1 Logics: The Fundamentals of Memetic Participation

The Many Interruptions of Kanye West

On the evening of September 13, 2009, "Imma let you finish" entered the American pop vernacular. It was birthed in a mass media moment, when hip-hop artist Kanye West took the stage at MTV's annual Video Music Awards (VMAs). West may have uttered the phrase, but in the minutes, days, weeks, and years that followed, "Imma let you finish" ceased to be West's alone. The phrase was circulated and transformed by countless cultural participants, in countless contexts through diverse media channels. "Imma let you finish"—and the media moment at its genesis—became a strand of creative play in public conversation. It became a meme.

At the VMAs, West "interrupted" performer Taylor Swift as she received an award for Best Female Video. As Swift began her acceptance speech, West appeared on stage unannounced, telling Swift—and audiences beyond—that the award should have gone to Beyoncé's "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)." "Yo Taylor," West interjected, "I'm really happy for you. … Imma let you finish. … But Beyoncé had one of the best videos *of all time*. One of the *best* videos of all time." West's quick exit, MTV's quick cut to a commercial, and Beyoncé winning Video of the Year later that night weren't enough to keep the moment off sites like Twitter and YouTube, as well as traditional media outlets. As it was cemented in the popular imagination, the media moment spawned imitative mass media moments, as when hip-hop artist Jay-Z jokingly interrupted West at the 2012 BET Awards. Or when West—half jokingly—ran on stage after alternative artist Beck beat Beyoncé for Album of the Year at the 2015 Grammys.

But it wasn't just celebrities who entered the conversation. As awareness of the moment spread, "Imma let you finish" began to pepper

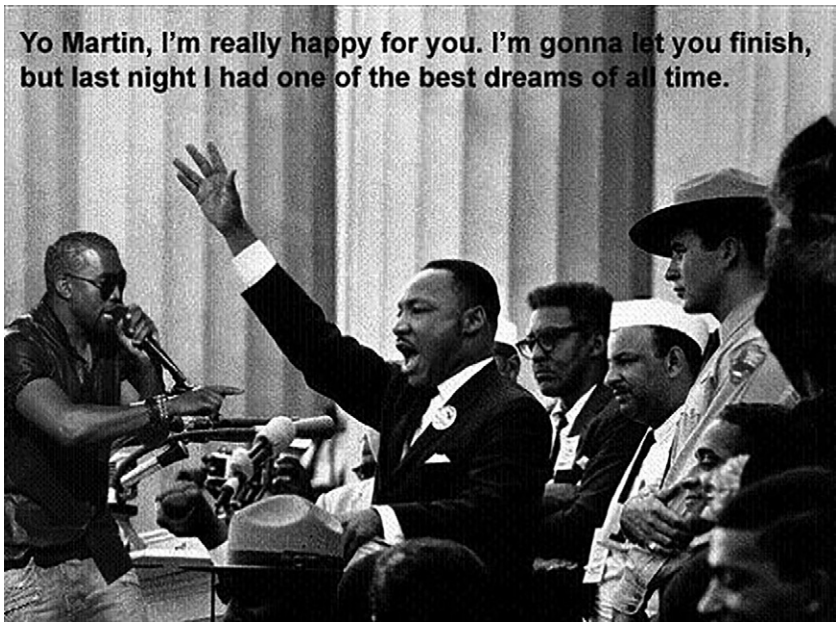

Figure 1.1
Kanye West inserted into a photograph of Martin Luther King Jr. during his famous 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech. A caption connects the address with West's interruption of Taylor Swift at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards. Collected in 2013.

conversations and populate hashtags, as did hyperbolic evaluations about something, anything, being "the *best* of all time. *Of all time*." And collective play with West's interruption wasn't limited only to words; participants on scores of sites created a flurry of visual "Kanye Interrupts" remixes. West was inserted into the 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech given by civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. (figure 1.1), and was used to wreck a multitude of cultural touchstones, disparaging Edward from *Twilight*, Mario from *Super Mario World*, and even the scientific work of Albert Einstein (figure 1.2). I myself applied the moment in an interpersonal context (figure 1.3), crafting an image to congratulate a friend during his presentation about Kanye West at a media studies colloquium (I texted it to him in the middle of his talk). Stitching together multiple strands from a shared premise, each of these images is an intertextual thread in a broader social tapestry. These threads can be vastly public, communally social, or intimately interpersonal. Together, they're the cultural work of public participants who create,

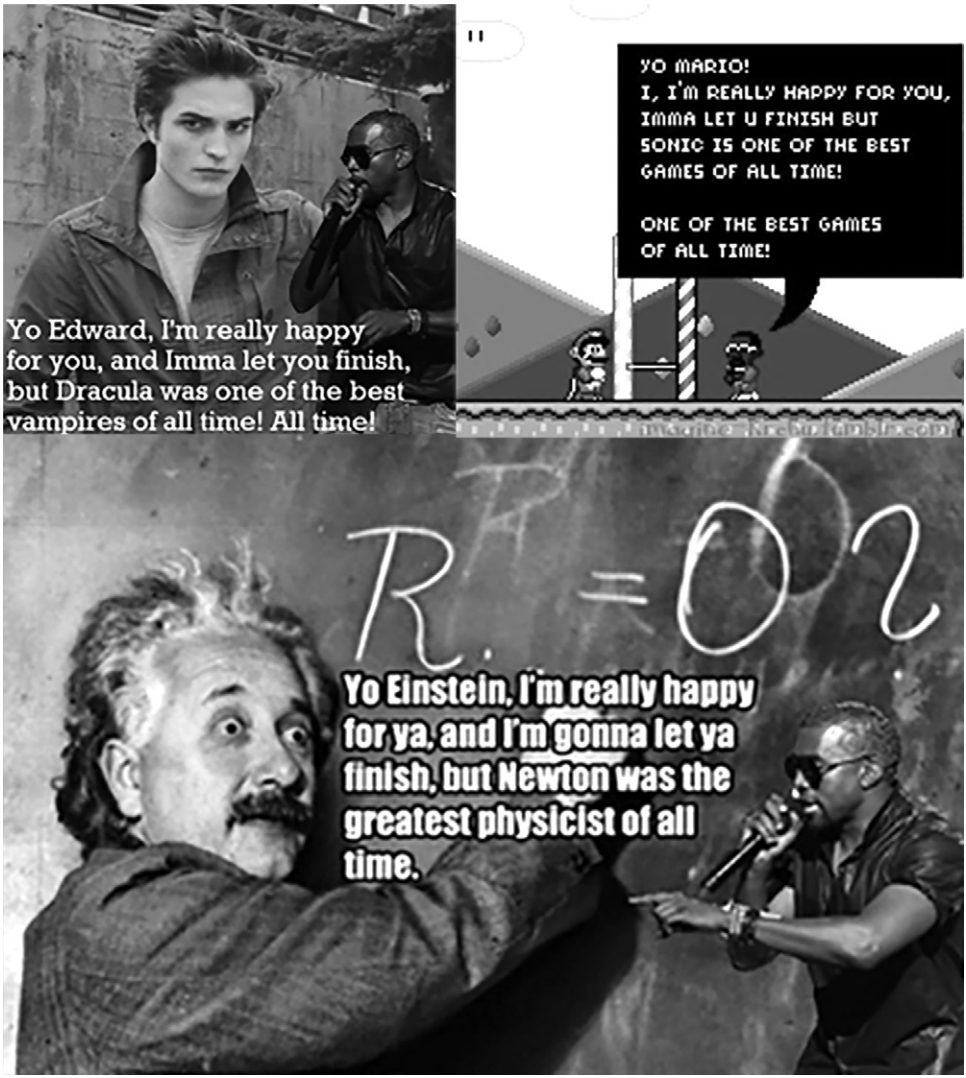

Figure 1.2
Three "Kanye Interrupts" images. Top left: West critiques Edward from the 2008 film *Twilight* about his vampire prowess; top right: West critiques Mario from the 1990 videogame *Super Mario World* on the quality of his game; bottom: West critiques physicist Albert Einstein as he formulates a scientific theory. Collected in 2013.

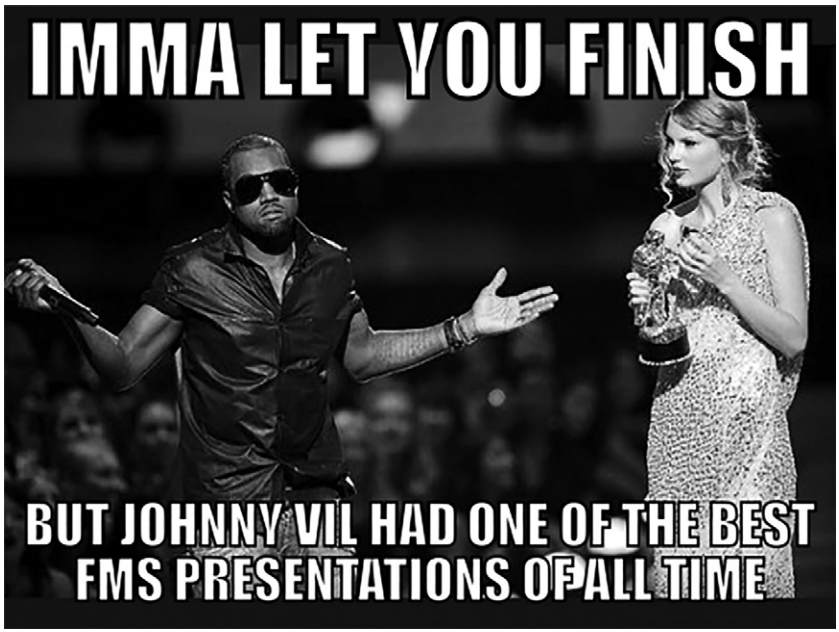

Figure 1.3
An image I created by captioning an Associated Press photo during a colleague's presentation at the 2012 University of Kansas Film and Media Studies Colloquium. John Vilanova ("Johnny Vil") was presenting a paper on the "Kanye Interrupts" moment. Created on January 28, 2012.

circulate, and transform media for their own communicative ends, weaving complex conversations as they go.

Internet memes depend on collective creation, circulation, and transformation. They're multimodal texts that facilitate participation by reappropriation, by balancing a fixed premise with novel expression. In Limor Shifman's definition, internet memes are "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics … which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users" (2014, 41). In their common characteristics, mutual awareness, and transformative circulation, memes are at once universal and particular, familiar and foreign. They're small expressions with big implications.

Internet memes complicate narrow ideas about the singularity of media texts. As the "Kanye Interrupts" meme spread, West and MTV lost

ownership of the moment. Instead, participants on sites like Twitter, YouTube, Reddit, 4chan, and Tumblr have made it their own. The texts produced on these sites are the work of vast collectives, even if they're collectives connected only by shared cultural understanding. The images in figures 1.1 and 1.2—like countless memetic texts—circulated without signature or citation. Finding their creator and site of origin is largely impossible, and arguably inconsequential when considering how they resonate. In this case, I gathered the images from the memetic reference site Know Your Meme in mid 2013, but the participants uploading them to that repository could have found them anywhere; there's certainly no guarantee that they were uploading their own creations.[1] But both creation and sharing can be expressive acts. As audiences have mashed West up with Darth Vader, royal weddings, and YouTube's famous "Keyboard Cat"—as they've circulated the creations of others—they've demonstrated what Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green (2013) call the "collective" and "connective" work of mediated publics. This public work combines words, images, audio, and video into buzzing, vibrant conversation.

And "Kanye Interrupts" isn't alone. Members of the mediated public consistently punctuate their participation with memetic texts. This vibrant participation is predominant enough that Shifman calls contemporary mediated conversations *hypermemetic*, since "almost every major public event sprouts a stream of memes" (2014, 4). As a memetic moment resonates and spreads, it becomes a new conversational thread in the popular vernacular, one that "permeates many spheres of digital and nondigital expression" (23). In this process, new texts become recognizable strands that are in turn woven into new conversations as participants see fit.

The rest of this chapter will discuss the logics that underlie the hypermemetic media ecology that produces "Kanye Interrupts" and ceaseless other examples. It will first connect memetics as a cultural theory to the media texts that now widely bear its name. *Meme*, from this theoretical lineage, is a term rooted in the work of biologist Richard Dawkins (1976, 1982). In the Dawkinsian sense, *meme* labels units of cultural transmission, but its application to what we call *internet memes* raises critical questions about individual agency in the social spread of information. Having explored this connection, the chapter will then introduce five logics fundamental to memetic participation, building a case for the centrality of multimodality, reappropriation, resonance, collectivism, and spread in participatory media.

(Re)introducing the Meme

Meme is a term coined by Dawkins to describe the flow and flux of culture. Dawkins conceptualized memes as cultural corollaries to genes, deterministic on a social level analogous to genes' biological determinism over individual traits. In *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins begins with the premise that "most of what is unusual about man can be summed up in one word: 'culture'" (1976, 189). For Dawkins, the unusual power of culture demands a theoretical lens consistent with the transference of genetic traits, provided that the same evolutionary laws govern both biology and culture. To that end, Dawkins introduced the term *meme*:

> We need a name for the new replicator, a noun which conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*. "Mimeme" comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like "gene." I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to *meme*. … Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. (192, original emphasis)

In this articulation, memes are cognitive replicators, passing from person to person through social imitation. To Dawkins, they can be "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches" (192). Broad cultural concepts like language, art, technology, and religion are composed of "co-adapted meme complexes" (199), or "memeplexes," woven from a series of more micro-level memes.

Dawkins's conception has a fairly long and controversial history within the biological sciences. More recently, the concept and its controversies have made their way to the social sciences and humanities. During this time—and living up to its definitional characteristics—the term *meme* has also evolved within participatory media collectives. And as it has done so, questions about the utility of using memetics to explain cultural practices have persisted. Despite these questions, the term now seems inextricably tied to many mediated conversations. It's a resilient—if problematic—lens, one that has itself spread well. As David Haig says, "the meme of the 'meme' is a tenacious beast, at least for those minds that are vulnerable to its charms" (2006, 64). The rest of this section will outline the associations made between memetics and mediated participation, and will assess the value of that connection.

From Dawkins to Kanye

One early connection between memetic theory and participatory media comes from Mike Godwin, writing for *Wired* in 1994. Godwin expresses frustration with what he calls "the Nazi comparison meme," a phrase he uses to label the tendency of participants on internet forums to compare other forum participants to Nazis during arguments. In his *Wired* piece, Godwin says his memetic framing of the common argumentative tactic met resistance from other forum participants: "Not everyone saw the comparison to Nazis as a 'meme'—most people on the Net, as elsewhere, had never heard of 'memes' or 'memetics.' But now that we're living in an increasingly information-aware culture, it's time for that to change. And it's time for net.dwellers to make a conscious effort to control the kinds of memes they create or circulate." From early connections like Godwin's, the memetic lens gained traction across participatory media and rose to prominence with the popularization of once esoteric online collectives, like 4chan, Reddit, and Tumblr, among others. Participants on these sites have co-opted the term, stripped it of some of its strongly Dawkinsian connotations, and reintroduced it to broader public discourse. These participatory media collectives have applied the term *meme*—if not always memetic cultural theory—to many of the media texts they create, circulate, and transform.

In the contemporary participatory media ecology, internet memes come in a few forms. In this book, I break them down into a few loose subgenres, all meeting Shifman's (2014) criteria of common characteristics, mutual awareness, and transformative circulation. First are *memetic phrases* like "Imma let you finish," introduced into the pop lexicon by the "Kanye Interrupts" media moment. "We are the 99 Percent"—a 2011 slogan used by Occupy Wall Street protestors to affiliate with the bottom "99 percent" of income earners—is another example. The 2010 "Double Rainbow" YouTube video inspired a memetic phrase as well. In the video, the narrator sees two rainbows in the sky above his home, and asks, awestruck, "What does it *mean*?" Countless others have since mimicked his philosophical wonder by applying the catchphrase, with varying degrees of irony.

Second, *memetic videos* were also remixed out of Kanye's interruption, cross-cutting the moment with political speeches, celebrity funerals, and even other memetic videos. One mashup combines "Kanye Interrupts" with the "Hitler Reacts" meme born from humorously subtitling Adolf

Hitler's monologue in the 2004 film *Der Untergang*. Shifman (2011, 2014) has cataloged these memetic videos across her work. She discusses Psy's 2012 music video "Gangnam Style," which inspired prolific remixing when it became a YouTube hit. She also analyzes memetic replies to Chris Crocker's 2007 YouTube video called "Leave Britney Alone," in which Crocker tearfully asks the public to stop harassing pop star Britney Spears.

Third, when Jay-Z interrupted West at the 2012 BET Awards, and when West repeated his interruption at the 2015 Grammys, they were enacting *memetic performances*, referencing, replicating, and escalating an embodied behavior for collective appreciation. Alas, others have not widely joined in, and no "Kanyeing" trend has taken off. But there are more egalitarian memetic performances. The year 2011 brought to participatory media "Planking" (photos of individuals lying flat in unconventional places as if they were planks of wood) and "Tebowing" (photos of individuals on one knee as if they were praying, in ironic homage to devout Christian football player Tim Tebow).

Last are the prolific *memetic images* shared across participatory media collectives (see figure 1.4). These small pictures are pervasive in mediated public conversation. "Kanye Interrupts" inspired the images in figures 1.1–1.3, but the images in figure 1.4 play with multiple source texts and multiple in-jokes.

Memetic phrases, videos, performances, and images are all intertextual, self-aware, and premised on transformation. However, these categories—like any typology—are not objective, intrinsic, or immovable. Their distinctions are my own invention, tied as best I can to the modes of communication that memetic texts inhabit. Overlaps, of course, abound. "Imma let you finish," for instance, is a linguistic phrase taken from a video moment and then applied to countless image files. For this reason, my emphasis here is on the ways participants memetically make their world through their mediated creations, circulations, and transformations, even as typologies, genres, and individual texts flux and flow. The social practices are what persist, as mediated participation moves from Dawkins to Kanye and to the countless memetic texts and collective moments that will inevitably come next.

A Conceptual Troublemaker

As the previous sections attest, internet memes have a conflicted connection to their namesake from biological anthropology. Shifman (2013) calls

Figure 1.4
Six memetic images. They use annotation and manipulation to reappropriate (left to right, top to bottom) a picture of a cat and a turtle; a scene from a 2011 episode of the show *Breaking Bad*; a Reuters photo of American President Barack Obama; a sloth; a print from the Etsy shop of user "sharpwriter"; and a combination of the 1966 television special *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* with a photo of University of California, Davis, police officer John Pike. Collected between 2010 and 2015.

memes "conceptual troublemakers," citing the ambivalent relationship between shared social practices and Dawkins's (1976) theories on cultural imitation. It's true that *meme* is the *in vivo* term cultural participants began using twenty years ago to describe the texts they were creating, circulating, and transforming. But this fact doesn't itself mandate that memetic theory is the best way to understand internet memes. As a tool for explaining cultural processes, memetics is contested both from within and beyond media studies.

The appeal of memetic theory is its power to explain the spread of vast information bit by bit, through micro circulations and transformations. This is how Godwin (1994) frames the utility of memetics in his discussion of the Nazi comparison meme. As the solution to the problematic Nazi meme, he proposes a "counter-meme." To this end, he introduces what he labels "Godwin's Law" as a callout to the Nazi comparison meme. Godwin's Law states: "As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one." Godwin's point in

this branded callout isn't just to bring attention to the negative communicative trend. Instead, Godwin names the law in order to "seed" a countermeme, which he hopes will begin to populate forum threads right alongside Nazi comparisons. His goal is that whenever a forum participant makes a Nazi comparison, another can immediately reference the memorable shorthand that is Godwin's Law. Through collective awareness and use of his maxim, participants can memetically rebuke Nazi comparisons. Twenty years later, Godwin's Law is still occasionally invoked, perhaps demonstrating that Godwin had the right idea. Of course, it's largely invoked when Nazi comparisons are made, which means it survives tangled up with the idea it was meant to counter.

Despite Godwin's aims, the processes that occur when cultural participants conceptualize shorthand "laws"—or when they intertwine Kanye West and Martin Luther King Jr.—may not be as easy as the "leap from brain to brain" that Dawkins (1976) theorized. Perhaps the most prevalent critique of memetic theory is that it favors a biological or cultural determinism instead of valuing the agency of social actors. This perspective has extended to its use in participatory media, especially in conjunction with "viral marketing." As Shifman explains, the meme metaphor "has been used in a problematic way, conceptualizing people as helpless and passive creatures, susceptible to the domination of meaningless media 'snacks' that infect their minds" (2014, 11). This deterministic perspective implies that there's a formula to unlocking the persuasive power of popular "user-generated content."

To Jenkins, Ford, and Green, the connection is dangerous because "simplified versions of these discussions of 'memes' and 'media viruses' have given the media industries a false sense of security at a time when the old attention economy has been in flux. Such terms promise a pseudoscientific model of audience behavior. The way these terms are now used mystify the way material spreads" (2013, 19). The concern is that framing participatory media as memetic diminishes the human agency essential to collective cultural production. Jenkins, Ford, and Green question the utility of a term that implies to advertisers and marketers that there's a top-down method for "infecting" a population with a transmittable unit of culture. They worry about the "false security" that comes with a reliance on a deterministic metaphor.

In Dawkins's (1976) original conception, memes are indeed strongly deterministic, since he conceives of memes as "replicators" acting on passive recipients. When tunes, ideas, catchphrases, and religious systems are passed from one person to another, individual choice is barely worth noting. Instead, Dawkins refers to memes as "self-copying" and "self-perpetuating" as they propagate. This is the lens Godwin (1994) applies to forum participation, even as he admonishes readers to "take control" of the memes they spread. "A meme, of course," Godwin says, "is an idea that functions in a mind the same way a gene or virus functions in the body. And an infectious idea (call it a 'viral meme') may leap from mind to mind, much as viruses leap from body to body." And as recently as 2013, Dawkins doubled down on his determinism when asked by *Wired* how he felt about the application of the term he coined to participatory media. "The meaning is not that far away from the original," Dawkins said. "It's anything that goes viral. In the original introduction to the word *meme* in the last chapter of *The Selfish Gene*, I did actually use the metaphor of a virus. So when anybody talks about something going viral on the Internet, that is exactly what a meme is" (quoted in Solon 2013). Robert Aunger (2000) points out that this sort of "meme as germ" metaphor tends to cast memes as deterministic entities that latch on to hosts and spread without the awareness of those hosts. The agency of individual actors to respond to and influence cultural transmissions is missing from these conceptualizations.

This critique of memetics is well taken. However, *meme*—both as a cultural concept and as a genre of mediated communication—can be applied with enough nuance to still hold theoretical value. Based on the vast creative expression evident in memetic participation, it's an oversimplification to deterministically frame memetics. Rather, memetics can acknowledge the autonomous decisions of social agents while also appreciating how those decisions compound into collective significance through creation, circulation, and transformation. To this point, Shifman sees internet memes as "(post)modern folklore, in which shared norms and values are constructed through artifacts such as Photoshopped images or urban legends" (2014, 15). This framing may be less appealing to marketers and advertisers, but the ambiguity comes with nuance. Memetics doesn't have to end with Dawkins's 1976 conceptualization, or even his 2013 one. An acceptance of parts of the memetic lens doesn't have to mean a wholesale acceptance of determinism. Instead of implying passivity, this understanding

acknowledges that every massive internet meme and every singular memetic text is the result of individual decisions intertwining into collective practice.

Through this lens, even the perhaps more problematic concept of *virality* becomes more nuanced. Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley (2013) do extensive work in *Going Viral* to shade their titular term. Along with issues of "speed" and "spread," they emphasize the importance of the "human and social" dimensions of viral media. They argue that thinking about virality as a "strategy" is dubious, and instead frame the concept as a lens for understanding the collective flow of information. Virality, to them, is characterized by the social sharing of a media text, its sharp acceleration into popularity, and its subsequent substantial reach in terms of both numbers and social networks.

The memetic metaphor isn't a given for participatory media, and conversations about its utility are worth having. However, the gradual propagation from the individual to the collective, the imitation and transformation during this propagation, and the competition and selection that guide the process are all inherent to memetics, and all a part of how internet memes are shared. And the memetic lens can help us understand that sharing, even as we appreciate the social dimensions inherent to it. Whitney Phillips (2013), mounting a "defense of memes" in an online essay supplement to Jenkins, Ford, and Green's (2013) book, argues that "memes spread—that is, they are actively engaged and/or remixed into existence—because something about a given image or phrase or video or whatever lines up with an already-established set of linguistic and cultural norms." In Phillips's conception, individual expression and collective precedent intertwine; a charge of passivity is an outsider's charge—one advanced by marketers and scholars. To the subcultural collectives Phillips analyzes, memetic spread comes from individual and social decisions. Holding on to the utility of memes as modern, mediated folk texts, while acknowledging the difficulty of unlocking an easy formula for the complex processes at their heart, the next section will address the logics fundamental to memetic media.

Fundamental Logics

In order to disentangle the complex relationship between memetics as cultural theory and memetics as media practice, I posit here that a few

Figure 1.5
An image from KanyeWesAnderson.tumblr.com combining a still of young Margot Tenenbaum in Wes Anderson's 2001 film *The Royal Tenenbaums* with lyrics from Kanye West's 2010 song "Power." Posted on August 26, 2012.

lynchpins of participatory media are also fundamentally memetic. I'll establish five fundamental logics evident in the creation, circulation, and transformation of memetic media: multimodality, reappropriation, resonance, collectivism, and spread. These logics are broader and older than memetic media, but memetic media illuminate their emerging interrelations and implementations. These fundamental logics afford individual innovation and variation within shared criteria. Memetic media—whether playful or serious, interpersonal or public, or all of these at once—exhibit specific tendencies across individual cases and genres. To demonstrate, I'll focus on "Kanye Wes Anderson" (for example, figure 1.5), a series of mashup images curated on the tumblog KanyeWesAnderson.tumblr.com.[2] "Kanye Wes Anderson" images make their joke by overlaying Kanye West lyrics on frames from films directed by American filmmaker Wes Anderson. Using "Kanye Wes Anderson" as an explanatory case study, this section will address each fundamental logic in depth.

Multimodality

Internet memes—just like the media landscape they populate—are fundamentally multimodal. There's a difference, argues Carey Jewitt (2004), between communication *media* and communicative *modes*. Media are "technologies of dissemination," such as newspapers, radio, film,