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The Admiration

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Figure 13.1 The Dual 701 record player and a polaroid picture of the author as a young boy.

The Smiths, Brixton Academy London, December 1986

My passion for pop culture and pop music, my admiration for pop stars and pop cultural styles, my life in pop cultural scenes and sound communities, began in December 1986 at a concert by British indie rock band The Smiths in the Brixton Academy in London. I was thirteen years old and until then had not had any significant connection to pop

culture and pop music. It all started on December 11 of that year with a journey during which something significant happened for me. The journey to London and the time there immediately changed my attitude toward the world and to myself. Since then, pop culture has become an essential area of experience for me: by “experiences we make,” I understand, together with Martin Seel (1985: 79, translated by MSK), “changes that happen to us by making them happen” (“Veränderungen, die uns geschehen, indem wir sie vollziehen”). My concert experience illustrates that, from the perspective of the pop culture recipient, the performativity and individuality of his or her pop culture is decisive, involving the powerful appropriation and/or modification of pop culture frames of reference, which are determined, among other things, by taste preferences, personal experience, individual attitude to life, or emotional ties to pop culture realities. This leads, as in my case, to a pop cultural self-empowerment and to the development of techniques of self-cultivation, from which a pop cultural ethos of lifestyle emerges through the identification with pop culture as a stubborn cultural (experiential and educational) reality.

My cousin, who is nine years older, had been socialized into subcultures, especially in punk rock. She seduced me to attend this concert with her and regularly played music to me even beforehand, and also told me about scenes from her own life. Both things fascinated and irritated me at the same time. I secretly admired her otherness, even though I found her often ecstatic voice, with which she told me about music, concerts, clubs, fashion, books, movies, and much more, rather exhausting to listen to. The first sound of admiration for pop culture and pop music, of that which I consciously felt as such, was this raucous voice of my cousin, who celebrated every bit of music she loved not only with excessive enthusiasm but with ecstatic vocalizations. Despite my best efforts, this vocal sound of hers initiated and inspired enthusiasm in me as well. And somehow I still feel that way today. I only want to talk about pop culture and pop music with excessively enthusiastic or outraged people. I want to feel their love for the cause in the sound of their voices, in the brightness of their eyes, and in the loving restlessness of their stories.

Every musical recording my cousin played to me, I experienced at the time mostly as a barely distinguishable, uniform noise. Her enthusiasm excited me—but the actual source of her enthusiasm definitely did not. This also applied to the music we listened to on our journey from the Ruhrgebiet, a major mining and steel-producing area in deep Western Germany to London: this journey took place without my parents’ knowledge because they were in the United States at the time and my cousin was supposed to be looking after me. In the pre-digital era, the desires and affects of the private world were barely controllable. Music as such didn’t play a particularly important role for my parents. It didn’t sound at home. So, my first real musical socialization happened through this cousin. I attended the municipal music school, not a noteworthy example of early musical education, for a short time only—and this still represents a thoroughly negative encounter with music in my life. To this day, all I can remember is a mishmash of voices, flutes, and xylophones. There is no clear and distinct memory, no distinctly shaped experience of sound. A similarly negative experience of music occurred to me three years later during some rehearsals with my first

band: in 1989 I played drums in the rockabilly outfit The Flaming Cowboys, in a very amateurish way and only briefly. Apparently, I had no sensibility and no ear to express my love for music as a musician.

On the way to London—a journey that for me was equal parts spectacular and frightening—we listened to Smiths albums on very poor quality audio cassettes the whole time. I can't remember a single song though. This first encounter with the band I would admire for years and decades after, the first band I ever admired, was a mixture of hiss, machine noise, cinematic imaginations in my mind, and an overly excited, heavily beating heart. My cousin sang along to all the songs—assimilating and performing this music with the same hysterical enthusiasm I had come to know earlier and that wouldn't let me rest. Carried along by her excitement, she would also tell me stories about all the songs—and not only about the songs: about the band, about what the songs meant to her, where she had heard them, who she had kissed when listening, and much, much more. Again, for me at the time this was largely a murky and somewhat confusing but exciting mishmash of words and noises and energy and intensity.

When we arrived in London, the first thing we heard was the urban sounds of the city; and, ongoing, the increasingly exalted voice of my cousin. This grew even more heightened when we stopped in front of a friend's house where we could stay overnight. The meeting of my cousin and her friend was—as I remember it—actually a moment, performed in a language that seemed to be more than just the English I had learned in school. It was full of the sound of affectionate enthusiasm and a wholehearted anticipation of the concert experience ahead. Whenever they pronounced the names of singer Morrissey or guitarist Johnny Marr, their voices peaked in pitch and volume. On top of that, a strong radiance emanated from their faces and a hot blush throbbed in their cheeks. Their excitement pushed the needle of affect volume into the red, into the zone of visceral distortion. I can still recall the intense feelings of that experience when at concerts I observe fans who appear to actually lose their personal identity in the moment. They seem to merge completely, joyfully, and in excitement with this particular concert situation and sonic experience. Recording this sound of fandom, these screaming fan responses could maybe represent in the best way possible the excited materiality of such an event. These is not just a vocal mimesis or mirroring—it is a collaborative, collective performance.

In London, the big city's ambient noise merged with the sound of our journey: the ecstatic fan voices from my cousin and her friend, subway sounds, the sound of heightened activity, traffic, and tension as in any metropolis. This amalgamated sound accompanied us until we finally stood in front of the concert hall—and even more so, when we arrived inside, at this holy grail. Our concert experience commenced with a cinematic sequence of beautiful, subculturally styled people who populated the space; it was one great jumble of voices and moods. Only when the lights went down in the concert hall could I focus on the stage—which was hardly visible from my seat. The hall was filled with a sea of heads and smoke, populated with hands and cups—and I could finally dive into this sonic environment that immediately engaged me. Precisely then, the magic of the concert experience had me. My cousin and her friends were pushing all the way to the front of the stage. I was completely

overwhelmed by the whole situation. And Morrissey—this is at least how I responded to it—seemed to address me specifically, maybe only me, with the first song of the evening, singing for me and asking me, like a good friend:

Shyness is nice, and shyness can stop you
 From doing all the things in life you'd like to
 So, if there's something you'd like to try, if there's something you'd like to try
 Ask me, I won't say no, how could I?

(The Smiths 1986a)

This evening as a whole I can only remember now as a very fragmented picture story. But at the same time I can also remember an intense and distinctly perceptible atmosphere, an impressive sonic experience. The two songs I remember most clearly, besides “Ask,” are “Panic” and “Cemetery Gates” (The Smiths 1986a, 1986b, 1986c, track 5)—the titles of the songs I learned only later from my cousin. I remember Morrissey’s words and sentences, the murmuring and the cheering reactions of the concert visitors; and I recall particularly the vocal tone with which Morrissey started those last two songs and the sound of us all singing along—even me, with no knowledge of the lyrics at all. It is still this vocal tone in pop music that immediately excites or deters me; it can trigger admiration or abort any interest in me—everything else comes much, much later. Morrissey’s voice matched so perfectly with my adolescent self: insecure, snotty, tender, vulnerable, casting about, searching for identity and identification. But always failing, like Morrissey’s erupting, close-to-queer voice.

This first sonic experience was formative for many years. But actually, I experienced that same feeling again with every subsequent concert visit, experiencing the music and sound, the styles and the people, the culture and the life exactly the same way as in this December of 1986. Or, with historical distance, it seems more accurate to say: I wanted to experience again and again the sound, style, and culture at every gig—maybe to preserve, perhaps even infinitely recycle, this somewhat innocent and immediate intensity of the first time. The sound of admiration should not, it could not change in this way: I was joyfully locked up in my own memory and backdrop of desire and affect. As a consequence, the more concerts I attended, the more I got the feeling that I had this situation under control: I knew how good concerts should sound or what kind of sound should come through the microphones and out of the speakers. Only a few later shows managed to free me from this strong early impression: Nick Cave & the Bad Seeds on July 22, 1998 at the Museumsplatz in Bonn; Tom Waits at the Metropol-Theater in Berlin on July 17, 1999; or The Sleaford Mods, who played in my hometown of Duisburg at the indie club DJäzz on May 13, 2014. Again, the voices of Cave und Waits, their style and aura could open me up anew for their performances—and so did the energetic madness of Sleaford Mods’ singer Jason Williamson, the sound of his anger, his broad Nottingham accent, the rebarbarizing sensuality he exuded, and the thoroughly sonic traces of his tics and tricks. And on June 29, 1990 I attended the Bizarre Festival at the Loreley Rock in Bornich St. Goarshausen. The acts playing there were The The, The Ramones, Phillip Boa & The Voodooclub, Fields of the Nephilim, and Ride, among others. At this festival the sound of the 20,000 fans harmonized with the

resonant space of enveloping nature. It brought me back to that earliest experience of sonic admiration in Brixton Academy 1986.

The quality of audio reproduction and sound systems at the time, thirty years ago or so, meant that the music boomed and wobbled, squeaked and shrieked; it was never clearly present and ultimately quite inaudible. The sound was terribly limited, probably as in many multifunctional halls and clubs where I have seen concerts. Venues for popular music can be horrible places to actually listen to music—if you intend to listen like a passionate audiophile, you simply have to know the songs of the bands very well in order to sing along. The smells of the joints, beer, and sweat are tangible, as well as the closeness and friction of other bodies, the looks of the other festival-goers, the many conversations, and also the sounds of traffic or nature outside. It is an experience of intensity and admiration, not of a sonic extravaganza or audiophile excitement. However, that particular sonic expression of admiration I experienced at the Smiths concert has now turned completely silent in my memory. The traces of this admiration are still tangible in my research and thinking about and love of popular culture. I still feel propelled, driven, and energized by this early experience. Yet the sound of the music itself did not achieve this—rather, the sound of admiration did.

Co-performing with Vocal Personae

So, my affective introduction into popular culture began on that evening in 1986: with music, fashion, subcultures, clubs, films, television, books, fanzines, magazines, art, and oh so much more. Based on this gig experience, popular culture managed to transform me over the years and decades, it altered my expressive and stylistic practices in a lasting way. I performed, unknowingly, being that young boy, a movement from one cultural field to another. Since then, popular culture in general, but also a particular selection of practices, protagonists, and artifacts has turned into the most crucial form of culture and aid to self-transformation and—for me— education: an ever-changing soundtrack to my life and experience, as it surely still is for countless other aficionados, listeners, dancers, and concert-goers. Later, this passion turned into a profession, a happy academic existence that allows me to waste time on the things that inspire me and that I admire or make me angry and skeptical. Over three decades later, while writing down my memories of those first sonic experiences of admiration and my subsequent introduction into popular culture, I ask myself: How did my experience and my interpretation of these sounds, this music and its artists change? While writing this chapter, I am putting on my completely worn out and scratched Smiths records. Can they guide me back into a nostalgic frenzy of memory? Spinning on my Dual 701 (first sold in 1973, the year when I was born) is their second studio album *Meat is Murder* from 1985 and the song “How Soon is Now?”: “When you say ‘It’s gonna happen, now’ / When exactly do you mean?”

The voice on record touches me at a spot where I am also touched by memories of the excited voice of my cousin. However, this chapter will not present a theory of the voice

in popular culture. Rather, it will discuss how transformations are instigated by such sonic and vocal experiences, by situated and material affects in popular cultures. Unlike a rationalized concept of education, I refer here to a more affective and personal concept of self-education, of self-confrontation, of desires and personal growth that seems to me to be characteristic of popular cultures. How can a particular voice or sound or situation be the main source of wholehearted admiration, and as such start a process of transformation? The performative production of popular music as an experiential and tangible reality does not take place primarily in and through the lyrics of the song, but rather through the singer's performance, as John Storey stresses:

When we say popular music, we mostly have in mind songs. And if we ask the question, "What does this song mean?" too often we respond by referring to the content of the lyrics.

But the meaning of a song cannot be reduced to the words on the page. As Greil Marcus puts it, "[W]ords are sounds we can feel before they are statements to understand" ...

Lyrics are written to be performed. "They only really come to life in the performance of a singer [...]" (Storey 2010: 131)

A perspective of admiration starts with the vocal and performative charisma of a given singer—at least it does so in the case I used to begin this chapter, regarding The Smiths, Nick Cave, Tom Waits, Sleaford Mods. With the reciprocal sound of admiration by and in the voices of fans, aficionados, and parasocial peers a non-harmonious tangle of emotions corresponds with and relates materially to the performers: the skillfully imperfect voices of the singers often mingle and fuse with the even more imperfect and even more excited and affected voices of the fans. The audience becomes a major co-performer of the pop persona on stage.

As there is not one particular narrow set of ideal vocals to be found in popular music, there is room for diverse expectations without a center. One might still expect, for example, that vocals in a hard rock song will sound not too far from a mix between Lemmy Kilmister from Motörhead and Brian Johnson from AC/DC; however, the individual approach to singing embodied in the singer's particular affect and performance angle is decisive. There is also a long tradition of excessively high male voices in popular music, connecting to a tradition of bright, androgynous voices that began at least with Buddy Holly: "Weaknesses that become audible are not necessarily perceived as weaknesses, but by being amplified, they are also strengthened" (Diederichsen 2014: 283; translated by MSK). The apparent weakness in the voice, and even in the performance, actually might lead quite, paradoxically, to a strength in the *musical persona* (Auslander 2006) as well as in the *pop persona* (Schulze 2013b). It is an effect of self-aggrandizement and self-empowerment that can transform someone into a super-charismatic, fascinating, attractive if not glamorous persona on stage. When personae such as Morrissey, Nick Cave, even Bob Dylan or Leonard Cohen sing, they are not so much practicing a profession, as showing an idiosyncratic way to be through sonic and vocal expression—seemingly freed from any external norms that might be forced upon them. They embody a sort of liberation and freedom in their vocal sound (Sowodniok 2013), their vocal persona. Bob Dylan, for example, is a great singer by any measure—in terms of expression, surprise, feeling, structure, humor, scale of his concerns.

However, his vocal performance is characterized by a narrative voice while at the same time he is a master of singing compositions into bits and pieces—for example in “Blowin’ in the Wind.” No simple text, no propositional content might ever fully reflect what this joyfully destructive vocal performance expresses and means for many of his fans. Dylan’s and Morrissey’s voices perform a liberation from restraints, an energetic unchaining from social and political restrictions that their fans respond to in co-performing at concert venues and around turntables. Their singing, however strange and quirky, sore, feeble, or self-harming it might sound, establishes this connection of co-performance with their listeners, their *sonic peers*. In this sense, their fans not only enter a parasocial relation, as is often discussed in research (Horton and Wohl 1956, Sanderson 2009, Marwick and Boyd 2011), but an intensely and materially sonic relation, a vocal bond to their admired artists and performers. Through this material bond of admiration, of imitation and embodying, popular culture and its protagonists become major factors in the self-education of their fans. In this way, the “fleeting event of the unrecorded voice” (Kolesch and Krämer 2006: 7; translated by MSK) especially serves as the starting point for a deep personal transformation of these listeners and co-performers.

Performative Cultures of Education

The personal and even biographical sound stories I used to start this chapter can illustrate three approaches to the exploration of popular cultures and popular music that are anchored in idiosyncratic and sensory experiences: *performativity*, *education through style*, and *storytelling*. The sound of admiration cannot possibly be reconstructed in an abstract and generalized way: it must start with an idiosyncratic experience of one particular person, one humanoid alien (Schulze 2018a). These approaches make such research possible.

The main focus of my research practice is therefore a strong focus on *performativity* in order to understand how music, sound and lyrics, social encounters, and concert experiences operate in popular music and culture:

They’re formin’ in a straight line
 They’re goin’ through a tight wind
 The kids are losing their minds:
 The Blitzkrieg Bop

(The Ramones 1976, track 1)

At concerts by The Ramones, the call of “Hey! Ho! Let’s go!” constitutes a speech act, a performance, and an execution at the same time—a place where speaking and acting coincide. The origin of the concept of performativity most relevant here goes back to J.L. Austin’s speech act theory (Austin 1962). This theory is based on the assumption that speaking a language means rule-guided behavior on the one hand and that the execution of a speech act itself is the basic unit of linguistic communication—not the word or the sentence. For Japanese pop-punk band Shonen Knife, who are avowed Ramones fans, this becomes “Iko, iko everybody let’s go” on their song “Riding On The Rocket” (on *Let’s Knife*,

1992, Virgin). Because it is recognized by the audience as a Ramones quote, when shouted at a Shonen Knife live show this transformed call sign transfers elements of the specific performativity of The Ramones and their live presentation into the Japanese band's own context. This indicates another quality of pop culture in terms of its performativity: the importance of citation, or quote-pop. For Austin, on the other hand, performative acts are not repeatable; repetition in the form of citation is parasitic and non-serious. Thus, judging the exclamation "Hey! Ho! Let's go!" as true or false is impossible and pointless.

So, performative statements are neither descriptions nor statements of fact, that is, they have no referential function. They are neither true nor false, but acquire their meaning through the actions performed with them. Performative statements can only succeed or fail depending on the situation, the context, the co-performers, and the community of actors and co-actors.

These performative practices in popular culture thus constitute an *education through style* that takes place within such experiences. Such processes of transformation are formative when they cause a major change in the fundamental elements of someone's predetermined world and self-concept (cf. Kokemohr 2007). Popular cultures are contingent, elective communities that include and center around such social and cultural processes; they materialize and medialize them, they perform them as text, image, sound, stage show—and they present social and cultural experiences in this context that can be appropriated and transferred into one's life-world. They can potentially open up performative spaces of self-education: the spaces of scenes and their specific styles, haircuts, fashion, dance styles, or aesthetic traits of communication, such as through vinyl artwork, posters, band t-shirts, texts, stage productions, and more. This is a secure community that educates one for life in a wider, maybe less secure community, where the "idea of education does not level the singularity in its relation to an outside world ... which does not just mediate a subject to a general concept and abolishes it as a singularity—but brings it into relation to the other and thus to the demand for justice" (Wimmer 1996: 137; translated by MSK). Hence, pop cultures show, perform and explain, make visible and audible, connect and create communities of difference. They set things in motion, allow communication and interaction to take place and help knowledge, ideas, or ideologies to circulate. They are themselves stages, spaces, and frames for dealing with the world and the self—ultimately, they are self-education agencies in which the subject becomes a project (cf. Flusser 1998). This education initiates or contributes to permanent processes of transformation.

Such education in popular cultures proceeds mainly narratively and performatively through *storytelling*, and takes place in a field of tension between reality and fiction. Popular cultures fictionalize socio-cultural realities and are at the same time dependent on the realities to which they refer. Being cultures centered around storytellers or telling stories, they trigger multimedia and multi-perspective narratives with an educational effect. To educate here means a process of co-constructing people and media as well as recursive connections between mass media and everyday communications and realities, defined by the performance of media cultures. Their oral histories allow particular *popular memory cultures* to emerge, and which constitute a community. Therefore, the sovereign role of one narrator or the sole authority of an author increasingly disperses into a wider

and almost untraceable network of references. The personal and idiosyncratic mixture of memories, experiences, sounds, and concepts constitutes an education through popular cultures and its styles. The long-distance transmission of narratives and of conversational experiences creates opportunities for this personal narration and conversation in everyday life—despite physical distance.

The performativity of popular culture and its memory cultures is determined by an idiosyncratic approach to storytelling (like mine earlier). The stories told are thus both educational and performative. The text itself also becomes a performance—of style cultures and processes of self-education. This individual participation in a performative educational process addresses the reader's memory or their own experiences of strangeness, of surprise, of self-discovery while reading. This self-discovery connects the performative-narrative process of education to more recent autoethnographic approaches, cherishing and respecting an author's and researcher's personal affect and entanglement with her or his research subject.

In Praise of Entanglement

Entanglement and personal affect are all too often still regarded as elements hostile to research and preventative of any meaningful insight. In the case of a deeply experiential research field like popular culture, such a perspective has never proven helpful. From the early cultural studies examining fandom, investigations of youth cultures, and the more recent approaches involving following protagonists of contemporary popular culture scenes in mobile ethnographies—all of these approaches have made efforts to shift the locus of authority in the research: from the researcher and his (more rarely, her) expertise, definitions, structural models, and finely crafted positionings in a research field to the protagonists of one particular scene, their performativity, their storytelling, their processes of education through style. In this sense, the perspective of the fans, the listeners, the consumers, also the admirers and the excited audience could easily be ignored—and it had been overlooked in a way that respected their existence but condescendingly assigned it a minor place. But why was the affect of admiration so often condescendingly ignored or even shamed? Why did it seem so much more interesting, exciting, and relevant to write and research on the genius artists, producers, instrumentalists, singers, and performers on stage instead of those who perform in the moshpit, in their adolescent bedroom, or on a street corner?

With this goal in mind, the sociological, psychological, and later media and communications-oriented research on fan cultures and the excited users, consumers, and prosumers surely provided a starting point, out of the traditional reversal of interest as performed since early cultural studies, Birmingham-style (cf. McRobbie 1991, Baym 1997, Hills 2002, Duffett 2013, Duits, Reijnders, and Zwaan 2014). However, in these cases the researcher seems still in a comfortable and unaffected outside position: she or he watches and observes and models the movements of his research objects from above and afar—even

if ethnographic research is included. Most of the time researchers in these cases still prefer to perform the habitus of the *unmoved observer*, analyzing and interpreting in a Kantian manner of *disinterested pleasure* (*interesselosem Wohlgefallen*). I do not believe this is a valid, an actually existing, or even fruitful and meaningful method of research. For me, such approaches may go in the right direction—but only halfway. They intend to give room and analytical respect to all those who admire, follow, and praise public personae, but these admiring individuals themselves are subtly misjudged by interpreting them as mainly just examples of larger cultural trends, phenomena, and tendencies. They are not respected as performers and protagonists in their own right and with their own genuine and impactful agency. In my understanding of these fan culture protagonists, they in fact co-create the very culture of which they are a fan. Most pop personae themselves seem to understand this when they reach a certain level of celebrity and recognition—at least a commonly used phrase at award shows and in public statements performs this: *I would be nothing without your support and encouragement!*

Research on admiration and excitement in popular culture, as two of the main driving forces of this culture and its manifold sub-, side-, and paracultures, cannot be performed in radical distance, disinterest, and stale ignorance of the affects that characterize and substantiate these cultures. Even more, a substantial amount of research in this area seems to me only possible when including *affect theory* in the equation (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, Biddle and Thompson 2013); this seems to me the very substance and not just a side-phenomenon of the experience of being a fan, an aficionado, an admirer, an excited person. What I explore under the concept of *popular media cultures*—or in German: *populäre Medienkulturen*—refers precisely to this experiential, intensified, and pervasive cultural practice in close connection to mediated artifacts and practices as well as to personal, biographically anchored, and idiosyncratic processes of education and transformation. Popular media cultures are agents of these transformations: they constitute a widely disseminated ethnographic field that cannot be researched from a distance, as part of a kind of *armchair ethnography*. It is this specific research field, consisting mainly of fans and performers, practitioners and aficionados itself, that demands the personal involvement and participation of the researcher. The affective relation, the entanglement, and the personal involvement are in this case not an obstacle to thorough academic investigation, but the very means by which this strand of research proceeds.

Admiration can be, in this respect, a major catalyst for academic research. However, it cannot be this as an unreflected form of praise and of speechless bewilderment or surprise, but as a research object for which a researcher might her- or himself also be included in the research object. Although it is part of a tradition of Westernized research to focus solely on expressions in language form, it is clear that affects and objects, relations, and situations are also a focus of research for ethnography, sociology, for anthropology and for cultural research in general. The three aspects mentioned in the previous section all then contribute to this: the *performativity* that is the substance of an affectively experienced situation; the *process of education* that can be observed and experienced in this situated research too; and the *storytelling* that is instigated by an experiential situation. The researcher acknowledges, therefore, her or his own entanglement in the situation being researched—and starting

from this, the substantial co-performance between an artist and their fans is expanded by a comparable co-performance from the protagonists of a scene or situation and the single researcher researching it. Admiration becomes in both of these cases a driving force: for an epistemological process consisting of situated storytelling, an analysis of co-performances, and the interpretation of educational processes.

Expanded Fan Fictions?

In the twenty-first century, there have developed more and more platforms, genres, and media formats that give opportunities to perform the experience of admiration and entanglement in a popular media culture. This started with the long-lasting, often overlooked corpus of *fan fiction* in analog or online publication formats, evolving into *weblog and videoblogging* culture in the 2000s, and recently even expanding into the mediated co-performance and appropriation of popular culture on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, or Snapchat. The history of fan fiction is already an area in research (e.g. McCardle 2003, Thomas 2006, Black 2008, Ng 2008, Hellekson and Busse 2014, Jenkins et al. 2015, Fathallah 2018), but its prolific and ongoing production demands a continuous and rapid expansion of this research field; moreover, in the co-performance of this field one can find an energetic core out of which a lot of other phenomena in fan culture can be understood. The forms of imagination, the practices and tricks of appropriation, and all the wider variety of starting points for this shared performativity—all of it takes place here. It is thus a prime example of how deeply intertwined and entangled popular cultures are: it can seem increasingly useless to analyze the performativity of one artist, one genre, one set of artifacts when not also including all the fan fictions and fan imaginations that circulate around and gravitate toward it. Fan fiction represents the subjectivities, the projections, obsessions, and fantasies that actually make a protagonist of popular media culture a truly desired object and a pop persona.

This tendency was expanded in the first influential and internationally impactful examples of user-generated reading-and-writing platforms such as blogs, online communities, and interest groups that often later expanded into video-blogging and micro-blogging platforms. Within these platforms the energy of fan fictions, their imaginations, their excitement, and admiration found new formats to attach to. This wide and large online discourse, obviously, cannot be reduced to just a continuation of fan fiction; but as soon as one begins to explore and interpret the enunciations and performances on these platforms and blogs, one discovers the richness of fans' engagement, affects, thinking, and living with their admired celebrities, performers, musicians. Writing about pop personae does not end with formats tied strongly to fictional or academic genres—it expands creatively and energetically when explored on an open plane of these platforms. Writers, inventors, fans, and admirers let loose here and are encouraged to extrapolate on all their weird dreams and obsessions, practices and ideas, wishes and fears around pop personae. These platforms are the habitat of manifest admiration and entanglement

within a parasocial relationship. In my understanding, these idiosyncratic translations of media experiences into the erratic life-worlds of fan fiction substantially increase an intensity of experience in two areas: within the actual everyday life of the fans as well as within their abilities to reflect upon these. They do not necessarily contribute to escapism or a life consisting only of parasocial interactions, because—as with popular media cultures in general—they represent and perform options for communication that instigate further processes of reflection and activity. However, these processes can be evaluated ethically: popular cultures and popular media cultures do not teach or educate in themselves, but they potentially represent a gateway to more freedom or even into emancipation, which one must choose for oneself and which one must actively realize. The confrontation with the other, the alien, and the strange is here a crucial experience as well as part of the discovery of the familiar and the homely in the other.

One of the most recent and undoubtedly most prolific examples of this sort of expanded fan fiction can be observed on the comparably younger video and social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat but also on older and more established ones like YouTube or Vimeo (Vernallis 2013, Höfer 2019). There needs to be more research on how the performers, commenters, editors, prosumers, and fans on these platforms actually appropriate, assimilate, and embody the pop personae they perform. Especially the drive of excitement, entanglement, of presuming and collaboratively co-performing is very fully developed in these examples. On these platforms the formerly niche culture that once crafted its daring, often strangely twisted, and not infrequently also weirdly sexualized fan fictions almost in hiding, is now in full bloom as a sort of new mainstream culture. How the users of such platforms perform with and against their admired pop personae, how they inhabit their dancing and singing styles, their signature looks and moves, their branded environments and their relationship, can all be enjoyed and digested in a thoroughly transformed and translated, appropriated and assimilated form.

On these platforms and—probably even more so—in future media environments that might allow for much more embodiment and appropriation of looks, styles, and media production techniques, one can recognize how, in my understanding, a popular media culture actually comes into being: The big productions and big stage appearances by major pop personae are not sufficient to understand the richness and the wide variety of expressions and experiences that characterize this culture. It is precisely the many often unknown co-performers, all of these fans and aficionados, who let this culture live and thrive. Processes of self-education in these popular media cultures basically require an incredibly high level of activity as well as an idiosyncratic and prolific inventiveness regarding the “practice of everyday life” (de Certeau 1988), so as to allow these processes of sense-making through performance to become generative and transformative. Even more so, from the beginning of such a process of activity and transformation it might not be clear what can actually be achieved, what will really happen, and where this process will ultimately lead its protagonists. However, if they succeed, these popular media cultures are then indeed very efficacious and impactful self-educational cultures. Popular media cultures as a whole *are* these co-performers: their incessant, cross-platform performances of appropriation, excitement, and performative pleasure.