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Justin N. Nguyen
University of South Florida

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I'm Going Digital: Potentials for Online Communities Through Internet Remix

by

Justin N. Nguyen

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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with a concentration in Humanities
Department of Humanities and Cultural Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Todd Jurgess, Ph.D.
Daniel Belgrad, Ph.D.
Sara Dykins-Callahan, Ph.D.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Introduction	1
Digital Technology	6
Dada	9
Neil Cicierega	14
Meaningful or Nonsensical?	24
Community	29
4chan	38
SilvaGunner	41
Closing Words	44
References	46

Abstract

In the late 90s and early 2000s, computers and internet usage became more widespread. This widespread usage led to a proliferation of “digital objects” (digital versions of audio, video, image, text, etc.) dispersed through the internet. The instant and near-infinite reproducibility of digital objects combined with their ease of manipulation by computer users has led to their widespread recognition and use as tools of communication online. As a consequence, technology has allowed those traditionally thought of as consumers to become cultural producers by repurposing digital media objects. Because of this, internet remix of digital objects is one of the best ways that internet culture has found to talk about itself. Internet remixes, which repurpose digital objects and themselves are distributed digitally, are a discerning self-reflexive medium to use as a lens to understand digital culture.

The formal techniques of these internet remixes echo previous art movements that employed repurposing, particularly the Dada and Surrealism movements of the early 20th century. They are also similarly motivated as they reflect Dada’s focus on blasphemous shock and absurdity, as a rejection of elitist institutions of authority, and Surrealism’s interest in the everyday experience and shared imagination. With internet usage so commonplace, digital objects and experiences have become the new everyday environment for many.

These remixes reveal the use of humor as taking a primary position in online communication. This humor is then used to signal shared ethos and experiences that lead to the formation of communities with these shared “imaginaries” – collective social fact – as their binding glue.

Introduction

As part of the first generation of children growing up with regular internet access, I, like my contemporaries, found myself constantly coming across various internet remix videos during my online adventures. On sites such as Albino Black Sheep, and later, YouTube, I and millions of other kids would watch endless hours of the nonsensical and ridiculous edits of the various movies, tv shows, and music that we were familiar with from our daily lives. These videos were hilarious in their absurdity, and my friends and I would enthusiastically share them with each other, both in person and online. We even dabbled in making a few of our own. Eventually, references to these remixed videos entered our common vernacular, establishing the main indicator of friendship: the shared in-joke.

As a kid, I simply found these videos funny, but I did not think of them as much more than a new kind of entertainment to enjoy. However, as my interest in and enjoyment of these remixes persisted into my adult life, when they became more and more popular and internet culture developed amongst an increasing base of users, I began to take a scholarly interest in the deeper meanings of these remixes and their unique aesthetic that was integral to the culture of the internet. So I wanted to discern the greater cultural meaning of internet remixes, both as works with meaning of their own, and as a function or cultural force of the internet's various online communities.

Because remixes have become such a prominent cultural mode on the internet, there is a bit of a methodological problem: where does one start? For the sake of the brevity of this thesis, I would like to focus on three main subjects that embody a similar use of media objects in remixes, in order to triangulate my position. These are **1)** the multimedia artist Neil Cicierega (1986 –

present), with focus on his musical mashup albums, **2)** the remix video “24601 Releases a Sammich on Parole” by YouTube user DaThings, which falls into a specific remix subgenre named “YouTube Poop”, and **3)** the online communities of 4chan and SiIvaGunner (note the third letter is a capitalized i), that take remix beyond the individual text or video and into the level of interface.

I choose these three for two main reasons: first: they were all shared to me personally by my own friends, lending a degree of self-demonstration to this thesis as I reference the works that are popular in the culture in which I grew up. But beyond my own personal connection or enjoyment, these three subjects, in their similarities and differences, also serve as a succinct way to triangulate the most important elements of the culture they are part of, since each text is working within a different way to remix texts, as well as the online experience altogether.

To begin understanding what that culture is, we first have the difficult task of reconciling these three, and understanding to what greater point they add up. These three media objects have similarities in some formal elements, and in their seemingly nonsensical nature, but perhaps little else. However, I argue that they each participate in, and are indicative of different dimensions of a larger cultural movement in which traditional consumers become producers, using cheap digital tools to remix cultural artifacts into new and often startling forms. This cultural movement, through the internet, is staging new methods of community formation. These communities, consisting mainly of children, teenagers, and young adults, operate through appropriating mass media products in humorous ways, in order to trouble the system from within and build communities on their own terms.

The work of Mizuko Ito, a Japanese cultural anthropologist who researches young people’s use of technology, can help to illuminate the connection between media objects and networking of

communities and culture. She traces this movement back to the modern era as marked by the advent of mechanical cultural production as described by Walter Benjamin.¹ This change posed significant changes to mass culture through its ability to copy and reproduce an item or image nearly infinitely. The newspaper, for example, which is printed in a mass and delivered to people's houses, became a dominant mode of informing and mediating those people's relation to the events around them in a relatively uniform way. Benjamin sees this as the start of this new paradigm of producer and consumer; newspapers that provided space to print "letters to the editor" also allowed the readers to become published writers to a degree. "Thus," he says, "the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character."² This created an environment where readers were prepared to turn into writers at any given moment.

Digital technology takes the advances of mass networking granted by print technology into new and transformative modes. For example, nowadays, while following the same principle, digital technology allows most news articles to be published online rather than printed and delivered via newspaper. This has profoundly affected news media outlets as they have adapted to online delivery as their primary platform, leading to new considerations such as reader analytics, comment sections, and instantly-published retractions. The comment sections in particular fulfill Benjamin's prediction; readers are able to become writers and provide their own feedback and opinions to an article quickly.

These changes not only affect the production from large corporations and publishers, but, as Benjamin foreshadowed, the concept of producer and consumer itself. In *Technologies of the*

¹ Ito, Mizuko. "Technologies of the Childhood Imagination: *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, *Media Mixes*, and *Everyday Cultural Production*." In *Structures of Participation in Digital Culture*, ed. Joe Karaganis. (Duke University Press, 2005), 90.

² Benjamin, Walter, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" trans. Harry Zohn, In *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, (Shoken Books: New York, 2015), 232.

Childhood Imagination, Ito details the importance of the proliferation of everyday media objects and their effect on individuals, rather than simply their effect on commercial industries and other traditional mass culture producers.

In a world of networked and viral cultural exchange—of cultural life captured in distributed archives, indexed by search engines, and aggregated into microcontent feeds for personal information portals—areas of practice once considered inconsequential dumping grounds of cultural production become irrepressibly consequential, **even productive**. The despised category of ‘mass consumption’ fractured by several generations of poststructuralists, and corroded by ongoing research in fan and reception studies, may find a still greater foe in the undisciplined practices of teenage music sharing, game hacking, and personal journal blogs.³

She notes, as I also wish to, that one of the primary qualities of digital culture and communication that differentiates it from traditional media is its heightened level of participation. People could always write in to newspapers, for example, but online news is more easily accessible and visible in terms of leaving a comment. This facilitation of participation allows a greater number of perspectives and individuals to be involved, as opposed to more traditionally exclusive communities, particularly, for my purposes, those intended for art and popular mass media. In comparison to earlier eras, Ito points out, groups that were traditionally thought of as simply consumers with little cultural power or influence themselves now find themselves with cultural power due to digital technology.

These emergent digital culture forms signal the active participation of previously marginal and invisible groups in what we must now recognize as *cultural production*, not simply as derivative acts of *active consumption* or ephemeral *personal communication*.⁴

In this participatory dimension, the traditional paradigm of demarcating consumers from producers becomes more complicated. It is now much easier for consumers to be producers; those for which mass media is intended *for* now have a different relationship and engagement with it. Rather than

³ Ibid., 89. Emphasis mine.

⁴ Ibid.

simply passive consumers, traditional audiences have become active consumers who generate culture as much as the traditionally thought-of “producers” do.

What does it mean when those previously constructed as “consumers”—nongenerative, passive audiences for professionally produced culture—are handed the means not only to distribute media through alternative peer-to-peer networks, but to remix, repackage, revalue, and produce media through amateur cultural production?⁵

Ito notes that this shift brings significant implications, ones that I hope to address here. Remixing of media objects of course, is not a new phenomenon at all, and predates the development of the internet by several generations. For the purpose of my argument, I trace back the origins of this movement to the Dada movement and Surrealism styles of the early 20th century; it is there that I see the most relevant roots of this phenomenon as a cultural trend. These remixes borrow from Dada and Surrealist formal and aesthetic techniques of repurposing existing material. These styles had a complicated relationship to the larger culture, in some ways aiming to destroy it and in other ways attempting to construct new ways of navigating it. This was a response to a climate of shocking violence and war that characterized the early 20th century. Internet remixes, respond similarly to early 21st century violence, trauma, and pessimism toward authority and traditional social structures. The participatory nature of the internet factors in as well, in how individuals now directly engage with these concepts.

The artworks I am looking at, which continue these styles and motifs in a new digital environment, ultimately offer a model that subverts the angle of destruction and continues the angle of construction, resulting in the potential for digital communities to unite and form around them.

⁵ Ibid.

Digital Technology

The forms of public address and mass media enabled by print culture are taken even further with digital technology's cheap media editing software and online networking. Widespread computer and internet usage starting in the 1990s and early 2000s has led to a new environment as a medium and communication platform. While mass printing allowed publishers to produce countless physical copies of an item, digital technology essentially eliminates the material aspect, allowing digital files to be reproduced and sent across any distance near-instantaneously.⁶ This makes them more malleable for people to remix and then share with a global community.

The technology's use in communication has also created a new "everyday" environment. The digital immateriality of the internet creates a "non-space" that is accessible to anyone (with a digital device and internet connection) at any time.⁷ This has led to the internet becoming extremely popular in developed nations, and nearly ubiquitous. Slightly over half of the worldwide population is an active internet user, and, according to a 2019 study from Hootsuite & We Are Social, the worldwide average daily usage of the internet is 6 hours and 42 minutes a day. The United States is close to the worldwide average, with a daily average of 6 hours and 31 minutes a day.⁸ This amounts to slightly under half of the average person's waking hours. One dominant use of these hours is in media consumption on sites like YouTube, which provide young people in search of distractions with hours of entertainment.

⁶ Baumgartel, Tilman. "Immaterial Material: Physicality, Corporality, and Dematerialization in Telecommunication Artworks." In *At a Distance: Precursors to Art and Activism on the Internet*, ed. Neumark, Norie & Chandler, Annmarie. (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2005.), 61.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Hootsuite & We Are Social (2019), "Digital 2019 Global Digital Overview," retrieved from <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2019-global-digital-overview>

With these facts in mind, I argue that the mass culture and everyday experiences that the Dada and Surrealist artists were interested in, in the 21st century, must factor in online experiences as well. The idea of the everyday object has been reborn: with internet usage so commonplace, and so much “non-space” for users to fill, digital objects have become the new everyday objects. This not only includes objects only possible to create with digital technology, such as computer-generated imagery, but, because of digitization, even traditional media objects, such as TV shows or music, or even copies of the *Mona Lisa*, exist on the internet as lines of code that reproduce the appearance of the originals. Therefore, a majority of classic, mass culture “everyday” media objects exist digitally as well. These everyday objects are then folded into the internet’s mass of digital objects, and are presented to internet users through subscriptions, recommendations, suggestions, and other digital “feeds”.

Digital objects have two defining qualities: A) their immaterial form, which leads to their instant and near-infinite reproducibility, and B) their digital ontology, which leads to the ease of their manipulation through computer tools by savvy users. These two qualities have led to digital objects sent and received through the internet becoming one of the most prominent tools of communication in the 21st century. Digital literacy, which I will define as the skill to navigate, understand, edit, and manipulate digital objects, is prominent with younger individuals, partially due to its being encouraged and taught in schools. For instance, while a student in decades past may have written an essay with pen and paper, it is now commonly expected for the student to type the essay using word processing software, and often even expected that he or she submit the assignment online as well. Digital slideshow software, such as Microsoft PowerPoint, have largely replaced paper handouts and traditional slides during public speaking presentations. As a side effect, ancillary materials included in these presentations, such as visual aids or video clips, will

also be digital, and the student must be able to save and edit these objects to their needs. As a result, proficiency in digital literacy has become ubiquitous and necessary for many; the media manipulation that students are taught in school becomes play in the works I am considering.

With digital objects being a new kind of “everyday object” that internet users find themselves constantly inundated with in a digital environment, internet remix of digital objects has become one of the best ways that this digital media-saturated generation has found to talk about itself. The remixes, because they A) use digital objects and B) are themselves digital objects, therefore are necessarily and inherently self-reflexive. Even works, such as “24601 Releases a Sammich on Parole” that seem to have no “point” to their remix end up being indicative, through their process of cultural consumption and re-production, of the unique network of the digital media environment. So, in other words, the choices of what is remixed and how the remix is done reveal which digital objects are considered “everyday” and what the attitude of the artist, and audience, is toward them. At the same time, the remixes themselves are a digital object that other internet users experience and the artist “speaks” through. In this way, remixes serve as a lens to understand the culture that the immaterial internet has developed.

These two main qualities of the internet are key to this thesis: A) its paradoxically immaterial nature, and B) the proliferation of digital objects within it. These two qualities of course parallel two factors that influenced Dada: the reproducibility granted by print technology, and the ubiquity of mass media facilitated by that reproducibility. Internet remixes follow closely to this format, so the question becomes, in what ways are the attitudes and circumstances of internet remix similar to or distinct from those shown through Dada and Surrealist works?

Dada

Digital remixes rely on re-appropriating existing audio and visual objects. While there are many antecedents to this style, for my purposes, I will connect to Dada and its related avant-garde movements as a wellspring for the start of this aesthetic logic that is carried into the digital era. Though, as we will see, there are large changes in cultural orientation in the century or so between Dada and the texts under consideration here.

Dada and its related movements are of course multifaceted and nuanced. Because they are so notoriously difficult to pin down to one, or even a few simple principles, I will specify that for my purposes, I am most interested in three main elements. These elements are: **1)** the devaluation of technical skill or craft as important to artistic meaning, **2)** the destruction of the traditional social order and antagonism toward establishment and authority, and **3)** the remediation of people's relationship to the everyday and ordinary through its repurposing of existing artworks and objects. It is in these three main interventions (and the formal techniques of the movement that were influenced by them) that have the most visible effects in internet remixes, though the values that inform them shift as we move from the early 20th century to the early 21st century.

All three of these aspects can be easily seen in the early Dada works of Marcel Duchamp (1887 – 1968). Duchamp was originally a traditional painter, having trained at an art conservatory.⁹ However, in the early 1900s, Duchamp became interested in and experimented with avant-garde movements, such as Cubism. He later worked in “readymades” that repurposed existing items, whether they were art objects or utilities. These were motivated in part by his desire and belief that

⁹ Culley, LouAnn Faris. *Duchamp's Readymades Redefine Art*. Salem Press Encyclopedia, 2019.

ideas were more important than technical skill and aesthetic beauty, when it concerned artistic value.

Duchamp's antipathy towards the 'craft' associations of visual art, and his concomitant belief that ideas should replace manual skill as the prime components of works of art, led to his selection of 'readymade' items as art objects from 1913 onwards. Most notoriously, he submitted a men's urinal – playfully signed 'R. Mutt' and titled *Fountain* – for the New York Society of Independent Artists exhibition in April 1917.¹⁰

L.H.O.O.Q., first produced in 1919, serves as a good companion to *Fountain* through its similar themes. While *Fountain* repurposed a urinal, *L.H.O.O.Q.* repurposed an actual work of art, or at least a reproduction of one: Leonardo da Vinci's 16th century painting, *Mona Lisa*. Duchamp took a postcard reproduction of the painting and drew a mustache and beard on the subject's face with pencil, and attached his signature and a title. While *Fountain* challenged what could be considered art by presenting the urinal as artistic, *L.H.O.O.Q.* challenged what was already considered art by defacing one of the most highly regarded artworks. Through this vandalism, Duchamp brought the "great art" down to a lower level; the title substantiates this idea as well, being a pun on the similarly-sounding French phrase "*Elle a chaud au cul*" that roughly translates to "she is hot in the ass", or "she has a hot ass". This juxtaposition of the elevated and high kind of art with the most base and perverse human sexual instincts attacks the original work in an attempt to eliminate the exception that masterworks of "high" western culture had from the vulgar everyday. For Walter Benjamin, the willingness to engage with a reproduction of an artwork indicates a rejection of the traditional ritual value of the original, allowing it to take on a new, and for him, political, meaning.¹¹

¹⁰ Hopkins, David. *Dada and Surrealism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. 9.

¹¹ Benjamin, 223-224.

This, of course, goes beyond just the artwork itself to an attack on the community for whom art is sacrosanct. These works were intended to shock and offend; *The Fountain*, for instance, was placed in an exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists amongst other more traditional and respected works. Benjamin describes Dadaist works as “an instrument of ballistics” intended to “hit the spectator like a bullet” in its ability to shock. As opposed to a painting or other work of art that is viewed and contemplated, Dadaist works happen *to* the spectator, and cause a bodily reaction. He states that “One requirement was foremost: to outrage the public.”¹²

This kind of shock was part of Dada’s rebellion against the traditional social order and classic ideas of Enlightenment rationality, which seemed, to them, ridiculous.¹³ Dadaist works of art sought to reveal the nonsensical truth of human social institutions, which included the elite ideals of beauty and skill in art. David Hopkins argues that the artists were “ambivalent in any case about art as an institution, with the Dadaists often pledged to destroying it.”¹⁴

The use of easily recognized images and objects, such as the ubiquitous urinal and the *Mona Lisa* (perhaps the most famous painting in history) in these works is no coincidence. A major theme in 20th century movements, like Dada, was the “revolutionary potential of supposedly ‘low’ cultural materials.”¹⁵ Rather than continuing to elevate the elite in artistry, they sought to reveal the artistic beauty in the everyday, and Dada mimicked the images seen in mass culture. Hopkins states:

Movements such as Cubism were deeply interested in breaking down the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture,

[...]

¹² Benjamin, 237.

¹³ Trachtman, Paul, *Dada*. Smithsonian, 00377333, May 2006, Vol. 37, Issue 2

¹⁴ Hopkins, 62.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 52-53

The left-wing commitments of both Dada and Surrealism gave a particular inflection to their gestures of solidarity with the ‘populaire’, even though in the early 20th century mass culture was usually something manufactured for the people rather than arising from them.¹⁶

Here, we see the parallels with Ito’s work, which deals with the distinction between mass culture objects produced for the people and those that come from them. This distinction blurs as mass media technology advances.

As Benjamin notes, the technology of mechanical reproduction is what makes most of this possible. Once again, *L.H.O.O.Q.* is a good example of this; as a postcard photocopy of the original *Mona Lisa*, it was dependent on printing technology to exist. Printing technology itself is part of an industrial process that exists within and supports a culture of commodification and sale, which allowed commercial mass media to become possible, and led to the artistic elements I outline above. Reproducibility reduced the need for an artist to “create” an original work, and allowed mass media to reach the sheer quantity it needed to become an everyday fixture. As I will argue, digital technology takes these trends even further.

Dadaist remixes reflect upon their own means of mass print or factory production through their self-reflexivity. They are able to be transparent about their construction by calling attention to the industrial processes and recycled objects that make them up, in order to make a statement about the dichotomy between high art and mass culture. Similarly, internet digital remixes reflect on their digital environment and computer production by calling attention to the digital tools that construct them and the digital objects that they sample. In this way, internet remixes are self-reflexive toward the new position of consumers as producers. The subjects chosen by the artists

¹⁶ Ibid.

for these remixes are significant as well, so in the next section I wish to take a look at some examples in order to illuminate the attitude these remixes reflect.

Neil Cicierega

Because of the wide distribution of digital objects, there is no shortage of remixes to analyze. The work of Neil Cicierega is a good entry point to the larger world of internet remixes, for several reasons. For one, his work is very indicative of the broad strokes of the movement as a whole; he is highly influential in the movement and very prominent. In addition, he is a multimedia artist, who, in addition to his remixes, also creates works in more traditional styles, including animation, puppet shows, and music with his band, Lemon Demon. His earliest works are a series of animations produced in Adobe Flash that he coined as “Animutations.”¹⁷ These videos animations included appearances from various pop cultural icons, including Pee-wee Herman, Hello Kitty, Elton John, Justin Timberlake, and a Budweiser.¹⁸ Another popular work from Cicierega is his *Potter Puppet Pals* series, an absurdist parody of *Harry Potter*.

While these works operate in more traditional mediums, the same themes of absurd humor and references to pop culture are shared between them. This connection makes him an excellent gateway to cross over to the Dadaist remix style. Finally, his work is distributed online, meaning that even his traditional work is operating in the same digital communities and environments in which remixes operate.

So for my purposes, his most relevant works are his musical mashup albums: *Mouth Sounds* and *Mouth Silence* released in 2014, and *Mouth Moods* released in 2017. These albums similarly combine and remix various pop cultural icons from different eras in musical form. In this way, they are like musical equivalents of the readymade.

¹⁷ Mieszkowski, Katharine, and Standen, Amy. “All hail Neil Cicierega.” Salon, April, 2001.

¹⁸ Ibid.

In order to more precisely illustrate the qualities of this form, I would like to focus close reading on one specific work, the mashup titled “Pokémon” from the album *Mouth Silence*. In the same spirit of the readymade, “Pokémon” contains no originally produced music or voice recording. Instead, it is built on the instrumental track of The Jackson 5’s “I Want You Back” (1969). In lieu of Michael Jackson’s original vocals, Cicierega places audio clips of various sources, mainly from the 1990s, discussing the Pokémon franchise during its early heyday in the United States. It begins with audio clips from news broadcasts, with anchors banally describing the franchise and its origin.

“Pokémon is an undeniable obsession with children across the country
So what exactly is a Pokémon? (Pika!)
Cute cuddly characters
Who become super-charged
So they can fight their enemies”¹⁹

“It began as a video game from Japan
And has become an international phenomenon
In the form of books, music videos, a tv-show
And trading cards in the hands of school kids all over the world”²⁰

However, as the track continues, the “lyrics” move away from these innocent descriptors and shift to contemporary fears surrounding the then-new multimedia franchise. It begins with concerns in schools with young Pokémon fans trading collectible cards with fellow classmates. This proved to

¹⁹ Cicierega, Neil. *Pokémon*. 2014. <http://www.songlyrics.com>

²⁰ Ibid.

be troublesome among school administrators due to card thefts, which was compounded by the difficulty in proving which cards belonged to which students in the first place.

“School officials are finding that Pokemon cards are responsible for fist-fights
And the Pokemon is creating a monster of a commotion for American kids”²¹

“Constant trading is not only distracting kids from classwork
But turning the playground into a black market
Where they buy and sell rare cards”²²

As a result of these incidents, in many schools, Pokémon cards were banned from being brought onto campus.

Beyond that, there were fears that the central conceit of the Pokémon franchise, that of collecting monsters for battle, was promoting violence among children, and even animal cruelty. Many schools, including, once again, my own, even banned play fighting as Pokémon at recess for this reason. Included in the lyrics is an excerpt from Dr. Carole Liberman, a psychiatrist, advising parents against allowing their children to be involved with the franchise.

“Parents should not let their kids
Watch Pokemon
Play Pokemon
Buy Pokemon cards
Have anything to do with Pokemon
Because the message is violence”²³

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

The final concern included in the work is an infamous sermon that is emblematic of religious or fundamentalist objections to Pokémon at the time. The creatures themselves were seen by many parents groups to be representative of evil spirits or demons. Engaging in Pokémon media was a way that children would invite these evil spirits into their lives. They would slowly let their guards down and would eventually become desensitized to their own spiritual corruption. This concern was found in franchises contemporary to Pokémon, such as the role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons*, and the children's novel series *Harry Potter*.

“The children are developing relationships
with all these Pokemon creatures
[...]
Wh-wh-why should they carry these monsters in their pockets?
[...]
Pokemon-World is a world of the demonic! Of the Satanic!”²⁴

The work ends with a quote from American politician Herman Cain (1945 – 2020), taken from his 2011 speech announcing the end of his campaign, which was damaged by allegations of sexual impropriety. The quote contains lyrics from the song “The Power of One” by Donna Summer, from the film *Pokémon the Movie 2000: The Power of One*.²⁵ The final line of the quote was edited slightly by Cicierega.

“I believe these words came from The Pokemon Movie
Life can be a challenge.
It's never easy when there's so much on the line.
But you and I can make a difference.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ “Cain quotes Pokemon as he bows out,” YouTube video, 0:59, posted by “CNN,” December 5, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zUg8S8_zRR0.

Just look inside, and you will find
The Pokemon”²⁶

I argue that the formal techniques of this work share much continuity with the formal techniques of Dada. In the most obvious way, it repurposes material that was not created by Cicierega, and ties it together. Some of this material, like the music, was originally intended to be artistic, and some, like the news clips, was not.

However, more importantly, the work carries the same spirit of Dada in its tone and theme. The quotations inserted into the song lose their context and become ironic mirrors of their original meanings. Their new meaning derives from their recontextualization and juxtaposition with other quotes and the music, which altogether gives off an overall mocking and humorous tone. Cicierega demonstrates prevailing attitudes at the time by including several mainstream media outlets that were emblematic of contemporary beliefs and concerns that informed the layperson’s opinion on the then-new and relatively unknown phenomenon. However, these quotes are hard to take seriously when placed in tandem with the spirited and upbeat dance music of the Jackson 5. Among these are opinions held by influential thought leaders and authority figures; the psychiatrist Dr. Carole Liberman argues that Pokémon influences children with an overall message of violence, and the preacher argues that it is Satanic. In including these, Cicierega is poking fun at the ridiculousness of supposed authority figures, a ridiculousness that becomes more apparent in hindsight when framed in this ironic way. Close to three decades later, Pokémon has become a cultural mainstay, and is largely seen as an innocuous family-friendly franchise. This is of course a stark contrast to the predictions of society-ruining violence and moral decay that were depicted.

²⁶ Cicierega, Neil. *Pokémon*. 2014. <http://www.songlyrics.com>

This ridiculousness is intentional; as Cicierega relates in interviews about his own work, he aims to shock. In one specific interview with Sasha Geffen in the online music magazine *Impose*, he states:

“There’s a lot of uncharted water with blasphemy in music,” he says, describing the tension you get when you move popular alt-rock and 90s coffee advertising into the same space. “You can either do it with two songs that people don’t like, or songs that they’ve been annoyed with at some point in their life, or you can mix one really goofy song with a song that’s more respected. **There’s a lot of different ways to elicit bad reactions.**”²⁷

He then speaks specifically of the closing seconds of “Pokémon”, where the music transitions to a sample of Hans Zimmer’s score for the 1994 film *The Lion King*. Within the *Mouth Silence* album itself, this is meant to be a transition to the next track, “Sexual Lion King”, a mashup of the aforementioned score along with Elton John’s “Can You Feel The Love Tonight” and “Circle of Life” (also from *The Lion King*) and Marvin Gaye’s “Sexual Healing” (1982).

One especially bad reaction, according to the listener response on Twitter, tends to come at the middle of *Mouth Silence*. After a brief ditty that samples a news piece on the mid-’90s Pokémon craze, Cicierega breaks into the music that plays when Simba discovers his dead father’s body in the *Lion King*.

“I almost didn’t do that,” he says, laughing. “I mixed Elton John into ‘Sexual Healing’ first”—the moment segues into a mashup of “Sexual Healing” and “Can You Feel the Love Tonight”—“I thought that was funny enough. Then I realized, oh, he’s singing, “Wake up, wake up.” There’s a line in the *Lion King* where Simba says, “Wake up.” What is that scene? Oh no, it’s the one scene that’s going to make everyone cry. I can’t put that in. **But then I did it anyway because if there’s a strong reaction that I suspect is going to happen, I need to go for it.**”²⁸

Here, he targets a revered and somber moment in a classic film (the death of Mufasa) with sexual humor in a way similar to *L.H.O.O.Q.*, for a similarly intended purpose of shock.

²⁷ Geffen, Sasha, “Mouth Singularity: Neil Cicierega’s Context Collapse,” *Impose Magazine*, September 2014, <https://www.imposemagazine.com/features/mouthsounds-neil-cicierega-context-collapse>. Emphasis mine.

²⁸ *Ibid.* Emphasis mine.

The quote from Herman Cain, however, reveals an interesting dimension that takes the work beyond mere shock and into revelatory cultural significance. Like the other sampled quotes, it is an earnest message being ironized. However, unlike the news clips, which aim to be neutral, and those from the preacher and psychiatrist, which aim to be negative, Cain's words are intended to be motivational and inspirational. Originally, he had attributed the lyrics simply to "a poet"; it was not the first time he had quoted them and not the first time that he had misattributed them.²⁹ Eventually, he correctly attributed the lyrics in his 2011 concession speech, acknowledging his previous errors:

I believe these words came from the Pokémon movie. The media pointed that out. I'm not sure who the original author is, so don't go write an article about the poem. But it says a lot about where I am, where I am with my wife and my family, and where we are as a nation. Life can be a challenge. Life can seem impossible. It's never easy when there's so much on the line. But you and I can make a difference.³⁰

Even after being corrected on the lyrics coming from a Pokémon film, and not a great poet, Cain chose to properly cite them, rather than abandon them. This suggests a level of integrity and genuine belief in these words, as, rather than perhaps dismissing them as childish or inappropriate, he instead doubles down and reemphasizes their application to his own life. Then, the irony comes from the ridiculousness of a quote from a children's entertainment franchise influencing a mainstream politician so profoundly and entering the political discourse.

This is fitting, as part of Dada's aim was to reveal the inherently ridiculous nature of traditional social institutions and conventions, and not to pretend that they are rational. In the eyes of the Dadaists, World War I did not break down the rationality of the world; it only revealed the

²⁹ Amira, Dan, "The Mystery of Herman Cain and the Donna Summer Lyrics," *Intelligencer*, August 12, 2011, https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2011/08/did_herman_cain_know_he_was_qu.html.

³⁰ "Cain quotes Pokemon as he bows out," YouTube video, 0:59, posted by "CNN," December 5, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zUg8S8_zRR0.

world as irrational to begin with. A famous French saying describes the idea: “Dada explains the war more than the war explains Dada.”³¹

However, far from the ridiculousness being shocking or discouraging, the Herman Cain quote becomes strangely inspiring, though in a way separate from its original intention. Reviews of Cicierega’s work suggest that audiences now find a paradoxical comfort in what would originally be shocking or upsetting. Sasha Geffen’s article and interview with Cicierega suggests this idea:

Paradoxically, there’s something comforting about the dissociation the record provokes. Scroll through the tweets about each album and most of them will be either shocked outbursts or gleeful appreciation, often both in the same tweet. These songs feel welcoming not just because their sources are familiar, but because now, in the wake of the internet, cultural dissociation is now familiar.³²

Similarly to how Dada was informed and influenced by periods of mass violence in the early 20th century, such as World War I, internet users in the early 21st century are also used to encountering shocking, surprising, and irreverent things online. The shock itself can end up becoming a kind of shared language of solidarity. Humor allows shock to become more easily digestible, and the use of familiar pop cultural media objects gives listeners a level of understanding and mastery. The early 21st century is similarly fraught with violence, with acts of both domestic and international terrorism, but, as Geffen argues, the internet itself is responsible for a lot of this shock in its role as a media interface. Through its collapse of time and space, the internet creates an environment where many forms of media, often graphic, “bleed” together, without much filtering or censorship.

Songs bleed into advertisements and ads bleed right back into songs. SoundCloud and Pandora recommend music based on a machine’s interpretation of our personalities. Our

³¹ Trachtman, Paul, *Dada*. Smithsonian, 00377333, May 2006, Vol. 37, Issue 2

³² Geffen.

Vine feed seems as likely to show us a quick clip of a live concert as it is bestiality porn or a human being's actual death. YouTube boils over with things like a person covering 'In the Aeroplane Over the Sea' from inside a fursuit. Everything is chaos. It's no longer possible to tell whether the unexpected music in our headphones is coming from the latest tastemaking blog or a pop-up ad for a cam girl site.³³

Reviews of Cicierega's albums in other publications offer similar interpretations as they also hint at horrified responses that are ultimately fun. Katie Rife for *The AV Club*, describes it as "laugh out loud horrifying."³⁴ Ryan Manning, writing a review of *Mouth Silence* for *The Verge*, titles his article "Mouth Silence is the sound of your brain roasting" and states:

It's the most horrific mix of the '80s, '90s, and today.

Imagine the rapture in all its violence and beauty, set to the sound of a trillion angels harmonizing to Third Eye Blind's "Semi-charmed Life." Imagine yourself hurdling through a lukewarm, glowing, pearlescent wormhole singing, "I'm not listening when you say goodbye." It's glorious. And that's just the intro.³⁵

This review uses highly paradoxical language, juxtaposing violence and beauty. But through the use of a "vernacular" of shock, it ultimately creates something comforting. He ends the review stating:

I don't expect you to listen to this in one sitting, but if you do, I assure you: you'll have a strong reaction, negative, positive, horrified, glorified.³⁶

In an environment and period of uncertainty, the mode of shock becomes appropriated as a standard vernacular of communication. Listeners and viewers can take comfort in these established nostalgic brands and mass media images they recognize. It can also lead to a sense of mastery and understanding of shock that similarly comforts. Cicierega's choice to target Mufasa's death as a site of humor, and his expectation that it would be the most impactful scene to use, are

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Rife, Katie. "The sequel to 'Mouth Sounds' is here, and it's laugh out loud horrifying." *AV Club*, July, 2014.

³⁵ Manning, Ryan. "Mouth Silence is the sound of your brain roasting: The most horrific mix of the '80s, '90s, and today." *The Verge*, July, 2014.

³⁶ Ibid.

telling. Fiction traditionally serves as a way for individuals to displace and understand their emotions; for many children especially, this scene served as their first introduction to the concept of death. Using it as fodder for a joke illustrates directly the now-standard use of humor in order to cope with trauma, by employing an ironic and detached laughing at death. Finding the humor in this imagery and being able to take it less seriously allows the listener to feel a sense of mastery and comfort. In other words, it allows them to reenact what may be a frightening experience on their own terms. As Benjamin states, engaging in shock leads to a “heightened presence of mind” that prepares them for the world.³⁷

Equally important as this individual experience is the reliance on shared experiences, knowledge, and media products, which will be significant later in my argument of how these audience members relate to each other as a community.

³⁷ Benjamin, 237.

Meaningful or Nonsensical?

It is important to note that Cicierega, breaking off from the traditional Dadaists, does not see his own work as particularly artful, simply as comedy. During his *Impose* interview, he stated:

“*Mouth Sounds* and *Mouth Silence* are more like YouTube joke videos,” he tells me. “It starts from a place of comedy.” He works outside of music’s avant-garde, but seems to have stumbled independently upon a few of the same aesthetic strategies used by critically acclaimed producers.

[...]

“Most of the songs on *Mouth Sounds* were just things that I uploaded individually to Tumblr as a joke or an experiment,” he says. “I don’t want to think that I’m creating art while I’m creating it.”³⁸

In this way, the works break off from the intentions of traditional Dadaists, who had more overtly left-wing political motives in their art. Cicierega, while using similar aesthetic qualities and similar themes of irony and absurdity, does not share the same political motivation, instead aiming simply for humorous reaction.

Regardless of his own views of his work, it is easy to read a meaningful theme into certain tracks, like “Pokémon”, and argue that it is a pointed satire of sensationalist news media and traditional moral authority figures through mocking them, as I describe earlier. In other words, it can be both a joke and meaningful. In this case, it is useful to situate it with a remix that has a less obvious meaning, if any.

A good example of this comes from a subgenre of remix called YouTube Poop, which gets its name from the website on which the genre is most commonly found. The closest to a uniform definition for the genre comes from a document submitted to the U.S. Copyright Office in the Library of Congress, petitioning for remix videos to be a protected class. Michael Wesch, a

³⁸ Geffen.

professor of cultural anthropology at Kansas State University, served as a consult on the document and defined YouTube Poop as “absurdist remixes that ape and mock the lowest technical and aesthetic standards of remix culture to comment on remix culture itself.”³⁹

I would like to focus on one specific YouTube Poop, titled “24601 Releases a Sammich on Parole,” produced and uploaded by a user under the screenname DaThings (also known as “Ellie Spectacular”) in 2013. The video remixes a popular promotional clip from the 2012 version of the musical *Les Misérables*, directed by Tom Hooper. The clip, titled “Les Misérables – Clip: ‘Javert Releases Prisoner 24601 on Parole’” was uploaded to the film’s official promotional YouTube channel shortly before the film’s release in theaters.

The remix plays with the medium and content in more absurd ways, as it brings in the element of video as well, not just audio. This includes cinematographic effects such as zooms, shaking camera movements, mirroring images, and extreme color grading. The audio editing is just as extreme, including chopping up dialogue in order to make characters repeat themselves or appear to say completely new lines entirely. For example, rather than 24601, antagonist Javert refers to protagonist Jean Valjean as 24602060451, with the audio for “5” taken from the character’s later line: “Five years for what you did.” Instead of their proper names, the characters of Jean Valjean and Javert also refer to themselves instead as “Jaj Valjaj” and “Jajvert”, respectively, through audio editing that reverses the first spoken syllable of each character stating his name. Outside images are brought in to create more humorous effects, such as presenting Javert eating the titular “sammich”, or dressing Valjean as a nun to correspond with an edited line

³⁹McSherry, Corynne & Hofmann, Marcia, “In the matter of exemption to prohibition on circumvention of copyright protection systems for access control technologies” 2011, 39.

describing him as a “dangerous nun”, rather than a dangerous man. The title of the work itself, as well, is a verbal “remix” on the original title, and not an original title.

While it is not much of a stretch to argue that “Pokémon” is a satire and meaningful criticism of the media and authority, it is a little bit harder to find any inherent meaning in a work such as this one. “Pokémon” is clearly *about* the Pokémon phenomenon; while “24601 Releases a Sammich on Parole” uses *Les Misérables* as its source material, it could hardly be argued to be actually *about* the film. It does not really aim to make any pointed criticism or statement about the film; instead, it simply uses the film as a medium to tell its jokes using footage that many YouTube viewers would recognize.

Instead, I would argue, as Wesch does, that this remix is about itself. In this, it draws on Surrealist and Abstract Expressionist techniques, which privileged the absurd, unplanned, and often, illogical. André Breton (1896 – 1966), one of the chief theorists and founders of Surrealism, wrote in 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism*:

“Therefore, I am defining it once and for all:

SURREALISM, n. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express -- verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner -- the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.”⁴⁰

Drawing on 20th century psychology, Surrealism aimed to reveal the unconscious aspects of thought. This was done through “psychic automatism”, automatic behaviors, rather than planning and reason. By creating art automatically, artists unleash their repressed psyches, and can express the most instinctive and unconscious desires as a stream of consciousness in artistic form.

⁴⁰ Breton, Andre. *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. Translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972. 26.

“24601” is about remixed video itself, as Wesch suggests. Language, as Breton writes, is a significant aspect of Surrealism, as we often do not spend much time consciously constructing what we say.⁴¹ This does not necessarily have to be verbal either, as shown in his definition of Surrealism. Just as automatic art is revelatory about the techniques, or language, of painting or drawing, remixed works such as “24601” reveal the language system of editing. The effects used in the video are all basic effects found in commercial video-editing software; this remix in particular was produced in Adobe Premiere Pro.⁴² I argue that the seemingly random and seemingly meaninglessly nonsensical nature of the edits is equivalent to unconscious automatic drawing. This “automatic editing” that slices up the clip and adds effects based on the first thing to come to the artist’s mind calls attention to the techniques and construction of film, leading to a work that is almost entirely self-reflexive.

This self-reflexivity extends to its use of, as Wesch describes, “the lowest technical and aesthetic standards.” The outside insertions call attention to themselves by being obviously out of place. For instance, the pistol that Jajvert hands Valjaj and later shoots him with is anachronistic for the film’s 19th century setting, and is purposely inserted in a way so that it is clear the characters are not actually holding it. Similarly, the “sammich” is senselessly and impossibly floating in midair, and Jajvert is not meant to actually appear to be eating it. In the final sequence of the video, Jajvert’s head and torso are attached to cartoon arms and placed in a video game environment. Similarly to the distortions and visual effects, the inserts own up to the use of “lowbrow” commercial basic editing techniques and does not attempt to disguise them. And, as in Surrealism, the lack of aesthetic conformity is not a concern, and in fact becomes a stylistic choice. Just as the

⁴¹ Breton, 32-34.

⁴² “Frequently Asked Questions,” last modified July 10, 2020, <https://elliespectacular.com/faq>

edit of the film causes verbal non-sequiturs, the incongruity in imagery is a kind of visual non-sequitur. The intentional fakeness of these edits contribute to the comedy as a stylistic low aesthetic. The more abstract, fake, and unbelievable the edit, the more absurd and ironic and ultimately funny it becomes.

Community

This analysis leaves one key loose end: the choice of material. Why choose to remix *Les Misérables* if the remix is not about the film? Why not choose another film clip, or even use original footage, like in Dada short films of the past? This loose end is key to understanding the unique angle that the internet provides. I would answer this question with: it was chosen because it was there. In other words, it is an everyday object. The subject was not chosen for any artistic meaning or even lack thereof, but simply for relevance. The original promotional clip from *Les Misérables*, as of 2020, has over 5 million views. The film grossed \$441,809,770 worldwide, and was also nominated for eight Academy Awards.⁴³ So for many, it is a staple of pop culture, and certainly a piece of media that many would recognize. Cicierega's "Pokémon" operates on largely the same principle, referencing the highest-grossing multimedia franchise of all time, an undeniable pop cultural staple. The work plays on the childhood memories of fans, who listen to the quotations and say to themselves, "I remember that."

In the case of these internet remixes, equally as important as the question "what does it mean?" is the question: "what does it do?" Mizuko Ito coins the term "imaginaries" to refer to the use of digital media objects as I describe:

*"imaginaries—shared cultural representations and understandings—that are both pervasive and integrated into quotidian life and pedestrian social identity, and no longer strictly bracketed as media spectacles, special events, and distant celebrity. I treat the imagination as a 'collective social fact,' built on the spread of certain media technologies at particular historical junctures."*⁴⁴

The imaginaries are cultural units that unite and form communities; Ito argues that technology, shared cultural imaginaries, and language are what allows the idea of a nation-state to be possible.

⁴³ "Les Misérables (2012)". *Box Office Mojo*. Retrieved 24 August 2020.

⁴⁴ Ito, 91.

She draws on the work of Arjun Appadurai to explain that these imaginaries are now pervasive digital objects:

With the circulation of mass electronic media, Appadurai suggests that people have an even broader range of access to different shared imageries and narratives, whether in the form of popular music, television dramas, or cinema.⁴⁵

The internet allows any with a connection to access and share media with others, allowing users to have many media experiences in common, or “imaginaries.”

Media images are now pervasive in our everyday lives, and form much of the material through which we imagine our world, relate to others, and engage in collective action, often in ways that depart from the relations and identities produced more locally.”⁴⁶

While communities are traditionally thought of as local cultures, the communicative power of the internet allows those with “imaginaries” in common to connect, despite their distance. These shared units of culture allow communities to form online. This shared culture, as I allude to in my introduction, is one where traditional consumers are now able to become producers by remixing mass media objects. One main mode this is shown is in remixes, which serve as a community-oriented play on a certain kind of everyday object, such as the *Les Misérables* clip that can be endlessly re-spun into remixes, like “24601”, that signal an in-joke among the audience.

Ito traces this breaking-down between consumer and producer to pre-internet media franchises, such as Yu-Gi-Oh!, and, fittingly, Pokémon. This is in both how these franchises produce media and market those media, and how consumers participate in them. Firstly, these franchises operated in multiple markets, and Ito refers to this mass-media ecology as the “media mix”.⁴⁷ Their existence through TV series, books, toys, manga (comics), and card games meant

⁴⁵ Ibid., 91-92.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ito., 89.

that the franchises' ontology was difficult to pin down; instead, all of the different aspects both inform and are influenced by the others.

Yu-Gi-Oh! was of particular interest to Ito, as, unlike in Pokémon (where the cards are abstract representations of the monsters that exist in the diegesis), in the diegetic universe of Yu-Gi-Oh!, the characters play with actual cards. In this way, it is easier for children to recreate the fantasy of the show's narrative in their own reality as they played together. The multimedia franchise encouraged this, relying on "intertextual referencing" across the different facets of the franchise, with their marketing following the pattern of the TV show. One example Ito notes is the Blue-Eyes White Dragon, an important and rare card in the story of Yu-Gi-Oh!. The card was given artificial scarcity and other premiums in its card game release in order to achieve a similar effect in reality.⁴⁸

Consumers of these media participated in what Ito refers to as "hypersociality" and "extroverted childhood". These terms suggest that children moved their involvement in these media from simple passive observation to participation. In other words, rather than simply sitting at home and watching the shows on TV, children were inspired to become more active by using the other, more tangible, aspects of the franchise:

"David Buckingham and Julian Sefton Green have argued in the case of Pokemon that 'activity—or agency—is an indispensable part of the process rather than something that is exercised post hoc' (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 2004, 19). The image of solitary kids staring at television screens and twiddling their thumbs has given way to the figure of the activist kid beaming 7 monsters between Game Boys, trading cards in the park, text messaging friends on their bus ride home, reading breaking Yugioh information emailed to a mobile phone, and selling amateur comics on the Internet."⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Ibid., 94-95.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 96-97.

She defines this as being characterized by a kind of entrepreneurial spirit. The “black market” of trading cards, which is fittingly alluded to Cicierega’s “Pokémon,” is seen by Ito as an example of children taking the media and objects given to them, and their intended use (“media apparatus”) and turning it into something new. Though there are adult fans of these franchises as well, Ito notes that there is a significant difference as children are limited by their resources, such as money, transportation, and information, and therefore needed to find more creative solutions. This led to a system where kids did not only follow what was prescribed to them by the official marketing systems and the shows, but instead took a system and made it their own. The official systems influenced and guided their participation, but did not dictate it.

The media mix of Yugioh does not end with the player’s interpellation into the narrative fantasy, or even with the recontextualization of the imagination into local knowledge, but extends to the production of alternative material and symbolic economies that are informed by, but not mediated by, the corporate media apparatus.⁵⁰

The main takeaway from this is the blurred dichotomy in cultural production, particularly of mass media, between traditional producers and consumers. In the modern era, cultural objects were considered produced at the “top” and then handed down to consumers to be consumed in prescribed ways, such as paying to see *Les Misérables* in a theater, or buying the DVD. However, Ito argues that rather than passive consumers, the audience has become cultural producers as well through the tools and ability to manipulate media objects through computers:

In other words, these practices produce alternative cultural forms that are disseminated through everyday peer-to-peer exchanges below the radar of commodity capitalism; they are a mode of cultural production that does not overthrow capitalism, but operates in its shadow, through “cultures of insubordination” (Sundaram, this volume) that both rely on and disrupt the dominant mode.”⁵¹

⁵⁰ Ibid., 105.

⁵¹ Ibid

Rather than simply engaging in their prescribed, passive, commercial, usage, such as watching the DVD, users seek creative new methods to “play” with them, like remixing a clip and distributing it among others. So, ironically, the commodity itself becomes the source for non-commodity texts; Ito states that these products “articulate with (and provide fodder for) an exploding network of digitally-augmented cultural production and exchange” that is enabled by the interactivity and networking of the internet.⁵² Through this, remixes operate in the “shadow” of commercial and capitalist cultural products through their appropriation, but they do not replace them.

The kind of “hypersocial exchange” Ito argues the internet enables is one where media objects take the place of traditional cards and toys, due to the internet’s nature as a “powerful alchemy of personal cultural production and communication combined with large-scale networks of digital distribution and archiving.”⁵³ Digital media objects, though they do contain cultural meaning themselves, also serve as material for new cultural production that abstracts away from their original meanings.

“Rather than the one-way street connoted by the term mass media or mass culture, hypersocial exchange is about active, differentiated, and entrepreneurial consumer positions and a high degree of media and technical literacy. This builds on the sensibilities of kids who grew up with the interactive and layered formats of video games as a fact of life, and who bring this subjectivity to bear on other media forms.”⁵⁴

Hypersocial exchange leads to the formation of internet subcultures of users with “imaginaries” in common, like those who produce and consume YouTube Poop. Earlier, I indicated that comfort in the absurd humor of these remixes is the main mode in which these communities operate. Adam Galpin, of the University of Salford’s Psychology department, drawing a parallel between

⁵² Ibid., 91.

⁵³ Ibid., 89.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 97.

absurdist remixes and traditional “so bad it’s good” films, argued that humorously absurd content naturally causes for that feeling to be shared with others.

[Galpin] says the fascination with a truly bad film can be passed on in the same way that viral content spreads on social media. There’s a communal feel to sharing the experience of a bad film, in the same way as a meme on Facebook or Twitter.

He adds: “There’s something in there about the experience of sharing emotions, which has been demonstrated in loads of other areas of media. If something gives you an emotional experience, you have an innate drive to share that with people.”⁵⁵

This kind of play with absurdity and humor extends to a certain necessary self-reflexivity in communication and interaction itself. A study in 2003 by Mike T. Hübler and Diana Calhoun Bell concluded that humor is the main method of indicating a shared ethos on the internet.

“Aristotelian elements of character, intelligence, and goodwill can be found both in traditional and computer-mediated forms of online joking. The purpose of humor in messages can encompass each element of ethos. By laughing at the same joke, individuals can identify with each other and keep the other’s interests in mind, common characteristics of ethos appeal to goodwill.”⁵⁶

The reference to Aristotle indicates that, of course, using humor to signify goodwill and build camaraderie with others is not new. However, it does take on a more primary and self-reflexive form in its use in online media.

A study by Christopher Holcomb demonstrates this, citing an example of a series of text messages in an internet chat room. In this example, the display name of user “green eggs and ham” becomes the site of the remix.

green eggs and ham (Message #16):

Sly, I agree that Heimel is a lousy social critic. I thought she was slanted in her views, flippant and unfeminine. She was way too crude.

⁵⁵ Beasley, Tom, “The psychology behind why we love bad films so much.” *NewStatesman*, January 2, 2018, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/film/2018/01/psychology-behind-why-we-love-bad-films-so-much>

⁵⁶ Hübler, Mike T. and Bell, Diana. “Computer-mediated humor and ethos: Exploring threads of constitutive laughter in online communities.” *Computers and Composition* 20, (2003). 280-281.

Beavis (Message #23):

Green Eggs, just because she expresses her views she is unfeminine'? That may not be what you are saying. so please clarify.

Hagbard Celine (Message 424):

To the infidel green eggs and spam:

TOO UNFEMININE?!?!?!?! Hello, wake up call. this ain't 1950, deary. Women are now allowed to be just as crude, foul-mouthed and bad-tempered as men. HAIL ERIS

green eggs and ham (Message #35):

Celine:

But they shouldn't be.

Hagbard Celine (Message #51):

Green smegs and flan,

Why not. Why is one word more offensive than another'? And why should it just be women who act nice and don't cuss? hail eris

Dickman and Throbbin' (Message #58):

Green plagues and spam, It is wrong to judge someone on their judgments of others.

We could keep this up all day.

Scroll (Message #81):

Green Eggo's [. . .]⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Holcomb, Christopher. "A Class of Clowns: Spontaneous Joking in Computer-Assisted Discussions." *Computers and Composition* 14, (1997). 14-15.

The name “green eggs and ham” is mocked through its variations, in a free association way. The user is called at first an “infidel”, and then “green eggs and spam”, by user Hagbard Celine, in a joke that plays on both rhyming and the reputation of spam as a lesser knockoff of ham. The second message uses a similar double meaning, playing on the rhyme of “eggs” with “smegs”, an explicit reference to foreskin. The third user, Dickman and Throbbin’, creates a variation on the first, keeping “spam” in the name, and changing “eggs” to “plagues”. So each iteration brings on a slight variation on the phrase. These variations, including the final one, “Green Eggo’s”, according to Hübler and Bell, rely on the noticeability of the rhyming and text form, which contributes to its ease in perpetual wordplay.⁵⁸ The text-based nature of this interaction does make this easier in its permanence of the text on screen. Each sequential variation of the name is easy to keep track of due to the ordering of the text messages, making the permanent digital environment more conducive to this kind of long-running gag.

The key takeaway from this interaction is the signifying of a shared ethos by those who chose to mock the username. Those who were arguing against “green eggs and ham” all used mocking variations on the name, and their messages took highly argumentative and aggressive stances against what they perceived to be a sexist comment. On the other hand, it is notable that the user going by “Beavis” used the more cordial abbreviation of simply “Green Eggs”. Noticeably, he was the only one in the group who was offering a more charitable message for “green eggs and ham”, asking the user to clarify his meaning and open-mindedly reserving judgment by claiming that it is perhaps a misunderstanding.

⁵⁸ Hübler and Bell, 280.

Play at the level of signifier is a normative activity in chat rooms, forums, and message boards. Digital interactions often take the self-reflexive form of remix, with humor as a primary conceit. Ryan Milner uses a similar relation between community and media to describe humorous image-macro memes as a new form of idiom. He recounts one attempt by his student to define memes:

“I asked my students to define ‘internet meme’. There was the usual desk staring, until a student in the back spoke up. ‘It’s like...a nationwide inside joke,’ she said. Her unconventional definition inspired chuckles. But as the hours wore on, I realized its prescience. ‘Internet memes’ - discursive artifacts spread by mediated cultural participants who remix them along the way – balance the familiar and the foreign. They’re at once universal and particular.”⁵⁹

Christopher Holcomb notes this as well in his work, stating:

“A joke instantly organizes participants into hierarchically differentiated groups: those who get the joke and those who don’t; those who laugh and those who choose to withhold laughter; and finally, those who laugh *with* the speaker and those who are laughed *at*.”⁶⁰

Shared humor in online interactions is a common and primary occurrence, but this can go beyond the simple short interactions and lead to the formation of “imaginaries” that constitute entire communities online. There are two main communities that I would like to focus on in order to demonstrate the principles I outlined above in action. Both of these communities operate using humor as their main mode of communication, and this specific style of humor is one based on Dadaist principles of shock and irreverence. As we will see, positive and negative

⁵⁹ Milner, Ryan. “Media Lingua Franca: Fixity, Novelty, and Vernacular Creativity in Internet Memes.” Selected Papers of Internet Research 14, (2013). 1.

⁶⁰ Holcomb, 4.

4chan

Whitney Phillips, in her book *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*, offers insight into the community of internet trolls on the website 4chan. These trolls serve as an excellent example of a community of those that Holcomb would describe as laughing *at*, or creating victims.

“After ten minutes of scrolling through the seemingly infinite stream of nameless, faceless posts—nearly everything I say was attributed to ‘Anonymous’—I was ready for a break. A break, a shower, and a nap. There was so much porn and gore, so much offensive, antagonistic humor, and so much general foulness I could hardly process what I was seeing.”⁶¹

As Phillips notes, trolls on 4chan seek what they refer to as “lulz”, a feeling of irreverent amusement that arises from engaging with the absurd. In a system of anonymous users, it is also the key driving force that unites trolls and gives them a sense of community. They know nothing about each other, but can work together toward a common goal of pursuing laughter through irreverent humor. Phillips acknowledges the indeterminate and interpretable meaning of the word, stating that most defined it simply as “you know it when you see it.”

This idea of simply “understanding it” of course, requires being part of an in-group, therefore reinforcing the idea of constitutive laughter at the absurd and irreverent forming the basis of online community. This understanding, as noted earlier, is screened through shorthand idioms and in-jokes that users are expected to understand. As she states, “instead of saying please, trolls said ‘plox’; instead of saying masturbation, trolls said ‘fap’; ‘sauce’ was shorthand for ‘where did you find that image?’ while ‘inb4 an hero’ meant ‘I expect you’ll tell me to go kill myself, but I’ve

⁶¹ Phillips, Whitney. *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015. 1

already thought of that, so don't bother.”⁶² Some of these are easy to understand. Slang such as “ploX” and “sauce” are simply corruptions of the original words, “please” and “source”, respectively, while “fap” is onomatopoeic. “An hero” however, requires more context, and being part of the “in-group” to understand; the user must have knowledge of the 2006 suicide of Mitchell Henderson, whose memorial page contained the infamous typo, in order to link it to being shorthand for committing suicide. Of course, this is indicative of repurposing an object, and applying dark, shocking, and offensive humor to form a new common idiom that moves away from the original meaning. As Hopkins notes, in this culture, “we all too readily aestheticize our darker motivations and impulses.”⁶³

Phillips describes this behavior as “generative,” echoing one of Ito’s key distinctions about digital culture, and setting it in similar relation with corporate or mass media as internet remix is in. As she describes it: “sensationalist corporate media outlets are in fact locked in a cybernetic feedback loop predicated on spectacle; each camp amplifies and builds upon the other’s reactions, resulting in a relationship that can only be described as symbiotic.”⁶⁴

Phillips notes as well the effect an online environment has in interactions (as I explain in the “Community” section) by citing the seeming incongruity between what she knew of her brother “in real life” and his behavior online. She states that she could not “understand why my brother, a smart, thoughtful, and generally easygoing kid, would find this space so amusing. Because what was even happening? What language were these posters speaking?”⁶⁵ Internet trolls may engage in rather extreme behaviors, similarly to the anarchic and destructive side of Dada. This takes on

⁶² Ibid., 38.

⁶³ Hopkins., 17.

⁶⁴ Phillips., 52.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 1.

a more primary form due to the mediating nature of the internet, and the self-perceived difference between the online persona and the “real life” version of a person. Phillips interviews one troll who explains that he would receive racism differently if it were through the internet, rather than in person:

“If someone called me a chink or gook online I really wouldn’t care at all. In real life though, depending on who says it, if someone called me a chink or gook I would want to beat the hell out of them . . . Reason for this is because online they have no clue what race I am and so they are obviously trying to troll me which I find funny. Real life though they are actually attacking my culture/race which I can’t stand, unless it’s a friend or something.”⁶⁶

In an online space, offensive or shocking behaviors can easily be disassociated from the user, as something that disappears once the window is closed, and is designed to never cross over into the user’s “real” life. It is a form of acting out and dissociation that is seen as appropriate in this particular digital environment.

The use of race here is apt, as it is indicative of the kinds of imaginaries that make up the shared ethos of this community. Phillips deduces that most 4chan users are young, middle-class, male, and white, based on their knowledge and access of computers and the pool of media and people they make reference to. The fact that this is not completely provable actually supports Phillips’ argument, as it indicates how literal race and gender hardly matter; instead, it is the ethnocentric and androcentric ideal and point of view that matters and makes up the dominant ethos of the community and is taken for granted, regardless of the user’s “real” race or gender.⁶⁷

The use of offensive humor and targeting of anything that expresses genuine emotion or vulnerability establishes the core and uniting ethos of this particular community.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Ibid., 34.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 54.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 36.

SilvaGunner

However, other, perhaps more innocent and even positive communities operate on the same spectrum and through similar principles. The YouTube channel SiIvaGunner (note the third letter is the letter I, not L), is a group of music artists that, similarly to Cicierega, produce parody and mashup music, generally from video game soundtracks. The central conceit of the channel is that these videos are labelled as if they were the original tracks, in both the title and description, to lure in users searching for that music and the shocking them with an absurd remix. The channel's character is very rarely broken. The channel's name itself is part of the joke, intended to resemble the name of a channel that uploaded the original game soundtracks, SilvaGunner (note the third letter is the letter L, not the letter I).⁶⁹⁷⁰ This is intended to similarly deceive unsuspecting users. However, unlike 4chan, this is largely a for-fun and victimless crime, unless momentary confusion is regarded as victimhood.

The channel's existence itself is an in-joke separating the fooled from the fooling, but even within the remixes themselves, several in-jokes and running gags exist. Common material that shows up in several remixes include samples from *The Flintstones* theme song, the song "Snow Halation" from the anime *Love Live!*, (2013) "Megalovania" from the 2015 video game *Undertale*, and "We Are Number One" from the children's show *LazyTown* (2004 – 2014). A quick look into the comment section of any of these videos gives a perfect example of community being formed

⁶⁹ The original SilvaGunner (the third letter is L) channel was active on YouTube from 2008 – 2010, before being removed for copyright violations. A new channel named GilvaSunner (the name being an homage and joke on the original SilvaGunner name) began uploading the same music shortly afterward. The parody account SiIvaGunner (the third letter is i) was originally named GiIvaSunner (the third letter is i) in order to be confused for them, as part of the joke. The name was eventually changed to the current name after complaints were leveled.

⁷⁰ Ballard, Thomas M. "Meme as a Rhetorical Concept for Digital Media Genres." PhD diss., Iowa State University, 2018. 100-101.

through shared sense of humor. The comments are filled with those explaining or appreciating the references used in the remix, and adding their own jokes.

One of their most popular videos, with over 4 million views, pretends to be the “Athletic Theme” from Super Mario World. It begins like the actual piece, before transitioning into a remix of The Cartoons’ version of “Witch Doctor.” In the comments section, one user states: “Now I expect to hear this every time I hear the actual theme.” This comment received 3500 likes, and three replies in a row with users simply stating “same.” Further down the comment chain, one user states: “I don’t even remember what the original sounds like at this point”, to which another jokingly replies, “bruh this IS the Original.”⁷¹ This short exchange is a good example or microcosm of the general attitude of this community; comment sections allow users to validate each other and indicate their shared ethos through humor.

As opposed to 4chan, the way that this community’s aesthetics form its general ethos ends up having a more positive effect. In addition to validating and supporting each other through the shared experience of getting the joke, the tangible shared sense of community led to the SiIvaGunner team and fans working together to raise over \$100,000 for Stefán Karl Stefánsson, the performer of “We Are Number One”, who was diagnosed with cancer in October 2016.⁷² This is notable as ironic appreciation of the humorous remix eventually turned into sincere appreciation for the remixed subject. Many SiIvaGunner fans, in their teenage or young adult years, would likely have never taken note of or have been interested in this children’s entertainer on their own.

⁷¹ “Athletic Theme (PAL Version) – Super Mario World,” April 22, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEcOzjg7vBU&lc=UgzW3Dex-1-bvqJlIEZ4AaABAg>

⁷² Asarch, Steven, “‘We Are Number One’ Meme: Why Do People Keep Remixing A Children's Show Song?,” iDigitalTimes, December 2016. <https://web.archive.org/web/20161220181807/http://www.idigitaltimes.com/we-are-number-one-meme-why-do-people-keep-remixing-childrens-show-song-574576>

However, through the transformative remix, they were introduced to him, and through buying into the shared ethos of the community, they came to collectively care for him.

Closing Words

In his *Impose* interview, Neil Cicierega recounts a specific incident where he witnessed firsthand an audience congregating online to listen to his album in a unique way that I find to be a precise example of what I am trying to argue here:

As he watched the initial responses roll in minutes after putting *Mouth Silence* up on SoundCloud last month, Cicierega witnessed a listener drag the music into a context he hadn't even considered. "When it first dropped, I watched all these people listening to it and tweeting about it in real time," he tells me. "They were all hitting the same points at the same time. I love seeing all that stuff, and hearing people's first reactions. But it was all text. And I noticed one person was like, 'I'm going to stream myself listening it on video.' And I was like, that seems cool, I want to watch a person's face as they listen to it. So I clicked on it and she turned out to be a cam girl. It was just this young woman on one of these cam girl websites where you get donations or points, like, give me 50 points and I'll show my butt. But she wasn't trying to do that stuff. She was just listening to the album and reacting. I was like, this is so cool. And then 20 minutes into it someone gave her 50 points and she showed her butt while the music was playing. That was the first time I watched someone listening to the album. It was like, okay, even if you're trying to be sexy for strangers in a chat room, you're still laughing at this music and being confused by it. That was the coolest reaction I saw."⁷³

In this anecdote, Cicierega expresses positivity toward the shared experience of audience members listening to the album together, stating that he loved to see it. Later on, his remix work itself is repurposed, becoming the soundtrack for a digital stripper's live show. However, rather than shock or anger, he reacts positively to this, stating that it was the "coolest reaction" he had seen, as he appreciated that the cam girl and her audience were enjoying the music, even if it was in a different way than intended.

Digital remixes reveal a culture in which traditional consumers may now become cultural producers and congregate with likeminded individuals. And, face with the shock and hostility that frequently frames online sociality, they appropriate the techniques of Dada. Though we see in

⁷³ Geffen.

some communities, such as 4chan, darker and more anarchic instincts being fulfilled, we can see in other communities the potential for more positive and constructive action based on the same principles of humor. In other words, the aesthetic styles that are intended to be blasphemous and shocking can also be used in a more positive way in order to find new ways to enjoy, rather than destroy.

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