This case study focuses on electronic music producer James Whipple, active under the alias M.E.S.H. Born in Seattle, U.S. in 1985, Whipple grew up in Santa Barbara, California, and later studied in the design and technology department at New School University in New York. In 2009, he moved to Berlin, where he is currently based. Regarding his musical background, he mentioned taking a few lessons in electric bass as a teenager, “without going far.” He started producing electronic music at around the age of 15, and has since developed his producing skills on his own. Music journalist Aimee Cliff summarized his musical development:

After briefly dabbling in pop-punk bass guitar at the age of 13, Whipple moved on to making a mixture of noise, musique concrète and drum ‘n’ bass on Fruity Loops as a teenager, developing a sweeping collage style that can be traced all the way through to his idiosyncratic productions today. (Cliff 2015)

Since 2014, Whipple has supported himself through touring around the world as both a DJ and live performer. He is closely connected to electronic music scenes in Berlin, and co-founded the Janus collective, which organizes a regular club night (currently...
Whipple’s tracks explore the possibilities of electronic music on various levels. His compositions maneuver between spacious sound textures and sharp and complex rhythms not bound to a fixed rhythmic grid. His sound aesthetics are shaped by synthesized sounds, but he also regularly uses external sampling material. Whipple’s sound is sometimes described as IDM (intelligent dance music)—a (rather elitist) label used in the 1990s to refer to a range of genres and sounds that were not primarily club-oriented—or as “IDM 2.0” (Twells 2017).

Whipple lives in the attic of an apartment building between Berlin Kreuzberg and Neukölln. This is where he has set up his home studio and where he has produced most of his tracks, including “Methy Imbiß.”2 Our only in-person interview took place at his workstation in his bedroom; some of his gear was installed in a further room. When we met, in January 2018, he complained about the acoustic situation in his apartment, which he considered “terrible.” He was at that time planning to move into an external studio. Whipple publishes and distributes his releases digitally through all prevalent online platforms and on vinyl.

As a known and visible actor in the field of experimental electronica, my attention was drawn to Whipple’s music while researching potential tracks for this study. At that time, in 2016, he had just released his EP Damaged Merc, so I contacted him to ask about its sampling sources. Through a brief exchange of emails, I became particularly interested in the track “Kritikal & X” from his debut album Piteous Gate (2015). In this track, Whipple processed a YouTube video of an argument between two gamers playing the video game Counter-Strike (Liechti 2017i). After I conducted a longer interview via Skype on the sampling strategy behind this track, Whipple sent an email with some additional information, mentioning that another track from the same LP, “Methy Imbiß,” also featured sampled media material: “One more sample from Piteous Gate I forgot about, in ‘Methy Imbiß’ all of the sweep effects and voices come from a heavily processed sample of a militia firing mortars in Eastern Ukraine.”

This disclosure caused me to shift my focus to this track. It

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2 Moro, featured in Chapter 8, released his second EP Irrelevant (2018) through Janus. It was their seventh release in four years (2014–2018).

3 I will not further discuss the track’s title in my analysis. With “Methy,” Whipple refers to a particular “damaged, post rave” aesthetic that sounds like it has been played on “completely smashed” synthesizers. The German word “Imbiß” refers to particular places: “This just made me think of a lot of the terrible sort of snack shop ‘Imbies’ in Berlin, or even in a lot of Eastern European places that I have been. Just like the late-night place where everyone’s drinking schnapps and gambling. Just the kind of dark, methy energy, like seven in the morning in one of these places.” See also the meaning of “methy” in Urban Dictionary (2019).
caught my interest because the processed sound material is highly political and controversial while also being almost completely concealed: an excellent precondition for a case study. This analysis thus centers on questions such as “why would a producer sample field recordings from a war zone in a concealed way?”

The track was released on the LP *Piteous Gate* on July 15, 2015, as number eight of a total of nine tracks; on the vinyl version it appeared as the fourth track on the B-side. In the last six years, an unofficial upload on YouTube (uploaded on September 5, 2015) has reached 7,135 views and 172 likes. On SoundCloud, another upload by the music magazine *self-titled* has reached 4,121 plays, 97 likes, and 9 reposts in the same period (as of July 2021).

The research and analysis of this case study faced several challenges that I will briefly address here before analyzing the sampling process in detail. Among all of the case studies in this book, this track is the oldest (released in 2015). At the time of my research, Whipple had already begun work on his second album, *Hesaitix* (2018). Consequently, Whipple’s memory of the production process of his previous tracks was diminishing, and he could not answer some of my questions with certainty. Although he shared two Ableton Live versions of the track with me (the album version and a live version), I could make only superficial use of them as a source for analysis due to missing plugins and instruments. Even on the producer’s end, the files had lost their usability over time: “Most of the channels aren’t working anymore,” Whipple told me.

This situation makes clear that if in-depth analysis of electronic popular music wants to tackle production-related issues, it must focus on tracks that are in the process of being made, or at least recently published. Another challenge—once again characteristic of the field, as I will discuss later—was Whipple’s extensive travel for DJ sets around the world, which meant he was unable to answer some of my interview requests. Finally, Whipple’s working process complicated the analysis too. In an online interview he described his workflow:

> So before I even started writing I spent a long time making sounds and collecting samples, messing about with things and saving presets. I made my own huge preset library with all the effects bundled together, just so everything’s ready to go. Because I really, really hate starting with a blank slate, it drives me insane. Often my tracks will all be splintering off from the same project file, I’ll constantly be like “Save As...,” “Save As...,” “Save As...”. I’m copying and pasting the project, and deleting everything, but all the sounds are still there. So the tracks are kind of feeding on themselves. (Whipple in Finlayson 2015)

The project file of the track under examination was labeled “finalthoriumpillthurs-MAY.” The title indicates that the file is based
on the project file of the track “The Black Pill,” which was itself based on the project file of the track “Thorium”—both tracks which appear on *Piteous Gate*. This workflow makes it especially hard to reconstruct the compositional process, as we can never be sure which traces took root in which project. On the other hand, it exemplifies an existing compositional practice, and shows the significance of samples in Whipple’s productions in general.

What follows is an analysis of the sampling of Ukrainian war footage in “Methy Imbiß,” which will show the concealed sampling of highly controversial source material beyond a communicational intent.

**Background: Eastern Ukraine and the War in Donbas**

To contextualize the sampled material, I want to proceed with a few remarks on the history and ethnic composition of Eastern Ukraine, as well as on the events of the military conflict which started in 2014. Throughout its history, Ukraine has been at the mercy of influential powers such as Russia and Poland. Barring a few exceptional periods, it is only since 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet Union that Ukraine has been a sovereign entity. Processes of nation building are therefore still ongoing. Moreover, as Andreas Kappeler (2019, 28) observes, Ukraine has always had a polyethnic and multi-religious character. My focus here lies on the Eastern Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, mostly collectively addressed as the Donets Basin, or “the Donbas.” This region was a center of heavy industry for the late Tsarist empire and during the Soviet period.

Today, according to Kappeler, around 40 percent of the population of the Donbas is ethnically Russian, and 80 to 90 percent are native Russian speakers (357). These numbers are similar or even higher for other Eastern and Southern regions of Ukraine, in contrast to regions in the country’s center, North, and West (Ivanov 2016). While the South and East are traditionally oriented towards Russia, the North and West look towards Europe. These significant differences have led Kataryna Wolczuk to speak of present-day Ukraine as “an amalgam of regions” (Jordan 2015, 114). These statistics also show that, in the case of Ukraine, language is “not necessarily a marker of [ethnic] identity” (115). Although most people in Eastern Ukraine speak Russian, not all of them are ethnically Russian. This will also become clear in the analysis of the source video for this case study.

The large Russian population—after 1991, Ukraine encompassed the largest group of ethnic Russians outside of the Russian
Federation (Bremmer 1994, 262)—and the economic strength of the region are just two factors explaining the significance of Eastern Ukraine to neighboring Russia. In fact, Ukraine and Russia claim the same historical roots, in the medieval Kyivan Rus’. Referring to this shared history, the current president of Russia, Vladimir Putin, has repeatedly emphasized that Ukraine is part of “the Russian world” (Kappeler 2019, 335, own translation), and this formed part of his justification for escalating the conflict during the final phases of this book being written, in early 2022. In summary, Eastern Ukraine is of considerable strategic and ideological significance for Russia. Other major powers, such as the EU and the U.S., also consider the region around the Black Sea to be of great geopolitical importance (Ivanov 2016, 53).

According to Oleh Ivanov, the military events in the Donbas region since 2014 must be seen against this backdrop, although linguistic-ethnic heterogeneity was not their immediate cause (ibid.). Support for the pro-European Euromaidan protests of winter 2013, which emerged in the capital Kyiv, was significantly lower in the East of the country than elsewhere. In fact, in the East, this broad revolutionary movement fueled pro-Russian sympathies and separatist tendencies. After Russia’s annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in March 2014, armed conflicts that were heavily influenced and supported by Russia began to spread in the Donbas. In 2014, the conflict reached several bloody peaks, in particular between May and September. While finishing this book, the conflict was still ongoing, escalating to a new level in early 2022.

Ivanov describes the character of this military conflict using the term “hybrid warfare,” by which he and other scholars refer to the use of the information sphere as an integral tool of war. Although Russia has officially denied its involvement in the conflict, they support pro-Russian fighters with weapons, elite troops, and propaganda campaigns. Kappeler (2019, 371) writes that the conflict has increasingly taken on the character of a Russian-Ukrainian war. However, the actions of the fighting units are often uncoordinated. On the Ukrainian side, a diverse mix of forces are involved, including the army, the National Guard of Ukraine, and various volunteer troops with highly suspect members. Among them is the Donbas Battalion, which is subordinated to the National Guard and, according to Kappeler, harbors right-wing extremists among its volunteers (365). It is volunteers from the Donbas battalion that are featured in the sampling source for James Whipple’s “Methy Imbiß.”
The track processes external media material from a YouTube video. According to the ID3 tag of the sample file and the clip title in the track’s Live project, the source video had the title “Ukraine War 2014 – As the Soldiers of the Battalion ‘Donbass’ Bombs Position,” and was seemingly uploaded by the user “DeathWar.” The clip title in Live further delivers a YouTube code (“aDkv5njFk Ng”), but the corresponding video is no longer accessible online. (“This video is no longer available because the YouTube account associated with this video has been closed.”) Still, I was able to find at least three videos on YouTube that correlate with the audio of the sample and that share the same or similar titles.

All three videos run for 2:05 minutes and were uploaded between August 30 and September 8, 2014. I assume that the video was recorded on a phone camera and uploaded shortly after recording, and that other users then copied and re-uploaded the video. While I cannot be certain, I believe that the documented events actually took place in July or August 2014, during one of the conflict’s offensives. One of the three videos (Mimi 2014) also begins with a two-second musical clip of drums and bass that has no connection with the ensuing video. As this short sound is also part of the sample used by Whipple, I assume that this clip correlates with the version sampled by the producer in “Methy Imbiß.”

The videos begin with images from the battlefield: we see a cardboard sign warning of a mined area (ёэђѠ, “mines” in Russian, 0:04), a bombed apartment building (0:07, 0:16), and empty bullet casings (0:11). A group of soldiers then appears. The title of the video suggests that they are part of the Donbas Battalion, and this seems to be corroborated by the battalion’s emblem, which can be seen both on the left arm of one of the soldiers (1:38) and on a car number plate (2:00). The soldiers then position, load, and fire off mortars. We see roadblocks, and civilians hiding around a stony road sign that reads нфіѐэцѓɫ шѓѕѓч э (“Have a nice trip” in Ukrainian, 0:51). The sign locates the video outside of a village somewhere in the Donbas.

The first video was uploaded on August 30, 2014, by the user Tuna GULL, and had received approximately 252 views by June 2019. By the time of this book’s completion, this video was no longer available as the connected user account had been closed. The second video was uploaded on September 4, 2014, by the user Clashes, and has 54 views (Clashes 2014). The third video was uploaded on September 8, 2014, by the user rhali mimi, and has 24 views (Mimi 2014). View counts are noted as of July 2021.
The video contains snippets of a conversation, both in Ukrainian and Ukrainian-accented Russian. Table 10.1 shows a transcript of the comprehensible parts of the video. The highlighted part was sampled in “Methy Imbiβ.” The conversation concerns the bombardment of the enemy. One mortar seems to hit its target, though we do not know what (or whom) it hits. Towards the end of the video an out-of-shot voice asks, “Who is there now?” This might be the voice of the person filming.
The final piece of dialogue allows me to speculate on the potential documentary character of the video. It appears that the person filming wants to share a particular scene with a broader audience. However, the intentions behind both the recording of the video and its distribution remain unknown. We also do not know how close to the actual frontlines these events occurred, and whether or not they were staged for the recording.

Regarding the processing of the video as sampling material by the producer James Whipple, it is important to contextualize the video as spontaneous, documentary-like footage from the battlefield of the war in Eastern Ukraine in summer 2014. The mixture of languages, the date of upload, and the unit of voluntary fighters featured clearly locate this video in the Donbas.

**Sample Processing**

Whipple sampled one extract from the YouTube video in “Methy Imbiß” (1:09–1:41). The sample features the firing of a mortar and the soldiers celebrating their strike (see conversation transcript and the highlighted parts above). The clip is processed in full only once (sample-clip 1), while a shortened version is repeated twice.

The intentions behind both the recording of the video and its distribution remain unknown.
The second repetition of sample-clip 2 (sample-clip 2'; 1:09–1:25) is one second longer than its precursors. All sample-clips contain the sound of the mortar being launched (1:21–1:25), which is the constitutive acoustic event of the sample, while only sample-clip 1 contains voices.

Figure 10.3 shows the extraction of the sample-clips from the source file. The noise of the mortar is visible as the loudest acoustic event in the excerpt, at around 1:20.

Figure 10.4 shows the structure of the track by focusing on the processing of the sample in question. It only displays the track’s most important elements, meaning many parts are not sufficiently represented. The transcript is structured according to the bars of the Live project file (set in 4/4 time signature). However, as we can see from the timestamps, we cannot take these bars as a time measure. Whipple constantly changes the track’s tempo, meaning it does not adhere to a fixed meter. The transcript only serves as an orientation grid, showing the track’s structure and arrangement.

“Methy Imbiß” follows a three-part structure with an intro and an outro. Each part is introduced by a short breakdown and marked by a new sonic character. Only the breakdown at bar 48 is completely empty; the others (at 96 and 116) still contain a few sounds. The highlighted ambient noise doesn’t represent a single audio track from the Live file, instead combining several sounds. These indications are only approximate, as it is difficult to identify when these sounds are playing and when they are not, especially since they can no longer be precisely traced in the Live file. The track’s rhythmic elements consist of three different patterns (a, b, and c) that loop throughout. One highlighted unit marks the playback of one execution of the respective pattern. Due to the constantly changing tempo, the repetitions of these patterns do not always sound the same. The sign $\times$ indicates the characteristic snare pattern that occurs regularly in four slightly different versions ($\times, \times', \times'', \times'''$). Finally, the transcript shows the arrangement of the war sample. Due to a slight adjustment of the pitch—minus three semitones in its first appearance (bars 49–58)—sample-clip 2 is longer than when it is repeated in bars 81–88.

The fact that the track starts at bar number 37 indicates that the mastered track is an excerpt from the Live file. Before bar 37 and after bar 132 there are further compositional components that are not part of the mastered track.
Figure 10.4: Transcript focusing on processing of the war sample in “Methy Imbiß”

Despite its considerable presence throughout the track, the sample is barely audible due to heavy manipulation. Whipple manipulated a whole range of parameters relating to the sample-clips; I will only describe the most important here. The transcript above, for example, shows how the producer fades the sample-clips in and out. The sound of the mortar taking off thus always appears at full strength, while the beginnings of the clips—and, in the case of sample-clip 1, the ending—are partially hidden. Whipple also applied two effects to the sample-clips: both a flanger effect (Uh-bik-F) and a granular pitch shifter (Uhbik-G) change the pitch and playback time (delay) of the audio signal. As a third measure, the producer constantly changes the tempo of the entire composition, within a range from 60 bpm to 200 bpm:

![Figure 10.5: Automated parameter “Song Tempo” in “Methy Imbiß” (screenshot from Live)](image)

This extended process of manipulation—as well as the layering of a range of rhythmic and atmospheric elements—precludes a clear perception of the sampled material. In the final mixdown of the track, the material is only audible in select, short moments. The sound of the mortar taking off is most audible, as an undefined, flickering noise. In the transcript above, this explosive sound is
highlighted with the symbol ˒. In bars 13 and 59, the sound exceeds the duration of the sample because of the applied delay effect. The symbol ○ finally indicates audible environmental noises and sounds from the sample. While the noises at bars 83 and 108 are only barely audible, the sharp whistle preceding the mortar taking off (at bars 56 and 110), and the human whoop following the apparent strike and some fragments of voices (bars 71 and 73), are quite clearly perceivable. This latter section (bars 67–74) also contains the most prominent appearance of the sample in the track.

Sample Visibility and Reasons for Sampling

(a) Reasons for Sampling

The processing of battlefield sounds in a popular music track inevitably raises critical questions: what is the aim of a producer in processing such controversial sound material? Is there a political message behind it? Is the producer aestheticizing war? Are there ethical boundaries in sampling? What does it say about our society when such sounds become an integral part of popular music? These and more questions highlight the need for a precise analysis of reasons for sampling. My analysis will describe a sampling strategy that allows for a nuanced view on the matter: the sampling of battlefield sounds in “Methy Imbīß” most of all demonstrates the wide field of artistic expression and action that lies between direct political communication on the one hand and naïve aestheticization on the other.

The sampling strategy behind “Methy Imbīß” is affected by all four approaches of the SSR. What stands out at first is the absence of the active perspective in the contextual approach. Instead, the neutral perspective appears to be most important. In my conversations with Whipple and in press interviews, he emphasized his personal interest in particular political events during a particular time period. Most of the tracks on the album Piteous Gate were produced over a short period in winter 2014/15; Whipple said it took him around “three months” to finish them (Finlayson 2015). In retrospect, it is hard to trace the exact period of production for “Methy Imbīß.” The meta tags of the sample file itself list April 4, 2015, as the date of creation, making it likely that Whipple converted the sample from YouTube on that day. However, the producer assumed that he had started work on the track “a few months before.”
What we know with certainty is that Whipple was interested in “following unfolding geopolitical maneuvering” at that time. He was referring especially to the Russian military intervention in Ukraine that started in February 2014. He mentioned that he was “obsessed” with these events, following them through various online channels:

I was heavily online at the moment. During the time I was writing that record, I was very, very online and I felt wrapped up in what was happening. I was following lots of stuff, involving Syria and Ukraine.

I found the sample because I was following various press and propaganda channels on YouTube and LiveLeak and the website www.liveuamap.com. It was possible at a certain point to follow various militias through social media and forums.

An excerpt from an online conversation further specifies Whipple’s interest:

Whipple immersed himself in all angles of the conflict he could find across the media and the internet, from the reporting on Russian television to the videos uploaded from the mobile phones of soldiers on the ground. The experience of being totally immersed in the feed and trying to decode differing points of view left him feeling understandably overloaded.

We’re living in a weird era right now, this second coming of geopolitics. It’s almost like the 19th century. It’s not the
90s, it’s not an ‘end of history’ thing – suddenly we’re back to the world being divided into different factions,” he explains from his home in Berlin. “I feel this kind of moral ambivalence and weirdness in the atmosphere right now. Politically it’s just not enough to demonise one thing before another thing – everything just feels so compromised right now. Something could pop up in your feed that’s this really invigorating great piece of progressive news, then you dig a little deeper and it’s some group that’s trying to undermine something by feeding it into the media. (Whipple in Wilson 2015)

In the last quotation, Whipple was referring to what I previously introduced as “hybrid warfare”: the propaganda and targeted disinformation that plays a crucial role in the military conflict in the Donbas. Whipple is obviously aware that the sampled video might be part of this practice too, and this is precisely what fascinates him: there is more news and information available on a given military conflict—and we should say instantly available—than ever before, but one can never be sure which source the information comes from and what intentions lie behind it.

This sampling strategy exposes a personal practice of the use of media and shows how this everyday practice is connected to the process of musical composition. When asked how he consumes news in general, Whipple emphasized his ambition to develop his own opinion on a given topic from various angles:

I try to avoid following publications / magazines / newspapers / channels directly and just follow specific writers directly on Twitter. If someone seems trustworthy and is good at Twitter, I will follow them and see what they’re interested in. You’re less likely to get a manipulative headline engineered to make you click. I think a lot of political psychosis derives from this practice. Most peoples’ worldview is basically defined by what headlines and images their eyes glossed over, cumulatively over time. I also strategically follow people on several sides of any issue, to either drive myself insane or be less susceptible to propaganda and formulate my own opinion.

The sampling process in “Methy Imbiß” was an outgrowth of this opinion-forming process. Whipple was not at that point actively collecting sampling material towards an artistic goal. He was rather researching a topic that took his interest. In his own words, he was “privately following what was going on in the world, and that seeped into my music eventually.” Moreover, he was “obsessed” by the close perspective he was able to get despite the geographical distance between him, producing music in his apartment in Berlin, and the battlefield in the Donbas. In fact, the war in Eastern Ukraine was one of the first military conflicts that could almost be streamed in real time.
Ukraine was one of the first military conflicts that could almost be streamed in real time.

You can go on YouTube and find videos of volunteer brigades in Ukraine laughing and joking around and stuff. I don’t know, it’s so addictive when you’re following the news and you’re following certain accounts on Twitter or Facebook or something like that. You’re following day-to-day events as they unfold. I find that really addictive, maybe not in a cool way. It doesn’t really relate to the music very much, it’s more like my own personal interests, but I do follow a lot of stuff like that. (Whipple in Finlayson 2015)

I assume that Whipple’s first encounter with the video sampled in “Methy Imbiß” and the moment he selected it as sampling material did not coincide. The events in the video presumably took place between July and August 2014. As Whipple was following instantly generated news content at the time, he might have come across the video soon after its upload. It is likely that he then bookmarked it with no direct intent to sample it. He mentioned that he uses the online social networking community Are.na to save links and images that he finds interesting. Later, when going through his bookmarks, he selected the video once again (the stage of selection is reached for a second time). This would explain the gap between August or September 2014, when he might have watched the video for the first time, and April 2015, when he finally converted it from YouTube and imported it into the project file.

A considerable driving force behind the sampling of the battlefield footage was thus the producer’s personal interest in certain political events. This is a good example of a strategy shaped by the neutral perspective. Whipple confirmed this interpretation:

That sample ended up in this track because during the time that I was writing the album I was just really closely interested in following something. But the original choice of the sample was aesthetic. It wasn’t political but it reflects a sensibility or sort of only something that I was really just actively following and interested in, morally interested in, politically interested in and... it found its way into this sort of aesthetic thing that’s not necessarily any kind of political statement and I think artists should reserve the right to do that.

Here Whipple pointed to other motivations behind this sampling strategy that I will discuss later. First I want to comment on why I do not consider the active perspective relevant to this sampling strategy. As introduced earlier, this perspective encompasses sampling strategies that aim to protest, criticize, or, at least, actively communicate something. There is no obvious communicational intent in Whipple’s sampling strategy; it is thus not about “saying something” (in contrast to the communicational intents I have detected in all other case studies). This will become increasingly
clear when discussing the visibility of the present sampling strategy below. In an interview, Whipple stated that “it’s less that there’s an agenda – it’s a reflection of a mental environment” (Whipple in Wilson 2015). As such, Whipple strictly distinguishes between his own political attitude and his musical productions:

> If I had some kind of ideological agenda I wouldn’t make music – I’m a very political person, but for me this goes into much different territory. I think music is something very different. I think music is just something strange and from a different planet. I’m not trying to take the stand of the apolitical white dude, but for me this record is more of a reflection of a sensibility as opposed to a discrete statement. (Whipple in ibid.)

Hence, the absence of a political agenda in music (i.e. the active intent to communicate) does not mean the absence of “the political” as a whole. Or, conversely, being a political person does not necessarily lead to the overt inclusion of “the political” in an artistic work. There are artistic possibilities in between these poles, one of them represented by the present track. Similar to the case study of Lara Sarkissian, “Methy Imbiß” thus bears the signature of a politically aware artist.

The second contextual category highlighted in the SSR is the personal perspective. By sampling Ukrainian battlefield sounds, Whipple incorporated his personal thoughts and reflections—his environment—into one of his productions, regardless of the material’s controversial potential:

> I’m happy if I can, as an artist, have some sense of my own lived reality whether that’s a political reality or a personal reality. Even if it’s very abstract music.

> So maybe the basic motivation behind this kind of sampling strategy for you is to include what’s around you; to include the context that is around you in your music, but in a very non-obvious way?

> Yes, that’s important to me.

It was meaningful to Whipple to include battlefield sounds from Ukraine in his music. Not meaningful in the sense of a transfer of particular semantic content (i.e. the firing of a mortar by Ukrainian soldiers in a particular context), but in the sense that it referred to his personal thoughts and interests at the time of producing the track (his examination of “geopolitical maneuvering”). He uses the producing technique of sampling to link his musical practice with his “mental environment.” This process is therefore not intended to be obvious to a broader audience, as the discussion of visibility below will further illustrate. Instead, it remains personal.

In this way, the present sampling strategy resembles the practice
of writing diaries. José van Dijck summarizes some of the central features of this longstanding cultural technique: “Paper diaries were meant to fix experience in time, to freeze one’s thoughts and ideas into words (and perhaps illustrated materials) to serve as a reminder of former experience later on in life” (van Dijck 2004). Sampling is used by Whipple to freeze, in music, his thoughts and his experiences of his “own lived reality.” For him, this track might always be connected to the political events of 2014. Finally, Whipple’s sampling strategy should be regarded as part of processes of identity formation—similar to those demonstrated by COOL FOR YOU, Lara Sarkissian, and Moro. The producer’s “own lived reality” processed in the track constitutes what Whipple calls his “inner environment”:

Piteous Gate was a sort of document of a zone between a fraught inner environment, a series of loosely connected political moments, and the unthinkable complex and inhuman networked layers mediating between them. (Whipple in Shape 2016)

In a quotation that appeared previously, Whipple mentioned that “the original choice of the sample was aesthetic.” This suggests that we cannot fully explain the reasons behind this sampling strategy with the contextual approach; the material approach is also significant. This aspect connects to a particular function adopted by sampling in Whipple’s general compositional practice. The producer stressed “the ability in recorded music of a certain high fidelity where you can create or replicate different spaces and transitions between spaces,” confirming that he has “always been interested in that.”

For Whipple, sampling is a tool to add something to his compositions that he cannot access through sound synthesis alone: atmosphere. He wants to spatialize his music instead of working against an empty background—or on a “blank canvas,” as he put it. This practice lies at the border between the contextual and the material. It is difficult to determine whether a particular selection is made because of the material characteristics of the sounds or because of the contextual associations they evoke. When a sampled sound is intended to evoke a particular atmosphere or feeling—such as in the previous case study of the track “Perversas”—we would find ourselves at the contextual end of the scale, and thus in the narrative perspective.

However, Whipple is mostly concerned not with evoking a particular situation, but with the existence of space in general. Here, we are at the material end of the scale. (One could argue that “space” per se is an extra-musical concept and evoking space is thus always a contextual process.) In the present case, the emphasis lies primarily on the specific material nature of the sound and not on
the related extra-musical context. Whipple illustrated this practice with another example:

> You can be working on something very simple and then you have a recording of just the air. Just a really quiet ambience recording and you put that on something simple that you’re doing and it completely situates it.

It is not crucial where this air has been recorded, or that it is air at all. What matters is that, thanks to the sample, the track contains particular frequencies that spatialize the processed sounds. Whipple is aware that this practice could be used in a highly manipulative way:

> I’m always kind of framing things into little scenes and stuff. They’re more removed from that primary impulsive electricity into circuit into amplifier into speaker thing [(pure sound synthesis)]. I’m working with these kinds of recordings. You can just play with the subtleties of hearing because you’re creating different spaces that the listener unconsciously or consciously situates himself in when they’re listening. And then it can be very manipulative or it can be a purely aesthetic thing you know. Like you can add crowd noise to a live recording to make it sound like there’s more people there. Stuff like that can be really subtle. I find that interesting.

Regardless, the sampling of the battlefield sounds in “Methy Imbiß” serves the aim of spatializing Whipple’s composition. This is particularly clear in the short sections where environmental noises or voices from the sample are audible. The impulsive, choppy nature of the track overall depends on the small breaks between the main rhythmic patterns. By filling some of these breaks with environmental sounds, Whipple creates a feeling of space. It is important that not all breaks are filled: the feeling is intensified further when the listener recognizes differences between these breaks. Accordingly, one break is completely silent (bar 48), one features ambient noises only (60), two feature the striking snare sound (96, 116), and six breaks are filled with sounds from the sample (52, 56, 64, 68, 108, 112). It is striking that Whipple has processed the sample at exactly those parts where the rhythmic patterns contain longer and more explicit breaks (pattern b). This strategy supports his aim of using the sample for its spatializing effect. Here, the sound of the mortar taking off is the central acoustic event. The recording equipment assumed to have been used in the source video seems to be crucial as well:

> The sound of the mortar taking off it’s from a phone camera that’s not necessarily pointing at it. Some guy with his phone trying to film the situation, and then they’re just in the middle of the day sending some mortars, and the quality of that kind of terrifying sound, but filtered through the

The sampling of the battlefield sounds serves the aim of spatializing Whipple’s composition.
By heavily manipulating the sample-clips, Whipple liberates the sample from its semantic content, turning a contextually charged battlefield sound into a non-contextual environmental sound.

Whipple uses sampling here as a tool of simulation. This strategy of simulating space requires the sample-clip to be audible, but at the same time not recognizable.

Beyond contextual and material motivations, Whipple also ascribes a procedural function to the technique of sampling in general. In brief, Whipple uses sampling, in his own words, as “a compositional crutch.” Sampling supports (or limits) his compositional process on a structural level. He described this specific use of sampling as follows:

“It’s hard for me to write on silence. I have to have something in the background to write on top of, so there have been situations where maybe I’ll sample something and I’ll kind of have it as a loop and then I start a track on top of that and then I eventually remove that sample. Yeah, it’s definitely like a compositional crutch in a way.”

Whipple here refers to sampling as a hidden practice. In this case, the function of the sample is neither to transfer semantic content to the musical product nor to contribute musical elements to it, but to enable an environment for the successful production of a new composition. It is hard to ascertain whether this strategy of compositional limitation played a role in “Methy Imbiß.” Whipple’s aforementioned habit of starting new tracks on the basis of older project files is certainly evidence for such a practice.

In fact, the Ukrainian war sample might have been the starting point for the track: “I must have started with it [the sample], yeah. It still has the ‘1 AUDIO’ name that must mean that it was the first thing I did.” Here, Whipple is noticing that the audio track featuring the sample is at the top of a list of 26 audio tracks in the Live file, leading him to suggest that the sample served as a basis for the whole composition. I am not entirely sure of this, since Whipple’s memory for these details has become vague in the meantime. One could also suggest that the sample entered the project at a later stage. The sample file’s date of origin (April 4, 2015), and Whipple’s claim that he started the project a couple of months before, seem to support this view.
I will comment on the final highlighted category in the SSR, the accidental approach, only briefly. This sampling strategy contains an aspect of chance if one takes into account the selection of the sampling material. The selected material is arbitrary at least to a certain degree, and there is little evidence that it was important to include exactly this particular video. Whipple recalls: “At the time there were many strange YouTube and LiveLeaks channels with a lot of incidental cell phone footage, not of direct combat but of life out in the field, young men screwing around, machismo.” Accordingly, a lot of other, similar web content from the battlefield in Ukraine could potentially have been selected. The actual selection was thus contingent on YouTube’s algorithms, as well as on what Whipple found while researching the conflict.

(b) Attitude

The question of attitude is especially relevant in this case. Concealed sympathies for one or other of the parties involved in the conflict would considerably affect the evaluation of Whipple’s sampling strategy. The producer said that he struggles to take a clear position on a general level, thus opting for a differentiated view on the matter:

\[\text{You can't really be like “oh I'm on this side.” Because like the [Ukrainian] government is so corrupt. All the new stuff that's happened the last one or two years, like rehabilitating all these old Nazis and all the nationalism and right-wing stuff that's happening on the Ukrainian side is really creepy. But obviously, I had some kind of sympathy for the original situation [before Russia’s annexation of Crimea, note by the author] because it was so clearly a land cut.}\]

Accordingly, we can assume that Whipple has a distanced and critical view on the processed material. Further potential sampling motivations, such as advocacy for a certain group of people or, in the most extreme case, glorifying war can be excluded. When discussing some ethical questions this sampling strategy inevitably raises, Whipple repeatedly articulated a personal discomfort in having processed this sample:

\[\text{Sometimes artists work with charged material and they make sort of pronouncements or statements that are not really their place to make. But as an artist it's important to bring things in and kind of work through it in an aesthetic way and see how it comes out versus some... I would never want to speak for other people or tell other people's stories.}\]

\[\text{Were there, at any point in the production process, ethical questions that you thought about? E.g. can I use war sounds? What if someone was hurt or even killed by the actions taken in the video? If you knew someone was hurt,}\]
would it have changed something?
I didn’t really set out to do it like that (sampling/fetishizing war). I would not use a sample with someone being killed, I don’t like gunshot samples or this kind of obnoxious masculine posturing. I have a hard time with this question because I find these kind of shock tactics for example in a lot of older industrial and noise totally uninteresting. I’m not interested in either a kind of agitprop or edgy nihilistic gestures. (...) I used the sample in a very manipulated form, in a way that did not read clearly as related to warfare. I’ve traveled to Ukraine a few times now and have good friends in the Kyiv scene who have direct experience with what was happening post-Maidan. I would feel embarrassed if I had to say I was sampling war to make a statement or signal edginess (that is instrumentalizing it in a clear semiotic way). I probably should have left the sample out or never mentioned the source. A similar effect could have been achieved by blowing into a microphone.

Some of these doubts regarding his own sampling strategy only surfaced after Whipple had released the track and traveled to Ukraine to perform live and as a DJ. (He had not been there previously.) Having established some relationships in the country, he began to question the way he had treated the material. But these thoughts were not completely new. Fear of aestheticizing war, and discomfort about making a statement from a distant and uninvolved position, made Whipple finally decide to manipulate the sample into obscurity. This shows that the tension between the self and the other plays a role in this sampling strategy, just as it did in others we have examined.

(c) Visibility

Throughout this analysis I have repeatedly referred to the question of visibility. In comparison with the other case studies in this book, this strategy is the most concealed. Accordingly, the master fader in the FOV (number 6) is positioned almost at its lowest point.

The Ukrainian war sample is only barely audible. A casual listener would most likely only detect the voice at 1:09. However, a closer and more focused listen might make it possible to identify all the passages that I have marked in the transcript as audible. Fader 1 is thus positioned at the lower end of the scale, but not at its lowest position. In contrast, the sample is signaled as such. Once the sample is heard, most listeners would probably assume the sampling of environmental sounds and, in the context of the section around 1:09, of course, a voice. The degree of signalization is not consistently high though. The noise of the mortar being launched is not clearly signaled as a sample—it could equally have been synthesized. Accordingly, fader number 2 is positioned in the middle.
Fader number 3 is the only one positioned at its highest point, showing that the sample is clearly referential. For the producer, it refers to a specific geographical and temporal context. The next fader, number 4, is at its lowest position, as the sample is completely obscured and thus not recognizable at all. Finally, the last fader (number 5) is an interesting case. A few hints on the Ukrainian context are made in the communication around the album *Piteous Gate*. The cover of the *This sampling process can be said to be almost fully concealed.*
album, for example, shows a photograph of the destroyed airport of Donetsk, Eastern Ukraine. Moreover, Whipple repeatedly mentioned in public interviews that he was influenced by the events in question and that he had processed material related to them on the album (Finlayson 2015, Shape 2016, Wilson 2015). Nevertheless, I have placed this fader at a low position, since Whipple has never mentioned these references in direct relation to the track, meaning this information has almost no effect on the visibility of the sampling process.

In conclusion, this sampling process can be said to be almost fully concealed. Relating to the three general fields of sampling motives introduced earlier, I identify the fields of content (strong interest in the source context) and, on an acoustic level, inspiration (spatializing sound) as crucial. The field of communication, however, is absent.

**Conclusion and Prospect**

This case study of “Methy Imbiß” by James Whipple (M.E.S.H.) has offered rare insights into the fabric of electronic music. I have described and analyzed a sampling strategy that is, to a great extent, hidden from the listener. The sampling of the sounds of war is motivated by the producer’s deep interest in a specific subject (neutral perspective of the SSR) and the desire to incorporate his “own lived reality” into the musical production (personal perspective). Aspects of sound aesthetics (creating spatiality/atmosphere), the compositional process (sampling as a “compositional crutch”), and chance (accessing a particular video) also played a role. As its main seismographic substance, the sampling strategy behind this track gives an example of how a military conflict can be received and discussed by a popular music producer in the 21st century.

As should be clear, this book is not about demonstrating or unearthing any “real” content or fixed “determinations” in popular music, in the sense of “this track is about something” (as Whipple put it in our conversation). If we have not yet distanced ourselves from such a highly questionable project—can abstract electronic music without lyrics really be about anything at all?—this track is an ideal occasion to reflect on it. It is not my concern to present this track as being about war in general or the Ukrainian conflict in particular, despite the fact that we can find in it traces of this conflict and of a particular temporal context. My aim is rather to interpret and contextualize these traces, and to show what they mean for the act of producing popular music. Whipple himself addressed the issue of music with fixed content by comparing his productions to the artworks of painter and graphic artist Milton Ernest Rauschenberg (1925–2008). Rauschenberg included found objects in his works.
that brought various contexts into them, such as photographs from history, street life, and contemporary history. As Whipple explained, “although these pieces made its way into the painting, it’s not that the painting is about that thing.” Still, the question remains: what does it ultimately mean when Whipple processes battlefield sounds from the war in the Donbas in his track?

In this concluding section, I want to approach this question from two angles. First, I will, once again, emphasize the significance of “the personal” in the sampling strategy under examination. Second, I will briefly argue why I do not consider the track a mere aestheticization of the sounds of war. Finally, as a prospect, I will propose an extended anthropological study that could deepen the insights gained here.

(a) The Significance of “the Personal”

I’ve internalised a lot of this talk about cultural appropriation in music that’s happened more and more over the last couple of years, and I feel like the way out of that conversation is to recognise your own specificity, and build on your own voice. As opposed to having that idea in mind of what you’re going to reference or copy. For me, it’s important to find what’s in the music that’s me. So often, people come along and borrow a sound in a way that’s really thoughtless, and just put their stamp on it, but in an arbitrary way. You don’t really get a sense of them as an artist or as a human. (Whipple in Cliff 2015)

This quotation by Whipple from an online interview also serves as a summary of his approach to sampling: when sampling, he seeks a personal relation to the processed material. But where or what is that “personal” when a U.S. producer living in Berlin samples battlefield sounds from Eastern Ukraine? As this analysis has revealed, it lies in the political context of the period of production. The sample in question ended up in the track first of all because Whipple was interested in—even “obsessed” with—the events in Eastern Ukraine at that time. The military conflict was one of the first that could be followed online in near-real time through live streams, live tickers, and phone videos from the battlefield. This context constituted a “mental environment,” or, in other words, the producer’s “own lived reality.” Here, “the political” in its narrow sense (events and actions resulting from decisions and actions taken by state actors) becomes personal; the distant (events occurring 2,000 kilometers away in the Donbas, without any personal relation to the producer) becomes close. These events, mediated instantly through online channels, become part of the lived reality of everyone who is interested in following them. The personal and the private have become political.
Whipple used the production of electronic music as a vehicle to process these (political) influences and impressions. On a metaphorical level, this track is a commentary on the feeling of constant “data overload” experienced in the internet age. When producing the tracks for his album *Piteous Gate*, Whipple was obsessed by particular web content and struggling to make sense of it: what do I do with all this information? How can I process it? What do I think of it? What is true, and what can be considered propaganda or “fake news” (targeted disinformation spread through the internet)? It is this incomplete opinion-making process that supplied the framework for the production of this track. These questions are not only relevant to the producer as an individual; they have become essential issues in and beyond Western societies in the years preceding this study. The personal has become public.

Last but not least, my analysis has shown that Whipple uses music production in a manner similar to diary writing. Through sampling, Whipple is able to freeze his thoughts about and experiences of a particular moment in time—key functions of the old paper diary (van Dijck 2004).

**(b) Aestheticization of War Sounds?**

The complex ethical discussions that surround the processing of war samples made Whipple doubt his own process in retrospect. The producer mentioned that he “probably should have left the sample out or never mentioned the source.” He pointed out that “a similar effect could have been achieved by blowing into a microphone.” From the perspective of reception, he might be right: no semantic information from the sample’s source context is required in order to perceive the sample. Its supposed function is to create a sound effect and to spatialize the track, an acoustic result which could have been achieved without the use of political material. By manipulating these contextually loaded sounds to the point of obscurity, and thus depriving them of their original context, Whipple basically aestheticizes them.  

However, interpreting this sampling strategy as mere aestheticization would not do justice to the artistic practice under examination. We can imagine a spectrum, at one end of which is pure “aestheticization,” where the source context is irrelevant and only aesthetic judgment matters, while at the other end, a communicational intent clearly refers to particular sources. We would have to situate this strategy in between these two extremes: although we can observe a procedure of aestheticization, the source context remains crucial. A thorough analysis of reasons for sampling, as I
have presented here, is necessary to (even approximately) answer this question. As soon as “content” can be considered one of the general sampling motives, we can no longer speak of a mere aestheticizing practice. This leads to a paradox: in this sampling strategy, semantics are not important, although they remain key.

(c) Prospect: An Extended Study

This analysis offers a few points of departure for potential further studies. First, the examination of alternate versions of the track intended for live contexts. I had access to such a version, made by Whipple after the release of the album *Piteous Gate*. Interestingly, in this version, the Ukrainian war sample was much more audible than on the album track. However, I decided to limit my analysis to the album track for several reasons. First, the war context of the sample is still largely concealed in the live version, meaning my final interpretation of the sampling strategy would not have been much affected. Secondly, the simple existence of the Ableton Live file does not say anything about the actual presentation of the track. An analysis would require information about the context of performance: when and how was the track played, in front of what kind of audience, and mixed with which tracks?

An extended anthropological study could take over at this point. Such a study could tackle the questions previously stated, as well the following: what is the significance of Whipple’s sample archive—his stored bookmark list that he uses as a pool for later sampling? How does it affect his sampling practice, and what mechanisms of selection are at play? To what extent does “Methy Imbiß” represent only an individual instance of the producer’s sampling practice? Or: to what extent can we find further traces of Whipple’s “lived reality” in his other productions?

Finally, I want to address the reasons behind the producer’s participation in this study. In our conversation, Whipple responded with a well formulated answer that points to one of my core interests:

_I appreciated that you were taking a formal/technical interest but not the classic interest in “gear,” synthesis, and these types of things. Making music on a computer is a process with tens of thousands of small decisions to the point where someone making this kind of music, at a certain point, doesn’t even really remember what they are doing (in that sense it is kind of painterly?), in severe contrast to how it is often explained or legitimized post-facto. I liked that you understood that, and that it wasn’t so clearly definable and explainable but wrapped up in both technical and social concerns._ [Note in brackets by the artist.]
Whipple here pointed to the complexity of music-making and neatly summarized my own concern: to develop an analysis of popular music tracks (and their production) in general, and sampling in particular, that considers a broad range of aspects and perspectives.

In this case study, my own research focus and my interviewing approach were obviously an advantage: Whipple was motivated to share his thoughts and experiences with me. This case study shows that a close anthropological approach is essential if one wants to explore hidden sampling strategies. I assume that Whipple would not have shared information about his processing of the war sample in any interview. It was my impression that he first tries to ascertain how a particular issue will be treated before discussing it with an interviewer. This might not be an exceptional insight, and many producers might share this conscientious approach to interview requests. However, it is important to be aware of how such an attitude can affect one’s own research. As with this sampling strategy, the most useful information is sometimes only revealed after considerable investment in fieldwork.

After these in-depth analyses of five tracks, all released between 2015 and 2017, I now want to shift perspective. The next chapter should be understood as an interlude that offers a methodological perspective. It is a report and reflection on two sessions of direct observation of music production. This interlude aims to offer further insights into the culture of sampling, by covering the intimate moment of production.