

“It wasn’t our song anymore”: Molchat Doma, the death of the reader and the birth of the TikTok

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Abstract

The article investigates the transnational reception, circulation, and remediation of music on TikTok, taking as a case study the Belarusian band Molchat Doma (The Houses Are Silent), whose song “Sudno” became viral in 2020 in conjunction with the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic. The article argues that: a) TikTok users generally disregarded the author’s encoded meaning for their own self-expression; b) depoliticized and memeified Molchat Doma’s gloomy post-punk; c) prompted self-memeification in the author, who became an active (though secondary) participant in the textual rewriting. The article aims to contribute to ongoing debates around the digital consumption of popular music.

KEYWORDS: TikTok, Molchat Doma, meme, Belarus, presumption, post-Soviet popular music.

Introduction

Digital media presumption (production + consumption) is having a fundamental impact on music, and debates around the reconfiguration of music uses and values through this lens are increasingly topical (Tschmuck 2016, Danielsen 2017, Sanchez-Olmo & Viñuela 2020). Notwithstanding the urgency of the issue, not many studies have yet analysed music in relation to TikTok, which has since 2020 become increasingly popular as a social media platform for mash-up, user-driven culture. This article asks therefore the following questions: how is music content rewritten and remediated on TikTok? What are users’ attitudes to this process? And how do these receptions and reuses of music act on the original author?

To explore these issues, I take as object of study the Belarusian band Molchat Doma, whose 1980s-inspired post-punk with Russian lyrics became viral on TikTok in 2020. I will show how the band's music and aesthetics have been appropriated, transformed, and recirculated through the lens of memeification, understood here as the process of turning something—in our case a musical product—into an Internet meme.

From the analysis of Molchat Doma's spread on TikTok, I argue that online prosumers have now obtained primacy over the original musical text they appropriate even as 'unknowing' audience members. I propose to term the unknowing prosumer's rewriting of the musical meaning *memetic disreading*, which consists of unawareness of the original text in favour of self-expression and participation in a trend. Further, I argue that such a rewriting is so influential that it spills over and back to the author, giving rise to *self-memeification*. Not only do TikTok prosumers have the power to engender memetic processes that radically transform the meaning of the original text, but they also change the ways in which the author looks at it. Together with this, however, I show how Molchat Doma's music benefited from this viral *disreading* despite the perceived obfuscation of their musical message, as the band's popularity overflowed to other online streaming platforms on which music has a primary role (and artists are paid a little more). By analysing how transnational audiences have appropriated and reconfigured Molchat Doma's music, this article aims to contribute to timely scholarly discussions around music digital consumption, transnational flows and online participatory cultures.

In what follows, I will first provide an overview of the key scholarly discourses which this article draws on. Secondly, I will sketch out Molchat Doma's career and reception on different social media outside TikTok. Thirdly, I will outline the main features of Tiktok in relation to music and its role in Molchat Doma's ascent to fame. Lastly, I will analyse the memeification performed by the band on itself in response to their TikTok success, before drawing some conclusions.

The transfer and recontextualization of popular music

Somewhere in the US, a teenager stands in her room, in front of a camera. She is about to engage in what is known as a 'wardrobe challenge': in a flash, she tries on a huge number of clothes. The [video](#) is made of post-production cuts, and the shots of the different outfits follow one another at instantaneous speed. The video quickly gathers 750,000 likes. Somewhere else in America, another girl shows her dark blonde armpit hair, then splashes some blue dye into a bowl and applies it with a brush on the hair. She is pleased with the result, which she shows to the camera. Her [video](#) gathers 1.2 million likes. A guy, in another part of the US, eats a burger in a garden. The [video](#) he is making is a response to a trend, initiated by another user, under the tag: "I'm vegetarian but your meat is my only exception". His video is liked 570,000 times. All three videos last around fifteen seconds.

What links these seemingly different visual products is a song playing in the background, in Russian: it is Molchat Doma's "Sudno (Boris Ryzhii)" [Bedpan (Boris Ryzhii)], a dark and gloomy post-punk adaptation of a 1997 poem by Boris Ryzhii,

a Russian poet who committed suicide in 2001, aged 26. The lines from the poem playing in all these videos are: “Life is hard and uncomfortable / But it is comfortable to die”.

It is May 2020, and we are in the middle of the first-wave of the pandemic. People, especially the youth, are looking for something to do to escape the isolation in which they have found themselves. Downloads of this new creative mash-up video and social media app called TikTok are soaring. The app combines music, texts, videos, special effects, emojis; videos can be liked, grouped into trends and acquire a viral effect; each video has a comment section where users can engage with one another, often without knowing one another; users have followers, and can even hit sponsorships if their following grows and their videos are consistently viral.⁽¹⁾ But most importantly, the app offers users the possibility of self-expression, visibility and interaction in a time when the analogue world is nearly inaccessible.

In this operation of remaining visible, music is often secondary to the individuality of the users. Indeed, for what concerns the use of sound, TikTok tells us about the last frontier in musical transfer and recontextualization, the latest journey of what Isabelle Marc (2015) calls the ‘travelling song’:

Even though a song is created in a specific national or communitarian context that determines to various extents its production and reception processes, once it is released and disseminated, especially via the global music market, it travels and wanders through time and place, thus becoming a transcultural product. The fruit of these voyages is what I call a “travelling song” and by extension “travelling music” (Marc, 2015: 5).

Central to Marc’s analysis is the transnational reception of cultural artefacts, their adaptation and appropriation. Audiences across the globe, she maintains, may be better reconfigured as collective translators of a song, as well as devourers, violators, or even destroyers of ‘the other’ from which the music originated (Marc, 2015: 12-13).

Debates around audiences’ engagement with music have a long history. In their critique of the capitalist cultural industry, Adorno and Horkheimer (1944) saw consumers of popular culture as passive and uncritical. Driven by profit, the cultural industry had managed to anaesthetise the masses through entertainment. Many scholars have since challenged this bleak analysis, claiming that consumers (though not all) do exercise their agency in creative ways. Michel De Certeau (1984), for instance, focused on the inventive tactics people use when engaging with products of capitalist cultural discourse, claiming that ‘to consume’ means also to do, make and produce anew. In his pivotal study on fan cultures, Henry Jenkins (1992) showed how passionate users (fans) shape novel creative texts from the media they consume. Already then, Jenkins saw that a growing number of media fans were turning ‘pro’, pursuing careers in the field they once ‘poached’ and inspiring other fans’ creative aspirations (Jenkins, 1992: 49).

With the advent of the digital and the boundless possibilities for self-expression offered by social media, consuming and producing have progressively merged into one, fuelling the rise of the ‘prosumer’—a portmanteau of ‘producer’ and ‘consumer’— as a significant creative force. ‘Prosumption’ (similarly, ‘production + consumption’) of values and goods, as identified by Alvin Toffler (1980), has

always existed (Ritzer, Dean and Jurgenson 2012), yet the Internet has now radically altered its speed and intensity. Like never before, the simultaneous reception and re-circulation of content online enables audiences “to creatively ‘write’ their own meaning and perform/slash/subvert/hack/rewrite/jam and generally reconstruct the original cultural arguments and forms” (Gordon, 2016: 13). Covid-19, as the ‘great accelerator’ of digitalization and many other spheres of human activity (Amankwah-Amoah *et al.* 2021) has intensified this process as well.

As a result, on user-driven social media platforms, communities of audiences acquire an increasingly leading role in the production of culture (Rayna and Striukova 2016). Re-readings of a text may become more popular than the original, obscure it, or even efface it. Returning to Marc (2015), and following Benjamin (1995 [1934]), the idea of the ‘original’ in culture is thus picked apart, and the primary text ends up having “a diachronic primacy, but not an ontological one” (Marc, 2015: 12). Further, the ‘death of the author’, which Barthes (1977: 148) famously paired with the ‘birth of the reader’, not only liberates users from the author’s intentions and ‘encoded meanings’ (Hall 1980), but also allows for rewritings to bear no resemblance to the original and no acknowledgement of it.

This means that remakes may also be based on a misreading of the original text, or simply indifference to it, particularly in the context of platforms that enable the combination of various media and techniques. For example, users may appropriate a song for their videos on Instagram, but the audio element may be ancillary to the images. Likewise, since these platforms are made for international circulation, users may choose a foreign song without understanding the language. In this intermediatic, interlinguistic, intercultural and intertextual patchwork, music becomes just one of the colours in the user’s palette and can be (and indeed is) decentralised.

Linda Hutcheon’s (2012) concept of ‘knowing’ and ‘unknowing’ audiences is also useful here to better understand processes of obliviousness to the original text during cultural adaptations. Hutcheon argues that, when witnessing an adaptation, the unknowing audience has no awareness of the work on which the adaptation is based (unlike the knowing audience); as a result, it may perceive the adaptation as an original. Fitting Hutcheon’s argument in the online presumption chain, the same can be observed in the very making of adaptations (and appropriations): especially during processes of appropriation of foreign language products on platforms that are based on mashed-up, memetic and viral circulation of content, appropriators— from the very start— may not be aware of the text they are appropriating.

So, in these various journeys through different media and across different ‘unknowing’ adaptations, the ‘travelling song’ often becomes secondary to the needs and purposes of the new owners. This, as I endeavour to explain, is particularly evident on TikTok, a social network representing at the moment the pinnacle of presumption, patchwork creativity and memetic trends. As framed by Shifman, Internet memes are socially constructed public discourses “sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, [...] created with awareness of each other [...] and circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (2014: 7-8),. These phrases, images, or videos spread online causing people to replicate them, usually with humorous intent (Castaño, 2013: 96),. Memes, as a rule, are anonymous: the initial author’s (nick)name becomes lost

in the replication of the product, turning it into everyone’s property and ‘digital folklore’ (De Seta, 2020).

Mememes that involve music, even when created with ‘awareness of each other’, may contribute to efface the connections between the author and their musical text, while facilitating distracted listening. Usually, TikTokers do not create music, but create *with* music. Due to music decentralisation in this creative process, as well as its subordination to whatever memetic trend is in vogue, music prosumption on TikTok may become superficial and inattentive. Such a use of music tallies well with recent scholarly debates warning about streaming platforms’ damaging effect on music. According to some scholars, these platforms foster music’s decorative function and encourage passive consumption (Anderson, 2015; Eirksson *et al.*, 2018). Other studies, instead, have shown that online streaming inspires adventurousness and diversity in listening habits (Detta, Knox and Bronnenberg, 2018). David Hesmondhalgh (2021) maintains that several of the fears regarding the algorithmic devaluation of music may be too binary or premature, and they risk falling back into a romanticization of the past. However, all these interpretations are not mutually exclusive: while it may well be that streaming platforms have brought about an intensification of distracted listening, there never was a time when music was attentively appreciated and actively consumed by everyone. Besides, the role of music on TikTok can be akin to that of a film soundtrack, or even to what we hear in shopping malls. The difference, however, is that TikTok loosens the tie between music and attention even further through the promise of prosumption. Cut to fifteen seconds and put at the service of the users’ creativity, music may be repurposed yet again as neither something we attentively consume, nor something we passively hear, but as something we actively use and casually ignore.

Molchat Doma

Molchat Doma (hereafter also: MD) formed in Minsk, Belarus, in 2017 and at the time of writing have released three albums: *S krysh nashikh domov* (From the Rooftops of Our Houses) in 2017, *Etazhi* (Floors) in 2018, and *Monument* (Monument), in 2020. The band consists of Egor Shkutko (vocals), Pavel Kozlov (bass, synth), and Roman Komogortsev (guitar, synth, production). The band members were born between 1993 and 1995, that is, on the cusp between the generation of the so-called ‘millennials’ (1980-1995) and ‘generation z’ (1995-2010). Molchat Doma play in the style of post-punk as articulated by British bands like Joy Division, New Order and Depeche Mode, and through the prism of Soviet new-wave bands such as Kino (Cinema) and Tsentr (Centre). MD’s tracks feature synths (both as leads and as texture), heavy and driving bass, electronic drums with abundance of toms and claps, reverbed and chorused guitars, and deep, reverbed vocals. Shkutko’s lyrics are in Russian and often present themes of alienation—for example in tracks like ‘Ya ne kommunist’ (I’m Not a Communist), ‘Kommersanty’ (Merchants), ‘Kletka’ (Cell), or ‘Ne smeshno’ (Not Funny)—and a sad and problematic version of love—for instance in ‘Zvezdy’ (Stars), or ‘Volny’ (Waves).

MD have experienced a worldwide popularity that is perhaps unprecedented for any other Russophone musician other than the duo t.A.T.u. in the early 2000s: according to Spotify's [statistics](#), in the last three years the band has regularly had over 2 million monthly listeners. In September 2021, their top-5 listening locations were situated in four continents: Mexico City (60,251 listeners), Moscow (42,015 listeners), Santiago, Chile (32,587 listeners), Los Angeles, US (31,249 listeners), Istanbul (22,328 listeners). Such audience distribution testified to the great extent of the band's transnational spread.

MD's journey to worldwide fame was riddled with audience presumption and began with users' copyright violation. In 2019 *Etazhi* appeared as an unofficial upload on the YouTube channel 'Harakiri Diat', a platform of curated playlists of alternative and independent genres. The album quickly gathered over two million views before being taken down for copyright infringement. Two years later, in September 2021, even though the official YouTube upload of *Etazhi* had 2.6 million views (mostly gathered when the unofficial one was taken down), two (new) unlicensed uploads were still very popular, totalling 2.1 million and 1.9 views. The [latter](#) was again 'Harakiri Diat', who now claimed to have obtained official "permission from the artist and label" to use their copyrighted content.

When *Etazhi* gained transnational momentum on YouTube, MD had never played a solo concert in their native Minsk. However, the unofficial YouTube exposure helped the band receive interest from the fashion industry: MD signed a sponsorship with Fred Perry (the band usually [wears](#) black Fred Perry t-shirts and black trousers), while Hugo Boss used their song 'Na dne' (At the Bottom) for their "seventies-inspired" pre-Spring 2020 [campaign](#) on the theme of a 'nostalgic night out'. In addition, their live activity intensified consistently: in the beginning of 2020 the band gave 35 concerts in 21 countries across 37 days (20 of which sold-out, and 9 with venue upgrades). Around the same time—January 2020—MD signed with the US indie label Sacred Bones, which soon reissued their previous albums (originally released by Berlin-based Detriti Records), providing another considerable boost to the band's career. What started as a pirate upload evolved into a world tour: with sold-out North American and Mexican dates scheduled in Spring 2020 under the tagline 'New Wave Sadness Tour' (then played between 2021 and 2022), MD became Belarus' most successful music export of all time.

Even though the grinding halt on live music caused by the coronavirus pandemic forced the band to postpone their live activity, it did not stop their transnational spread: as the music industry moved entirely online, so did fandom. Firstly, popular YouTube post-punk [compilations](#) crowned MD as prime representatives of the new genre of 'Russian Doomer' (a gloomy, dark post-punk with Russian lyrics, sung in a depressed baritone and accompanied by reverbed and chorused guitar, icy keyboards and straight picked bass). These playlists quickly turned into safe spaces in which users, by sharing their experiences of depression, anxiety and displacement in the comment section, enacted cathartic and therapeutic sessions. Secondly, fan communities dedicated to the band appeared on Facebook, often in connection with architecture—particularly Brutalism and Soviet Modernism—which the band has used as integral part to their aesthetics (Davydova 2020). Thirdly, "Molchatdoma" became a Twitter hashtag and an entry on the famous meme repository *knowyourmeme*. In short, Molchat Doma's music was received differently across different social media platforms and gave rise to varied examples

of presumption. Though still inscribable into memetic culture, such cases deserve a study that cannot be included here for reasons of space, as this article is limited to MD’s largest online resonance, namely the viral TikTok videos featuring “Sudno”.

MD’s international breakthrough continued through the dramatic events of the Belarusian uprising of August 2020. The mass protests were ignited by suspected frauds in the presidential elections, which saw Lukashenko extend his uninterrupted twenty-six year streak in power. When the regime brutally repressed the pacific demonstrations, MD took a stance. On 10 August, on their Facebook page, the band posted a picture of the resistance, in which some demonstrators stood defiantly in front of the anti-riot police (Molchat Doma, 2020). A few days later, the group participated in the creation of ‘[For Belarus](#)’, “a musical compilation in support of Belarusian victims of repression and violence”. In an interview with the foreign press, MD expressed dissatisfaction with the current political order in their country by laconically asserting: “it’s fucked up” (Renshaw, 2020). At the same time, the band was aware of the boundaries of what was permitted and what was not in the contemporary Belarusian climate, where 23% of acts of cultural repression in 2020 targeted musicians (*PEN Centre*, 2020). This prudence is reflected in the band’s lyrics, where ambiguity and indirectness are preferred over open contestation. In an interview with the Russian media, MD stated that all they wished to express was contained in the songs, and people could find references to politics if they wanted to (*RBK*, 2021). The same applied to their videos from this period, which, as Lonkin (2021) maintains, are better understood as a call for civil awakening directed at their fellow citizens rather than a head-on confrontation with the government. Yet, regardless of MD’s engagement with their country’s issues, the political events in Belarus were largely underappreciated, or overlooked altogether, in the transnational reception of the band’s music on social media.

This apolitical decontextualization was favoured by processes of memeification and cross-media rewriting of the original text. During the viral wave, “Sudno” featured in a plethora of videos of young TikTokers dancing (or, in slang, ‘vibing’) to the song’s upbeat tempo. The general trends of these [videos](#), which had fewer views than wardrobe challenges, ranged from curiosity about Eastern Europe to irony or romanticization of the Soviet era. Some users used “Sudno” as a soundtrack, criticising such an idealisation of the Soviet or East European ‘way of (low) life’. However, despite the aim to divert the attention onto the problems of the region, political readings of Molchat Doma’s music, as well as politicized mash-ups, did not become a trend. For instance, when a TikToker put “Sudno” in the background of footage describing the violent repression of the Belarusian protests in August 2020, the video obtained only 4,000 likes (Vauchok, Marshall and Nechepurenko, 2020). True, the first viral wave of “Sudno” on TikTok and the Belarusian uprising did not entirely overlap, yet the dramatic events of August 2020 did not generate any noticeable second boosting of MD on the platform (if anything, what became viral in concomitance with the Belarusian uprising was a video of bats dancing to “Sudno” on Facebook and YouTube—see below). Thus, MD’s music on TikTok was decontextualized from politics, and the disregard concerning the reception of the author’s text extended to the social issues of the author’s country.

TikTok and cross-media appropriation

In February 2020, the Belarusian webzine *Piarshak* asked me to comment on the incipient success of Molchat Doma (at that time propelled primarily by YouTube). I said that I had noticed a growth of such cases—post-Soviet post-punk becoming fashionable in the West—but also that this was likely to come at the cost of the music’s memeification and possible devaluation (*Piarshak*, 2020). Little did I know, back then, about the app TikTok.

The Chinese video-sharing social network TikTok was launched in 2017, but its popularity soared in 2020 in conjunction with the coronavirus pandemic, when it became the most downloaded app globally (Geysler, 2021). As of July 2021, TikTok was downloaded 2.6 billion times and had 1.1 billion active users (*ibid.*), placing it at number 7 in the ranking of most-used social media platforms (*Datareportal*, 2021). As of September 2020, a 100 million of them were located in the US (Garcia 2020).

The app allows users to upload videos between 15 and 60 seconds that repeat themselves in a loop. TikTok’s main strength is its interface, which allows users to easily create content combining videos, songs, sounds, images, texts, special effects, emojis, filters, and so on. The app is, in this sense, the digital heaven for mash-up culture. It is also the perfect place for ‘poachers’: apart from creating videos by using songs from the app’s library, the functions ‘duet’ and ‘stitch’ permit to reinterpret and remix previously published videos. TikTok’s ‘for you’ homepage offers users an automatized endless stream of content, tailored according to an algorithm based on their previous searches and watched videos (and not on whom they follow, like Twitter or Instagram, or whom they are friends with, like Facebook). This means that users with a small number of followers can obtain massive exposure if they fall into a viral ‘trend’. The app is considered the new platform where ‘generation z’ talks politics (Zeng and Abidin, 2021), though TikTok’s algorithm favours radicalisation (Weimann and Masri, 2020) and cannot prevent the spread of misinformation (Basch *et al.*, 2021).

A distinctive feature of TikTok is its ‘sound’ section. While the app gives users the opportunity to select a song for the video background across its licensed catalogue, the song itself can become a thread. This means that even if hashtags and content differ, the song can be the unifying trend across videos. The more times the algorithm sees people using a ‘sound’, the more it will propose that ‘sound’ to new viewers, prompting more users to create their own content using the same ‘sound’ (*Ditto Music*, 2021). As of September 2021, TikTok did not yet offer a function for sorting the videos featuring a ‘sound’ in chronological order. As the magazine *Wired* notes: “On TikTok, there is no time” (Matsakis, 2019). The app does pay right holders, and services like Distrokid and Tunecore allow artists to upload their music on the platform. (2) TikTok’s method of royalty payment, as of July 2021, was by each posted video, and not by number of streams, like Spotify (D’Agostino, 2020). (3) This signifies that even if one video goes viral, the artist is paid only one time. TikTok, like Spotify, pays the music right holders, and not the artists directly, thus revenues for TikTok plays vary according to terms set in the distributor’s contract with the platform. A rough estimate suggests that TikTok royalties are around £0.022 per video (D’Agostino, 2020)—for comparison, Spotify’s average seems to be around £0.0032 per stream (*Free Your Music* 2021).

This means that if the same song appears on 100,000 videos, the right holder receives £2,200, but if the same video is played 100,000 times, the right holder receives £0.022.

In some cases, TikTok has had an impact in boosting unsigned musicians’ careers almost overnight. Bussing performer Sophie Fraser, for example, became a TikTok celebrity when someone filmed her covering a song in the streets of Melbourne (Kaye, 2020). Unbeknownst to her, the video of her performance attracted two million views. She then created her own personal TikTok page and was eventually approached by a few major labels (Kaye, 2020). According to TikTok claims, the app has a commitment to breaking new talent, and is the place where 80% of users discover new music, more than on any other platforms (*TikTok Newsroom*, 2021). In August 2021, TikTok UK launched a campaign for the discovery of unsigned artists by putting up placards in several cities across the country. On the placards was a QR code that, once scanned, led users to a pool of unsigned music for their perusal. As stated by the Head of Music Operations for TikTok UK, the app promised musicians the opportunity to go “from bedroom to billboard” (*TikTok Newsroom*, 2021). This, as a rule, is the path that several independent musicians have taken: mostly belonging to Gen-Z, performers who have broken through on TikTok have usually been solo acts playing in their room (Yang, 2021). The mix of digital cost-cutting technology and pandemic isolation, which also accelerated the decline of rock bands (Lynskey, 2021), has made producing music at home, if not the only choice, the most convenient one.

Therefore, as an app at the intersection of commerce, digital technology, mash-up culture, prosumption, self-expression, (chance of) instant fame, and remedies to pandemic anxieties, TikTok was in 2020 the ideal platform for cross-media appropriation, individual creativity and collective escapism. Such attributes have been largely maintained by the app after the pandemic, and the app’s reputation has consolidated despite the appearance of contenders. (4)

Memetic disreading

Let us now detail what happened to Molchat Doma and their song ‘Sudno (Boris Ryzhii)’ (Bedpan – Boris Ryzhii) on TikTok. “Sudno”, which features in the band’s second album *Etazhi*, is based on the lyrics of the Ekaterinburg-based poet Boris Ryzhii (1974-2001). Ryzhii, who is now celebrated in Russia as one of the most important voices of his generation, committed suicide aged 26. His poems deal with loss, pain and the everyday life of Russia’s Ural province in the 1990s, a period characterised by a rise in criminality and poverty, in which the old structures of the Soviet Union had disintegrated but the new ones emerging after the transition to capitalism were not working. ‘Emalirovannoe sudno’ (Enamelled Bedpan), the poem that MD put into music, was written in 1997: (5)

Enamelled bedpan
 Window, nightstand, bed
 Life is hard and uncomfortable
 But it is comfortable to die. (6)

I lie and think: perhaps
 This white sheet here
 Yesterday covered someone
 Who has now gone into the other world. (7)

And the tap drips quietly
 And life, worn-out, like a whore
 Comes out of the fog
 And sees a nightstand, a bed.

And I try to get up
 I want to look her in the eyes
 Look into her eyes and burst into tears
 And never die. (8)

The composition is likely to describe a hospital room, as evidenced by the reference to the bedpan, the white sheet, and someone having lain there the day before. While in bed, presumably with a grave illness or possibly after a suicide attempt, the protagonist of the poem weighs up life and death, seemingly leaning towards the latter. This sense of despair is somehow counterbalanced by the apparition of life itself, though this too is depicted as dilapidated and pitying him (she is scruffy and only looking at the humble furniture, not at him). The protagonist is attracted by this vision and wants to capture life's secret to save himself. On this suspension, the poem ends.

Between April and May 2020, "Sudno", went viral on TikTok, almost two years after its release. It is impossible to determine exactly how the viral effect started (in general, analytical tools for academic TikTok analysis are at the moment scarce), but it seems to have been because of a 'wardrobe challenge': people trying as many clothes as they have, taking a picture of themselves in each outfit, and eventually assemble the pictures into a fast-forwarded movie (Davidson 2020). It is also plausible that some TikTokers had already appreciated the song on YouTube when it became popular there a year before and decided to use it on TikTok. In any case, the Chinese app went beyond any other social media in popularising the Belarusian band: until September 2021, the hashtag #molchatdoma boasted 44.3 million views, the hashtag #молчатдома (in Cyrillic) received 19.6 million views, and 'the sound' 'Судно (Борис Рыжий)' was used for 188,300 videos. (9)

However, the enormous number of views did not correspond with a celebration of the band as the 'author' of the song—quite the opposite. The themes of the videos in the background of which "Sudno" played were various, but almost always unlinked with the song's message, with the gloomy atmosphere of the music, or with Molchat Doma's dark aesthetics in general. Apart from those listed in the introduction, some of the most popular videos (which seem to come from non-Russophone, US-based TikTokers) featured an [eyebrow make-up](#) (posted on 25/5/2020, 808,000 likes), a collection of [eyeglasses](#) (posted on 20/5/2020, 684,000 likes), [room tidying up](#) (27/5/2020, 439,000 likes), [hair dying](#) (14/5/2020, 417,000 likes), and a girl [massaging her feet](#) by walking down the stairs (30/4/2020, 285,000 likes). The main feature of these videos was the individuality of the person making them, and that is where the attention was focused: if memes are created

with awareness of one another, this awareness did not concern the music, but the actions of the TikToker. The original text was now transformed and primarily consisted of the user and their performance, not the song.

At this point, I propose to assemble these textual translations and audio-visual appropriations of a song under the term *memetic disreading*, which, in my view, sums up the type of online music use that TikTok is arguably facilitating. *Memetic disreading* (not *misreading*, as this would imply a reading of the text) is the disregarded use of music favoured by algorithmic trends and performed by prosumers for their own auditorium. It is ironically similar to what Hall (1980) would have called an oppositional reading: the reader rejects the author’s intentions, but this time unknowingly. *Memetic disreading* does not entirely fall into the category of ‘fandom’ proper: the “exceptional readings” (Jenkins 1992) performed by these prosumers are exceptional insofar as they obliterate the musical text, rather than celebrating it. Nonetheless, even if the new product does not carry any trace of the musician’s intentions, to *disread* does not mean ‘to disrespect’. These prosumers are not performing an impolite action against the musician, if we assume their viewpoint. Firstly, they act according to the rules of the hosting platform, which is designed for the substitution of the author with the user, even if this may imply a decentralization of the author to the point of irrelevance. Secondly, they may not know who the author is (and why should they?). Nor does *memetic disreading* have a parodic intent: it is a candid obliviousness to the author and an equally innocent celebration of the self, on which the text is re-centred. *Disreading* is favoured by the mechanisms intrinsic to social media like TikTok, whereby music is only one among several layers of meaning, pressed against the brevity of the video, the urgency of a trend, and one’s own need for attention and validation. In *memetic disreading*, it is not the music that becomes a meme, but the performance of the self.

Undoubtedly, language plays a crucial role in the global misunderstanding of artefacts such as “Sudno”, but this does not affect the primacy of the user either. As Jenkins (1992, p. 290) clarifies, “a poached culture, a nomadic culture, is also a patchwork culture, an impure culture, where much that is taken in remains semidigested and ill-considered”. This concerns language too, as many US Tiktokers may not have known Russian. To this extent, several Russophone users asked in the comment section of the videos whether their non-Russophone counterparts realised what the song was about (some were perplexed or disconcerted about the stark contrast between the cheerful videos and the sad lyrics; others created new ironic memes about the whole situation). Nonetheless, by looking at the comment section of these videos, it again emerged that the centre of the discussion was not the song, but the user’s actions. From appreciation to denigration, and often using emojis and abbreviations, onlookers expressed opinions more about what they saw than what they heard, and the language of the song mattered to a limited extent. But while the content of the lyrics was indeed only comprehensible to Russophones, the gloom conveyed by the dark atmosphere of the arrangement and the spectral vocal melody was accessible to all. This universal, emotional aspect of the song was largely bypassed by TikTok users in favour of the memetic trend. For example, when the *New York Times* asked Kaya Turner, the author of the popular blue armpit hair video, to comment on Molchat Doma, she said that “she had used the song because she had heard it in other clips

on the app, and ‘just thought it was cool’ [...] She hasn’t listened to the band since, she added” (Vauchok, Marshall and Nechepurenko, 2020).

The process of appropriation of “Sudno” by TikTokers around the world extends, or indeed blurs, the limits of what constitutes fandom, as “Sudno”’s adventure in the paradise of the poachers fostered cross-platform contaminations with beneficial effects for the band. On the one hand TikTok’s algorithms of memeification, designed for the prosumer’s imperatives of self-expression, did render the musical text secondary. On the other hand, however, the TikTokers’ memeification of Molchat Doma’s music and obliviousness to its message helped the band’s popularity overspill into other platforms and amplified the band’s fanbase. As Susam-Saraeva argues, even if “translations, adaptations and appropriations have traditionally been subjected to denigration due to their perceived belatedness and derivativeness” (2019: 48, 54), they at times work “in the same way as film adaptations [which] may increase the sales of the novels they are based on”. (10) During its TikTok virality in May 2020, “Sudno” gathered three million streams on Spotify (Kling, 2020), peaking at no. 2 on Spotify’s viral chart worldwide (Amter, 2020) and no. 1 in the US Spotify’s viral chart (Zhang, 2020). As of January 2022, an unofficial [upload](#) of “Sudno” on YouTube received 29 million views, while the band’s official [video](#) for “Sudno” reached 13 million views. (11) All of this suggested a high degree of cross-platform ‘spill’ of virality between social media and streaming services. Moreover, at the reprise of live activity in late 2021 and 2022, the band’s schedule was packed with sold-out concerts in North America, South America and Europe. These developments testify to the existence of a continuum between *disreading*, prosumption and fandom. Perhaps, in the same way in which the distinction between production and consumption has disappeared, so has the difference between fans and ‘users’.

Self-memeification

When “Sudno” went viral, Molchat Doma had never used nor heard of TikTok (Inglis, 2020).(12) A few months later, however, the band’s TikTok account regularly featured ironic memes about “Sudno”. To assess this change, it is helpful to understand Internet memes as ‘events’. An ‘event’, as Žižek (2014) argues, is something whose effect exceeds its causes. Memes are indeed transformative: through their textual reinterpretation and boundariless dissemination they have the power to change the perception of a text at a collective level. Surprisingly or not, this includes also the author’s own perception of that text. Indeed, a significant occurrence observable across MD’s TikTok history was the author’s *self-memeification*, whereby the band became its own textual poacher. In other words, the memeification of audio-visual content performed by prosumers on the internet snowballs onto the original authors, prompting them (the authors) to ‘look back’ at their creation and reassess it. *Self-memeification*, via which authors rewrite their own material, usually in a funny key, is one of the results of such reassessment.

However, the band remains secondary in this process of *self-memeification* as well. While MD publish posts regularly, their TikTok page has not received the same attention as the remakes of their song by other users (as of September 2021,

MD’s own official TikTok profile had a total of 80 videos and 434,000 likes). In total, the band posted 18 memetic videos (roughly one in four during the period surveyed), 11 of which concerned “Sudno”. Interestingly, some of these were reposts of memes created by other users (across various platforms), a further testimony not only to the belated position of the author, but also to cross-platform contamination. Here is a list of some of the “Sudno” memes:

- [Scenes](#) from an old TV show from Chile (25/1/21 – 1,000 likes);
- Re-sharing of a previously posted video (now deleted), depicting three dogs dressed as burglars and seemingly driving away from a robbery (6/1/21 – 1,000 likes);
- An old [video](#) of Soviet soldiers, dancing a Cossack dance (18/12/21 – 2,000 likes);
- A Killer Bean [animation](#) (12/5/2020 – 451 likes);
- A group of guys ‘vibing’ (7/5/20 – 348 likes);
- A [frog](#) hidden in a plastic cup (5/5/20 – 393 likes);
- A group of guys [dancing](#) in a living room (1/5/20 – 365 likes);
- Three kids [dancing](#) (28/4/20 – 461 likes).
- On 26/04/2020 the band posted a [video](#) of a cat ‘vibing’ to “Sudno” (727 likes). The video, however, was posted two days before by the user ‘GOTHICAT’ on [YouTube](#) (where, as of January 2022, it received 60,000 likes and 669,000 views), and 11 days before by the user ‘Fer’ on [Facebook](#), where it hit 40,000 likes and 2.4 million views.
- On 30/04/2020 MD posted a [video](#) of an infant dancing while crying, to which “Sudno” was superimposed (409 likes). This video, too, had been posted on [YouTube](#) by the user ‘rat meat’ more than two months before, and gathered 200,000 likes and 2.3 million views (as of January 2022).
- On 1/9/2020, the band posted a [video](#) of bats dancing to “Sudno” (522 likes). This one, as well, had already become viral elsewhere. Roughly a month before (in concomitance with the Belarusian uprising), a meme-maker by the name of ‘Caio Vita’ had taken a video of hanging bats from somewhere else, flipped it upside down, speeded it up, colour-graded it and added the song. On Facebook, the [video](#) boasted 34 million views and 523,000 shares (it has now been taken down).

Molchat Doma’s aptitude to memes put them on an equal footing with their poachers in terms of intention and showed the author’s versatility in rebranding their own product based on the customer’s feedback. However, as the band’s videos received far less engagement, it also demonstrated the band’s belatedness in relation to the fans and consumers of their music. This ambiguous condition, in which authors are caught between the distortion of their art’s encoded meaning and global resonance, was not only consciously felt by the band, but also, in turn, ambivalently framed. MD elaborated on this especially during interviews, that is, during more formal and self-contained occasions in which the role of the author could be reinstated. Commenting on their TikTok breakthrough, for instance, Kozlov suggested exactly the idea of a trade-off, whereby global fame came at the cost of memeification, misinterpretation, and loss of authorship, but still in an overarchingly productive framework:

It was a positive thing. We got a lot of exposure. But at the same time, judging by the videos people were making, they missed out on the whole idea. The music and rhythm were important, but the meaning was totally lost. It wasn't our song anymore (Kozlov in Inglis, 2020).

For Molchat Doma, therefore, the 'death of the author'—and subsequently the death of the reader—corresponded to the 'birth of the Tiktoker', and repurposed the band's music in ways they could not imagine. One of them is that the band itself was induced to re-produce the consumers' humorous commentaries on a song about human despair, thus participating in its own memeification and in the song's misinterpretation, transformation, or even devaluation. In this process, the leading role of unknowing users was undisputable.

Conclusion

The 'travelling song' does take unpredictable routes, and morphs into various meanings beyond the control and intention of the author, yet with the advent of TikTok it unites with media to which it becomes increasingly subordinate. Such transformations do not always happen because of 'fans' (people with an affective attachment to a cultural product), but also because of prosumers who are 'attached differently' to the original text, by virtue of the *memetic disreading* with which they approach, appropriate and recirculate music. Likewise, as the song itself becomes a meme, it may assume the meme's constitutive anonymity and lose its bonds with the author, turning into a collective—almost folkloristic—product. This loss of authorship (or, perhaps, the presence of a large multitude of authors) ushers the artifact towards the very essence of 'popular', in which culture is shared, used and owned across people and spaces in free, horizontal and non-hierarchical ways (Thompson 2017, 206). The lifespan of this digital folklore, however, is way more limited than traditional, 'analogue' and orally transmitted rhymes, tales, or myths.

Notwithstanding their ephemerality, these mash-up 'imitation publics' (Zulli & Zulli 2022) are useful for people as a coping mechanism against an uncertain future. Across TikTok, the reception and recodification of MD's music spanned multiple points in the spectrum: from a noise in the background of wardrobe challenges, ignoring the author and its message, to memes emphasising the music's upbeat rhythm or the idealisation of Eastern Europe. Whatever the appropriation, though, memes perform a productive escapism. Regardless of the extent to which users overlook the original text, participation in memetic trends may create for them a sense of respite from everyday worries. Taking into account the current global state of affairs, this action may be important for people's mental health.

Similarly, Molchat Doma's TikTok adventure illuminated the interplay that neoliberal and tech-inspired individualism has with collective belonging. Prosumption, as its dynamics suggest, is centred on the self and favoured by technological advancement, but if rewritings of texts are to become popular, they need to mobilize a considerable number of those people 'formerly known as the audience' (Rosen 2006). Thus, prosumption that becomes memetic rests in

collective appreciation and participation, even if the ‘interactive reading’ (Van Leeuwen 2008) of the text may not concern the musical product but the user’s self.

However, while we must appreciate that music does not play the leading role on TikTok because of how the platform is structured, we must also acknowledge that this has consequences for music and how we think of it. Like casual listeners on radio, TikTokers are neither required nor expected to be familiar with the author in order to enjoy a song. Similarly, TikTok ‘sound’ trends may function as yet another channel for music to go mainstream, just as ‘old’ media did in the past. At the same time, the traditional idea of music as a badge of belonging (Hebdige, 1979), and as a reflection and indicator of the listener’s attitudes, taste and style is further disrupted. Appropriating a particular song does not necessarily classify the user as a ‘knowing’ fan (or consumer) of that song. As the song, for copyright reasons, is automatically acknowledged underneath the videos and turns into a trend, it may also become invisible.

In addition, the case of Molchat Doma confirms the complexities of globalisation, with its processes of value decontextualization and disembedding (Bauman 2000), mediatization (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle 2013) and tensions between homogenisation and diversity. On the one hand, MD’s music dissemination defied and even subverted the hegemony of Anglo-American musical products, affirming the influence that the periphery can exercise on the centre thanks to digital technologies and social media. On the other hand, MD’s music was de- and re-contextualized, exoticized, memeified and devoid of the band’s political potential.

Lastly, an afterthought on music consumption as it is encouraged on TikTok. Howard Becker’s (1982) concept of *art worlds* has taught us that the work of art, including a song, cannot be understood in isolation, but as the result of a collective effort involving a wide range of people in addition to the artist. Contributing to the meaning of a song are not only the performers, but also sound-engineers, producers, record label staff, cultural intermediaries (e.g. music journalists and critics), but also, as studies of fandom have revealed, the fans of their music. To this group, we can now add a new category: the *disreaders*. If we base our analysis on such prosumers—namely, if we take into account all those TikTokers who ignore and obscure the artist’s music for their self-expression—the limits of an ‘art world’, or a ‘music world’ (Crossley, 2015), may dissolve even further. It may well be that as our attention reduces and time contracts, the ‘music world’ behind a song expands. This begs the recurrent but no less alarming questions: as prosumption accelerates, what happens to music and its social potential? Is music turning into noise, or simply being reconfigured according to different parameters and values? If we frame TikTok as the supreme cannibalization of music to this date, and as the prime example of what Fisher (2013) called the stuttering GIF of frustrated temporality, what we see is an acceleration concerning cultural (re)production that does not explore the possibilities of ‘friction’ between past and future (Noys, 2015), but, rather, rejoices in the categorical refusal of the future.

Endnotes

1. This is evidenced by the mushrooming of TikTok houses, luxurious mansions purpose to host TikTok celebrities while they create content. The TikTokers accommodation and enviable wages are paid by brands, which are interested in expanding their products' reach to young consumers (Windheim 2021).
2. In addition, TikTok has a commercial music library of 150,000 royalty-free songs, which gives the opportunity to emerging/unsigned artists to circulate their content.
3. Such a method has been confirmed by D'Agostino also in 2023 (by updating the same webpage). Ingham (2022), however, reports that TikTok "licenses music from record companies via individual 'blind check' payments, each of which covers a certain grace period. In these grace periods, TikTok (and its users) can incorporate copyrighted music as much as they please."
4. The app has now been downloaded 3 billion times (Iqbal 2023). Outside of China (where it is called Douyin), TikTok has the largest number of active users in the United States (116 million) (Ceci 2023).
5. These verses take inspiration, in turn, from a renowned poem by the Russian symbolist poet Aleksandr Blok ('Noch', ulitsa, fonar', apteka', written in 1912).
6. These first four lines were by far the most commonly used in the TikTok videos (which are often only 15-second long).
7. These four lines were not included in the Molchat Doma's song.
8. Эмалированное судно, / окошко, тумбочка, кровать, / жить тяжело и неуютно, / зато уютно умирать. / Лежу и думаю: едва ли / вот этой белой простыней / того вчера не укрывали, / кто нынче вышел в мир иной. / И тихо капает из крана. / И жизнь, растрепана, как блядь, / выходит как бы из тумана / и видит: тумбочка, кровать... / И я пытаюсь приподняться, / хочу в глаза ей поглядеть. / Взглянуть в глаза и разрыдаться / и никогда не умереть.
9. However, this huge number, according to the previous estimated statistics, should equal a meagre £4,142 in revenue for Molchat Doma's right holders.
10. Another up-to-date example of songs being popularised through the screen, as well as climbing up to no. 1 in the charts some time after their release, is Kate Bush's 'Running Up That Hill' (1985), which hit no. 1 in the UK charts in 2022, thanks to the TV series Stranger Things.
11. The official video was uploaded by the band on November 2019, but started gathering views only in concomitance with the band's TikTok virality. The official video depicts a person in a small and dim lit room with no windows and furniture. The walls of this room are made of sheets of printed paper and drawings. The protagonist moves around the room, occasionally picking up and throwing away the sheets of paper.
12. An account, however, had already been created, by their record label, Sacred Bones. The first MD's TikTok was posted in December 2019 (to 339 likes), while the second in April 2020, when "Sudno" was already becoming viral on the platform (though this video also has very few likes in comparison – 393).

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