5. “You Just Got Covered”: YouTube Cover Song Videos as Examples of Para-Adaptation

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Abstract

Cover songs are broadly viewed as adaptations within the context of relevant scholarly debates, yet little has been written about user-made YouTube cover song videos as adaptations. Scholarly work outside adaptation studies mainly describes such videos as derivative or fan-made videos. This chapter revisits the concept of para-adaptation as a first step in understanding how these videos form a multi-layered dialogue with other media forms developed within and around YouTube. User-made YouTube cover song videos do not visually emulate (unless the video falls under the category of parody) the official music video of the song covered, yet the visual settings may also be viewed as adaptations since they borrow familiar elements from other participatory or industry-driven practices. Para-adaptation is a more fitting term to describe such videos: no-budget user-generated content that creatively “disturbs” commercial source products, and may eventually achieve a status that surpasses the “ordinary” expectations of its creator(s). These videos, deliberately or due to a lack of media production competencies and/or space availability other than a bedroom, “fail” to establish a look closer to industry standards. Rather than subtracting from their appeal, these “failures” not only enrich the culture of “ordinary” creativity, but become a source of inspiration for re-energized forms of commercial entertainment.

Key words: Cover; YouTube; adaptation; para-adaptation

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Introduction

In 2012 Walk off the Earth (WOTE), a rock band based in Canada uploaded on YouTube a video of their cover of the hit single “Somebody That I Used to Know” by Gotye. The playful combination of the vocal and musical abilities of the band members and their staging in front of the camera (five musicians playing one guitar) as well as the deadpan performance of one of the members of the band (Mike Taylor, also known as the Beard Guy) made the video go viral within days. The same arrangement was later presented on The Ellen DeGeneres Show. However, the replication of the same arrangement in a TV studio was awkward in many ways. The transference of the WOTE arrangement from the Between two Ferns-like décor of their do-it-ourselves (DIO) cover to the larger stage of the TV show inevitably restricted their otherwise novel and globally celebrated YouTube video to an old school variety-like act.

WOTE’s TV appearance was simply “non-televisual” when compared to the staging – fully utilizing the studio’s spatial and technical possibilities – of other bands appearing on the same show such as the Thirty Seconds to Mars “Do or Die” performance or the adaptation of the official music video of Sia’s “Chandelier.” WOTE’s TV presentation of their YouTube cover remained faithful to the original staging of the musicians’ bodies simply because the “five-musicians-playing-one-guitar” arrangement is the basis of the cover’s success. The less “confident” TV adaptation of the same arrangement reaffirms that the deliberate use of limitations and possibilities featured in WOTE’s no-budget cover video can be “better viewed on YouTube”; in other words, the key characteristics of the video are examples of how YouTube enables a type of creativity, which is not fully prescribed by gatekeepers.

The key reason I am introducing the “five-musicians-one-guitar” video is because it has become a paradigmatic case of a YouTube cover song video; a cover that according to Mosser’s classification of covers has become a

1 Sia talks about the specific performance in an interview she gave to Dazed. Sia states that her “fantasy at the beginning of this process was to marry reality television with Nordic arthouse cinema.” During the performance Sia is positioned on the far back right corner of the TV set (which is a direct reference to the dilapidated apartment in the music video) and sings the song facing her back facing to the camera, while the young dancer Maddie Zeigler, as mini-Sia (wearing the characteristic blond Sia wig), recreates the music video’s choreography. “Sia on taking performance art to the masses: Behind the scenes as the blonde-bobbed artist explains her visionary ‘Chandelier’ video and Ellen performance.” Dazed, accessed October 1, 2015, www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/19982/1/sia-on-taking-performance-art-to-the-masses.

“base” performance, primarily, because of the visual mediation of the musical performance. One of the aims of this article is to focus on the visual form and style of do-it-yourself (DIY) or DIO covers on the same social media platform to highlight certain common characteristics. The specific band also exhibits a process of “evolution” in the making of their DIO music videos uploaded to YouTube and this is something that a number of YouTube users go through in order to attract a larger viewership and potentially come to enjoy the financial benefits of YouTube’s Partner Program.

In addition, the comparison between WOTE’s YouTube and their Ellen DeGeneres performance illustrates that self-made YouTube music videos featuring amateur, unknown, or aspiring recording artists performing familiar songs form a YouTube genre in its own right. Many of these videos are small-scale musical and visual productions, whose appeal depends on elements that innovatively marry limitations, inadequacies, and possibilities as illustrated by WOTE’s YouTube cover. The word “genre” instead of “trend” is already being used to describe such videos. In addition, the publication of guides to YouTube such as Social Media for Musicians: YouTube, which aim to help aspiring musicians to improve the quality of their video presentations as well as build a “brand” that would possibly secure a successful monetization of their cover song videos, further illustrates the fact that such videos need to meet certain criteria. Small-scale does not of course imply an inferior form of the music video genre or of the source performance of the song being covered. Furthermore, some of these self-made videos may also be read as a form of personal expression that combines the intimacy of the home video, the confessional elements of online video diaries or video blogs (also known as vlogs), and performance elements that may be closer to the process of a technical exercise or educational process, rather than an attempt to get noticed by talent producers. YouTube cover song videos predominantly establish a connection with a preexisting commercial product, but at the same time follow YouTube-based communicative patterns and thus form a cultural phenomenon outside industry favored practices and

4 Jean Burgess, “‘All your Chocolate Rain are Belong to Us?’ Viral Video, YouTube and the Dynamics of Participatory Culture.” In Video Vortex Reader: Responses to YouTube, ed. Geert Lovink and Sabine Niederer (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2008), 101–109.
7 See Cayari, “The YouTube Effect.”
closer to processes found in media fandoms. YouTube-based popularity may become a mainstream media reference, which may in turn expand a user’s earning potential, lead to major-label record deals, or generate an invitation to audition for a hit TV talent show such as The Voice.

YouTube cover song videos (as discussed here) should not be confused with the aesthetics and practices specific to fannish vidding or parodies of the official music video of a commercial song. According to Francesca Coppa, “vidding is a form of grassroots filmmaking in which clips from television shows and movies are set to music. The result is called a vid or a songvid [...] [F]annish vidders use music in order to comment on or analyze a set of preexisting visuals, to stage a reading, or occasionally to use the footage to tell new stories.” YouTube cover song videos by contrast are amateur, sometimes sophisticated, video productions featuring an aspiring singer/musician, who performs a version of a preexisting song. The video is usually self-made, and such videos are predominantly shared on YouTube. Coppa argues that a vid “is a visual essay that stages an argument, and thus it is more akin to arts criticism than to traditional music video.” The examples discussed here are musical performances that showcase the vocal abilities and creativity of the performer(s) appearing in the video, tested against a popular commercial product. However, similar to Turk’s work on vids and vidding, YouTube cover song videos also “respond to and repurpose commercial media [...] in ways that the producers and copyright holders did not intend and may not approve.” Furthermore, YouTube cover song videos are examined outside the context of fan studies, and are thus viewed as a DIY process that appropriates amateur or industry-made practices to visually communicate and inexpensively promote a musician.

George Plasketes is one of the few scholars to have published consistently on the topic of covers. In his influential article “Re-flections on the Cover Age: A Collage of Continuous Coverage in Popular Music,” he explores the history and cultural significance of cover songs in popular music. Plasketes has published extensively on this topic, including works such as “Re-flections on the Cover Age: A Collage of Continuous Coverage in Popular Music,” “Like a Version: Cover Songs and the Tribute Trend in Popular Music,” and “Like a Version: Cover Songs and the Tribute Trend in Popular Music.”

9 Ibid.
Age: A Collage of Continuous Coverage in Popular Music," Plasketes notes, “by the early 1990s, cover song momentum as a musical movement was well established. Whether due to an overreaction to a fad, leftover excess from the 1980s, artistic convenience, or the industry’s profit motivation, covers proliferated creatively and commercially, transcending trend status into a surging, re-sounding subgenre.” Plasketes interestingly connects his understanding of cover songs to processes of adaptation:

The process of covering a song is essentially an adaptation, in which much of the value lies in the artists’ interpretation. A song travels a slightly different course than a piece, which evolves from page to stage to screen, whether silver or small. With music, the song undergoes a recontextualization, remaining in the same medium, with the artists translating the material into a particular style.13

Plasketes’ statement that the song undergoes a recontextualization within the same medium is not incorrect as a general observation, but it limits the understanding of the cover song performance to elements specific to music. Burns, Dubuc, and Lafrance’s14 basic model of analyzing covers as adaptations takes into consideration the visual elements of a cover song’s (music) video. The authors acknowledge “the circulation of multiple versions and manipulations of a given popular song or video. Through the medium of the Internet, music consumers are exposed to a seemingly endless stream of song and video versions.”15 This is particularly evident on YouTube, where the image is undoubtedly an intrinsic part of covering processes by non-commercial musicians and offers an interpretative challenge that Plasketes omits from his basic comparison between covering processes and page-to-screen adaptation. YouTube-based cover videos as a form of adaptation entail a twofold process. The musical settings refer to an existing song, but the visual settings refer to or borrow from a set of practices that are a combination of YouTube and music video aesthetics. Both the musical and visual settings may consciously or otherwise refer to or mimic the arrangement of other YouTube videos (not exclusively amateur-made) covering the same song.

12 Plasketes, “Re-flections on the Cover Age” 146.
13 Ibid., 150.
Mosser notes that the term cover song “is used without the recognition that there are many different kinds of ‘covers’.” In order to avoid a narrow definition of what an original song may be, Mosser proposes the term “base song” instead, which may be read as a term that is analogous to the “source text” or “hypotext,” or a term that at first glance wishes to deprioritize values associated with the use of the word “original.” He explains that he uses the term “base” to refer to a song “that, due to its status, popularity, or possibly other reasons, is taken to be paradigmatic, and thus the version to which all other recordings or performances are compared.” The base song is to a certain extent an inclusive term, since a cover song may become itself a base song as in the paradigmatic case of WOTE’s “Somebody That I Used to Know” YouTube cover song video. In other words, Mosser’s working definition of the base song entails the possibility that at a certain moment in the history of a song, which holds the status of the base song, a paradigmatic cover may take the original song’s position as a base song or base song performance due to its popularity or charismatic performance of the covering artist. Ingham uses the term “adaptation displacement” to describe such covers.

Burns et al. introduce the category “versions by fans performing the song” together with other categories that may fall under a broader understanding of cover videos, but they do not offer an elaborate understanding of what this may entail or how it may function as a form of adaptation. The key aim here is to discuss covering processes outside industry-controlled contexts of remaking music and making music videos. Terms such as adaptation displacement or base song as a case of adaptation displacement have been used by the above authors to refer to commercially successful covers, clearly positioning the phenomenon within an adaptation framework. Aligning my own work with this trend of studying covers as adaptations, I propose to revisit the term para-adaptation as a first step in understanding how small-scale YouTube cover videos such as WOTE’s video can also be read as adaptations and not solely as fan versions of popular songs. The success of WOTE’s video has led to a new relationship between the source and the cover song that is not strictly determined by the order of release, or where and how the source song or cover song were released. Para-adaptations are therefore

16 Kurt Mosser, “Cover songs.”
17 Ibid.
user-generated creative contributions that, on the one hand, are associated with a specific industry-created product and, on the other, wish to feature creative talents or responses in a way that is not limited to paratextual or fan video functions. Such user-generated content may eventually achieve the status of “base” content within and around its ordinary context of production.

Stylistic features of YouTube cover songs

Self-made cover song videos on YouTube share key aspects of musical and visual elements. Many performances are acoustic renditions of popular songs or are emulations of a defining cover version of a base song by a popular artist. However, the visual aspects of a cover song video do not usually incorporate elements of the official music video of a base song. The visual elements of such videos mainly follow “norms” that reflect the attractive aspects of YouTube, which according to Michael Strangelove are “dialogue, access to opinions and people, and the sense that we are seeing things that cannot be seen within the regular fare of commercial media.” Self-made YouTube cover song videos may also establish a visual connection to types of industry-driven online music videos such as the video recordings of live radio performances by popular artists covering other artists or singing an acoustic version of one of their own songs (e.g. BBC Radio 1’s Live Lounge segment). These complementary visual offerings of radio performances have been described by Berry as examples of “radio visualization,” which is itself a process developed to meet the challenges of transmedia engagement.

The video recording of live radio performances as a form of music video is not an elaborate or costly audiovisual production, and it is not a new visual experience as official music videos that use a recording studio as their décor existed pre-2000s (The official music video of “We are the World” [1985] is a classic example). The location is the studio of the radio station where the live performance takes place and the video is usually published online after the completion of the radio segment. Bits from the radio interview with the artist and the artist’s preparation moments before the performance may be included in these video segments, but the focus of the video is the live performance. These video segments also form another popular YouTube genre, which may be described as a non-Visually elaborate

21 Strangelove, Watching YouTube, 48.
music video featuring a commercially successful artist and forming part of radio stations’ transmedia storytelling strategies. Interestingly, the visual elements of visualized radio covers are closer to self-made YouTube covers as their medial characteristics adhere to the possibilities and limitations of YouTube and online videos in general. Even though self-made cover videos published on YouTube are not always recorded as live performances, the small-scale production of visualized radio covers and the singing-head shot are the two main characteristics that these music video subgenres share. The small scale and what appears to be a less controlled arrangement (of an artist’s performance) of visualized radio covers invites a viewing of these performances that equally suggests access to an event that, as Strangelove notes,\(^\text{23}\) cannot be seen within the context of large-scale productions or traditional media presentations. Even though the performer is a popular recording artist, the visual informality of the video recording, the acoustic nature of the cover and the usually comfy clothing selection offer a homier atmosphere.

Covering is a process that is closely related to industry practices, but can now originate from outside the industry as a form of “everyday creativity”\(^\text{24}\) at the level of video production, and as a kind of demo at the level of musical talent display. It may be argued, then, that the practice of self-made YouTube cover videos is an evolution of the demo tape. Unedited and non-pre-recorded YouTube cover videos may refer back to the sometimes poor quality of the demo tape or in certain cases the DIO image-making of aspiring artists and bands, but the publication of contemporary demo material by young musicians goes beyond the limited circulation of the demo tape. Unlike music track sharing websites (e.g. SoundCloud and Bandcamp), YouTube covers are multi-media examples, but they may also engage in a kind of transmedia relationship with the aforementioned music track sharing sites. For example, YouTube user Mia Wray, whose music video cover is discussed in the final part of this article, also has a SoundCloud account, where she publishes her covers and original music. Wray lip-syncs to her pre-recorded cover of “No Diggity vs. Thrift Shop,” which she also shares on her SoundCloud account as a music track. Wray covers the base-status acoustic mashup by Ed Sheeran and Passenger, which was performed live by the two artists during a radio show, titled *Fifi and Jules*. Its visualized version was shared on YouTube by a number of users.

\(^{23}\) Strangelove, *Watching YouTube*.

The intention of this study is not to evaluate online videos of song covers in terms of success or failure, departure from or fidelity to an original song, but to take into account the visual aspects of the phenomenon of YouTube cover song videos made by non-professional videographers/non-commercially successful musicians, and to illustrate that the visual elements of these videos also establish a dialogue with existing industry-related and other user-generated practices such as radio visualizations, home videos, and vlogging. This phenomenon could be read as a form of para-adaptation because a great number of these videos are no-budget productions, which surround, or become a defining adaptation of, a commercial source product, and deliberately or due to a lack of media production competencies “fail” to meet the aesthetics or quality of industry standards. Rather than subtracting from their appeal, these “failures” in essence underpin the success of these videos. Therefore, the visual relationship of these cover song videos with the entertainment industry is to a certain extent one of aesthetic difference, which is in no small part the result of recognizable technical and technological limitations nonetheless deemed acceptable by the YouTube community. This difference is sometimes adopted by “lo-fi” commercial entertainment, and YouTube-inspired shows or show segments often become a space where celebrities can themselves perform everyday “fails” or display a different set of talents such as lip-syncing mastery (e.g. Lip Sync Battle).

The covering process by amateur musicians can be described as “parasitic” since YouTube performers feed off the popularity of commercial music videos or performances also hosted on YouTube. Existing research indicates that authorized “music videos are among the most popular content shared on YouTube.” According to a 2012 Nielsen report the teen’s dominant choice for discovering music in the US is YouTube. Liikkanen and Salovaara also note that YouTube is “the most recognized digital music brand.” The same authors write that derivative videos (covers being a subcategory of this broader category proposed by the authors) are “the most heterogeneous of all the primary music video types. These videos were inspired by the

25 See also Edmond’s discussion of the music video of the song “Here We Go Again” (2006) by the group OK Go. Maura Edmond, “Here We Go Again Music Videos after YouTube,” Television & New Media 15.4 (2014): 305–320.
Classic music videos, but they included novel elements in their video, audio, or embedded content." They conclude, “traditional videos receive more views but derivative videos invite more active viewer participation through commenting and voting.” However, amateur-made covering is far from being a deadly threat to the survival of the music industry. The relationship between the phenomenon of amateur YouTube covers and the industry can be more accurately described as mutually symbiotic since mainstream cultural products (e.g. talent shows) also benefit from the platform’s talent discovery possibilities, not to mention YouTube’s licensing deals. It could also be argued that user-generated creativity is no longer a “revolutionary” alternative to commercial channels that promote media content but an “extension of the cultural industries,” which have evolved into platforms that host both amateur and professional creativity. For example, the Starmaker 3.0 App (launched in June 2014) by Starmaker Interactive (a company that has established a partnership with The Voice franchise among other similar partnerships) allows users to make a “music video selfie” and then upload their video to YouTube. The company sells this product using the slogan “Be discovered or discover the next music star.” This example illustrates Schäfer’s understanding of how new business models benefit from the activities of users through implicit participation, “where social interaction and user activities are channeled and controlled by design.” Still, a number of these videos remain explicitly peripheral and sometimes become defining cultural contributions standing in contrast to the kind of videos the Starmaker App seems geared towards – with its offer of backing tracks of mainstream songs and auto-tune possibilities to pre-record a user’s vocal performance.

In order to offer an understanding of the aesthetic differences between YouTube user-generated music videos and industry-related visual forms of musical performances I will return to the comparison between WOTE’s YouTube cover of “Somebody That I Used to Know” and their performance on the Ellen show. The key problem of WOTE’s recreation on television is one of production scale. In Unruly Media Carol Vernallis identifies scale as one of the defining characteristics of YouTube clips. One of her key

29 Liikkanen and Salovaara, “Music on YouTube,” 114.
30 Ibid., 123.
31 Mirko Tobias Schäfer, Bastard Culture!: How User Participation Transforms Cultural Production (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 11.
32 Ibid., 44.
observations is that post-2000s audio-visual culture is influenced by the music video; in order to make this point, she identifies the sonic and visual connections between YouTube videos, digital cinema and music videos. The large-scale audiovisual examples she uses to support her argument are the filmic works of David Fincher, Spike Jonze, and Michel Gondry, who started their filmmaking career as music video directors. Vernallis describes YouTube as the “new digital cinema’s shadowy twin”34 and lists some of the key smaller-scale values (limited length, low resolution, impromptu lighting and design, etc.) of YouTube, which along with their variations are also characteristic of cover song music videos:

YouTube’s aesthetic values include bold graphic design and well-judged scale. This may be related to the medium and its mode of delivery – a clip’s limited length, its level of resolution, and the forms of attention it encourages. Poorly lit small environments shot and uploaded with low resolution may tend toward fuzziness […] YouTube clips must often garner attention in a competitive environment; many that struggle to gain legibility, go bold.35

WOTE’s YouTube video shares some of these small-scale characteristics; an uninterrupted still shot, dressed with non-professional lighting, indoor plants and window shutters acts as a background in order to enhance the boldness and playfulness of their attempt. This conscious, yet successful pairing of self-made elements with the band’s skillful performance led to the popularity of the video, and hence the transposition of this pairing from a small-scale production to a larger-scale context, in this case the set of a mainstream television show, inevitably feels odd. Vernallis observes that “some of the most popular clips’ particularity must be locked in the ways these figures reside exactly where they are within their flat, miniature cubicles.”36 Interestingly, this locking of multi-bodies in front of a still camera has become a kind of trademark arrangement in many of the band’s YouTube videos. WOTE smartly established a dialogue between their YouTube performances and their more polished appearance in the official music video for their song “Red Hands,” which even though it uses a dolly-out/pull-back shot and displays the energetic movement of the musicians amidst an obviously larger-scale set, also includes moments

34 Ibid., 134.
35 Ibid., 135.
36 Ibid.
where the bodies of the five members coexist in the frame in a way that
refers back to their YouTube videos.

Many user-created cover song videos on YouTube share the low-res,
poorly lit and under-decorated DIY characteristics described by Vernallis
in *Unruly Media.* At the level of visual characteristics, these videos
usually do not establish a dialogue with an official music video of a
base song. Instead, they establish a dialogue with a broader “movement”
of online video production, which is often the result of autodidactic
activities to master the process of creating videos; in this case, music
videos that aim to share, express, and display a set of musical skills using
familiar songs.

While many aspiring recording artists upload their performances on
YouTube hoping to be noticed by talent producers of shows such as *The Voice,*
the predominantly self-made video recordings of amateur-made YouTube
performances are evidently contributions to what Plasketes describes as
a diversified and accelerated cover age. These small-scale contributions
also form part of an accelerated and diversified online arena that is shaped
around the core of the commercial music industry, and yet they may become
popular through an adaptation process that is not tightly linked to the
power structures of the music industry. Therefore, the non-involvement
of industry-driven image-making processes is, to a significant extent, the
reason why amateur-made YouTube cover videos are para-adaptations.
These videos exist in an intermediate position. They are neither subcultural
nor entirely monitored by the industry, but they “exploit” the success of
base songs to generate views, as well as utilizing the tools that YouTube
provides to meet the needs of its users such as the Music Insights tool. The
production of these videos is usually characterized by technical and creative
“inadequacies,” yet the “likeable” quality of these videos is precisely the result
of their inadequacies or small-scale settings. In this fashion, they echo the
manner in which other cultural products (e.g. Jeffrey Sconce’s understanding
of paracinema) that differ from mainstream forms of entertainment are
celebrated for their aesthetic “lows.”

Interestingly, not all YouTube cover song videos feature low-grade
qualities. Many user-generated cover song videos try to create the feeling
of a studio setting, or mimic the visual settings of professionally-made

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37 Ibid.
38 Plasketes, “Re-flections on the Cover Age.”
39 Jeffrey Sconce, “Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic
recordings of music videos in a manner similar to the video recordings of live radio performances or artists’ acoustic covers of their own songs, or through the use of spaces such as abandoned indoor spaces, warehouses, or residential garages familiar from professional productions. Many creators of cover song videos invite comments that will help them improve their skills and videos, thus there is also an apprenticeship process, which renders the cover song, and cover song video, as non-professional but still part of a creative growth process that welcomes criticism. The basis of this criticism is often the result of a comparison to the base song. Amateur performers of cover songs also learn from other performers, who upload covers on YouTube. More experienced performers and video makers tend to upload “making of” videos to explain the process of covering or to comment on the dos and don’ts of the same process. For example, YouTube user JonDittertMusic uploaded a video in 2013 titled “How to Make Cover Songs on YouTube” in which he explained the basic process of uploading a cover video to YouTube in the form of a stand-up comedy. His humorous description of some of the steps of the process refers to key visual and sometimes confessional characteristics of amateur-made cover videos: “Step 4 is to set up your camera, anywhere is fine [...] it doesn’t matter [about] the lighting,” “It’s time for crucial Step 5, Apologize. Hey guys I just actually started to learn this song today so forgive me if I make any mistakes” and “Step 7: Upload your video, some cameras will even let you upload straight from your camera to YouTube, which will keep you from feeling bad about skipping that tedious editing part.”

YouTube viewers may follow the channel of an amateur performer, who serially covers mainstream songs, and tend to make requests; some of these followers might even request an original song by their favorite YouTube performer. These practices form a hybrid aesthetic, which combines home video and radio visualization settings; even though covering is associated (unofficially or otherwise) with a source product, the visual and the familiar musical settings usually function as ways to bring to the fore an unknown artist’s personality and musical talent. The covering process in this case is not usually an homage or an attempt to establish a profound dialogic process, but a hook, that is, a way to grab someone’s attention. Furthermore, the title of a popular song as part of the video’s title will possibly help the discoverability of the performer on YouTube. Such forms of talent display are now well established; therefore, it is worth bearing in mind that this hybrid aesthetic may simply be a choice that results from a conscious assessment of the rewards of covering songs on YouTube. Even so, it remains part of a practice that, unlike industry paradigms, can be self-/user-managed.
YouTube cover song videos of “No Diggity” and “Titanium” as para-adaptations

For a closer examination of YouTube cover song videos as para-adaptations, I will discuss music videos created by amateur or unknown musicians covering the songs “No Diggity” by the American R&B group Blackstreet featuring Dr. Dre and Queen Pen and “Titanium” by French DJ and music producer David Guetta, featuring vocals by Australian recording artist Sia, who is also one of the writers of the song. The search “No Diggity cover” on YouTube returns about 1,920,000 results and the search “Titanium cover” returns about 3,920,000 results (29/04/2018). A capella versions of both songs were featured in the film Pitch Perfect,40 and this may have contributed to the popular selection of these songs as cover material for the creation of YouTube cover videos by young musicians. In addition, most of the covers are inspired by acoustic versions or ballad versions of the songs performed by recording artists, e.g. “No Diggity” mashed up with “Thrift Shop” by Ed Sheeran and The Passenger or Chet Faker’s commercially recorded cover of “No Diggity” or Sia’s ballad version of “Titanium.”

The key type of YouTube cover video discussed in this section is described by Burgess as the “virtuosic bedroom musical performance.”41 This mainly refers to the unedited and low image quality type of video that the user JonDittertMusic playfully comments on in his “making of cover songs” video. According to Burgess, “the everydayness of the genre is all the more evident because of its situatedness in the bedroom.”42 Burgess adds that “the bedroom music genre demonstrates how relatively simple uses of video technology (recording straight to camera and uploading without much editing) and highly constrained genres (the musical cover), while not necessarily contributing to the aesthetic advancement of the medium, can invite further participation by establishing clear rules43 for other YouTube users who may want to start covering or advance to the next level of making cover videos. These “rules” are formulated through what Burgess describes as operations of play and learning that also involve the showcasing of talent and in effect the “setting of standards for other players in the game to attain or beat.”44 “Making of” videos such as the one created by JonDittertMusic in the form

40 Moore, Pitch Perfect.
41 Burgess, “All your Chocolate Rain are Belong to Us?”
42 Ibid., 7.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
of parody or J Sharnie’s video tutorial titled “How to Make/Record Cover Songs for YouTube” are examples of videos that aim to communicate a set of acceptable standards in terms of video production and audio production. J Sharnie introduces three levels of YouTube cover song production: Basic, Intermediate, and Advanced. A key musical element of many bedroom music videos that somewhat establishes a closer rapport between the viewers and the performer is that the musicians sing and play an instrument live while a web camera records them (a basic form of a YouTube cover song according to J Sharnie); in this case performers do not lip-synch to their pre-recorded version of the cover or sing to a backing track (elements which are usually met by intermediate and advanced YouTube users).

Sunn St. Claire’s cover video of “Titanium” (published in 2011) is an example that shares the “basic” characteristics of YouTube covers. Sunn introduces herself at the beginning of the video and informs the viewers that this is the first time she will play the guitar instead of the keyboard as in her previous videos. In the description of the video, she notes that this attempt is part of a learning experience and confesses that she sang the wrong lyrics adding a “haha” as a cute way to apologize. Her introduction and the medium-to-close-up framing reflect settings associated with vlogging, “a form whose persistent direct address to the viewer inherently invites feedback.” Sunn’s endearing direct address also echoes the “sweetness” and intimacy which Vernallis nostalgically associates with early professional music videos of the 1980s. Sunn closes her performance with what seems to be a spontaneous shy face that may suggest vulnerability, as she is not in a position to receive an immediate response from her potential online viewers, as she would be in the case of performing live for an audience.

Intimacy, vulnerability, and sweetness are key characteristics of many cover song videos uploaded on YouTube. Burgess and Green note that many user-made music videos “adopt a conversational mode, as artists preface their work with a discussion of the motivations or context of the piece they have written or will perform, respond to suggestions and feedback, often drawing the audience into the intimacy afforded by direct address.” Timid introductory comments prior to a performance, the silences before and after unedited performances, which include the process of pressing the record button, casual appearance, quick glances at the lyrics sheet, and the framing of homely surroundings, are all elements that do not visually

45 Burgess and Green, *YouTube*, 54.
46 Vernallis, *Unruly Media*.
47 Burgess and Green, *YouTube*, 54.
emulate 1980s’ music videos but are nevertheless components that meet the entry level standards of YouTube covering musicians and communicate the exploratory relationship between a musician and their video production tools as well as online audience (whose reaction might not always be friendly).

Radio visualization trends on YouTube channels operated by radio stations and their emulation by YouTube performers are an interesting development, as both recording artists and YouTube performers put their skills to the test and “battle” for online attention. The visual elements of many amateur and independently made online music videos (which are mainly composed of close-up shots of a performer wearing a headset with half of his/her face, off center, covered by the pop filter of the microphone and close-up shots framing hands playing a variety of musical instruments) are closer to the visualized covers published by radio shows such as BBC Radio 1’s Live Lounge. The sound of radio visualization-like YouTube cover videos is usually pre-recorded, as performers tend to create a multitrack audiovisual production. In addition, artists whose music videos are self-made cannot afford/manage a two-camera shoot (which will provide them with a variety of shot sizes and angles to play with in the editing part) if they decide to video record a live performance; hence a pre-recorded sound track allows for a better visual arrangement. Mia Wray's cover of “No Diggity vs. Thrift Shop” is an example of a pre-recorded multi-tracked YouTube cover featuring vocals by herself that emphasizes the arrangement of visual elements, in turn hinting at the non-elaborate characteristics of visualized radio covers or official music videos that often use a recording studio as their visual setting. The opening shot features Wray in a medium-to-close-up shot preparing for her performance. A dominant visual element is the microphone she appears to sing into while playing the guitar. Wray attempts to establish depth of field by adding a legible and slightly out of focus line of musical instruments behind her, leading to the closed door of what seems to be a bedroom. The second shot of the video frames her hands playing the guitar and then a third shot is a side view of her lip-syncing the backing vocals of the track into the microphone. This obviously affirms that the pre-recording was edited by, for instance, adding additional vocal tracks in the mix.

YouTube performers like the examples discussed here attempt to improve their video skills or visual settings (separate from their music skills) over time, or collaborate with other creators to mediate more effectively their personality and creativity. Mia Wray’s first uploads are examples of basic bedroom covers and Sunn’s improvement in the making of cover videos is evident over time, possibly after her realization that her performances were attracting a good number of viewers. Sunn’s “Rather Be” cover published three
years after her “Titanium” video is shot outdoors, and includes titles instead of a verbal introduction. In addition, Sunn has turned her shyness (the cute bite of her tongue after the completion of her performances) into a sort of “bold” trademark or branding element that is added after the completion of the performance (a cartoonish portrait of herself biting her tongue and wearing heart-shaped sunglasses, graded with warm yellowish colors against a black background. Her face appears in a yellow circle and her name, all in capital letters, appears in red, bold, and rounded letters under her chin).

Interestingly, the artists participating in Radio 1’s Live Lounge sessions also introduce themselves before they perform and invite viewers to subscribe to Live Lounge’s YouTube channel. The arrangement of these introductions sometimes leads to playful yet delicate slapstick moments since well-known artists try to accurately point to the “click here to subscribe” graphic; this is reminiscent of the “intimate” intros and the silences of YouTube performers before and after their bedroom performance. The less polished version of a popular artist’s image aims to communicate that the visualized radio cover is not simply just another media appearance of the artist, but a form of presentation that is closer to the stylistic features of online content, and a request for a form of interaction that is closer to the habits and experiences of social media users. Strangelove suggests that “the act of putting content on the Internet often results in dialogue” and that “YouTube amateur videos often take the form of requests of communication.” Radio visualizations aim to enhance the listener’s or follower’s experience as they provide opportunities for social interaction through accessibility to refashioned content that users can comment on or share via social media platforms. At another level, the circulation of visualized radio covers or acoustic performances by commercial artists on YouTube becomes part of a more complex, and not simply clickable, dialogic process as a number of non-commercial YouTube artists borrow from the visuals of such videos and respond through their own musical renditions or emulations of acoustic arrangements, which may become “base” arrangements within and outside the YouTube community.

Conclusion

The case studies discussed in the previous section show that YouTube cover song videos are particular cases of para-adaptation as they creatively

48 Strangelove, Watching YouTube, 48.
49 Berry, “Radio with Pictures.”
perform popular songs and mediate these performances in ways that cannot compete with large-scale industry aesthetics. Instead, they communicate a specific set of skills using tools that adhere to the particularity of YouTube as a social media platform. These videos are democratically available to the mass audience and therefore may become as popular as commercial products, like WOTE’s paradigmatic cover of “Somebody That I Used to Know.” The process of adaptation in this case is twofold since the performance may be identified as a cover, but the visual settings are not adaptations of the source song’s official music video. Instead, the visual settings of these videos sometimes borrow visual codes from practices specific to radio visualization or are simply variations of the bedroom musical performance, which may include vlogging elements. Therefore, these videos provide a visual experience independent from industry practices of commercial music video production, or they relate more significantly to professional material that is also made for the purposes of online viewing, such as visualized radio covers.

Unlike the classification systems proposed by Mosser and Magnus et al., YouTube cover song videos are, to a certain extent, examples of adaptations that may not have a clear “departure” or “destination” and this is partly because of today’s frequency and variety of re-covering, which is not limited to well-known artists. YouTube performers may reference the source song (wrongly or otherwise), but they don’t always wish to communicate the (hi)story of this song or express a sense of devotion to the “owner” of the song, as the above examples illustrate; rather, they wish to promote their talents through a deliberate performance of the song. The above exchanges point toward useful ways of looking at the journeys of familiar content across media, especially those that are associated with how viewers view, consume, and partake in the recycling of such content. While adaptation studies scholars introduce or reintroduce models of study that highlight dialogic processes and non-hierarchical ways of looking at adaptations, YouTube viewers and users tell us that this might already be the norm in some areas.

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