# ‘A Vaguely Erotic Mime’: Mimetic Text vs. Optical Tactility Sabrina Ward-Kimola

TikTok dances assemble various fragments—music, human bodily rhythms, platform infrastructures—towards an imitative end. The imitative body within this assemblage is no novel development; it has moved to the collective rhythms of Saturday night tango and the warehouse rave. Even in a pandemic, Club Quarantine has been a place for bodily togetherness, divided by the margins of a grid.[[1]](#footnote-1) The body desires movement and it desires rhythmic unity. This innate desire to imitate is central to the TikTok body’s forward momentum, its platformed desire. A jittering scion of recorded mimetic short videos, the TikTok dance presents bodily unity bounded within platform protocols. Take, for example, the infamous TikTok translation of Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion’s choreography from their ‘Wet Ass Pussy (WAP)’ music video: the first line, ‘from the top/make it drop’ is accompanied with air splits/low squat, followed by the widely censored ‘that’s some wet ass pussy’ on cue with rhythmic twerking supported by outstretched limbs. Within a month of WAP’s release, 200,000 TikTok users had posted a video of themselves performing the same routine.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Despite its antecedents, the TikTok dance’s particular assembly of cultural phenomena is both uncanny and novel. While it is simply a dance that can be learned virtually, it is also a massively-propagated and circulated media object: a ‘vaguely erotic’[[3]](#footnote-3) form that expands outwards at staggering scale from a central node, or ‘original’ video posted by TikTok celebrities like @addison.re or @charlidamelio. While they appear to take on processes familiar to memetic logics (i.e. they are widely propagated and shared on and across platforms), TikTok dances maintain their form without transmutation, seemingly impermeable to the trolls, deep friers and various third-party remixers that have historically characterized imageboard meme culture.[[4]](#footnote-4) As a kinetic, mimetic and viralobject that resists evolution, the TikTok dance is part participatory internet culture part hypodermic needle: although it *looks* very much like a meme, it doesn’t *act* like one. While it circulates at scale, as a distinct video file, it resists reuptake and remixing. In light of these tensions, I read TikTok dances through a critical lens of mimesis. I contextualize this within the conditions through which TikTok replicates sameness in a way that extinguishes the possibility for variation embedded in memetics as normally understood.

As distinct from Shifman’s definition of memes as ‘units that propagate *gradually* through interpersonal contact’,[[5]](#footnote-5) the TikTok dance functions less as the networked creativity of memetic publics and more as what Zulli and Zulli call ‘imitation publics.’[[6]](#footnote-6) To draw out what in TikTok’s mimesis nullifies this memetic logic, I turn to Walter Benjamin’s concept of the mimetic faculty, loosely defined as the process through which one reverses perspective through an imitation of the Other. Central to the mimetic faculty is imitation as an undetermined and continual becoming that can only aspire towards, but never fully meet the object of imitation. I conclude with a discussion of the “phenomena of dance as something inherently bound to the social”[[7]](#footnote-7) and reorient the significance of the TikTok dance as a cultural form worthy of further analysis.   
  
In ‘Extending the Internet meme: Conceptualizing technological mimesis and imitation publics on the TikTok platform’, Diana and David James Zulli argue that TikTok’s algorithm (the ‘For You’page), organization procedures and user-oriented video tools extend the internet meme to the level of platform infrastructure.[[8]](#footnote-8) Using Light et al.’s walkthrough method, the authors point to the way that the sign-up page, logics of categorization (i.e. dance videos organized around a single song), and user norms such as reactive and narrative imitation, coalesce to produce so-called ‘imitation publics’.[[9]](#footnote-9) Defined as ‘a collection of people whose digital connectivity is constituted through the shared ritual of content imitation and replication’, imitation publicstake form through mimetic processes that TikTok encourages: the habitual imitation of bodies constituted by and through TikTok’s protocols.[[10]](#footnote-10) Zulli & Zulli point to TikTok’s entire machinery as a mimetic text: the platform governs through a series of technical arrangements that condition habitual regimes of user production. Mimetics thus becomes enshrined in the avenues of possible action by directing the potential unfolding of resulting media objects.[[11]](#footnote-11) This mimetic logic also extends beyond the TikTok platform, as the easily accessible share buttons allow the video to overflow onto other platforms while still maintaining its shape. After all, how does one edit a video once it has already been packaged and compressed into a shareable file size on WhatsApp, Instagram, or to the lucky recipient of a text message?[[12]](#footnote-12) The *public* of an imitation public expands into the domain of adjacent platforms through the very infrastructures that both enclose and open the viewing and sharing of content in particular ways. There is no reuptake, no mixing; inscribed with a watermark, the mimetic TikTok is maintained as an impermeable copy both in form and potential bodily uptake. Given the relative novelty of TikTok as an object of scholarly gaze, Diana and David James Zulli’s analysis provides a valuable departure point from which to think about the burgeoning role of TikTok in online cultural spaces. Their analysis also presents an opportunity for further teasing of a loose distinction between mimetic and memetic, which elides their mutual constitution. Simply put, mimesis is the mediated imitation of phenomena (or the Other); it is an interpretation of nature through the tools that enable the production of art and culture. Because the imitation of forms beyond our grasp can never be fully achieved, to render it is to create something new. Consequently, there is the evolution of forms that constitute the flows of cultural unfolding – for our purposes here, this is the meme.

As the clock struck 2013, Limor Shifman emerged from the ninth circle with foreknowledge of memetics to come: firstly, it is a unit of cultural information that eventually scales into a macro-level social phenomenon; secondly, it is a unit of cultural information that is repackaged through mimicry and remix; finally, it is a unit of cultural information that competes for attention.[[13]](#footnote-13) Together, Shifman attributes these coalescing processes to memetic motion. TikTok enables the seamless circulation of content at scale through a logic of organization that manifests as the grouping of content based on the sound or song included in the video. Zulli & Zulli also point to how the logic of competition is embedded within these sound/song tags, with the most popular videos sorted at the top of the page.[[14]](#footnote-14) It is this exact infrastructural influence Zulli and Zulli identify that makes TikTok videos something alike but not identical to the meme: TikTok deviates from Shifman’s second criteria through these pre-articulated channels of remixing. A privilege revoked from a potential memetic public, the act of remixing has already been determined by the platform. This predetermination is reinforced both by the conditions within which one can create content (a fixed suite of video editing tools), and habitual regimes of TikTok’s userbase who yearn for visibility (often manifesting in the aesthetic *du jour*), in addition to the spectral algorithm of the ‘For You’page. It is because of these predetermined streams of mimetic output that Zulli & Zulli describe TikTok as a mimetic text, in and of itself.



Fig. 1. Stills of pop musician Roséperforming the infamous WAP choreography. KpopPostEditor, *Cardi B Reacts to BLACKPINK Rosé WAP Dance Challenge on TikTok,* 2021, video stills, KpopPost, https://www.kpoppost.com/blackpink-rose-wap-dance-challenge-tiktok-cardi-b/

To conceive of TikTok as a mimetic text complicates the role that mimesis has traditionally played in the continual unfolding of memetics. Originating from a central source or node that has maintained virality because of its position in the sound/song tag (i.e. the most popular WAP TikTok dance), the cascade of subsequent TikTok dances resemble cultural processes somewhere between mass communication, characterized by a single broadcast, and participatory internet culture as a model of culture that ‘sees the public not as simply consumers of preconstructed messages but as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined’.[[15]](#footnote-15) Units of popular culture (i.e. Addison Rae’s WAP dance) are widely imitated, but not for long; TikTok’s infrastructural conditioning of mimetic possibilities restricts the imitation public from going beyond a threshold of similarity. While imitation publics are built upon the production of new content, there are no new forms: they are but an echo originating from a central source, or ideal image. The TikTok dance shines bright and fades quickly. WAP is already ancient history.

As the mimetic text of TikTok makes clear, mimetics are at once a process and a representation. TikTok mimesis exploits an assemblage of working pieces (algorithm, organization, user norms) to produce an aesthetic output that echoes a central ideal image as given *by* TikTok’s algorithmic production of culture – the top three WAP videos on the sound/song page. The novelty of TikTok lies in the automation of the mimetic process formerly taken up (to varying extents) by online users.

To reveal this processual distinction, I turn to Walter Benjamin’s mimetic faculty. It can be described as: miming, or the mirroring of representation through a likeness; imitation; the inspiration to proceed in like-kind; and replication, to produce a material copy.11 Benjamin’s interest in the mimetic faculty centered around the desire and capacity for humans to ‘become and behave like something else’[[16]](#footnote-16). Benjamin scholar Michael Taussig expands on this definition and presents mimesis as ‘the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other’[[17]](#footnote-17). This capacity is contingent upon sensuous probing, as a copying or imitating something requires a ‘palpable, sensuous, connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived’.[[18]](#footnote-18) Benjamin even goes so far as to describe the mimetic faculty as ‘the gift of seeing resemblances’.[[19]](#footnote-19) The key point here is that the desire to imitate and the ‘gift’ of the capacity to sense resemblances produce an enactment of similarity, or mimesis. Because the human cannot *be* something else, they can only articulate similarity through the tools at their disposal (i.e. the paintbrush, the alphabet, a flute, vocal chords, the body). Through these mediated enactments, the subject aspires to *become* something else.

In *Doctrine of the Similar,* Benjamin writes that ‘neither the mimetic forces nor their objects, i.e., the objects of imitation, have remained the same, unchanged over the course of time’.[[20]](#footnote-20) This underscores phylogenesis as central to memetic behavior. Revealing itself over time, phylogenesis is the iterative mutation of form as a chain of memetic agents render their interpretation of an object. Due to factors that are dependent on context – relations between the object and imitating subject, the tools, the specific quality of the interpretation, to name a few – there will always be a gradual change of form. As is made evident in the evolution of the internet meme, the memetic process at scale dislocates the ‘original’ form (which in our case refers to the first instance of its emergence as a social phenomenon), effectively priming it towards a multiplicity of possible articulations. While the various processes involved in the coagulation of a given form at a moment in time are not visible, they are central features in the potential of that form. For this reason, the curation of our tools of mimetic enactment towards a particular output (exact bodily movements) within a demarcated space (the bounded TikTok video often unwieldly to share) ruptures Benjamin’s mimetic process that would yield an infinite multiplicity of potentials. TikTok’s communicative conditions, or mimetic text, pre-empts form, retaining the TikTok dance as a bounded entity.

Although Benjamin points to the potential for objects (namely modern optical media) to support the mimetic faculty, Taussig extrapolates from Benjamin’s *One Way Street* to suggest the discussion of mimesis begin at the (gestating) body. Describing the ‘womb as mimetic organ par excellence’[[21]](#footnote-21) Taussig points to the relationship of a child to their parent as first one of ‘reproduction as replication’ and further, one of *optical tactility*, with the child yearning to ‘hold the object [that is its parent or other desired form] at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction’[[22]](#footnote-22). From this early age, the gazing, porous ego desires to become that which with they are in relation, a process through which the young child begins subjectivation – the realization of themselves as a subject distinct from the Other. From this moment arises Taussig’s concept of optical tactility, defined as the relationship between vision and imitation of the Other. This concept enables a processual way to think through memetics in the online space, where visuality is a central sensorial contact. Drawing from William James’ description of the self, Lisa Blackman refers to the ‘capacity of bodies to acquire more and more connections to artefacts, techniques and practices’[[23]](#footnote-23) through any means of sensorial contact. As a process that connects the body to a continual flow of ‘outer’ possibilities, optical tactility opens up a method of thinking the body as a process in relation to objects of imitation and media technologies, as opposed to the body as a bounded, sovereign entity.[[24]](#footnote-24) Blackman draws a distinction between bodies in composition, or bodies as always in the making, and the molar body which has been pre-formatted to a teleological end.[[25]](#footnote-25) The body as inscribed within TikTok’s mimetic text pre-figures the body’s articulation towards a definable end, foreclosing any potentiality as informed by an assemblage of interacting agents (objects, practices, techniques, artefacts, and so on). The mimetic process as it unfolds on TikTok is best characterized as fabricating a placeholder for an ‘any [body] whatsoever’[[26]](#footnote-26) that precludes meaningful[[27]](#footnote-27) contact and articulation.

We might be best to conclude by situating the TikTok body within the compositional futures articulated by choreographer-writer duo, Kasia Wolinkska and Frida Sandström. Their collaborative project, entitled The Future Body At Work, points to the ways:

The institutionalization of dance has developed hand in hand with ruling structures. Similar to what is inscribed onto the body at work or in war, through city architecture, and the organization of the nation-state, dance enables control and submission. Yet the very same methods used to control the body can be used for the opposite… Through an ongoing practice of scored and informed dance gatherings, we want to bring attention to how space is distributed and how we constitute it with others. In between words and movements, our social conditioning is put to work. We bring attention to how space is transformed through individual decisions and how listening can precede acting, how contraction gives space for release.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Afbeelding met tekst

Automatisch gegenereerde beschrijvingWolinkska and Sandström see the moving body as a site of potential that can be controlled and exploited as a means to a definitive end. Often in the interests of representation, the ‘reigning body absorbs the body of the ruled’[[29]](#footnote-29) a bodily relationship famously represented on the front cover of Thomas Hobbe’s 1651 text, *The Leviathan.* Rather than a site of relation, enactment and continual becoming, the ruling power facilitates placeholders for the infinitely replaceable, symbolic body. At the same time, the authors posit the body as a terrain of *process* that can possibly be resuscitated as a space where ‘feeling bodies burst beyond their representations’ [[30]](#footnote-30). Lisa Blackman suggests that the processual, dancing body not as ‘isolated, singular, or molar [but] requires a conjoining with others, human and non-human.’[[31]](#footnote-31) While the body in relation to the online space is not completely foreclosed, the architecture of TikTok’s mimetic text attempts to automate the memetic process, historically central to a relational becoming through the Other. Yet this very automation undermines the destabilization of the self-image in this process, reducing it to a tightly controlled development of mere representation. Through the lens of Benjamin’s mimetic optical tactility, we see a margin of slippage between representational and processual memetics that imparts immeasurable effects to the potentialities of future forms. To speak of an imitation public through the optical lens is to speak of the virtualized body as a means to a massively-scalable end in the interests of more and more content.

Fig. 2. The front cover of Thomas Hobbes’s The Leviathan. Wenceslas Hollar or Abraham Bosse, Drawing of frontispiece of Leviathan, 1910, ink drawing on manuscript, 784 x 600 pixels, Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Drawing\_of\_frontispiece\_of\_Leviathan.jpg

While I am skeptical of the ‘revolutionary’ potential of a hypothetically *becoming* body identified by Wolinkska and Sandström, it may be true that cultural innovation, i.e. the embrace of difference, enables an exit from the neoliberal grasp on the tools of our art and culture.[[32]](#footnote-32) To offer a lukewarm conclusion, I now bring your attention to a recent tweet by Spike Magazine’s Deak Kissick, similarly reflecting upon our apparent state of cultural paralysis:

We’re trapped in the world Frederic Jameson foretold, ‘a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum.’ But I know there are ways out.[[33]](#footnote-33)

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11. Ganaele Langlois, *Meaning in the Age of Social Media* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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23. Lisa Blackman, *The Body: The Key Concepts* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2008), 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Blackman, *The Body*, 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Blackman, *The Body*, 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Gilles Deleuze*, Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ganaele Langlois offers a useful way to think through the often-murky concept of meaning: ‘Meanings are what make us fit in, what make us develop certain characteristics and responsibilities and adopt culturally appropriate ways of life. Reversely, of course, finding meaning is also what enables us to formulate alternatives, to redefine the contours of our world and to break down the grid of power. The practice of making meanings is thus complex; it is both individual and collective, in turn a process of empowerment and emancipation and a tool of subjugation’, in Langlois, *Meaning in The Age of Social Media,* 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
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