerged in the professional production worlds of the mass media. This includes the fact that various elements of presentation, such as hard editing, cross-fading, different shot perspectives as well as split screen and picture-in-picture effect, indicate a long post-production phase. The same is true for the sound level. A reasonably trained listener can quite easily recognise that conventional sound recording techniques such as equalising, multi-tracking and sound effects are used in the production of the presented soundtrack. Generally speaking, it seems that the elaborate audiovisual production has become a prerequisite for gaining recognition as a YouTuber drummer.[8]

If we take a closer look at the way YouTube drummers make their videos, the idea of a blurring of media boundaries becomes tangible. The keyword "covering" has been mentioned several times above, which refers in the broadest sense to replaying pieces of music and thus

also appears to be applicable to the actions of YouTube drummers. However, the use of playback tracks, in many cases based on mixes or edits of the original recordings, suggests that the practice in question cannot really be called covering, even if the actors quite often use that term (the case of sina-drums is no exception in this respect). The songs are performed, but not covered in the conventional sense, because this would entail a deviation from the original, which may or may not be strong, but would in any case be audible. In contrast, the drum performances here are based on playing along with preexisting audio material and aim to be as close as possible to the original recording, down to the smallest detail, as it were. These clips have more in common with a historical reenactment, at least on a sonic level, than with most forms of covering (with tribute bands the similarity is probably greatest). Another aspect that speaks against the equation with covering is the dissecting character of the performance. Only one of the means of sound production heard on the original recording is extracted and made the expressive centre of the audiovisual product. This probably also led to the statement from a user that I quote in the title of this article, which reflects the attitude of many other users who comment on a video: "thank you for sharing this fantastic performance".[9] Even when covering a song with just vocals and acoustic guitar, the point is to capture the overall character of the song, that is, the interplay of melody, harmony, rhythm, and sound. And that is definitely not the case with YouTube drummers. If you will, they only zoom in on a section of the sonic events that constitute the recorded song.

By focusing their performance on a clearly identifiable goal, namely the accurate imitation or rendition of a recorded drum part, the actors also give their persona a basic direction. They act in a sportive way, namely in the sense that the idea of challenge is behind their actions. Either they succeed in a musically accurate imitation of the original part, which captivates others, the audience, or they do not succeed or succeed only in a weakened form. The consequence of this is that technical aspects of the performance are placed in the foreground, for example in the way that the degree of difficulty of the performance must always be visually comprehensible. In this way, it is not possible, or only possible to a limited extent, to work on a concise image that is somehow original and arouses interest, as is strived for in the field of music video productions, for example.

But the audiovisual production touches on the persona construction of the YouTube drummers on yet another level, namely on the level of corporeality. The videos focus on the instrument of the classic rock band lineup, the playing of which is perhaps most strongly associated with physical exertion (cf. Smith 2021), something that has been thematised in pop culture itself in many places, for example through the character of "Animal" in the Muppet Show series. They make something visually tangible that until then had basically only been transmitted in auditory terms, namely via the sound recordings. For even though drumming is part of the iconography of popular music, it clearly takes a back seat to the other instruments in live events, music videos, concert films and other audiovisual media. At live events, this is related to the visual "disappearance" of the drummer behind the drum kit, and in music videos the focus is often on star showcasing, and this usually involves singers or guitarists. At most, concert film might be considered a genre in which drumming is made visually accessible with some consistency and in longer segments, but it could be argued here that the genre itself does not achieve the same cultural impact as live events and music videos. YouTube drummers' videos thus compensate for a scarcity of visual sources in popular music that clearly focus on drumming. It's not too far-fetched to see this as another reason for the great collective response to these videos.

The majority of videos, including the example, do not seem to be about reenactment in visual terms, as pursued by tribute bands. Here, too, it becomes apparent that the role that YouTube drummers take on, or rather constitute through their actions, has no direct model. Aiming for the acoustic but not the visual reenactment, they become a screen for projecting the physicality of recorded popular music. This in turn suggests that persona construction in their case is much less focused on contouring a combination of visual features than in comparison to

traditional pop stars or social media influencers. Their mediating role is once again revealed: they acquaint the audience with a specific form of bodily experience in the production of popular music.

CONCLUSION

The way YouTube drummers work on a persona can be characterised as a complex phenomenon between music, performance, media, and knowledge culture. By using YouTube to broadcast their performative skills to the public, the drummers create a distinctive role profile composed of various socially established roles (performer, teacher/instructor, content creator) augmented by quasi-curatorial activities. This hybrid element can also be cited as a reason for the fact that their personas seem strangely undecided. On the one hand, their appearance and behaviour correspond to pop-cultural codes in the age of social media; on the other hand, they lack the mix of salient personality traits typical of YouTube stars and traditional pop stars. In this respect, the personas seem to be an articulation of the mediator position that YouTube drummers occupy in the aesthetic worlds of experience in popular music. Through their actions, YouTube drummers open up a visual channel of perception for the playing of an instrument typical of rock music, which traditionally stands quite practically as well as symbolically in the background. In a certain sense, it is the drumming itself, from which a fascination certainly emanates not only for large parts of the audience, but also for practiced instrumentalists beyond the percussive domain, that pushes into the limelight. As the example of sina-drums shows, this has consequences for the very core of the persona construction, namely that a coherent and plausible, but not necessarily true, image of the private/real person is created. Sina Doering provides insights into her private routines, but essentially only into those that have to do with playing the drums. The image that emerges in this way is coherent and plausible and very likely also contains many true elements, but in the end, it is strangely artificial. It stands for an entity that could be described as a "thematic" or "drum" persona.

The case example has also shown that it is important to return theoretically to the more classical sociological concept of the social role as a critical complement to recent interpretations of the persona concept in the field of music research. The major platforms have created a media environment in which almost all activities relating to the creation of music can be turned into a product, i.e. videos themselves. This means the roles that musicians take on in the course of content creation potentially become part of the persona construction.

In addition, the YouTube drummer phenomenon is still interesting from a media theoretical perspective. It is a powerful example of how media participate in changing expectations about artistic forms of expression. The familiar song, hit, or evergreen becomes a vehicle for effective and, in many cases, demonstrably appealing self-expression, but one that departs, as shown, from conventional concepts of artistic self-expression. When watching such videos, are we witnessing an amateur musician, a professional, an aspiring pop star, or a successful online instructor? All of these categories play a role in one form or another but cannot be used as a frame of reference standing alone. The YouTube drummer phenomenon represents the ongoing breaking and redrawing of boundaries, between media genres and artistic forms, as is generally typical of late-modern media worlds and frequently discussed under the header of media convergence or convergence culture.

However, finally, it seems worthwhile to connect this insight with the question of who or what is actually "popular" in popular music today. One answer to this could be that not only stars or individual aesthetic objects are popular, but also – and increasingly – aesthetic forms, and media-induced forms at that. A video platform like YouTube is not only a huge virtual stage, but also a highly efficient pattern recognition and regrouping tool due to the algorithmic systems that are applied. At its core, this is true of any of the major platforms, which is why it can be argued, with some degree of exaggeration, that platforms embrace classification. However, the systems of classifications that emerge in this way cannot be stable after all,

because platforms are part of popular culture and the consolidation of aesthetic typifications within it would quickly lead to questioning popular culture as a field of generating experiences. Thus, at this point, it becomes clear that all platform-using content creators act within a constantly readjusting system of machine-gridded creativity. The platform economy still seems to be about new stars being born in large numbers, but this is being expanded to include the constant birth of new forms that can then be easily recognised and reclassified automatically. Researchers have only begun to properly understand the formative impact of this system on musical-cultural terrain.

END NOTES

[1] There is also the term "Instagram drummer", which – quite understandably – refers to drummers who mainly use the Instagram platform for their purposes. A comparison of both phenomena has the potential to provide insights into the influence of the platform on music-making, audiovisual presentation and the portfolio of video types combined in one channel. For reasons of scope, this cannot be pursued in this article.

[2] Persona Studies Vol. 5 No. 1 (2019). Available at: <https://ojs.deakin.edu.au/index.php/ps/issue/view/120> (Accessed 31 July 2023).

[3] See also the channel of Lindsey Raye Ward. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/@LindseyRayeWard/featured> (Accessed 27 November 2023).

[4] Sina Doering is also active on other platforms, specifically Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and Soundcloud, and uses them in a way that broadly corresponds to the prevailing modes of use in each case. This is: on Instagram, primarily everyday experiences are shared in a "behind the scenes" mode, on Facebook, dates are announced, news is communicated, and current YouTube videos or offbeat actions such as a fundraising campaign are placed, on TikTok, seemingly unrelated actions with a curiosity factor are presented, and Soundcloud serves as a virtual showcase for her recordings (though she has currently uploaded just two tracks there).

[5] See also "RUSH - SUBDIVISIONS - DRUM COVER by CHIARA COTUGNO". Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BybyFS3CpSc> (Accessed on 27 November 2023).

[6] See the video "Sina's Tribute to Keith Moon - The Art Of Drumming (Sky Arts Documentary 2018)". Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cz-d-O30qeo> (Accessed on 31 July 2023).

[7] Another example of a person who has outgrown the YouTube universe and gained recognition as a "drum expert" is Luke Holland. See his channel "Luke Holland Drums". Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/@LukeHollandDrums/featured> (Accessed on 27 November 2023).

[8] The complex production setup becomes the actual content in some videos. See, for example, "How To Create Drum Covers | Video + Audio Editing Tutorial For Beginners". Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCie40RsKOM> (Accessed on 29 November 2023).

[9] The statement comes from user @davidfortini9157 and refers to the clip "Walk Of Life (Dire Straits) • Drum Cover" uploaded on the channel sina-drums on 16 June 2023. The full comment reads: "I love this band; this song brings back so many memories. Thank you for sharing this fantastic performance." This kind of thanking can also be read as evidence that the quasi-curatorial facilitator role of the drummers plays no small part in the reception situation. Via the

acknowledgement, the users address the instance that made the "new" experience with the "old" audio material possible for them (see also the discussion on the corporeality of popular music below).

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"I GUESS THIS IS GROWING UP": ANALYSIS OF POP-PUNK'S REGAINED POPULARITY AND ITS SHIFT FROM BANDS TO PERSONAS

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ABSTRACT

This research article examines the transformation of pop-punk from bands to solo artists and how the genre regained popularity due to new popular personalities and the transmedia engagement in social media and with established media. Through a three-pronged approach, this study adopts phenomenological, theoretical, and empirical perspectives to understand the transition and regained popularity fully. The phenomenological angle delves into the case studies of musicians, revealing key factors behind the shift to solo artists in pop-punk. Theoretical explanations contextualize the phenomenon within broader cultural frameworks, considering industry and transmedia dynamics, audience preferences, and technological advancements. Empirical evidence, including statistical data from social media profiles, quantifies the impact of the shift. This study contributes to a comprehensive understanding of pop-punk's transformation, offering an exploration of its past, present, and future within the ever-evolving music industries and transmedia landscapes.

KEY WORDS

Pop-punk; Popular Musical Personas; Solo Artists; Social Media; Transmedia; TikTok.

INTRODUCTION: A SHORT HISTORY OF POP-PUNK

"Pop-punk is back" is what YouTuber Finn Mckenty (The Punk Rock MBA 2021) proclaims in his video about the comeback of a popular genre in which he discusses his reasons to believe that the musical style will gain popularity again. He also mentions the term "Nu Punk" which describes the modern variations of the old label pop-punk. The genre in question gained popularity in the mid to late 1990s. Key albums were *Dookie* by Green Day in 1994 (sold over 10 million units in the US alone according to the RIAA and over one million in Europe according to the IFPI) and *Smash* by The Offspring released in the same year (sold over 11 million units worldwide according to the IFPI). These releases and the genre gained a lot of mainstream music and media industries' attention during this time (Strauss 1995). In 1999, one of the most popular pop-punk acts Blink-182 released their most successful long-player *Enema of the State* (which sold over 15 million units worldwide according to the IFPI) including numerous hit singles like "All the Small Things" and "What's My Age Again", a song that claims "... nobody likes you when you're 23". Which is arguably the opposite of what Mckenty says about the genre pop-punk; a musical style that is very much liked despite its twenty-something age. Popular movies like the *American Pie* series featured so-called College Rock, especially pop-punk songs like those of Blink-182 and helped the genre to gain awareness with teenagers. Many similar bands

and acts like Sum 41, Good Charlotte, Avril Lavigne and Simple Plan followed in the early 2000s and had very popular releases, too (*Let Go* by Avril Lavigne for example sold over 7 million units in the US according to the RIAA and over 2 million units in Europe according to the IFPI). The Vans Warped Tour, a very popular traveling rock show in the USA and Canada, which featured many of these bands in their line-up helped the genre gain further attention (Diehl 2013). The genre was mainly a North American phenomenon in the beginning, with key bands like Blink-182, Green Day and The Offspring coming from California followed by many other popular groups from other parts of the United States (Bowling For Soup, New Found Glory, and SR-71) and Canada (Sum 41 and Simple Plan).

After various successful releases in the late 2000s by bands like Fall Out Boy, Paramore, and bands that were influenced by other genres who were considered to be "emo" like My Chemical Romance or Panic At The Disco, the ongoing popularity of the genre declined. In the 2010s less and less pop-punk bands had major hits or headlined popular live music festivals (Maloney 2013). A notable exception is Hayley Williams from Paramore who started a successful solo career in the late 2000s while still working with her band and releasing a critically acclaimed album in 2023 with Paramore again. In the mid-2010s a number of bands formed that followed the tradition in terms of sounds, looks and aesthetics and considered themselves pop-punk (Cohen 2013). Major groups in this period were State Champs, the Wonder Years, Real Friends, Knuckle Puck (all from the USA), and Neck Deep (UK). Those bands were considered more underground and did not embrace mainstream culture[1] like previous pop-punk bands did; the critically acclaimed album *The Greatest Generation* from 2013 by The Wonder Years and all of their other albums never received an RIAA or IFPI certification like Gold status for over 500,000 units sold, nor did the works by the other previously mentioned bands. Looking at the streaming numbers, the most successful song by The Wonder Years "Came Out Swinging" has about 30.000.000 and State Champs' "Secrets" about 43.000.000 streams on Spotify, while "Basket Case" by Green Day has 984.000.000 and "All the Small Things" by Blink-182 over one billion streams on Spotify. This might be part of their self-identity but also due to a lack of charisma, persona and pop star material as pop-punk expert and YouTuber Mckenty (The Punk Rock MBA 2021) describes it. Nevertheless, this generation also was rooted in or at least had connections to mainstream popular music. This was shown, for example, by the interest of many bands in mainstream pop songs which they covered – not only by imitating but transforming the originals into their own punk rock version (Upton 2021).

Pop-punk, like often attested for its predecessor punk rock (Tanner 2008), has defiant elements, especially considering music videos (Grebe & Winkler 2021), artwork (Prinz 2014) and lyrics (Diniati & Fitrawatti 2022) and artists like Blink-182 or New Found Glory often represented white middle-class suburban teenagers and high school or even college students. It could be argued that pop-punk is a popularization of the punk rock genre, which is comparable to what happened to other genres like grunge.[2] However, throughout the history of pop-punk the major artists were usually bands, mainly consisting of White American male musicians.

In the years 2020 to 2022 a new wave of pop-punk artists surfaced and many bands from the 1990s and 2000s gained popularity again which led fans and experts (like YouTuber Mckenty, The Punk Rock MBA 2021) to believe that pop-punk has had a revival. An interesting observation, which was stated by critics like Mckenty, is that these new artists are in most cases solo artists and that there was a shift from bands to individuals while the music itself did not change too much. The aim of this paper therefore is on the one hand to analyze the shift from bands to personas in pop-punk and on the other hand to investigate which factors impacted the popularity of the genre in recent years. Both developments can be seen as parts of transformation in pop or transformational pop (see Flath, Jacke & Troike 2022). This research focus on musical personas within the culture of pop-punk reveals a broader trend in popular culture where narratives and personas are increasingly spread across multiple media platforms (Jenkins 2007 and 2020). This transmedia concept could be linked to the rise of social media

platforms and digital content creation which the current study will investigate later on.[3] However, the first step is to get a deeper understanding of the new wave of the genre.

BACKGROUND: HOW DID POP-PUNK SUBCULTURE CHANGE?

In 2020, the American rapper Machine Gun Kelly released the album *Tickets to My Downfall*. This was his fifth LP and the first that featured only pop-punk songs, while the four previous ones were hip hop albums. Kelly seemed to be inspired by Blink-182's drummer Travis Barker with whom he produced several songs and by trending videos on social media that featured pop-punk music (Cicchetti 2022). One year before in 2019, he released his first song featuring Barker on the drums following his interest in vocals from pop-punk recordings that inspired many emo rappers like himself. Around the same time various solo artists were acknowledged by the music scene media for releasing pop-punk songs and reviving the genre (e.g., Richardson 2020). The top credited musicians besides Machine Gun Kelly were KennyHoopla (USA) and Yungblud (UK).

Other solo artists like Mod Sun, WILLOW (the daughter of Jada Pinkett Smith and Will Smith), Sueco (all from the USA), and Lølø (Canada) followed. At the same time, it seemed that there was only a small number of new bands who would be part of this rise of the genre. The Australian band Stand Atlantic, Waterparks from the USA, and bands from the UK like Trash Boat and Boston Manor were emerging but not as prominent and successful as the solo artists with regards to their following on social media, streams on streaming platforms, and sales figures. Like Mckenty music influencer for alternative music, Jesea Lee also suggested to label this next wave of pop-punk as Nu-Punk (Lee 2021). From a music analytical viewpoint, the music itself sounds much like previous pop-punk recordings. Most songs feature riff orientated guitars with a distorted sound, bass, drums, and easily recognizable hooks. The major difference according to Lee is that the music was hip-hop influenced, meaning there were more verses in a rap-style present. Additionally, the focus seems to be on solo musicians and not bands anymore. Still, many musicians from the first pop-punk wave like Mark Hoppus (Blink-182), John Feldmann (Goldfinger), and Avril Lavigne collaborated with the new and upcoming artists but in the case of Hoppus and Feldmann not as (solo) artists but as producers.

Since the music of the new pop-punk artists is not that different from previous recordings and new solo artist as well as established pop-punk musicians expressed how they enjoy the regained popularity of their music and culture, it could be argued that there is a new wave of pop-punk rather than a new subgenre that would need a new label (e.g., Nu Punk like suggested by Lee 2021). The major change seems to be a kind of personal transformation that solo artists are preferred over bands as representatives of this wave.

ANALYSIS: A TRANSDISCIPLINARY, MULTIPERSPECTIVAL CURSORY APPROACH

To comprehensively explore this transformational shift and the rise of popularity, we decided on applying a three-pronged analytical framework: the phenomenological perspective, theoretical explanations, and empirical evidence. Embracing a cursory approach allows us to delve into the lived experiences of both musicians and fans, uncovering the influential factors behind the transition from bands to solo endeavours. Moreover, our investigation delves into theoretical explanations, drawing from academic literature and discourse surrounding music industries and media dynamics. We aim to contextualize the phenomenon within a broader cultural framework, understanding the factors that may have driven the rise of solo artists in pop-punk. By analysing audience preferences and (transmedia and music) technological advancements, we seek to unravel the complex interplay of forces that have shaped this evolutionary trajectory.

Lastly, we support our analysis with empirical evidence, examining social media presences of pop-punk bands and artists. These primary sources offer valuable insights into their experiences, artistic choices, and the reception of their work. We will therefore examine statistical data from music charts, social media profiles and trending hashtags to quantify the rise of solo artists and discern patterns that signify the genre's evolving landscape.

Findings on the Shifts from Bands to Personas

One of the key figures in the comeback of pop-punk is Blink-182's drummer Travis Barker. He not only collaborated with several artists for a vast number of singles, he also acted as a role model for careers. As Lee (2021) puts it, Barker was one of the few pop-punk artists who embraced mainstream culture and media. He played with multiple artists from various genres at major pop events like MTV's video music awards, had his own reality TV show, and he had affairs and relationships with female celebrities that had a lot of attention from the yellow press. Coming from a subculture he acted like a transmedia star continuously and consistently telling small narrative elements that were in line with his overarching narrative (Jenkins 2007) and helped not only his person and band but the whole genre to gain mainstream popularity.

Through catchy melodies, lyrics often cantered around growing-up, and distinct sounds, pop songs often become intertwined with significant life moments, as well as through protagonists as musicians and their personas as visible public images and performances (personas originally meaning masks) serving as time capsules of individual and collective experiences. Analysing these protagonists following Auslander (2004) and Jacke (2018 and this issue) one has to differentiate between real persons, star personas and characters. As such, established pop music artists like Travis Barker emerge as specific transmedia zeitgeist markers within attention economies, even for various generations, bridging the gap between the past and present, and leaving an indelible impact on the musical, cultural, and media landscapes, maps, and memories (Jacke 2015; Jacke & Zierold 2015; Strong 2011). Musicians and artists as personas in pop music are a mutable concept (Fairchild & Marshall 2019) and therefore personalized markers of public and media attention especially within popular music cultures. In other words: "The current configuration of the entertainment industry makes transmedia expansion an economic imperative, yet the most gifted transmedia artists also surf these marketplace pressures to create a more expansive and immersive story than would have been possible otherwise" (Jenkins 2007).

Moreover, Barker's exceptional drumming style and innovative contributions to the genre have extended beyond Blink-182, collaborating with a myriad of artists across various genres, further cementing his legacy as a musical allrounder. As the music industries evolved, Barker's adaptability and willingness to embrace new musical directions have continued to resonate with younger generations, allowing him to maintain relevance as an artist and to become a generational marker once again.

Machine Gun Kelly (short MGK) or Mod Sun both can be regarded as popular musical stars as real persons, star personas, and characters, who did not only collaborate with Barker but also followed his example by embracing established media and engage in public displaying their personal life and relationships and therefore becoming transmedia and mainstream popular music celebrity or star personas. For example, MGK is in a relationship with movie star Megan Fox. They both post a lot of information like the announcement of their engagement in January 2022 to their social media accounts. MGK worked as an actor in movies playing, for instance, iconic Mötley Crüe drummer Tommy Lee. MOD SUN was in a publicly well documented polyamorous relationship with influencer Tana Mongeau (5.7 million followers on Instagram) and actress Bella Thorne. Moreover, he will be playing a role in a movie co-starring MGK and Megan Fox. Lil Huddy was in a relationship with one of the most influential TikTokers Carli D'Amelio and Jxdn was in a relationship with TikTok star Nessa Barrett and both collaborated

on their social media channels with their partners and therefore were exposed to a broader audience.

Following the argument of their professional utilization of social media, we can see that indeed current pop-punk artists have much more followers and engagement on their social media accounts (see Table 1). To be fair, musicians from bands do not have to be celebrities or active social media characters and many bands from the first wave naturally started their social media accounts long after their initial musical success. But individuals like Travis Barker managed to become such a prominent star persona in mainstream culture that he has more followers on Instagram (8.200.000) than other musicians from his generation and even more than some of the current solo artists. Lee (2021) describes the new generation as the people "who sit at the cool kids" table now instead of those from older bands who were usually "not cool" or misfits. Artists like MGK or Jxdn grew up with social media and know how to act and perform on the platforms. They can be considered as influencers or even star influencers – Lil Huddy was even part of the influencer community Hype House.

Frontmen of first Pop-Punk wave bands	**Follower on Instagram**	**Frontmen of 2010s Pop-Punk bands**	**Follower on Instagram**	**New generation of Pop-Punk solo artists**	**Follower on Instagram**
Billie Joe Armstrong (Green Day)	2.600.000	**Ben Barlow (Neck Deep)**	200.000	Willow Smith	11.000.000
Tom Delonge (Blink-182)	1.200.000	Parker Cannon (The Story So Far)	97.700	(Lil) Huddy	10.600.000
Pierre Bouvier (Simple Plan)	318.000	Derek DiScanio (State Champs)	90.400	Machine Gun Kelly	9.100.000
Deryck Whibley (Sum 41)	139.000	Dan Campbell (Wonder Years)	61.000	Yungblud	3.800.000

Table 1. Comparison of the number of Instagram followers of the most popular pop-punk artists of the three waves in July 2023

Solo artists seem to be well suited to achieve a star status because all public as well as niche and established media attention will be focused on this one persona in the center of a marker or even brand as constructions (and deconstructions) of expressive individuality and uniqueness within the context of star and celebrity systems (see Jacke 2018). In combination with being content creators who usually operate their social media channels on their own (at least in front of the camera), individual musicians can showcase much more of their personality and reflect the social and cultural change like seismographs (see Jacke in this issue). Seeing other solo artists thrive in this re-explored genre might have motivated musicians in a much better way to produce pop-punk music than seeing bands from previous generations and building of a network of references and interplay of innovation and tradition.

Building on the analysis of artist personas in the pop-punk genre, we can further explore the transmedia aspect that has become increasingly pivotal in shaping these personas and their influence. The concept of transmedia, with its emphasis on narrative and identity extension across multiple media platforms (Jenkins 2007 and 2020), offers a deeper understanding of how artists like Travis Barker, Machine Gun Kelly, and others have expanded their reach and impact. First, they use cross-platform real person, star persona, and character storytelling. Artists in the pop-punk scene have leveraged various media platforms to construct and disseminate their persons, personas, and characters. This isn't limited to music releases but extends to social media platforms, collaborations with artists from other genres, appearances in films and television, and even participation in online viral challenges. Each of these platforms contributes a unique narrative strand, enriching the overall narrative or concept of the artist within Auslander's and Jacke's three dimensions.

Second, they engage with diverse audiences. By utilizing different media channels and formats, pop-punk artists can engage with a broader audience base. For example, Travis Barker's involvement in reality TV shows and collaborations with artists from varied musical backgrounds allowed him to connect with viewers and listeners who might not typically engage with pop-punk music.

Third, the integration of personal life and artistic identity in public forums, as seen with Machine Gun Kelly and his relationships, plays a critical role in transmedia storytelling. This blending of personal and professional life creates a more relatable and humanized image of the artist, further drawing in audiences. Lastly, they leveraged digital media. The digital era, particularly the rise of social media, has been a game-changer for artist and especially celebrity and star personas (Marshall 2021). Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and X, formerly known as Twitter, allow artists to craft and share aspects of their persona in real-time, offering fans an ongoing and interactive narrative experience. This immediacy and interactivity are key components of transmedia storytelling.

Another interesting explanation for this transformation might be that artists evolved to be artistic entrepreneurs, like Steffen Just (2014) described in detail. It is much easier for artists to communicate "directly" with fans over social media. They can therefore advertise their music products much more efficiently and without music companies, promoters, distributors or even journalists "interfering". Many of the older pop-punk musicians embraced the possibilities and used trends and challenges on social media to promote themselves and their music.

Another contributing factor to the shift might have been that the old economic model of being a band was continuously replaced by the entrepreneurship model focusing on individuality (Marshall 2021), especially during the COVID 19-pandemic. Producing music as a solo artist is considerably easier and cheaper than with a band, especially while in a quarantine, but one could argue that musicians like Machine Gun Kelly were solo artists before the pandemic and then shifted toward pop-punk. Additionally, recording music as a band with individual band members recording separately is more demanding in terms of managing the project and more time consuming to record while distancing from other band members. Also, the solo artists tended to still record songs with other musicians but labelled them as collaborations or features keeping their individual personas rather than forming a new group.

In the early days of pop-punk, the music industry was organized around physical formats like vinyl and CDs. Bands like Blink-182, Sum 41, and New Found Glory achieved success through traditional record deals and album sales. However, as the music industry transitioned into the digital era, the landscape changed dramatically.

The advent of digital online media and the decline of physical formats like CDs, even if they already were digital, brought about a "crisis" in the music industry. This shift required artists and the industry itself to adapt to new monetization strategies. Meier's (2013) research highlights how, in this evolving digital marketplace, "artist-brands" became central to the

capitalization of music. These artist-brands were not only focused on music sales but were also tied to multiple revenue streams.

This transformation allowed individual artists to take centre stage, as they could more readily adapt to the digital environment. Unlike bands, individual artists could pivot across various digital media platforms, connect directly with fans through social media like influencers, and explore new monetization avenues such as licensing their music for advertising and brand partnerships.

Meier's concept of "promotional ubiquitous musics" underscores how popular music, including pop-punk, became a promotional tool for consumer and media brands. This shift in strategy aligns with the rise of solo pop-punk artists who could easily collaborate with brands and integrate their music into various forms of media to expand their reach and revenue streams.

In conclusion, we can find that individually embracing mainstream culture and established media (like displaying private affairs and engaging in movie acting), identifying with stars from previous generations (through collaborations), and engaging in content creation for social media are contributing factors for why we experience a transformational, transgenerational and, above all, transmedia shift from bands to solo artists in the genre. Theoretically, it seems to be a reasonable behaviour for musicians to strive for a solo career if they want to achieve star status or to become generational zeitgeist markers.

Findings on the Rise of Pop-Punk's Popularity

TikTok and online platforms in general have become very important for distributing, establishing, economizing, advertising, and mediatizing popular cultures and music genres. One key platform for pop-punk in the 2010s was Soundcloud (Achmad & Setiyanti 2015) where a lot of hip hop artists release and explore new music. The platform might have helped rappers discover pop-punk. However, more influential in recent years was TikTok. The platform helped artists, influencers, and users to reach a wider audience organically. Its innovative community functions, like duets and stitches, contribute to the distribution of original videos through the co-creative engagement of fans who describe these features as essential for their motivation to use the app (Omar & Dequan 2020). The app has a great potential for content creators who take advantage of the possibility to grow a genuine audience without paying for advertising like on other social media apps. Especially newcomer musicians benefit from the app and its users' openness to amateur recordings and low-quality sounds that fit the app's "bedroom culture" (Kennedy 2020).

Music challenges help discover unknown and old pop music (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin 2022). But not only music related content can be found on the app. In recent years, TikTok grew to become a casual learning platform which attracted more users (Linke 2022). On the flipside, another study reported that non-users stated that TikTok was perceived to be too juvenile/cringey and providing too much cyberbullying (Vaterlaus & Winter 2021). But since the popularity and media coverage on the app grew constantly some of the non-users might have changed their mind.

Interestingly, millennials became much more interested in the app over the course of the last few years. Adults in their late 20s and 30s uploaded videos to the platform and engaged in (music) challenges (Cuesta-Valiño, Gutiérrez-Rodríguez & Patricia Durán-Álamo 2022). With the growing interest of millennials in the social media app it seems likely that they engaged or even came up with some of the music challenges. Two of the most notable trends on TikTok related to pop-punk were #itsnotaphasemom and #imjustakid. Many adults produced videos for these hashtags. These trends that were popular in 2020 exposed many users to the music of pop-punk bands All Time Low, who's song "Dear Maria, Count Me In" was usually sung after shouting "it's

not a phase, mom. It's a lifestyle" in the first trend, and Simple Plan, who's song "I'm Just a Kid" was used for reenacting childhood photos in the second trend, and to the genre in general.

Another major factor that can be considered as a contributing influence for the new success of the genre is diversity, which was not the case during the first wave of the genre. As previously described, pop-punk bands in the late 1990s and early 2000s consisted mainly of White suburban straight men, whereas the new generation featured much more diverse people like WILLOW, Iann Dior, and Trippie Red. This in turn might have helped attract more people to the genre who previously were not likely to identify with the bands and musicians.

Popular culture is full of retro-eras and revivals – not only in music but in movies or fashion, too. Simon Reynolds (2011) wrote extensively about this phenomenon and pointed out which factors led to revival of certain styles and ideas in his opinion. First, it is the digital revolution that impacted music listening and music production. Second, it is the music industry driven by capitalism that tries to recreate safe trends, whilst investing less in upcoming but uncertain trends. Third, it is the movement and culture of hipsters who are not producing or exploring new music but act nostalgic by curating and archiving old music. This means that engaging in an older genre like pop-punk is much easier due to digital technologies and much more rewarding since being a fan of an older genre is much more accepted and even appreciated today as fan cultures have been fully established and popular music no longer is exclusively a youth culture. "Music history usually is about things that were new in their own time. They were radical, unusual in some sense, breaking with tradition. Most things we think of now as classic were actually innovative in their time" (Reynolds in Reynolds & Jacke 2022, p. 386).

The music industry gladly provides the fans with new releases, re-releases and events (see When We Were Young Festival in Las Vegas) to cater those interests. These explanations lead us to believe that there was indeed a new interest in pop-punk and its personas in recent years that can be theoretically explained as typically transmedia in different dimensions like genre, collaboration, gender, medium, technology, star-audience relationships, participatory relationship culture etc. "This capacity of celebrities to move across fields and to be deployed strategically in these various platforms and domains of contemporary life and society points to their convertible value. Businesses and industries attempt to quantify that value and use it for specific purposes" (Marshall 2021, p. 167). Additionally, we found some indicators that support such a claim.

In 2021, Machine Gun Kelly and Blackbear had a joint hit that reached the 23rd place in the Billboard Year-end Charts. "good 4 u" by Olivia Rodrigo landed on the 5th place of the same charts that year. The song was inspired by Paramore's "Misery Business" which is why Paramore members Josh Farro and Hayley Williams were credited as co-authors. Besides the inspiration and the very similar chorus, the song features various pop-punk characteristics such as guitar driven instrumentation and rock drums with a tempo of 167 bpm. It can be argued that in recent years, pop-punk songs made it to the mainstream charts (in comparison: Blink-182's hit "All the Small Things" made it 40th place in Billboard Year-End Hot 100 in 2000). Additionally, pop-punk artists were considered for performances at mainstream award celebrations. Machine Gun Kelly and Travis Barker performed at the 2021 MTV Video Music Awards and in 2022 MGK performed at the Billboard Music Awards.

Not only the artists but also the fans discovered social media for themselves. As mentioned before, older generations of fans such as millennials managed to enter platforms like TikTok and helped promote the genre as theoretically explained due to nostalgic reasons. Especially music challenges or trends like the #imjustakid challenge and the popular hashtag #itsnotaphasemom helped established pop-punk bands from the 2000s gain attention again. The latter was not only associated with pop-punk but also the emo lifestyle which had a big revival on social media, too.

The success of pop-punk in general and specific bands like Simple Plan in particular who recently started to run entertaining Instagram and TikTok channels benefited from the social media trends evolving from a kind of youth subculture to an transgenerational popular music culture. As Ciccheti (2022) describes it, TikTok's virality helped new artists to reach the charts and for older songs to chart again. The interest of fans, social media platforms, and engagement of the musicians helped to revive a whole genre and further develop a whole way of life and culture.

Discussion: Mainstream Sellout

In 2022, Machine Gun Kelly released his long-player called *Mainstream Sellout*, the second album after *Tickets To My Downfall* that consisted entirely of pop-punk songs. Quoting the TikTok trend based on All Time Low's song "Dear Maria, Count Me In" it seems, "this is not a phase". Moreover, the genre gained popularity amongst new listeners and older fans in recent years and returned to the mainstream as MGK puts it with his album title.

One aim of our study was to analyze whether the genre had a rise in popularity and therefore been part of a classical transformation from former subculture to transmedia mainstream culture. As shown in the previous chapters not only new and successful artists emerged but also established bands and musicians were able to gain new popularity – therefore a whole dynamic network of references of popular music culture has been developed focusing on star and celebrity personas as well as persons and characters. It was argued that some factors like a shift to solo musicians, the hip hop influence, and the music itself speak for a new wave of pop-punk. The main factors that influenced the success of the genre in recent years were musicians' usage of music streaming and social media platforms, millennials on TikTok, music challenges on the same app, embracement of mainstream pop culture by individual artists, more diversity, and a movement toward reviving certain pieces of popular music and culture, especially online.

For musicians and professionals in the music and media industries some of these aspects can be considered as relevant for building careers and promoting existing as well as upcoming music products and personas. Musicians who engage in online music challenges use it to promote their own on presences. It helps to communicate and create content that fits the platform instead of just promoting concerts, merch, or new releases. Allowing other users to utilize one's music can be beneficial. Establishing events that cater the new interest in the genre is not only helping the genre to grow further but are also a profitable enterprise. The When We Were Young Festival in Las Vegas featuring Avril Lavigne, MGK, My Chemical Romance, and many more of the most popular pop-punk acts sold out so quickly that the producers scheduled two more dates for the event. The factors that influenced the comeback of the genre are interesting for music business and for music research. Our results might help future studies to investigate other transmedia revivals and transgenerational phenomena.

The other aim of the study was to investigate the shift from bands to solo artists in the genre of pop-punk. We identified several factors that contributed to such a change as part of a popular music and star/celebrity culture focusing on individuality (Auslander 2004; Jacke 2018; Marshall 2021). The personas as the visible masks of stars and celebrities in public differing from characters and real persons who chose pop-punk as their musical and part of an audible style. personas embrace mainstream culture and established media, identify, and align themselves with stars and celebrities, i.e., personas, from previous generations, and focus on social media. The shift seems to fit a new generation or at least group of listeners and fans as co-creators and allows them to learn more "directly", even if still mediated, staged, and orchestrated, about their stars through online platforms and media coverage – therefore completely transmedia. Furthermore, the digitalization of the music industry created an environment where individual artists could more effectively navigate and capitalize on emerging opportunities, thus influencing the shift from pop-punk bands to solo artists. This

transition was driven by the need to adapt to new industry dynamics and capitalize on the changing ways in which music was consumed and monetized in the digital era including the increasing "value of individual visibility" (Marshall 2021, p. 173) and "the proliferation of online micro-celebrities" (ibid., p. 174).

The shift from album-centered music, like traditional rock, to a more individual star- and persona-centered model, as observed in the evolution of pop-punk, might reflect broader trends within the music industry. Rock music, which traditionally, but not exclusively, relied on full-length album releases and band-centric identities, has also seen a transformation. The era of the vinyl/CD and album-dominated sales has given way to an environment where individual artists can thrive by embracing digital media, social platforms, and diverse monetization avenues.

This evolution has allowed solo rock artists to establish and maintain direct connections with their fan bases, sidestepping some of the traditional gatekeepers of the music industry. Moreover, the concept of "artist-brands" and the strategic use of music in advertising and brand partnerships have become common practices for musicians seeking to expand their reach and revenue sources.

In this shifting landscape, the ability of artists to adapt to the digital music industry's new realities has become crucial. While the traditional album format remains significant, it no longer solely defines success in rock music. Instead, artists who can navigate the digital realm, release music more flexibly (e.g., songs, singles, and EPs), and engage with their audience through social media and streaming platforms are positioned for success.

In conclusion, the transition from album-centered music to a more individual star-centered model, as exemplified by the evolution of pop-punk, can serve as a microcosm of broader changes within the rock genre and the music industry as a whole.

Future research might want to explore if a shift like this can be found in other genres, too. To argue with Blink-182's lyrics "this is *not* growing up" – this is adapting to a new fan and media culture, i.e., popular music and transmedia culture.

END NOTES

[1] Following Huber (2013) and Jones (2012) we understand mainstream popular music culture as an imagining of dominant or major culture in music and media industries. Mainstream is seen as a category to describe artists who are successful concerning transmedia publicity, financial and attention economical merit, big audiences, and fan cultures (see Jacke in this issue).

[2] For an analysis of the German media coverage of the Grunge phenomenon and especially the personas and anti-star cult of Nirvana see Jacke 1998, for research on Grunge, Kurt Cobain and memory see Strong 2011.

[3] Jenkins' model of transmedia seems to fit very well for our case study. Nevertheless, one can criticize its lack of definition of media. We understand media as a complex and dynamic interconnection between communication instruments, media technologies, socio-systematical organizations, and media offers (see Schmidt 2007; Jacke 2018).

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