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Book

YouTube and Music: Online Culture and Everyday Life

New Approaches to Sound, Music, and Media

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NEW APPROACHES TO SOUND,
MUSIC, AND MEDIA

Youtube and Music

Online Culture and
Everyday Life

Edited by Holly Rogers, Joana
Freitas, and João Francisco Porfírio

YouTube and Music

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Series: New Approaches to Sound, Music, and Media

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Joana: For the two and four-legged loved ones of my life.

João: For the three furry creatures who live with me.

*Holly: In memory of Monty, the furry creature who recently left us;
and for John, Polly, Jigs and Daisy.*

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How to Use This Book's YouTube Channel

YouTube and Music is a book about music, online culture and YouTube. It comes with its own YouTube channel, and most chapters have their own playlist.



The QR code and link for each chapter provides direct access to each specific playlist. These codes can be found at the top of each chapter.

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Preface

‘Like, Share and Subscribe’: Finding the Music in YouTube’s History

Jean Burgess

Back in 2007, when we were both postdocs, Joshua Green and I thought it might be fun and interesting to work together on a content analysis of the then new video-sharing website YouTube (the term ‘platform’ wasn’t yet being used in the way it is now). While this work eventually led to our 2009 book *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, it started out as a very basic, curiosity-driven, empirical project: we wanted to systematically describe the kind of content that was being shared and consumed on YouTube, and who was sharing it – a set of tasks that turned out to be a lot harder, but also more fascinating, than we first imagined. Even back then, the pace of change at which new genres were emerging felt dizzying, and traditional producer–consumer roles were being rapidly reconfigured in all kinds of disorienting ways.

Little could we have imagined that fifteen years later that, not only would YouTube still exist, and not only would it have become a culturally dominant platform, but also that there would still be so much more to say about it – as a digital media institution, as a cultural shaper and as a site of everyday consumption and creative practice. Indeed, if we think about platforms in generational terms, as suspect as those categories are, perhaps YouTube is now the ageing baby boomer of audiovisual platforms – while considered edgy and disruptive in its youth, it is owned and operated by one of the most powerful companies on the planet. It is now inarguably Big Media, and TikTok has largely taken its place as the hotbed of the latest viral trends. But one thing has remained remarkably consistent, and even intensified, over the life of YouTube as a platform and as an object of scholarly attention: the central role of music in the platform’s business model, its appeal to audiences and its role in popular culture more broadly.

It is wonderful to see this fine collection of contemporary work on YouTube and its role in music cultures – including cultures of production, performance and consumption or fandom, as well as its role in the ongoing digital transformation of the music industries and in the careers of musicians. The book also covers the role of music on YouTube as a broader cultural phenomenon – whether in the form of viral dance crazes, the site of collaborative music creation or the reorganization and creative destruction of genre hierarchies and musical canons. On perusing the contents of this volume there is no doubt in my mind that scholarship on YouTube's role in music cultures is not only alive and well but ready to set off in all kinds of exciting new directions. Let this book be your guide to the journey.

Foreword

Joana Freitas and João Francisco Porfírio



‘All right, so here we are in front of the elephants.’ This is the opening sentence of the first video ever uploaded to YouTube.¹ What started in 2005 as an online platform for the upload of ‘homemade videos’ and the sharing of ‘ordinary people’s lives’ quickly became the nucleus of an intricate web of audiovisual interactions that reached through and beyond cyberspace. The year 2005 also saw the launch of Google Video, the eponymous search engine’s alternative free video hosting site that was quickly dwarfed by YouTube’s success. Only a year later, two of YouTube’s co-founders, Chad Hurley and Steve Chen, uploaded a *thank you* message for their community, stating: ‘We’ve been acquired by Google.’² Once the competitor became the owner, YouTube’s corporate-controlled mediascape became one of the internet’s main platforms for interactive digital communities to connect, innovate and remediate through the sounding moving image. Since then, an unquantifiable amount of audiovisual content has been produced, shared, transformed, downloaded and consumed by billions of YouTube users worldwide, positioning the platform as a central hub for contemporary life. While YouTube is a recognized online space that provides new digital formats of content production and sharing, it also operates as a portal into the social, political and cultural spectrums of everyday life, creating new work logics and forms of labour (from DIY to self-made YouTubers), creative communities and social bubbles. Music and sound have played a vital role within this emergent and democratized space.

¹ jawed, ‘Me at the Zoo’, *YouTube video*, 00:00:18, 25 April 2005, <https://youtu.be/jNQXAC9IVRw>.

² YouTube, ‘A Message From Chad and Steve’, *YouTube video*, 00:01:36, 10 October 2006, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QCVxQ_3Ejkg.

From the outset, YouTube has been heavily indebted to music, with music videos consistently prominent among the most favoured category: Jean Burgess and Joshua Green note that, in 2017, ‘YouTube dominates online music streaming overall – making up 46% of all online music streaming time according to an industry report’.³ With record labels and artists frequently using the platform to premiere content, drop tasters and house their music videos, it has become a prime site for music marketing. But it has also become a place where lo-fi, user-driven content can be produced and shared; where new modes of musical creativity can be explored; and where communities can collect into grassroots affinity spaces. This book offers the first collection of explorations of the ways in which music has come to be a driver for much activity on YouTube: it explores how users have responded to its sonic and audiovisual content and how this response has led to new modes of audiovisual creativity and consumption.

Since YouTube’s launch, there have been rapid changes in cyberculture, and the internet and *online living* have become inseparable from the contemporary media environment that permeates it. From the advent of Spotify and social media platforms, gaming and participatory culture, digital media is accessible and networked from anywhere by almost everyone.⁴ Music and YouTube, both as separate and dependent phenomena, are defined by the affordances of these new spaces. Although YouTube rapidly became one of the main networked hubs for online music sharing and listening, its blurred lines between labour and enterprise, and amateurs and professionals, have made it a complicated creative space. On the one hand, it is the paradigm of convergence culture, participation and democratization and constitutes a global hub of digital cooperation and sharing. On the other, its promotion of content sharing, remediation and memes has given rise to legal issues, particularly around music copyright. A significant amount of YouTube’s content is related to music – songs, music videos, musical fragments, soundtracks, sonic memes, reaction videos, vlogs and so on – and

³ Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 77.

⁴ We recognize the struggles of accessibility and equality concerning digital literacy. Despite the global access to digital media that we have mentioned, we recognize that there are large swathes of the world’s population that do not have access to these tools: either through the lack of social capital and economic conditions, insufficient digital literacy or for sociopolitical reasons that deny access to the required devices and/or platforms. It is clear that the boundaries between these groups (even among themselves) and the overall world population are not static, and a subject may cross borders between groups simultaneously or move between groups depending on various factors and events throughout their lives.

much of this content is subject to strict copyright laws.⁵ Since this musical content is not always made available by the legal owners – musicians, labels, artists’ representatives and so on – both companies and YouTube quickly adapted and developed tools for adjusting to these new ways of producing and engaging with online musical content.

YouTube has received exciting scholarly attention from media and communication and technology perspectives, with topics ranging from medicine to advertising.⁶ A key investigative strain, heralded by Henry Jenkins, David Bell, Axel Bruns and others, has been the platform’s role in an emergent culture of convergence and participation, collaborative creativity and new forms of online sociabilities.⁷ While music appears on the edges of these investigations, however, it rarely takes centre stage, despite its domination of the platform’s content. The year 2009 saw the first book-length study of the platform: Jean Burgess’s and Joshua Green’s pioneering *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*.⁸ This book, still the centre of YouTube discourse, outlines YouTube’s reciprocal role within popular culture, mainstream media, digital literacy and audiovisual social networking: musical content is discussed within these areas, primarily from a social, statistical and technological perspective. In the same year, Pelle Snickars’s and Patrick Vonderau’s edited book *The YouTube Reader* offered a range of innovative approaches, including intermittent reference to music videos.⁹ Aside from these core texts, which offer early and deeply significant contextualizations and theorizations of *YouTube-ness*, the platform’s music content and musicality have largely remained of secondary importance, used by scholars to investigate viewing statistics or to support a different argument: it is

⁵ Mark Sweney, ‘Music Companies Have \$50m Stake in YouTube’, *The Guardian*, 19 October 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2006/oct/19/citynews.digitalmedia>.

⁶ Chih-Ping Chen, ‘Exploring Personal Branding on YouTube’, *Journal of Internet Commerce* 12, no. 4 (2013): 332–47; Kapil Chalil Madathil, A Joy Rivera-Rodriguez, Joel S. Greenstein and Anand K. Gramopadhye, ‘Healthcare Information on YouTube: A Systematic Review’, *Health Informatics Journal* 21, no. 3 (2015): 173–94.

⁷ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); David Bell, *Cyberculture Theorists: Manuel Castells and Donna Haraway* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007); Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

⁸ Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009).

⁹ Kathrin Peters and Andrea Seier, ‘Home Dance: Mediacy and Aesthetics of the Self on YouTube’, in *The YouTube Reader*, ed. Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009), 89–107; Christian Christensen, ‘“Hey Man, Nice Shot”: Setting the Iraq War to Music on YouTube’, in *The YouTube Reader*, 204–17; Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, ‘The Entrepreneurial Vlogger: Participatory Culture Beyond the Professional-Amateur Divide’, in *The YouTube Reader*, 89–107.

notable, however, that music does not count as a subject in the indexes for these early books.

This is surprising, as the study of music and the moving image is currently experiencing a lot of scholarly attention. Over the last few decades, film music studies, game sound analysis, music video aesthetics and the experimental audiovisual arts have all developed rich and varied bodies of scholarship. But it has only been during the last decade that engagement with sounding moving-image media has begun to diversify, with studies exploring how audiovisual aesthetics bleed beyond their disciplinary boundaries. In 2013, music's central position on YouTube came to the theoretical spotlight with Carol Vernallis's *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema*. Here, Vernallis proposes an audiovisual aesthetic paradigm in which music and musicality lie central in the 'media swirl' between music videos, digital cinema and YouTube: her book, while emphasizing intertextuality and transmedia, offered new critical perspectives on internet musicking; but it also stressed the need to further research the 'musical' qualities of these genres and the role that YouTube plays in its connections, remediations and innovations.¹⁰ Recent studies of this 'media swirl' include work on sonic transmedia and have revealed the connections between film, music video and internet culture.¹¹ And yet, while the study of audiovisual transmedia draws on previous engagement with the forms of music and the moving image mentioned above, there has been very little focused study of music and internet culture.

This is where this book comes in.

In the years following Vernallis's book, there has been an uptick in YouTube research, and the platform has been both the subject and the research tool for a number of studies on internet musicking. In 2020, we organized a conference on YouTube, music and digital culture in Lisbon in the hope of harnessing these fresh and new ideas about the relationship, influence and divergences of musical practices in the context of the digital paradigm of convergence and participation. It became clear, during this conference, that YouTube was not only an online depository for music content and its remediations but also has become, for many, a central aspect of daily life. These two approaches – what we refer to here as the *musicality of YouTube* and the *Youtubeness of music*

¹⁰ Carol Vernallis, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3–4.

¹¹ Carol Vernallis, Holly Rogers and Lisa Perrott (eds.), *Transmedia Directors: Artistry, Industry and New Audiovisual Aesthetics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020).

– are central to this book. Here, we extend previous investigations into and theories of YouTube by focusing on Lev Manovich's idea of the 'new media universe' afforded by new, digital and social media and the internet's move from 'a publishing medium in the '90s' to 'a communication medium' from the 2000s.¹² With music as our central motivation, we explore how the platform has transformed from a site that enabled internet users to engage with content produced by a small body of professional providers to one increasingly dominated by domestic and home-made content: as Manovich notes, Burgess and Green recognized this early on in the scholarly engagement with social media, when they proclaimed that some of the most important content on YouTube resides far down the 'long tail' and in a different aesthetic space from the glossy nature of its professional content: they say, 'because so much of the symbolic material mediated via YouTube originates in the everyday lives of ordinary citizens, or is evaluated, discussed, and curated by them, that YouTube, in theory, represents a site of cosmopolitan cultural citizenship'.¹³ Such citizen journalism and the participatory creation of a multi-authored cultural space from what the authors identify as 'mundane but engaging activities . . . from peer-to-peer guitar lessons to "memes" based around everyday consumption' has resulted in 'genuinely empathetic spaces for identity-based communities and for the sharing of personal stories'.¹⁴

This volume explores these interactions from a variety of angles, from YouTube users' comments to the soundscapes of domestic life and from online collaborations between composers and users to virtual stages for real and imagined performances. Authors from several different countries enter into a conversation about the ways in which music has been created and used by YouTube users to document, imagine and promote their daily lives through the web 2.0 principles of peer production and collaborative creativity. Some explore the ways in which the digital platform has been used to create and disseminate sonic and emotional soundscapes, to stage performances and build artistic (cyber)identity, to engage in *produsing* and circulating aural content for composing and teaching and even to customize listening habits. Some investigate Axel Bruns's notion of *produsage* – a hybrid between producer and user – in which participants can directly intervene in the cultural forms around

¹² Lev Manovich, 'The Practice of Everyday (Media) Life', in *Video Vortex Reader: Responses to YouTube*, ed. Geert Lovink and Sabine Niederer (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2008), 33.

¹³ Burgess and Green, *YouTube*, 126.

¹⁴ Ibid.

them without recourse to the skills or auxiliary technology ordinarily required for media communication between creator and audience.¹⁵ And others follow the echo chambers of community-driven aesthetics and bring in psychological approaches to assess user responses to uploaded content.

The book starts with an *Introduction* by Holly Rogers. More than just an intro, Rogers's text acts as an overview of the many forms of musicking that occur on and through the platform and considers the music industry, music video, pedagogy, audience reaction, fandom, collaboration, accessibility, censorship and professional and DIY content. It argues that YouTube has the capacity to destabilize the ways in which we write and canonize music histories. Following from this, the first section, *Transmedia, Performance and Digital Stages*, gathers together four chapters that explore how performers and composers have used YouTube's specificities to explore new musical possibilities. The section opens with Juri Giannini's case study on the pianist Lola Astanova. Departing from Philip Auslander's theoretical frame to investigate the strategies of presentation and representation in the digital world, Giannini identifies a new type of 'musical persona' forged by the contemporary 'digital artist' and formulates a theory of the 'musical selfie' by which performers can capture a refreshed type of liveness and identity. This new type of musician, he argues, can influence how musicologists and historians approach contemporary performance practice. The second chapter builds on the new breed of 'digital artist' through an analysis of Lil Nas X's use of transmediality and meme culture. Here, Emily Thomas uses an intersectional approach to trace how Lil Nas X's 2021 album *MONTERO* and its circulation across several platforms forge new forms of radical queerness able to subvert the dominant system of social injustice and oppression. Weronika Nowak's chapter offers a different approach to transmedia. She uses *LOST PLAY*, a multimedia piece by Jagoda Szmytka, to explore how YouTube can act as a tool for strengthening or modifying the transmedial and hypermedial strategies used in live performances and for developing new relationships between different types of narrative gaze and genres of audiovisual creativity. The last chapter in this section takes the ideas of digital creativity and transmediality out into the real world. Elisa Bruttomesso and Ofer Gazit use two viral music videos – 'Despacito' (Luis Fonsi, 2017) and 'Toast' (Koffee, 2018) – to explore how the global reach of YouTube has transformed and globalized low-income neighbourhoods in the Caribbean, making them visible as tourist destinations

¹⁵ Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond*.

to an unprecedented number of viewers/listeners around the world. Using an ethnographic approach to San Juan's La Perla neighbourhood in Puerto Rico and Kingston's Fleet Street in Jamaica, the authors examine how YouTube 'logics' mediate and trouble relationships between locals, tourists and online platforms.

The second section of the book, *Pedagogy and Interpretation*, takes a different approach to YouTube. Here, three chapters interweave case studies and dialogues about YouTube's interactive provision for music theory, education, interpretation and remediation. João Ricardo kicks off with a theoretical overview of the opportunities for e-learning, distance education and teaching in music composition. Focusing on audiovisual lectures on analysis, compositional technique and history, he explores YouTube's role in the democratization of music learning. In his companion piece, John Moore looks to several popular music theory YouTube channels and to what he calls the YouTube Music Theory (YTMT) community. Moore examines aspects of content, production and epistemology, shedding light on the frictions and synergies between online theory provision and that offered by institutionalized academia, noting how music-theoretical knowledge is codified, taught and disseminated in the digital age and how institutions can best adapt to the current ever-changing mediascape. Concluding this section is a slightly different approach to learning and interpretation. In their modular, co-written chapter, Carol Vernallis, Laura McLaren, Virginia Kuhn and Martin P. Rossouw shed light on a kind of video that remains overlooked in both journalistic and scholarly discourses: the lyric video. As one of YouTube's most pre-eminent musical genres, the lyric video is a diffuse and remediated audiovisual form that presents a synaesthetic fusion of image, sound and text. The authors show how this fusion allows us to attend to – and interpret – music in a richly textured and audio(-verbo-)visual way.

The final section of the book *Music Listening and Circulation* offers five innovative perspectives on YouTube's transformation of listening to and engaging with music. Here, hyper-personalization, meme culture, algorithmic nuances, online authorship, comments and appropriation are tackled through innovative research methods and ethnographic scholarship. Linking all chapters is a focus on the direct input and interaction between users and YouTube's musical content, a focus that reveals significant connections between the sonic customization of peoples' daily lives and the influence of users' comments on each other's personal experiences. The first chapter, by Sylvain Martet, uses the Song of the Year Award at the Association Québécoise de l'Industrie du Disque (ADISQ) galas to highlight the technical, social and cultural dimensions

of music sharing, while at the same time developing our understanding of YouTube's position within (and against) the traditional music industry. Vinícius de Aguiar approaches music sharing from a different perspective, using concepts from philosophy and media studies to argue that YouTube has become vital to the music industry as a regulator of the aesthetic autonomy of online platforms. He uses a variety of approaches to analyse the impact that YouTube's algorithmic functions have on the ways in which we programme, playlist and consume our listening on the platform. The next chapter moves away from algorithms and explores how YouTube has integrated itself into our domestic daily lives. Here, João Francisco Porfírio analyses data collected from videos and channels on domestic soundscapes for daily tasks, proposing new tools to help track and map YouTube's musical content. In so doing, he devises a system to examine how domestic soundscaping has become commodified and mass-marketed as a cultural product.

The last chapters in this section operate as a pair and offer two perspectives on YouTube's user comments. First is a co-researched psychological investigation into the emotional content of comments on music videos. Alexandra Lamont, Scott Bannister and Eduardo Coutinho explore how users 'talk' about music in music video comment sections, using different methodological approaches to provide a thorough analysis of data gathered from a small set of YouTube music videos. Next, and drawing the book to a close, is Eamonn Bell's close examination of a particular mode of user interaction: time-coded comments (TCCs). Bell proposes a new methodological framework, based on a computational topic model, for the exploration of YouTube's comments on musical content and urges the development of new modes of analysis for music's transforming role in the twenty-first century.

Taken together, these chapters begin a conversation about how we might approach music composition, interaction, circulation, pedagogy and promotion in light of new technological affordances. Our authors offer a variety of theoretical, psychological and computer-based approaches to YouTube's music-related content and explore how online musicking has impacted our everyday lives. Nowadays, music holds a central role in YouTube's continued success: and the platform itself has become a central creative hub for music exploration and innovation. YouTube's role in the constant flow of production, circulation, transformation and longevity of musical-related practices positions it as a central agent of a complex and diverse networked music and cultural industry.

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Carol Vernallis's monograph, *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context* (2004), is the first to articulate a theory of how music, lyrics and image can be placed in relation, as well as provide detailed analyses of individual videos. Her second, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema* (2013), takes account of a new mediascape that is driven by intensified audiovisual relations. She is co-editor of *Transmedia Directors: Artistry, Industry and New Audiovisual Aesthetics* and two Oxford Handbooks – *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics* and *The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Digital Media*. Her co-edited volume, *Cybermedia: Explorations in Science, Sound, and Vision*, engages scientists, musicologists, media theorists and industry practitioners, who together consider science, media and contemporary issues. Her most recent monograph *The Media Swirl: Politics, Audiovisuality, and Aesthetics* is in production. She teaches at Stanford.

Introduction: ‘Welcome to Your World’

YouTube and the Reconfiguration of Music’s Gatekeepers

Holly Rogers



*YouTube isn’t just a website . . . or even a technology,
but more a whole field of cultural practice.*

—Simon Reynolds¹

When YouTube began in 2005, its slogan of ‘Your Digital Video Repository’ marked its cultural position as a storage and sharing space for amateur, home-made content. A year later, in 2006, *Time* magazine announced ‘You’ as their person of the year: ‘Yes, you. You Control the Information Age. Welcome to your world’ was written underneath a mirrored screen with the word ‘You’ emblazoned beneath it (Figure 0.1). Recognizing the contribution to creativity, artistry, citizen journalism and the cultural industries of amateur users to websites like YouTube, Facebook, Wikipedia and Myspace, the accolade thrust what Jay Rosen calls ‘the people formally known as the audience’ into the cultural foreground.² Sonic material featured heavily within this cultural space, and although YouTube initially battled Myspace as a platform for developing, showcasing and promoting musical talent, it rapidly assumed dominance as a leading, malleable and participatory site for musical content. Almost immediately, the platform exerted a seismic influence on all corners of music making, from the

¹ Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to Its Own Past* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), 59.

² Jay Rosen, ‘The People Formerly Known as the Audience’, in *The Social Media Reader*, ed. Michael Mandiberg (New York and London: New York University Press, 2012), 13–16.



Figure 0.1 25 December 2006/1 January 2007 cover of *Time* magazine featuring the 'Person of the Year' cover. KAREN BLEIER/AFP via Getty Images.

music industry's most commercially successful acts to grassroots, lo-fi and DIY amateur practice; from composition, collaboration and innovation to funding, distribution and marketing; and from preservation, curation and remediation to the power relations of access and censorship. By 2018, 47 per cent of all music streamed online came through YouTube's platform; and by 2021, 44 per cent of the American population and 66 per cent of India's population used YouTube to stream music.³

In the year after YouTube's launch, two things happened: its slogan changed to 'Broadcast Yourself' in recognition of the amount of user-generated material being uploaded; and Google's acquisition of the platform initiated a drive for profitability through increased advertising and the inclusion of more professional content.⁴ Despite a subsequent increase in official material, Jean Burgess and

³ IFPI, 'Music Consumer Insight Report', April 2018, https://www.ifpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/091018_Music-Consumer-Insight-Report-2018.pdf; Hoang Nguyen, 'The Most Popular Music Streaming Platforms in Key Markets Globally', in *YouGov*, 19 March 2021, <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/media/articles-reports/2021/03/18/services-used-stream-music-poll>.

⁴ José Van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 125.

Joshua Green, writing in 2009, observed that the platform had firmly established itself as a powerful 'site of participatory culture' governed by a 'diverse group of participants'.⁵ In fact, they noted that, at the time of writing, 'User-created content made up more than two-thirds of the content coded in both the Most Responded and Most Discussed categories, where it comprised 63 and 69 per cent respectively'.⁶

Cybermedia's shift to DIY communicative practices and the rise of 'you' as a creative force represents one of the biggest cultural transformations of the century, a shift that Lev Manovich describes as a move from the web as 'mostly a publishing medium in the '90s' to a 'communication medium' in the noughties.⁷ This transference from the publishing of discrete media forms to a more reciprocal, two-way flow of communication was famously addressed during a 2004 conference in which Tim O'Reilly brought Darcy DeNucci's 1999 term 'Web 2.0' into popular parlance.⁸ Enabled by advances in computer technology and programming techniques that could be shared across platforms, Web 2.0 opened established processes of screen media consumption to user-friendly, interactive modes of engagement. This openness fuelled the rise of global social media, shifted the articulations of popular folk culture, encouraged collaboration and remediation and seemed to promise a citizen-driven space for democratized creativity.

YouTube, the second most visited website in the world after Google, played a key role in shaping the processes and aesthetics of this newly emerging space. On the one hand, music – as its most-viewed form of content – has been a major player in its mutable specificities; on the other, the platform as a 'communication medium' has performed a significant role in the transformation of music practice in the twenty-first century. Technology has always occupied a pivotal position in music histories; and it has never, Keith Negus reminds us, 'been passive, neutral or natural. Music has for centuries been created through the interaction between

⁵ Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Digital Media and Society* (2009. Rep. Cambridge: Polity Press 2019), vii.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁷ Lev Manovich, 'The Practice of Everyday (Media) Life', in *Video Vortex Reader: Responses to YouTube*, ed. Geert Lovink and Sabine Niederer (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2008), 33–44.

⁸ 'Web 2.0 Conference', conference website, San Francisco, California, 5–7 October 2004, <https://web.archive.org/web/20050312204307/http://www.web2con.com/web2con>; Tim O'Reilly, 'What is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software', *oreilly.com*, 30 September 2005, <https://www.oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html>.

“art” and technology.”⁹ The evolution of acoustic instruments, sound recording, microphones, amplification and radio and studio equipment has fundamentally restructured creative practice while distribution technologies from cassettes and vinyl to CDs to mp3s opened new opportunities for dissemination, listening and sharing. In his work on popular music, Paul Théberge refers to the democratization of music making afforded by technology during the twentieth century, David Hesmondhalgh has found these new freedoms at play in the punk and dance music scenes, David Toop in the production of skiffle and dance music, and I’ve located it within early video art-music performance.¹⁰ Others, like Georgina Born, Kyle Devine and Tara Rodgers, have recognized technology’s potential for a re-gendering of music practice.¹¹

YouTube slots into this history, not only as a new form of audiovisual dissemination but also as a space for emerging talent, global connections and remediated material. Notable across all music activity has been a move from the consumption of content to an active and social engagement with its processes and circulation: while users can interact with professional music and music videos through likes, comments and shares, Web 2.0’s transformation into a ‘communication medium’ also enabled amateur musicians and fans to create and distribute music and opinion in increasingly open and accessible ways. These direct-to-fan and peer-to-peer channels of transmission generate spaces for outsider music, amateur and collaborative creativity and refreshed forms of music pedagogy. This rise of new and interactive affordances for music culture has had implications not only for musicians, the music industry and fans; it has also played a part in destabilizing music’s traditional gatekeeping structures usually governed by A&R personnel, the music press, music academics, historians,

⁹ Keith Negus, *Producing Pop: Culture and Conflict in the Popular Music Industry* (London: E. Arnold, 1992), 31.

¹⁰ David Toop, *Ocean of Sound: Aether Talk, Ambient Sound and Imaginary Worlds* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1995), 43–4; David Hesmondhalgh, ‘Punks Attempt to Democratise the Music Industry: The Success and Failure of Rough Trade’, *Popular Music* 16, no. 3 (October 1997): 255–74; Paul Théberge, “Plugged in”: Technology and Popular Music’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, ed. Simon Frith, Will Straw and John Street (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1–25; David Hesmondhalgh, ‘The British Dance Music Industry: A Case Study of Independent Cultural Production’, *British Journal of Sociology* 42, no. 2 (June 1998): 234–51; Holly Rogers, *Sounding the Gallery: Video and the Rise of Art-Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Holly Rogers, “Betwixt and Between” Worlds: Spatial and Temporal Liminality in Video Art-Music’, in *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics*, ed. Claudia Gorbman, John Richardson and Carol Vernallis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 525–42.

¹¹ Tara Rodgers, *Pink Noise: Women on Electronic Music and Sound* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Georgina Born and Kyle Devine, ‘Music, Technology, Gender, and Class: Digitization, Educational and Social Change in Britain’, *Twentieth-Century Music* 12, no. 2 (26 August 2015): 135–72.

radio and broadcast television, patrons, record shops, museums curators and concert programmers. On YouTube, likes, comments, shares and subscriptions provide a glimpse into what and how music means to certain communities at particular moments in time. The rise of the collective voice and the affinity spaces of micro-genres and forgotten musical moments acts as a decentred and collaborative wade through music history that may challenge traditional processes of music gatekeeping and canon formation. At best, then, YouTube can be seen as a powerful crowd-sourced intermediary able to deconstruct and critique the traditional processes of music promotion, history and canonization.

And yet, countering the digital optimism inherent in readings of the platform as a free and equitable space have been issues of accessibility, censorship and artificial intelligence (AI) that temper a truly free and democratized understanding of music popularity, influence and innovation. In fact, Paul Harkins and Nick Prior voice caution over the 'loose deployment' of terms like democratization 'to identify technology-led shifts in music making – where the "digital" becomes a short-hand for a flattening of hierarchical structures of genre, access and production – elides socio-musical change as an uneven and gradual process'.¹² The fundamental dualities of Web 2.0's freedoms and restrictions are exemplified by YouTube, through its combination of user-generated and professional material, its conflicts between freedom of expression and strict copyright laws and the dissonances between its promoted policies of accessibility and the strict censorship impinged by various countries and cultures. Regularly the most-viewed type of material on YouTube, music offers a powerful insight not only into the ways in which these dualities play out on the platform but also of the ways in which they influence life beyond online culture.

By way of an introduction to the relationships, antagonisms and interactions between YouTube and musical cultures, this chapter identifies several different forms of YouTube musicking around the millennial turn. While it is impossible to capture the rhizomic complexities of the platform, the focus on the transformations, liberations and troubling of boundaries between musicians and audiences, professional and DIY, grassroots communities, original and remediated creativity and the live and the recorded embraces the unbounded chaos of 'your world'. How do we listen to music on YouTube? What mediations occur in the construction of the platform's constant generation of audiovisual

¹² Paul Harkins and Nick Prior, '(Dis)locating Democratization: Music Technologies in Practice', *Popular Music and Society* 44, no. 1 (2021): 84.

material? And what do these new modes of listening, creating, interacting and disseminating tell us about how ‘you’ have embraced the possibilities of ‘your world’ in the twenty-first century?

‘Us’, ‘Them’ and ‘the Bald Guy’: The Networked Music Industry

The mass cyber dissemination of digital music posed a challenge for the established practices of the record industry. Although only a part of the music industry as a whole, the record industry is one of its largest economic drivers, and the disruptions afforded by music and social media platforms like YouTube, Myspace, Bandcamp, Spotify, Apple Music, Twitter and TikTok necessitated a reconfiguration of established business practices. The MP3 format enabled users to explore new ways of engaging with sonic and audiovisual content and initiated a sharp decline in the production and distribution of physical music artefacts – vinyl records, CDs and cassettes.¹³ As a result, record labels had to negotiate ways to bolster their traditional distribution processes and sales revenue not only through official download channels but also by establishing ways to monetize dematerialized outputs like hits and likes and numbers of subscribers, comments and shares.¹⁴ However, one of the greatest challenges in the move to digital music came from unlicensed streaming and the unauthorized copying and sharing of music through peer-to-peer networks. The industry’s initial response to the challenges of networked media was what Martin Lister et al. describe as ‘complex and even chaotic’ and Jim Rogers notes how the word ‘crisis’ began swiftly to echo through music industry journalism and scholarship.¹⁵ It’s easy to see why. Although YouTube initiated strict copyright laws on its musical material through the watermarking of video sound and Content ID, using fingerprints that alert content holders to a potential infringement and allowing them to choose a subsequent path of action (as Sylvain Martet discusses in his chapter later in this book), in 2018, an industry report attributed low audio subscription numbers to the illegal downloading of music across the internet,

¹³ Ole J. Mjos, *Music, Social Media and Global Mobility: Myspace, Facebook, YouTube* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

¹⁴ Steve Collins and Sherman Young, *Beyond 2.0: The Future of Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹⁵ Martin Lister, John Dovey, Seth Giddings, Iain Grant and Kieran Kelly, *New Media: A Critical Introduction – Second Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 193; Jim Rogers, *The Death & Life of the Music Industry in the Digital Age* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 6–9.

which accounted for 38 per cent of that year's global music listeners.¹⁶ As we've seen, this was also the year that YouTube accounted for almost half of the world's music streaming and taken together, these two statistics position the platform as a major disruptive force for the record industry: as one listener explained when asked about music fans' preference for the platform's extensive free music catalogue, 'anything they want to listen to is on YouTube'.¹⁷

Nevertheless, the industry shake-up initiated by the rapid rise of social media was not all gloomy. In fact, the reorganized structures to arise from the 'chaos' quickly began to generate new revenue streams for record labels able to augment and coexist with more traditional industry frameworks through social media's access to local and transnational audiences.¹⁸ A main early concern was the value gap created between the money that YouTube generated from adverts and subscriptions and what made it back to the rights holders – the record labels, performers, songwriters, composers and music video teams. Copyright issues meant that the industry's biggest players – Sony, Universal and EMI – initially chose to share their videos with Vevo instead of YouTube, while Warner, after at first removing unauthorized content from the platform, eventually managed to develop a productive and mutually beneficial working relationship with it. Korean entertainment agencies like JYP Entertainment and YG Entertainment, on the other hand, quickly became official YouTube users, with S.M. launching their YouTube channel to great success in March 2006.¹⁹ It wasn't until 2021, though, that a fundamental shift saw a redistribution of revenue so that labels and artists not only received a cut of the advertising income but also a proportion of the subscription funds to YouTube Music and YouTube Premium, a shift that resulted in over \$4 billion paid to music creators in the year preceding June 2021.²⁰ However, critics have noted the issues of unpaid labour and the fair remuneration of all users, remixers and unsigned artists that contribute to frameworks from which YouTube generates income.²¹

¹⁶ Matt Binder, 'YouTube Accounts for 47 Percent of Music Streaming, Study Claims', *Mashable*, 10 October 2018, <https://mashable.com/article/youtube-47-percent-of-on-demand-music-streaming>.

¹⁷ IFPI, 'Music Consumer Insight Report', 2018, https://www.ifpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/091018_Music-Consumer-Insight-Report-2018.pdf.

¹⁸ Rogers, *The Death & Life of the Music Industry in the Digital Age*, 24.

¹⁹ Doobo Shim and Kwang Woo Noh, 'YouTube and Girls' Generation Fandom', *The Journal of the Korea Contents Association* 12, no.1 (January 2012): 125–37.

²⁰ Shira Ovide, 'YouTube Isn't the Music Villain Anymore', *The New York Times*, 8 June 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/08/technology/youtube-music-industry.html>.

²¹ See Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 73–97; Byrd McDaniel, 'Popular Music Reaction Videos: Reactivity, Creator Labor, and the Performance of Listening Online', *New Media and Society* 23, no. 6 (2020): 1625–6.

One of these new revenue streams is directly related to YouTube's primary quality: it is a platform for *audiovisual* media and provides record labels with the opportunity to augment the reach of MTV and related broadcast television channels by disseminating music videos across global networked communities, either as isolated uploads or, more often, via the official channels of particular musicians, directors or labels. Since YouTube's inception, music video has consistently made up a sizeable proportion of its most popular content. In fact, so great was the demand that, in 2015, the platform launched YouTube Music Key that offered subscribers official videos without ads; while this didn't take off as hoped, it relaunched shortly after as the much more successful YouTube Music. Despite a pandemic-related surge in DIY content (how-to tutorials, vlogs, opinion pieces, ASMR, etc.), as of August 2021, music videos still topped the platform's most-viewed lists, with 'Baby Shark Dance' (Pinkfong Kids' Songs and Stories) receiving 9.2 billion views, followed by 'Despacio' (Luis Fonsi ft. Daddy Yankee) with 7.5 million views. In fact, of the top ten videos, eight are music videos, including Ed Sheeran's 'Shape of You' (5.43 billion views) and Mark Ronson ft. Bruno Mars's 'Uptown Funk' (4.27 billion views).²² Of the next twenty most-viewed items (as of 2 November 2021) all but two are professional music videos (and those two are also music related in the form of visualized children's rhymes). K-Pop acts have used YouTube's global reach and possibilities for transnational circulation to particular effect, with Girls' Generation dominating video figures on the platform and South Korean rapper Psy erupting onto the world stage with the unprecedented success of his 2013 song 'Gangnam Style' (Figure 0.2), although his accomplishments were tempered by what Sue Collins refers to as 'dispensable celebrity' culture driven by regressive stereotypes and problematic race judgements.²³ Meanwhile, when BTS dropped their music video for 'Dynamite' on Big Hit's YouTube channel on 20 August 2020, it broke all records to become the most-viewed YouTube video in the first twenty-four hours after racking up 101.1 million views on its launch day alone.

While the major music industry players and YouTube battled it out for a collaborative approach to ownership and remuneration, musicians also found

²² Statista.com, 'Most Popular YouTube Videos Based on Total Global Views as of August 2021', 4 April 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/249396/top-youtube-videos-views/>.

²³ Shim and Noh, 'YouTube and Girls' Generation Fandom', 125–37; Brian Hu, 'RIP Gangman Style', in *Hallyu 2.0: The Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media*, ed. Sangjoon Lee and Abé Markus Nornes (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 229–44; Sue Collins, 'Making the Most out of 15 Minutes: Reality TV's Dispensable Celebrity', *Television & New Media* 9, no. 2 (16 January 2008): 87–110.



Figure 0.2 Screenshot from Psy's 'Gangnam Style' music video (Cho Soo-hyun, 2012).

their traditional processes challenged. Although official music videos have been an important promotional tool since their exponential rise to popularity during the 1980s, YouTube provides an important participatory extension to their professional boundaries and one-way flow of information in several important ways. One of the most notable changes was the provision of a space that allows musicians to engage in a range of direct-to-fan activities and thus mobilize audiences in new ways. The opportunity for fans to interact with musical content through likes, comments, shares, remixes, versions and parodies not only provided new ways of interacting with music and musicians but also reconfigured the role of the audience within music culture in general. While official artists rarely interact with their comments, they nevertheless encourage the development of various musical communities able to generate massive hits, comments and replies themselves, not only further promoting the artist but also the profile of various YouTubers. A good example of this is popular Swedish YouTuber and musician Seth Everman's sardonic 'i'm the bald guy' comment under Billie Eilish's 'Bad Guy' video (2019) that has received over 3.2 million likes (as of 3 March 2022). The power of YouTube's musical communities to generate interest in certain events has also been instrumental in opening an

alternate route for amateur musicians into the industry. Since its beginning, for instance, numerous music careers have been launched on the platform, including Justin Bieber's, whose 2007 amateur recordings of R&B covers were discovered by a talent scout; The Weeknd, whose YouTube videos, which initially withheld his real name and image, launched him into international stardom in 2011; Lana Del Rey, whose mixture of home videos and internet clips in her home-made video for her debut song 'Video Games' (2011) became an instant viral hit; and Nathan Evans, the Glaswegian postal worker whose traditional singing kick-started a sudden cultural frenzy for sea shanties in 2021. In response to the changing processes of the music industry, YouTube launched its Musicians Wanted program (March 2010), using the success of Pomplamoose, a Californian Indie duo who used the platform to upload pop covers, 'video songs' and extensive footage of backstage workings and track production to encourage unsigned acts and indie bands to apply; if successful they could upload music videos and information to the channel in order to dramatically increase their exposure while also receiving money for their work. The key was that the songs must be audiovisual – music videos not stills or promo shots (Pomplamoose member Jack Conte later went on to form Patreon).

Although early YouTube users distinguished between official, commercial YouTube channels and DIY uploads, two sides they labelled 'us' (or 'you') and 'them', the rapid improvement in, and access to, technology, along with schemes like YouTube's Partnership Program (2007), the YouTube Creator Academy (2013) and YouTube For Artists (2015), saw amateur content and its modes of dissemination and monetization become increasingly professionalized.²⁴ In their chapter later in this volume, Carol Vernallis, Laura McLaren, Virginia Kuhn and Martin P. Rossouw use lyric videos to explore the intersections between fan-made content and more professional interpretations of music videos, noting how differences are increasingly difficult to find. In fact, fan videos are often uploaded to musicians' official channels, while many artists, like Lil Nas X, now make remediated versions of their own work.

Conversely, professional and established musicians rapidly find themselves having to move into DIY territory to transmedially augment their album releases and maintain fan engagement in bespoke and personal ways. Where before, musician activities around record releases included live performances,

²⁴ Dana Rotman and Jennifer Preece, 'The "WeTube" in YouTube: Creating an Online Community Through Video Sharing', *International Journals of Web-Based Communities* 6, no. 3 (2010): 325.

interviews, zines and record shop appearances, YouTube opened up new and interactive paratextual possibilities which reconfigured what Jessica Eblom refers to as the 'work of a musician': 'nowadays, it resembles more that of a skilled entrepreneur in the gig economy. Social media is seen as the recipe for musicians' entrepreneurial success – it is absolutely necessary to be on social media and interact in order to build up an audience.'²⁵ While the most successful artists' YouTube channels are often controlled to some extent by their record company (Beyoncé's channel, for instance, offers only professional and official music videos, interviews and live footage), for others, the platform offers a real opportunity for direct – if mediated – fan communication.²⁶ As we shall see in Emily Thomas's chapter later in this book, Lil Nas X has created complex transmedial stories that augment and continue the narrative of his music videos in ways that confuse the boundaries between art and life. We can also see this confusion at play in the work of vlogging musicians. In his chapter, Juri Giannini explores the rise of the 'digital artist' who performs not for live audiences but for social media screens, breaking musical forms into short snippets in line with cybermedia's promotion of fragmentation and impact: he calls these fragments musical selfies. Concert pianist Tiffany Poon, for instance, uses her YouTube channel in an extremely personal way to foreground her process of practice and aesthetic decision-making in order to demystify her performance aura, while also monetizing her videos.²⁷ While Poon considers herself a performer rather than a YouTuber, TwoSetViolin quit their careers as professional performers to devote themselves to YouTube content, amassing over 2.81 million subscribers to their channel with their mixture of information, demonstration and comedic sketches about their instrument and its repertoire.²⁸ Singer-songwriter Jensen McRae, on the other hand, uses her YouTube channel for fan interaction, posting frequent vlogs and Q&A content (Figure 0.3).²⁹

However, such personalized insights into private lives and direct interactions with fans can have a dark side. While users can hide behind anonymity and

²⁵ Jessica Edlom, 'Authenticity and Digital Popular Music Brands', in *Popular Music, Technology, and the Changing Media Ecosystem: From Cassettes to Stream*, ed. Tomas Tofalvy and Emília Barna (London: Palgrave, 2020), 132.

²⁶ Beyoncé YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/c/beyonce/>.

²⁷ Ricardo Pereira, 'Tiffany Poon Vlogging the Life of a Classical Concert Pianist: How Can YouTube "Peel Back the Curtain on Classical Music"', 'Like, Share and Subscribe: YouTube, Music and Cyberculture Before and After the New Decade', Conference, Lisbon Portugal (1–3 October 2020).

²⁸ TwoSetViolin YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/twosetviolin>.

²⁹ Jensen McRae YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZTnNKbAAoWx2eIQEfrvNIQ>.



Figure 0.3 Jensen McRae, ‘Cutting Vox Today’ (28 January 2022).

usernames to troll and intimidate musicians, others are lured by the illusion of presence into difficult and complicated attachments. Referring to Nancy Baym’s observation that cybermedia has encouraged audiences to consider musicians as their friends, Edlom continues: ‘Culture, economics, and technology push musicians toward authenticity and closeness. Audiences “expect artists to be constantly available to them, offering unique, personal glimpses of off-stage life. They see musicians as friends . . .”’³⁰ While other platforms like Twitter and Instagram might lend themselves more easily to this closeness of communication, YouTube’s focus on the moving image has seen a rise in intrusive parasocial interactions.

‘The Wisdom of the Crowds’: The New Cultural Gatekeepers of Music

As we have seen, fans, music lovers and collectors play an important role in the curation of YouTube’s musical spaces. But they also contribute reappropriated and new content themselves. Countering the pre-recorded and heavily edited

³⁰ Nancy K. Baym, *Playing to the Crowd: Musicians, Audiences, and the Intimate Work of Connection* (New York: NYU Press, 2018), 171; Edlom, ‘Authenticity and Digital Popular Music Brands’, 133.

nature of many official music videos and their paratexts on YouTube is a vast reservoir of amateur live music performance capture. While there has always been a market for live music bootlegs – The Grateful Dead famously encouraged concert goers to record their concerts – mobile phones and cameras enabled an explosion of videoed gig footage and YouTube quickly became a depository for multiple perspectives and subjective viewpoints. On the one hand, official concert footage, like Adele's live version of 'Set Fire to the Rain' from the Royal Albert Hall (16 November 2011), which boasts almost seven million views to date, can help record labels to promote an artist beyond record sales; on the other, amateur footage of performances offers multiple viewpoints and audience reactions, capturing personal and ephemeral musical moments that can coalesce into a crowd-sourced historical archive.³¹

Simon Reynolds describes the result of this chaotic and compulsive sharing as a collective memory bank: 'A profound shift has taken place in which YouTube serves as both major player and potent symbol: the astronomic expansion of humanity's resources of memory. We have available to us, as individuals, but also at the level of civilisation, immensely more "space" to fill with memorabilia, documentation, recordings, every kind of archival trace of our existence.'³² In musicological terms, this provides a rich resource that marks a move from what Carolyn Abbate refers to as a drastic (event-based) rather than gnostic (knowledge-based) treatment of music performance: the shift from an analytical treatment of music to one that is an ephemeral, changeable and site-specific act (a drastic reading), where difference and mistakes between performances situate music as a living, volatile, fragile and exciting process – and one that brings the audience into an integral position not only as documentarians but also as curators of what is valuable and what is dispensable. The proliferation of viewpoints affords insights to different perspectives: What has each user decided to focus on and for how long, how is the audience behaving and what unique or unusual events have been captured that may evidence what Abbate calls the 'exceptional phenomenal presence' and 'drastic' effects of music?³³ The multiple fan footage uploads of Lady Gaga falling from the stage during her 2019 Las Vegas residency provide insight into all of these potentialities, for instance. YouTube, then, plays a vital role in preserving and providing access to musical material through paratexts not normally available in established retail outlines, from

³¹ As of 10 November 2021, the figure stands at 676,161,528 views. Adele, 'Set Fire to the Rain (Live at the Albert Hall)', *YouTube video*, 00:03:58, 16 November 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ri7-vnrJD3k&t=6s>.

³² Reynolds, *Retromania*, 56.

³³ Carolyn Abbate, 'Music – Drastic or Gnostic?' *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 3 (Spring 2004): 505–36.

live footage, imports, bootlegs, versions, B-sides, demos and remixes, to portals into micro-genres, unknown related material and access to obscure artists and releases. These forms of social interaction and the community-driven processes of fandom and storytelling augment previous zine cultures by opening up accessible and interactive affinity spaces, which Sean Duncan and Elisabeth Hayes (2012) define as ‘the physical, virtual, or combinations of locations where people come together around a shared affinity (interest)’.³⁴

Much of the niche material that resides at the end of YouTube’s long tails will not be widely heard, of course; nor will it be listened to attentively.³⁵ And this has a lot to do with the ways in which we engage with the platform. In 2011, Nicholas Carr derisively referred to internet browsing as ‘the shallows’, where attention is constantly distracted by new content and focus is distributed across the never-ending flow of information. Engagement with the internet, he argued, has rewired our brains to engage only superficially with material encountered online, often because it is consumed while multitasking.³⁶ In his chapter later in this book, João Francisco Porfírio notes how YouTube’s ‘domestic sonic videos’ are used to soundtrack normal domestic activities, for instance. But John Palfrey talks more benevolently of an oscillation between ‘grazing’ and ‘deep dive’ for digital natives, or those born into a digital world.³⁷ This oscillation between attentive and shallow engagement is important to the ways in which YouTube can be used as a musicological tool.

The platform not only gives access to content but also to the ways in which the content has been delivered, viewed, used, circulated and engaged with: and, as Steven Colburn has shown in his exploration of YouTube’s concert footage videos, those who film and upload live music to the platform position themselves as important cultural intermediaries.³⁸ It follows that YouTube’s affinity spaces harbour significant information about music histories and the ways in which

³⁴ Elisabeth R. Hayes and Sean C. Duncan, ‘Expanding the Affinity Space: An Introduction’, in *Learning in Video Game Affinity Spaces: New Literacies and Digital Epistemologies*, ed. Elisabeth R. Hayes and Sean C. Duncan (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 1–23.

³⁵ Chris Anderson coined the term ‘longtail’ in 2004 to describe how the internet has prompted a shift away from businesses selling a relatively small number of popular products to mass customers to one in which hard-to-find items, available only in small numbers, can generate significant profits: Chris Anderson, ‘The Long Tail’, *Wired* 12 (1 October 2004), <https://www.wired.com/2004/10/tail/>.

³⁶ Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: How the Internet Is Changing the Way We Think, Read and Remember* (London: Atlantic Books, 2011).

³⁷ John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* (Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2008), 343.

³⁸ Steven Colburn, ‘Filming Concerts for YouTube: Seeking Recognition in the Pursuit of Cultural Capital’, *Popular Music and Society* 38, no. 1 (2015): 59–72.

they are constructed. While it's important to temper digital optimism with the reality that many major labels and managers tightly control YouTube's official channels and cleverly play its algorithms (later in this book, Vinícius de Aguiar explores how the platform's algorithms promote sameness to keep you watching and listening for longer), the platform's cacophony of voices and opinions go some way towards destabilizing the closely monitored, traditional processes of canon formation and the leadership roles of music's established gatekeepers – musicologists, historians, record labels, broadcast TV, radio, music venues, music magazines, museums, AR personnel, DJs and record shop owners. There are several ways in which this can happen.

As a crowd-sourced depository, YouTube harbours unique data about reception history and acts as a powerful barometer for public opinion. Likes, shares and remediations indicate popular cultural sensibilities, while comments allow the public to voice their opinion in sometimes surprising ways. In their chapter later in this book, Alexandra Lamont, Scott Bannister and Eduardo Coutinho explore the different modes of social engagement operable in YouTube comments which, unlike straight data on viewing numbers and so on, reveal reactions to and emotional engagement with the content. Exploring what they refer to as 'the interconnected networks of listeners online', the authors highlight how cultural references are revealed through various types of emotional vocabulary. Eamonn Bell, in his chapter, approaches the topic from a different angle, using computing models to analyse critical time-coded comments and turn them into a musicological tool to see how YouTubers talk about, critique and share musical moments with the wider community. What is needed, he argues, is not new forms of analytical theory but new methods and techniques.

Content is also important: parodies and mash-ups point to significant cultural moments, the longtail reveals information about the longevity of certain artists and musics and video essays, lyric videos and reaction videos draw attention to tropes that are dominating the current critical landscape. In some ways, the platform perpetuates the classics. In July 2018, for instance, Guns N'Roses' 'November Rain' (1992) became the first music video made prior to the advent of YouTube to reach a billion views, while a version of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* (uploaded 30 January 2011) has enjoyed almost 238 million views and gathered over 62,000 comments.³⁹ But it can also propel

³⁹ Michael Christopher, 'Guns n' Roses' "November Rain" Is the First Video to Top 1 Billion YouTube Views', *Loudwire*, 16 July 2018, <https://loudwire.com/guns-n-roses-november-rain-first-90s-video>

artists to success directly from user interest, as we saw above. The viewing figures for the various music videos mentioned earlier provide useful insight not only into public opinion about individual musicians and bands, but also into a community's overarching engagement with certain styles and trends: between October and December 2020, hip-hop was the most-viewed music genre on YouTube, while in 2021, hip-hop musicians were the top ten most-viewed artists in the United States.⁴⁰

All this information reveals what certain musical communities find interesting and worth preserving or recirculating at a particular cultural moment. Folksonomies – the user-generated process of tagging material in order to classify and curate it into searchable or related themes – operate as a useful research tool here. In their work on the discovery of independent music online, Michael Gaffney and Pauline Raffety note that

social networking sites and music folksonomies offer ways of making the Long Tail more visible. . . . New genres for music appear regularly from 'micro-house' to 'cuddlecore' and it may be that folksonomies, with their adaptability, can better account for this rapidly changing vocabulary than a controlled vocabulary.⁴¹

Music folksonomies operate as powerful negotiators of themes and styles because, as James Surowiecki writes, they harness 'the wisdom of crowds,' which positions 'You' as a collaborative musicological curator of music's many narratives and histories.⁴²

YouTube, then, offers a cultural lens into contemporary music cultures. But it also provides a forum for direct political engagement, often in the form of citizen journalism – that is, when independent journalists, and members of the public, record and/or report on particular events and upload their footage to social media sites for quick dissemination and reportage.⁴³ While examples of major news events hitting YouTube have been well documented – the video of a UCLA student being tasered by campus police in November 2006, for instance, or the

-1-billion-views-youtube/; Evan Bennett, 'Four Seasons – Vivaldi', *YouTube video*, 00:41:59, 30 January 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GRxofEmo3HA&t=396s>.

⁴⁰ Ashley King, 'The Most Popular Music Genre of 2020 Was Easily Hip-Hop', *Digital Music News*, 1 April 2021, <https://www.digitalmusicnews.com/2021/04/01/youtube-music-top-hip-hop-songs/>.

⁴¹ Michael Gaffney and Pauline Raffety, 'Making the Long Tail Visible: Social Networking Sites and Independent Music Discovery', *Program* 43, no. 4 (2009): 376.

⁴² James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of the Crowds: Why the Many Are Smarter Than the Few* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004).

⁴³ Joke Hermes's definition of 'cultural citizenship' is as follows: 'the process of bonding and community building, that is implied in partaking of the text-related practices of reading, consuming, celebrating, and criticising offered in the realm of (popular) culture.' Joke Hermes, *Rereading Popular Culture* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 10.

shooting of Oscar Grant in a subway station on 1 January 2009 – sonic examples are often left out of the discourse; and yet their role not only in demonstrating the public's reactions to events but also in mobilizing groups of people in real time can be extremely powerful.⁴⁴

When Israeli-American music video director Alma Har'el recorded a group of women singing together in the 2017 Women's March on Washington, for instance, it became an instant viral video and unofficial anthem for the march. The women, led by MILCK and singing a multipart acapella version of her song 'Quiet' (released a year later in 2018), had rehearsed online, via Skype, and came together from all over the country to perform it for the first time during the march: the video was then uploaded to YouTube as a pedagogical resource for other groups of women (Figure 0.4).⁴⁵ Other examples have directly intervened into political events and their coverage. Áine Mangaoang's work, for instance,



Figure 0.4 Alma Har'el's recording of MILCK leading the chorus of her song 'Quiet' at the 2017 Women's March on Washington: Almaharel, '#IcantKeepQuiet #Anthem in the Women's March on Washington' (23 January 2017).

⁴⁴ Burgess and Green, however, point out that material in the Most Viewed category tends to refer to news stories already making headlines rather than launching breaking news items: Burgess and Green, *YouTube*, 75; Mary Grace Antony and Ryan J. Thomas, "'This is Citizen Journalism at its Finest': YouTube and the Public Sphere in the Oscar Grant Shooting Incident", *New Media & Society* 12, no. 4 (2010): 1280–96.

⁴⁵ Almaharel, '#IcantKeepQuiet #Anthem in the Women's March on Washington', *YouTube video*, 00:02:50, 23 January 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zLv1w8J8sWE>.

focuses on the Philippian penal system's use of pop music, dance and YouTube as part of a rehabilitation process to show the power of a viral video to generate significant cultural and political intervention: Guilnard Moufarrej's research into the uploading of protest songs performed by Syrian children to social media reveals the darker side of YouTube and its potential for disseminating exploitative war propaganda and misrepresentation.⁴⁶ These examples show how YouTube's music has become part of our cultural practices, allowing social and political networks to come together and share information, or to promote viewpoints as a form of propaganda, unmediated by the laws of network coverage. In their chapter on music tourism in the Global South, Ofer Gazit and Elisa Bruttomesso trace this flow of influence the other way, exploring how the locations of popular music videos have become problematic but also how positive sites of tourism can either stereotype or rejuvenate a particular location.

Reviews, Opinion and Music Learning

In all of these examples, user-generated content and the participation around it generated powerful social and political commentary. In 2012, Michael Mandiberg noted that sites like YouTube 'are pointless without audience participation: from the audience's perspective, in order to experience the site you *have to become a media producer*, and from the organizer's perspective, without audience production their site will fail': 'While old forms coexist with these new audience-driven forms and hybrids of the two, media participation is now part of media consumption.'⁴⁷ YouTube's spread of music activity into rhizomic paratexts and fan-driven affinity spaces revitalized the social and artistic spaces of musicians and fans as well as those of enthusiasts and learners, opening up new opportunities for 'media participation' with musical material through the platform's audiovisual tools. Journalistic videos – like music review channel ARTV and AJayII's videos – and cultural video essays about music – such as those found on Adam Neely's video channel – deliver musical commentary and opinion that can provide access to, and inform, the public's

⁴⁶ Aine Mangaoang, *Dangerous Mediations: Pop Music in a Philippine Prison Video* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021); Guilnard Moufarrej, 'Protest Songs, Social Media and the Exploitation of Syrian Children', in *Songs of Social Protest: International Perspectives*, ed. Aileen Dillane, Martin J. Power, Eoin Devereux and Amanda Haynes (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield International), 354–70.

⁴⁷ Michael Mandiberg, 'Introduction', in *The Social Media Reader*, 1, 2.

opinion of different kinds of music, while more pedagogical channels provide how-to tutorials for particular instruments, styles and techniques, critical theory and music history.⁴⁸ Bradfrey's channel, for example, offers score-based analysis of film music, while Nahre Sol's videos filter a variety of musical styles through an art-music lens. Both channels offer augmented blended learning environments for children and students as well as for the interested public.⁴⁹ The popularity of channels such as these provides useful insight into current music trends: which instruments are most popular (at the time of writing, guitar, piano, violin, drums and music production), which genres are the most sought after and which pieces are the most viewed. In his chapter, João Ricardo explores the different and innovative forms of composition pedagogy that exist on YouTube from official university courses and orchestra outreach programmes to the pedagogy of professional YouTubers and the DIY sharing of ideas and resources between users. Like music composition, the opportunity to run classes online can be lucrative for the teachers. Marty Schwartz's guitar channel Marty Music, for instance, receives over seven million views a month, reportedly drawing him hundreds of thousands of dollars.⁵⁰ In his companion piece to Ricardo's chapter, John Moore draws attention to the new synergies forming between music analysis YouTubers and those working on music theory from within higher education institutions.

Anabel Quan-Haase identifies several possible online pedagogical interactions ranging from self-directed to community-based musical learning, with student-expert interactions, peer-to-peer learning, networks, role models and serendipity all playing a major role.⁵¹ Much has been made of the pedagogically democratic spaces that YouTube provides for users who may not have access to in-person music tuition for socio-economic, geographic or political reasons

⁴⁸ ARTV, YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/AlbumReviewTV/videos>; AJayll, YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC6EkU9ytY6AEk1U4jhWbg/videos>; Bradfrey, YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCk_jzTmW2Fmfm70c2kZHpQ; Adam Neely, YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnkp4xDOWqqJD7sSM3xdUiQ>.

⁴⁹ Nahre Sol, YouTube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC8R8FRt1KcPiR-rtAfXlmeg>; Kari K. Veblen and Nathan B. Kruse, 'Children's Musical Play in a Digital Era', in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Media and Music Learning*, ed. Janice L. Waldron, Stephanie Horsley and Kari K. Veblen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 529–48.

⁵⁰ Marty Music, YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCmn1TWVJysjWPFiZhQ5uudg>; Michelle Castillo, 'Teaching "Stairway to Heaven" on YouTube Earns This Guitar Instructor Six Figures Annually', *CNBC*, 9 September 2018, <https://www.cnbccom/2018/09/09/youtube-guitar-lessons-turned-into-6-figure-career-for-marty-schwartz.html>.

⁵¹ Anabel Quan-Haase, 'Social and Informational Affordances of Social Media in Music Learning and Teaching', in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Media and Music Learning*, 427–42.

or prefer to learn in a self-directed way. But it's not just focused pedagogical videos that help users develop their musicianship: Janice Waldon et al. also note the importance of observing other people's musical performances in learning instruments and stagecraft.⁵² While there remains concern that the one-way flow of information delivered by pre-recorded tutorials does not allow for the level of feedback and interaction necessary for high-level performance, the platform's free tutorials have generated a new wave of accomplished musicians, and in 2019, London's Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance confirmed that several successful applicants had taught themselves to play via online tutorials.⁵³

'Broadcast Yourself': Produsage and Collaboration

Social media sites like YouTube are designed, notes Manovich, 'to be customized by the users'.⁵⁴ So far, the boundary collapse between 'media consumption' and 'media production' identified by Mandiberg above has been identified in user reaction through comments and likes, direct-to-fan modes of communication and pedagogical forms. If we now return to 'you' as a vehicle for innovation, it becomes clear that one of the most innovative results of YouTube's user customization arises from the refreshed forms of co-creativity it affords. This can happen in two main ways: through collaboration or by fusing the roles of producing and using – a merging that Axel Bruns refers to as 'produsage' – that allows users to generate and manipulate their own online material.⁵⁵ Musical collaborations can be seen throughout the history of the platform with examples like the 2009 YouTube Symphony Orchestra, paving the way for large-scale teamwork. The ensemble was the first collaborative online orchestra, made up of ninety-six professional and amateur musicians from more than thirty countries on six continents and including twenty-six different instruments. In April of that year, they performed the 'Internet Symphony "Eroica"' by Chinese-American composer Tan Dun at

⁵² Janice L. Waldron, Stephanie Horsley and Kari K Veblen, 'Introduction: Why Should We Care About Social Media', in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Media and Music Learning*, 1–20.

⁵³ Eleanor Harding and Elliot Mulligan, 'Beat It! Music Teachers are Being Replaced by YouTube as Pupils Ditch Face to Face Instrument Tuition for Online Videos, Experts Say', *Daily Mail*, 26 October 2019, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7615529/Beat-Music-teachers-replaced-YouTube.html>.

⁵⁴ Manovich, 'The Practice of Everyday (Media) Life', 37.

⁵⁵ Axel Bruns, 'Produsage: Towards a Broader Framework for User-Led Content Creation', in *Proceedings of 6th ACM SIGCHI Conference on Creativity and Cognition*, ed. B Shneiderman (New York: ACM Press, 2007), 99–105.



Figure 0.5 Screengrab from Ben Morales Frost's Lockdown Orchestra debut concert on YouTube: 'Lockdown Orchestra – Flight Fantastic' (27 March 2020).

Carnegie Hall, mixing on-site musicians with a live mash-up of other performers, all playing in real time (see the cover of this book). Live and interactive performances from multiple locations became a common phenomenon during lockdown. Some of these events involved famous artists: Lady Gaga's benefit concert, *One World: Together at Home* (18 April 2020, simulcast on broadcast TV), for instance, streamed artists like The Rolling Stones direct from their individual homes via split screen. Other projects aimed to bring together amateur performers into new ensembles. A good example of this is Ben Morales Frost's Lockdown Orchestra, made up of 150 musicians from six continents: their debut concert was uploaded to YouTube on 27 March 2020 (Figure 0.5).⁵⁶

The nature of collaboration has always been a thorny issue marred by ideas of authorship and control, particularly prevalent in the film industry, with its overpowering presence of the director as an auteurist voice. Recent work by Carol Vernallis, Lisa Perrott and myself to decentre the authorial voice and take into consideration the distributed authorship of fiction film (not only to include composers and sound artists but also costume designers, editors, script writers, scenographers, sound recordists, casting agents and location scouts) in order to

⁵⁶ beIN SPORTS France, 'One World: Together at Home – Digital Show', *YouTube video*, 05:59:55, 18 April 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nTd5Trp1pbq>; Ben Morales Frost, 'Lockdown Orchestra – Flight Fantastic', *YouTube video*, 00:03:35, 27 March 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Akcok8TIK5c>.

reposition it as a site of great collaborative venture has gone some way towards noting audiovisual media as a collaborative form not just for performance but also for the composition of audio and visual content.⁵⁷ This can happen at both the grassroots level and through large-scale funded projects like Kevin MacDonald's crowd-sourced documentary *Life in a Day* (2011), which was premiered live on YouTube (there has since been a new film, recorded in 2020).⁵⁸ People from all over the world were encouraged to record their everyday lives on 24 July 2010 and to send the footage into the production team, who sifted through the material and edited it into a linear narrative that moved from sunrise to sunset via interlocking stories from across the world. Matthew Herbert, one of the film's two composers, created his soundtrack in a similar way, issuing a request via YouTube for users to send in specific sounds that he could collect together and manipulate into the film's soundscape (Figure 0.6).⁵⁹ This form of crowd-sourced composition has become increasingly popular. Gathering sounds from a variety of users became the mainstay of YouTube personality and music producer Andrew Huang, for instance, who, for WWF-Canada's 2012 Earth Hour, created a song from user-contributed lyrics, sounds and videos.⁶⁰ And yet, in these



Figure 0.6 Mathew Herbert explains how to submit sounds to be included in the soundtrack for Kevin MacDonald's YouTube film *Life in a Day* (2011): Lifeinaday, 'How You can Build the Soundtrack to *Life in A Day*' (20 July 2010).

⁵⁷ Carol Vernallis, Holly Rogers and Lisa Perrott, *Transmedia Directors: Artistry, Industry and New Audiovisual Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2020).

⁵⁸ *Life in a Day*, 'Life in a Day 2010 Film', *YouTube video*, 1:34:56, 21 January 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JaFVr_cJJYI&t=2027s.

⁵⁹ Lifeinaday, 'How You can Build the Soundtrack to *Life in A Day*', *YouTube video*, 00:03:17, 20 July 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=46de7qPgcyg&t=3s>.

⁶⁰ WWF-Canada, 'WWF Earth Hour Anthem "When the Lights Go Down by Andrew Huang"', *YouTube video*, 00:03:42, 28 March 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MmwqfAFscaQ>.

examples so far, collaboration and the democratization of process has been tempered by an overarching organizing voice, be it Tan Dun as the composer for the YouTube Orchestra or Herbert as sound and music designer for *Life in a Day*. In their research on YouTube collaboration, Adam Hyde et al. have noted that the etymology of the word is literally 'working together' and that there is a 'delicate and significant line between "working with" and "being put to work by"'.⁶¹ It could be argued that, in the examples above, such a system of authorial control leads to problematic forms of labour division and unpaid, unrecognized compositional work.

While the result, although crowd-sourced, is more of a collage than a collaboration, other musicians have sought a more transformative process. Working within the social constraints of the pandemic, Jacob Collier and Charli XCX embraced the possibilities for collaborative creativity in their fan-driven lockdown albums, for instance. Both Collier and Charli XCX invited contributions from fans, offering real-time conversations and feedback and foregrounding their collaborative processes in their videos, going some way towards a more interactive form of teamwork, where the content undergoes a process of transformation and muddles authorship as it is passed back and forth.

'Take On Me': Internet Music, Mash-Ups and Fanvids

Fan involvement, participation and the promotion of DIY, peer-produced and user-generated content quickly became the mainstay of YouTube, placing it at the heart of what Henry Jenkins has referred to as a contemporary digital world governed by a form of 'convergence culture', in which media forms collide and constantly rearticulate one other.⁶² Above, we noted the antagonistic yet converging audiovisual vocabularies and styles produced by 'us' and 'them': of amateur and official content. While DIY users have moved towards professional modes of articulation due to the creative availabilism afforded by social media's technological accessibility, some professional users have moved into the paratextual DIY spaces of direct-to-fan engagement. However, research into the content of YouTube's videos has found that amateur uploads are increasingly

⁶¹ Adam Hyde, Mike Linksvayer, Kanarinka, Michael Mandiberg, Marta Peirano, Sissu Tarka, Astra Taylor, Alan Toner and Mushon Zer-Aviv, 'What is Collaboration Anyway?', in *The Social Media Reader*, 60.

⁶² Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 290.

characterized by the recycling of professionally copied content and the rise of what John Hartley calls ‘redactive creativity’, by which the revision, adaptation and recontextualization of pre-existent materials takes centre stage.⁶³ In terms of music, ‘redactive creativity’ turns the content and tools of the internet itself into compositional material and process. Internet music, like hypnagogic pop, chillwave and hauntological sounds, is a good example here. These forms use existing online sounds to craft new, highly self-reflexive music.⁶⁴ Artists like Macintosh Plus plunder, chop and screw and slowdown smooth jazz, lounge and elevator music into the internet genre of Vaporwave, for instance: Vaporwave’s sounds are often combined with graphics taken from and imitating early internet and web culture, anime and 3D Objects.⁶⁵ Similarly, musicians like Oneohtrix Point Never play with and highlight online material through remediation to create what Reynolds calls cybermedial ‘echo-jams’.⁶⁶

Web 2.0 design enables websites and networks deeply engrained with what O’Reilly refers to as the possibility for “hackability” and “remixability” that enables direct and unmediated forms of human interaction.⁶⁷ While internet music reformulates audiovisual samples, YouTube’s most common form of produsage can be found in its cacophony of sound-image mash-ups, memes and versions. Closely linked with the move towards sampling in early hip-hop and electronica, the reconfiguration of existing content on YouTube opened out sonic experimentation to more audiovisual possibilities. Reynolds notes that internet mash-ups and collages can be seen as a natural extension of YouTube’s endless flow of disjunctive material, where playlists invite unexpected juxtapositions of material and style and lead us into a ‘brittle and inconsistent’ sense of temporality.⁶⁸ Vinícius de Aguiar’s chapter takes on these issues to explore how we might curate our way through the tangle of networked listening and complicate the autonomy of this process.

Fanvids and user-produced mash-ups of previously uploaded material reveal YouTube as a site of content ready for creative plunder. In a way, this makes the content subject to a collaborative process, although mash-ups act

⁶³ Van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity*, 119; John Hartley, *Television Truths: Forms of Knowledge in Popular Culture* (London: Blackwell, 2008), 112.

⁶⁴ Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth, ‘From Microsound to Vaporwave: Internet-Medicated Musics, Online Methods, and Genre’, *Music and Letters* 98, no. 4 (November 2017): 601–47.

⁶⁵ Immortallyear, ‘Macintosh Plus – Floral Shoppe (FULL ALBUM!!!)’, *YouTube video*, 00:38:15, 25 December 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCq0P509UL4>.

⁶⁶ Reynolds, *Retromania*, 80.

⁶⁷ O’Reilly, ‘What is Web 2.0’.

⁶⁸ Reynolds, *Retromania*, 61.

more like Chinese whispers as material is passed from user to user, undergoing manipulation with each re-upload. Although our second volume of *YouTube and Music* focuses on the platform's numerous sonic remediations, it's worth noting several of the most influential types here.⁶⁹ Early on, the relative ease of manipulating downloaded material led to an explosion of mash-uped material, with many examples becoming highly influential commentaries on the original material. The process, of course, goes back to the beginning of moving-image media, with the advent of montage, where a story is told through juxtaposed fragments, a process first articulated theoretically by Sergei Eisenstein.⁷⁰ While in film, montage usually manipulates original material in the service of a narrative, its appropriation through social media as collage, *détournement*, supercuts and found footage mash-ups allows users to find connections between a variety of sources. This can either happen through the re-combination of a visual text with a musical one, as in *The Dark Side of the Rainbow* – a mash-up of Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon* (1973) with *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) – or between musical texts, as in *The Grey Album*, Dangermouse's 2004 fusion of Jay-Z's *The Black Album* (2003) with The Beatles' *The White Album* (1963) and its subsequent collaged visualization by Ramon & Pedro.⁷¹

In his early work on audiovisual mash-up culture, Nicholas Cook notes a similarity to multimedia art, in which the combination of distinct elements creates 'continuous collisions or negotiations among heterogeneous elements, giving rise to meanings that are emergent, unpredictable, and frequently ineffable':⁷² 'With all mashups, we experience each song through the other: in what I see as a basic principle of multimedia, the commensurability in certain parameters between the songs that make the mashup musically viable has at the same time the effect of throwing into relief the elements of acoustic, visual, and semantic friction between them.'⁷³ 'Semantic friction' often produces humour, but it can also generate hard-hitting political commentary. Electronic music duo Cassetteboy, for instance, plays with fragments and reassigns meaning in their

⁶⁹ Holly Rogers, Joana Freitas and João Francisco Porfirio (eds.), *Remediating Sound: Repeatable Culture, YouTube and Music* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2023).

⁷⁰ Sergei Eisenstein, Richard Taylor and Michael Glenny, *Towards a Theory of Montage: Sergei Eisenstein Selected Works Volume 2* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010).

⁷¹ Brady Turner, 'Home Made Movie – Dark Side of the Rainbow', *YouTube video*, 01:46:35, 1 October 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBamli0tIRg>; Axel, 'Danger Mouse – The Grey Album (2004)', *YouTube video*, 00:44:46, 27 May 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-iA7AyFIU0>.

⁷² Nicholas Cook, 'Beyond Music: Mashup, Multimedia Mentality, and Intellectual Property', in *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics*, 57.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 57.

heady mash-ups of government speeches. In 2008, their first YouTube upload went viral with its scathing and rhythmic restitching of appearances by then British prime minister Gordon Brown.⁷⁴ Such audiovisual work can be read as a powerful form of cultural citizenship, where a community can engage in analysis and commentary through the lens of popular culture – and where the same community can find a space in which to discuss and respond to the material, keeping it alive and relevant. Cassetteboy's work has been so successful in part because it offers a near-instant response to current events, bypassing the funded and post-production processes of high-production music.

While Dangermouse and Cassetteboy offer slick viral forms of sonic remediation, fanvid mash-ups are examples of more user-generated content: the mix of Radiohead 'Lotus Flowers' with Beyoncé's 'Single Ladies', where Thom Yorke's crazed dancing proves a rhythmically snug fit to Beyoncé's tune, is a good example here. In his work on fanvids, Mathias Korsgaard notes that they 'often display the potent pairings of image and music sources; in these cases the videos offer a double reading of both the musical and the visual source material, in which one sheds new light on the other'.⁷⁵ Double readings are particularly apparent in bad lip-syncing videos like 'Edward and Bella: A Bad Lip Reading of *Twilight*', the re-cutting of *The Shining* trailer to Peter Gabriel's 'Solsbury Hill' (1977) and literal videos, like DustoMcNeato's version of Aha's 1985 classic 'Take on Me', all of which use audiovisual montage to critique pre-existing material.⁷⁶ Such critique also resides in the versions and parodies that litter YouTube. While many are sincere covers of favourite songs, others use well-known sonic structures to manipulate our view of both original song and new context, like Chris Mann's lockdown parody of Adele's 'Hello' (2015), 'Hello (From the Inside)' (uploaded 26 March 2020), which quickly garnered over fourteen million views from people delighted with the conversion of a song about a painful breakup to a perceptive and beautifully sung parody of lockdown anguish (see Figure 0.7a–d).⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Cassetteboy, 'Gordon Brown', *YouTube video*, 01:46:35, 8 October 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBamIi0tIRgcom/watch?v=6QapZI2cLQQ>.

⁷⁵ Mathias Korsgaard, 'Music Video Transformed', in *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics*, 505.

⁷⁶ Badlipreading, "'Edward and Bella' – A Bad Lip Reading of *Twilight*", *YouTube video*, 00:03:07, 4 September 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmxSk0wZxss>; neochosen, '*The Shining* Recut', *YouTube video*, 00:01:24, 8 February 2006, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmkVWuP_sO0; DustoMcNeato, "'Take On Me": Literal Video Version', *YouTube video*, 00:03:47, 4 October 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HE9OQ4FnkQ>.

⁷⁷ Chris Mann, 'Hello (From the Inside): An Adele Parody By Chris Man', *YouTube video*, 00:04:51, 26 March 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5azNpTwVk8>.



Figure 0.7a-d Screengrabs from Chris Mann, 'Hello (From the Inside)' (26 March 2020).

YouTube's vlogs offer a different form of remediation, in which pre-existent music is placed against newly captured images. Previously, people were able to express themselves and chart their everyday lives online through blogs, but YouTube introduced a temporal, documentary element into this process: 'What before was ephemeral, transient, unmappable, and invisible became permanent, mappable, and viewable', writes Manovich.⁷⁸ As the zeal to document the mundanity of life took hold, new audiovisual strategies began to manifest. Jenkins has pointed out that early vlogs and video diaries demonstrate an interest in video as a form as much as its ability to produce certain types of content, and while this is true visually, sonically many vloggers aimed for a familiar, even cinematic audiovisual texture.⁷⁹ Synchronous sound prevailed in YouTube's early vlog culture, partly because the specialist skill set required to compose music made it difficult for many users to write their own soundtracks, and partly because YouTube's strict copyright laws prevented the use of pre-existent music. As a result, library music (also known as production music) was often used. This is music, produced by work-for-hire composers, that is owned, licensed and distributed by production music libraries for use in various audiovisual settings. Initially, vloggers could make use of free resources, buy royalty-free packages or

⁷⁸ Lev Manovich, 'The Practice of Everyday (Media) Life', 38.

⁷⁹ See Henry Jenkins, 'YouTube and the Vaudeville Aesthetic' (2006), http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2006/11/youtube_and_the_vaudeville_aes.html.

pay a small fee to production music libraries, but in 2013, and in response to the overwhelming popularity of vlogs, the platform launched the YouTube Audio Library where users can download copyright-free music and sound effects to use in their work.⁸⁰

Remediated content, then, in all its possible forms, dominates YouTube's audiovisual landscape. Above, the idea that YouTube operates as a powerful historiographical tool for music's histories and canons was posited. If we now revisit this idea with remix and mash-up culture in mind, it becomes clear that YouTube not only offers a crowd-sourced forum for the construction of music histories but also destabilizes the very idea of a musical canon itself. The prevalence of remediated sonic and audiovisual content on YouTube suggests that the criteria for historically or culturally significant music (or music that is included in a canon), which has traditionally included originality, complexity, innovation and longevity, may need to be rethought to include citation, version and reuse: and the focus on single musicians opened out to make room for collaborative creativity and different skill sets.

Undemocratic Democracy

So far, we've explored how YouTube's amateur interactions have remediated, highlighted and intervened in the contemporary cultural landscape. But whose cultural landscape? These new approaches and opportunities can be seen as a real democratization of creativity, process, pedagogy and collaboration, either within the DIY communities or more officially via Musicians Wanted or through professional musicians like Jacob Collier. From this perspective, musicians can use the platform to bypass the normal processes of the music industry, to self-promote and to do so with tools that are readily available and easy to use, while music fans can find shared social spaces to voice an opinion. This offers a welcome bridge between the grassroots collectivity of folk culture that is local, accessible and of the people and the alienating drives of mass popular culture with its one-way flow of pre-produced material.

These blurred processes, as we have seen, challenged the mechanisms of music historiography and the progression of great works, not only by opening

⁸⁰ YouTube Audio Library: <https://studio.youtube.com/channel/UCfDql8zxZmMPFFiuwU1QQJQ/music>.

the forum to more diverse musicians but also by giving voice to a greater range of commentators. Both challenges enabled what Katie Ellis and Gerard Goggin describe as 'a "social lifeline"' to those living with disability, encouraging, notes Patricia G. Lange, young users to develop skills and patterns of communication essential to living in our current networked world, and allowed previously suppressed or oppressed voices to rearticulate their histories and cultural positioning through forms of feminist cyber-activism and the construction, or deconstruction, of race-related identities.⁸¹ Considered in this way, YouTube can be seen as a positive space open to multiple viewpoints and positions. And yet, such digital optimism is tempered by several overarching concerns: What is shown and who has access? Who can speak, and who can listen?

While the platform initiated a cultural move from television's and film's one-way flow of information and scheduled programming to a more liberated distribution of content, YouTube's flow of video is not as unmediated as it initially appears. In her work on YouTube's search engines and ranking algorithms, José Van Dijck notes that YouTube helps its thirty million daily visitors to navigate through the seemingly limitless flow of uploads via very specific processes:

The site controls video traffic not by means of programming schedules but by means of an information management system that steers user navigation and selects content to promote. Even though users feel they have control over which content to watch, their choices are heavily directed by referral systems, search function, and ranking mechanisms (e.g. Page Rank). In other words, ranking and popularity principles rule YouTube's platform architecture.⁸²

What's being suggested to users holds the power to influence judgement, and these 'heavily directed' processes bely the digital optimism of YouTube's apparent neutrality. These algorithms not only expose the darker side of online culture's ostensibly democratic processes, including surveillance and data harvesting, but also provide a service that, while useful to many users, nevertheless operates through the promotion of sameness. While YouTube has the potential for cosmopolitan, globalized and localized social groups, Geert Lovink has noted that the unfolding of related videos and suggestions as you watch certain content leads us deeper into similar territory, re-enforcing

⁸¹ Kate Ellis and Gerard Goggin, quoting D Morrison, in 'Disability and Social Media', in *The Social Media Handbook*, ed. Jeremy Hunsinger and Theresa Senft (New York: Routledge, 2014), 127; Patricia G. Lange, *Kids on YouTube: Technical Identities and Digital Literacies* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

⁸² Van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity*, 113.

existing perspectives by creating echo chambers where dialectical or divergent content is not forthcoming.⁸³ Travelling through these ‘filter bubbles’, users find reinforcement of their political and aesthetic tastes and persuasions rather than challenge or difference.⁸⁴ In musical terms this can lead to streams of similar music and artists, which makes it hard for listeners to encounter new sounds and for emerging and experimental artists, or those located outside of the Western soundworlds, to find new listeners. It is these algorithms and echo chambers that contribute to what Alan Bryman refers to as the cultural homogenization and Disneyization of society’s media.⁸⁵

This flow of sameness troubles diversity. As Burgess and Green argue:

YouTube proves that in practice the economic and cultural arrangements that ‘participatory culture’ stands for are as disruptive and uncomfortable as they might be potentially liberating . . . who gets to speak, and who gets the attention, what compensations or rewards there are for creativity and work; and the uncertainties around various forms of expertise and authority . . . the value and legitimacy of popular culture.⁸⁶

Recent algorithm analysis of YouTube content has shown up a notable lack of ethnic minority voices at the top of suggestion lists, and a 2020 lawsuit alleged that the AI and algorithms used could racially profile both content and users.⁸⁷ Although ultimately resolved in favour of Google, another lawsuit argued that the algorithms remove or limit content by Black or LGBTQIA+ creators, and other investigations have found that politically neutral channels and mainstream media are privileged.⁸⁸ Complicating these findings further is the issue of internet user distribution. What those in the West consider to be mainstream use is of course not necessarily mainstream in the rest of the world. When coupled with an uneven access to equipment and adequate

⁸³ Geert Lovink, ‘The Art of Watching Databases: Introduction to the *Video Vortex Reader*’, in *Video Vortex Reader*, 11.

⁸⁴ Seth Flaxman, Sharad Goel and Justin M. Rao, ‘Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online New Consumption’, *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (2016): 298–320.

⁸⁵ Alan Bryman, *The Disneyization of Society* (London: Sage, 2004).

⁸⁶ Burgess and Green, *YouTube*, 19.

⁸⁷ Eriq Gardener, ‘Class Action Complaint for Declaratory Judgement Restitution and Damages’, Official report, United States District Court, Northern District of California (filed on 16 June 2020), <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6950241-Newman.html>.

⁸⁸ Reed Albergotti, ‘Black Creators Sue YouTube, Alleging Discrimination’, *The Washington Post*, 18 June 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/06/18/black-creators-sue-youtube-alleged-race-discrimination/>; Mark Ledwich and Anna Zaitsev, ‘Algorithmic Extremism: Examining YouTube’s Rabbit Hole of Radicalization’, *First Monday* 25, no. 3 (2020), <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/10419>.

power and internet provision, the idea of popular content takes on problematic resonance. In their identification of online culture's 'participation gap' that arises through the '[f]undamental inequalities in young people's access to new media technologies and the opportunities for participation they represent', Jenkins et al. alight on the disparities of technological privilege.⁸⁹ Shzr Ee Tan approaches these inequalities from an intersectional ethnomusicological perspective in her exploration of global digital musicking. Noting the lack of internet uniformity outside the historical Global North, she points out that streaming services are either unavailable or used differently around the world.⁹⁰ Issues of censorship, privacy and gender vary between different countries and communities and at the time of writing the platform remains blocked in China, removing the voices of a powerful and sizeable community from any research into YouTube Music.

YouTube Transmedia

YouTube's promotion of, and impact on, music and musicians has been both liberating and restrictive. While participation gaps, education, availability and censorship temper any broad statements about the platform's influence on contemporary music cultures, it is nevertheless possible to suggest that it has intermediated between audiences, the music industry and amateur musicians in refreshed ways. YouTube's videos encourage interactive listening, archival spaces, pedagogical opportunities, new music, mashed-up sounds and images, compositional collaborations and canon deconstruction.

But YouTube does not operate in isolation. In fact, in many cases, it operates as a conduit between other platforms. As two chapters later in this book show – Weronika Nowak's work on expanded opera and Emily Thomas's work on Lil Nas X's worldbuilding – YouTube exists within cybermedia's post-media world. Despite their individual specificities, affect and style are shared between TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms, with links, portals and paratexts stitching together different specificities and user expectations.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Henry Jenkins, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century (Part One)* (Chicago: The MacArthur Foundation, 2007), https://www.macfound.org/media/article_pdfs/jenkins_white_paper.pdf, 15.

⁹⁰ Shzr Ee Tan, 'Digital Inequalities and Global Sounds', in *The Cambridge Companion to Music in Digital Culture*, ed. Nicholas Cook, Monique M. Ingalls and David Trippett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 253–73.

⁹¹ Holly Rogers, 'The Audiovisual Eerie: Transmediating Thresholds in the Work of David Lynch', in *Transmedia Directors*, 241–70.

Vernallis positions the platform within what she calls the heightened ‘media swirl’, a vortex in which all forms of screen media influence – or ‘converse with’ – each other.⁹² While YouTube was a key early driver of this musical ‘media swirl’, platforms like Twitter, TikTok and Twitch and Web 3.0 metaverse games like *Fortnite*, *Roblox* and *The Palace* have augmented and redefined the possibilities of online participation. And yet, YouTube continues to be a major force for music, in all its forms, within the internet’s converging spaces. The following chapters in this book provide the first collated explorations of the synergies and affordances of YouTube and Music: they explore how users have responded to its sonic and audiovisual content and how this response has led to new modes of analysis. Balancing this focus on music consumption, listening, performing and sharing are the chapters in our companion text, *Remediating Sound: Repeatable Culture, Music and YouTube*. Here, authors concentrate more on the processes of user-generated content and the aesthetics of participation: in particular, the logics of audiovisual remediation, adaptation and mashup.

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⁹² Carol Vernallis, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video and the New Digital Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3–29.

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Transmedia, Performance and Digital Stages

‘Musical Personae’ 2.0

The Representation and Self-Portrayal of Music Performers on YouTube

Juri Giannini



YouTube is changing ways of making, performing and perceiving music, allowing both professional and amateur artists to bypass traditional gatekeeping channels of music production and distribution and to independently upload their own music.¹ Its development resulted not just in an ‘explosion of video content on the web’ but also paved the way for what Lev Manovich has described as a Web 2.0 ‘new media universe’ that enables private users to access, comment on and share media content easily and for free without having professional skills and equipment.² Furthermore, since 2007, the YouTube Partner Program (YPP) has made it possible for video producers to earn money from the platform, transforming it from an archive for pre-made, primarily professionally generated content to a more interactive, participatory

¹ This chapter is a strongly revised and extended version of lectures held in the framework of the cycle ‘Musical Digitology’ (University of Music and Performing Arts, Vienna) and at the 2020 Lisbon conference ‘Like, Share and Subscribe: YouTube, Music and Cyberculture before and after the New Decade’ <https://youtcc2020.weebly.com/>.

See James Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 9th edn (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 993–9 for the importance of new technologies in making and distributing music; see also Michael Huber, *Musikhören im Zeitalter Web 2.0: Theoretische Grundlagen und empirische Befunde* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2018), 58, for the role played by Web 2.0 in emancipating the reception of music from the gatekeeper function of music critics.

² Lev Manovich, ‘The Practice of Everyday (Media) Life’, in *Video Vortex Reader: Responses to YouTube*, ed. Geert Lovink and Sabine Niederer (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2008), 33.

and malleable digital infrastructure, a shift identified by Manovich as a move to the era of ‘social videos’.³

These media innovations influence the ways in which music history is perceived, narrated and written. Traditionally, academics, historians, journalists, performers, concert venues and large broadcast companies have been the gatekeepers of these musical histories and canons. Since the turn towards ‘social videos’ and interactive, DIY processes of online culture, however, the power held over the dissemination of information by these established gatekeepers has begun to loosen. As cybermedia began to afford opportunity for different voices and perspectives, the great canons of music history started to fragment and, increasingly, online platforms like YouTube became refreshed sites for the performance of musicology, music analysis and music historiography, as we have seen in the Introduction to this book.⁴ YouTube and other virtual/digital channels have become a regular presence in everyday academic life, from research to teaching and performance, stimulating innumerable questions related to the intersections of music historiography and the digital world. Academic musicology, in all its different disciplinary orientations and methodological approaches, is engaged with this shift towards a culture of social media, an engagement traceable through several scientific publications,⁵ conferences⁶ and research projects.⁷

As a result, YouTube and other digital spaces have become a significant component of musicological research and reception studies. In 1998, Nicholas Cook analysed the ways in which record covers can co-shape the nuances of musical meaning. His argument focused on the way artists were presented or

³ Ibid., 33.

⁴ For a survey on the emergence of digital culture as a source in music history writing see Matej Santi and Elias Berner (eds.), *Music – Media – History: Re-Thinking Musicology in an Age of Digital Media* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2021) n.p.

⁵ See for instance Santi and Berner, *Music – Media – History*; see also Sheila Whiteley and Shara Rambarran (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Virtuality* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), for a general approach; or Ignazio Macchiarella, ‘Making Music in the Time of YouTube’, *Philomusica on-line* 16, no. 1 (2017): 1–11 for a more focused study.

⁶ See, for example, ‘Music in the Disruptive Era: The Digital, the Internet and Beyond’, <https://www.luigiboccherini.org/2018/12/14/music-in-the-disruptive-era-the-digital-the-internet-and-beyond/>; ‘Like, Share and Subscribe’.

⁷ In winter Term 2019, for example, I co-organized (with Julia Heimerdinger and Nikolaus Urbanek) the lecture series ‘Musical Digitology: Musik und Musikgeschichte in Zeiten von Digitalisierung und WWW’, <https://www.mdw.ac.at/imi/ringvorlesung-musical-digitology/>; at Koblenz University, Corinna Herr is leading a project financed by the DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) with the working title ‘Darstellung und Rezeption klassischer Musiker*innen bei YouTube: Aufführungs- und Lebenspraxen im digitalen Zeitalter’, Classical Musicians’ Presentation and Reception on YouTube: Performance and Life Practices in the Digital Age, https://www.uni-koblenz-landau.de/de/koblenz/fb2/instmusik/koooperationen_und_projekte/DFG-Projekt.

rather, represented, on their record sleeves and the associations and suggestions that these representations manifested.⁸ At the time, Cook's investigation was pioneering, at least in the field of historical musicology: and yet, thanks to the subsequent blossoming of social media and participatory culture, it is no longer possible to engage meaningfully with the representation and self-portrayal of performers and reception analysis – no matter which stylistic field of music is dealt with – without a close engagement with the ways in which these portrayals display across different moving-image platforms.⁹ Even in the field of historical musicology, an engagement with certain aspects of social media can be found, as in Peter Moormann's dealing with the interaction of digital media and practices of promotion and self-presentation of classical musicians in his monograph on Gustavo Dudamel,¹⁰ and various explorations of the medial turn in classical music.¹¹

By considering the performance of music as a dynamic current cultural practice rather than a historical monument, this chapter extends previous investigations through a close study of a classical music pianist who performs nearly exclusively on digital channels.¹² This lens throws light on some of the strategies of presentation and representation enacted by musicians operating within and across online communities. Departing from Philip Auslander's theory of the 'musical persona', I focus on YouTube as a platform particularly open to these new forms of musical appearance in order to reflect on the ways in which traditional paradigms of liveness (the way a performance can be defined) can be ripped apart, fragmented and reconstructed according to characteristics of digital technologies, a deconstructive process that presses classical performers into the realm of the online influencer. Drawing parallels with the photographic selfie, I sketch a theory of the 'musical selfie' by which classical musicians

⁸ Nicholas Cook, 'The Domestic Gesamtkunstwerk, or Record Sleeves and Reception', reprinted in Nicholas Cook, *Music, Performance, Meaning: Selected Essays* (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2007), 139–55.

⁹ See for instance Lori Burns and Stan Hawkins (eds.), *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Popular Music Video Analysis* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019); Carol Vernallis, Holly Rogers and Lisa Perrott (eds.), *Transmedia Directors: Artistry, Industry and New Audiovisual Aesthetics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020).

¹⁰ Peter Moormann, *Gustavo Dudamel: Repertoire – Interpretation – Rezeption* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2019).

¹¹ See Alexandra Gronwald's dissertation project 'Klassische Musik im Wandel: Classical Music Videos', <https://musikwissenschaft.philhist.unibas.ch/de/doktorat/laufende-doktorarbeiten/klassischemusikimwandelclassicalmusicvideos/>.

¹² Nicholas Cook, 'Between Process and Product: Music and/as Performance', *Music Theory Online* 7, no. 2 (2001), <https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.01.7.2/mto.01.7.2.cook.html>, sections 14 and 15.

deliberately experiment with fragmentation and representation as a means both to stimulate a new idea of liveness and to assert their identity as virtual/digital artists.

‘Musical Personae’ and Digital Space

‘[P]erformance does not exist in order to present musical works, but rather, musical works exist in order to give performers something to perform.’¹³ Auslander develops this famous statement by Christopher Small by interrogating and extending the dualism of work versus performance into the realm of identity construction: ‘[T]o be a musician is to perform an identity in a social realm. What musicians perform first and foremost is not music, but their own identities as musicians, their musical personae.’¹⁴ According to this view, musical objects serve only as pretexts for performers’ actions – for the contextual representation of identities.¹⁵

Considering musical performances as an ‘integral part of the production of music’, and advocating for analysis of ‘the totality of any event as well as its contexts’, Auslander shifts to the changes central to the new musicological turn of the 1980s. One fundamental challenge to traditional historical musicology was the criticism of the idea of work centrality (or what Auslander calls the ‘ontological priority of texts’).¹⁶ Thinking of music as performance, he argues, is ‘to foreground performers and their concrete relationships to audiences, rather than the question of the relationship between musical works and performance.’¹⁷ From this standpoint, the identities of artists are both created by musicians and negotiated in partnership with audiences and sponsors (thus socially co-created in a network of conventions and expectations) in different contexts and performance situations. Arguing against Stanley Godlovitch,¹⁸ Auslander developed his model not just for understanding ‘traditional’ Western

¹³ Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998), 51.

¹⁴ Philip Auslander, ‘Musical Personae’, *TDR: The Journal of Performance Studies* 50, no. 1 (2006): 101.

¹⁵ For ontological questions regarding the duality of work versus performance and its impact in canon building, see Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*, Rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Carolyn Abbate, ‘Music – Drastic or Gnostic?’, *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 3 (2004): 505–36 – this article deals with the neglect of performative categories in writing and talking about music.

¹⁶ Auslander, ‘Musical Personae’, 101.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁸ Stanley Godlovitch, *Musical Performance: A Philosophical Study* (London: Routledge, 1998).

art-music performance formats such as the solo recital, but also for thinking 'in the purview of musical performance all instances in which musicians play for an audience', including digital or digitally mediated contexts.¹⁹ Emphasizing the significance of artists and audiences (of human beings), Auslander criticizes both Small's and Cook's analytical frames, which focus on the abstract dualism of work/performance or product/process.²⁰ Each musical genre constitutes a social frame carrying its own particular set of conventions, and – crucial for the case study I will present next – the choice of musical works is, he argues, 'part of the expressive equipment musicians employ in the production of personae'.²¹

Auslander's point of departure in the definition of the 'musical persona' is Simon Frith's emphasis on two performative aspects: 'star personality' and 'song personality'.²² To this 'double enactment' (Frith), Auslander adds a third component based on the idea of film actors performing a star personality beneath the represented character:

Frith proposes that we hear pop singers as 'personally expressive', that is, as singing in their own persons, from their own experience. But two other layers are imposed on that one because popular musicians are 'involved in a process of *double enactment*: they enact both a star personality (their image) and a song personality, the role that each lyric requires, and the pop star's art is to keep both acts in play at once'.²³

Auslander's expansion and differentiation considers different 'signifieds' combined and expressed by performers: '[T]he real person (the performer as human being), the performance persona (which corresponds to Frith's star personality or image) and the character (Frith's song personality)'.²⁴ Even if, in Frith's representation, it is mainly about the embodiment through the voice and interpretation of the song lyrics, non-singing musicians can use other strategies to develop characters, making the 'musical persona' (his/her social staging) an essential component inseparably connected with the musical product with which the audience identifies itself. The perception of the music is mediated thus by our conception of the performer as 'musical persona'.²⁵

¹⁹ Auslander, 'Musical Personae', 103.

²⁰ Ibid., 101.

²¹ Ibid., 117, 118.

²² Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

²³ Philip Auslander, 'Performance Analysis and Popular Music: A Manifesto', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 14, no. 1 (2004): 6.

²⁴ Ibid., 6.

²⁵ Ibid., 7.

In his preliminary research on this theory, Auslander also discusses questions of performance in cyberspace, concentrating on the phenomenon of internet chatterbots and questioning how new technologies may lead to a different understanding of liveness.²⁶ However, at his time of writing (in 2002), cyber-liveness and online musical performance were still immature ventures: at the beginning of the 2000s, streaming and the digital mediation of music was still exclusively limited to sound only via the MP3 format (first with Napster, then with other legal or less legal peer-to-peer platforms) and the visual and physical gestures of music making remained largely unseen.

A 'Digital Artist'? A Case Study

To what extent are Auslander's observations applicable to current musical phenomena (performances) on the net? And what is the role played by aspects of intermediality and interactivity in the context of musical interpretation in cyberspace? I will approach these questions through a case study dedicated to the 1982-born Uzbek American pianist Lola Astanova. Like other 'crossover' classical performers, Astanova uses her own YouTube channels as a platform for her persona, but her methods of presentation and representation are also unique in several ways: as a classically trained pianist, she performs nearly exclusively on YouTube and other digital spaces and her videos evidence her adoption of new audiovisual performance formats and DIY strategies more typical of net influencers than traditional art-music concert performers.

To begin with, Astanova had a standard career for a virtuoso child prodigy, attending a music school for gifted children in Tashkent at the age of six, participating in competitions, starting a concert career and performing in different European countries from the age of eight. In 2003, she emigrated to the United States and graduated from Houston's Rice University in 2005.²⁷ After her move to America, her career started to expand away from her traditional performing roots and moved towards a more celebrity-driven circuit: in 2008,

²⁶ Philip Auslander, 'Live from Cyberspace: Performance on the Internet', in *Mediale Performanzen: Historische Konzepte und Perspektiven*, ed. Jutta Eming, Annette J. Lehmann and Irmgard Maassen (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 2002), 319–35.

²⁷ 'Lola Astanova', https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lola_Astanova; Parenteau Guidance, 'Lola Astanova, a Young Russian Piano Virtuoso Embarks Upon Her Professional Career in America', <https://www.prlog.org/10037225-lola-astanova-young-russian-piano-virtuoso-embarks-upon-her-professional-career-in-america.html>.

she performed at the National September 11 Memorial & Museum at the benefit concert hosted by New York mayor Michael Bloomberg, for instance.²⁸ In 2012, she made her Carnegie Hall debut at a benefit gala concert for the American Cancer Society, hosted by Julie Andrews and chaired by future US president Donald Trump, who is one of her greatest fans.²⁹ The concert was received sceptically by a reviewer from the *New York Times*, who drew attention to her exaggerated gestures, lack of emotion and the focus she gave to her outfit.³⁰ On several other occasions, Astanova received similarly close attention for her performance style and appearance: her usual attire consists of extremely high heels and tiny miniskirts that (self-)sexualize her persona. Astanova later performed at the White House, playing the National Anthem at the Fourth of July concert and in a private concert at Trump's Mar-a-Lago Club.³¹ Although performing at various other functions,³² she never entered the traditional international concert circuit, remaining instead anchored to the showbiz world and event concert culture where she performed with and for politicians, movie and fashion stars and athletes, and with other stars of the popular music business like Andrea Bocelli, David Foster and Al Di Meola.³³

Apart from gala concerts and similar events, Astanova cleverly developed her online presence, eventually settling her performance practice securely within virtual spaces.³⁴ Her Instagram page has more than 1 million followers (as of September 2021) and 866,000 people like and follow her Facebook page, where viewers can watch her videos and, in terms of net influencer economic strategies, buy digital formats of her tracks, sheet music of her transcriptions, arrangements of pop tunes and even personalized video greetings, performances

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Seth Hettena, 'The President and the Soviet-Born Pianist: Donald Trump Has Known Lola Astanova Socially for Years, and She's Performed at Both the White House and Mar-a-Lago', *Rolling Stone*, 15 January 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/lola-astanova-trump-779405/>.

³⁰ Zachary Woolfe, 'Air Kisses, Spike Heels and Ample Rubato', in *New York Times*, 21 January 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/21/arts/music/lola-astanova-in-horowitz-tribute-at-carnegie-hall-review.html>.

³¹ Zachary Lewis, 'Cleveland Orchestra Gives Private Concert at Trump's Mar-a-Lago Club', in *Cleveland.com*, 24 January 2014, https://www.cleveland.com/musicdance/2014/01/cleveland_orchestra_gives_priv.html.

³² See Lola Astanova's Homepage, <https://lolaastanova.com/about> for lists of other concerts.

³³ F. Alex, 'Bésame mucho – Lola Astanova & Al Di Meola (23 Feb 2019)', *YouTube video*, 00:01:01, 24 February 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJSixjbg-Wk>; LOLA ASTANOVA, '(TRAILER) Andrea Bocelli & Lola Astanova in "The Journey to the Theatre of Silence"', *YouTube video*, 00:02:23, 20 January 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WOY9Hk28aIE>; Lola Astanova FanClub, 'Lola Astanova / Novak Djokovic – Piano performance at the opening of ADRIA TOUR (Belgrade)', *YouTube video*, 00:01:00, 15 June 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1sBhsDDN9ng>.

³⁴ See listing in <https://linktr.ee/LolaAstanova>.

and gadgets from her official shop ‘pianoslayer.com’, as well as products selected and recommended by her through an Amazon link. Her Twitter page has only 1,700 followers and has not been updated since July 2019, probably because of Twitter’s more text-based strategies. Although she hosts several digital channels, her YouTube channel has garnered over 482,000 subscribers,³⁵ and her YouTube video of Beethoven’s ‘Moonlight Sonata’ transcribed for piano and cello (played by the Croatian cellist Stjepan Hauser, a fellow ‘YouTube Star’ with whom Astanova shares another channel) has received over 49 million clicks and 22,000 comments.³⁶ Paratexts have also developed on YouTube, like the ‘Lola Astanova Fanclub’ channel, which boasts 129,000 subscribers.³⁷

Following Astanova’s channels over the last two years, I have noticed how she changed the direction of her official channel by limiting the number of videos uploaded and by intensifying the promotion of the MP3 files of her productions. In other channels, on the other hand, a range of videos have appeared (most of them on the Lola Astanova Fanclub channel), which offer fragmentary excerpts of compositions (e.g. a 52-second video of Chopin’s Second Piano Concerto with the indication ‘favorite part’,³⁸ fragments of Chopin’s and Beethoven’s compositions,³⁹ ‘funny’ entertaining videos,⁴⁰ soundtrack melodies⁴¹ and duos with Hauser, among other things). As would be expected of an artist concerned with celebrity culture, Astanova’s repertoire is very traditional – she plays pieces

³⁵ As of 13 September 2022.

³⁶ Lola Astanova and Stjepan Hauser YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCxpTH0kZbYO68VKnyUsyfA>; LoLa & Hauser, ‘LoLa & Hauser – Moonlight Sonata’, *YouTube video*, 00:04:07, 20 April 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AzWDs26YL9Y>.

³⁷ Lola Astanova FanClub YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCL-W-DnLleZNakTyvvh4_Ng.

³⁸ Lola Astanova FanClub, ‘Lola Astanova – Chopin Concerto No. 2 (favorite part)’, *YouTube video*, 00:00:51, 20 September 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zWsiPXVnJDs>.

³⁹ Lola Astanova FanClub, ‘Lola Astanova – Moonlight Sonata 3rd Movement by Beethoven’, *YouTube video*, 00:00:57, 25 July 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILz2wvnEum8>; Lola Astanova FanClub, ‘Lola Astanova – Beethoven “Pathétique” Sonata 3rd Movement’, *YouTube video*, 00:00:57, 7 August 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qa01GcEL80c>; Lola Astanova FanClub, ‘Lola Astanova – Chopin’s Nocturne in C sharp minor’, *YouTube video*, 00:01:10, 29 October 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mxzn6HRnps>; Lola Astanova FanClub, ‘Lola Astanova – Etude Op. 25 No. 12 (Ocean) by Chopin’, *YouTube video*, 00:00:58, 1 August 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bf3FFvAZ4LE>.

⁴⁰ Lola Astanova FanClub, ‘Lola Astanova – Il Canto degli Italiani (Italian Anthem)’, *YouTube video*, 00:01:26, 12 July 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_4zZL5_Bn0; Lola Astanova FanClub, ‘Lola Astanova – Piano, wine and dance’, *YouTube video*, 00:01:00, 21 April 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gJld8FB0NY>; Lola Astanova FanClub, ‘Lola Astanova – Barbie playing piano’, *YouTube video*, 00:00:32, 1 July 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Obkjet4Tikw>.

⁴¹ Lola Astanova FanClub, ‘Lola Astanova – Will you be my Valentine? – Love Theme from Cinema Paradiso’, *YouTube video*, 00:01:00, 14 February 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dbNR85Il6vg>; Lola Astanova FanClub, ‘Lola Astanova – The Piano Duet from Tim Burton’s Corpse Bride’, *YouTube video*, 00:01:05, 21 October 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyFkqhZEt-A>.

from the virtuosic piano canon by Chopin, Liszt, Rachmaninoff and others, besides well-known standards from the classic piano repertoire like Beethoven's 'most famous' movements and her own versions of popular songs and current hits. These excerpts pose questions of historical and authorial 'responsibility': who made, uploaded and recombined these fragments of whole performances? Astanova herself (perhaps by making unused video footage available as fragments to her official fan site) or somebody else? Or rather, to use a terminology better denoting the way digital platforms and channels work and the way their cultural logic has changed, who are these 'content creators'?⁴² According to Jean Burgess's and Joshua Green's concept of 'co-creative relationships', those questions don't really matter for discussions about YouTube, since 'whatever YouTube is, it is produced dynamically (that is, as an ongoing process, over time) as a result of many interconnected instances of participation, by many different people.'⁴³

While this questioning might at first seem to distract from the question of 'musical persona', it in fact serves to illuminate the malleability and ambiguity of the boundaries between presentation and self-representation, a blurring that is a direct result of Astanova's multimedial online 'musical persona'. Marta Gabryelczak-Paprocka has presented three case studies dedicated to soloists strongly promoted by the contemporary media system: for her, Astanova, Hauser and the German violinist David Garrett represent a new typology of classical musician that positions their images as products of a consumerist world and is able to adapt to the expectations of present times and prevailing trends.⁴⁴ Gabryelczak-Paprocka empirically analyses (through interviews) the way the visual dimension shapes an audience's aesthetic perception.⁴⁵

The visual dimension is crucial to the success of Astanova's videos. They usually take place indoors (her apartment or recording studio, for instance, Figure 1.1),

⁴² Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2018).

⁴³ Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, 'The Entrepreneurial Vlogger: Participatory Culture Beyond the Professional-Amateur Divide', in *The YouTube Reader*, ed. Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009), 90.

⁴⁴ Marta Gabryelczak-Paprocka, 'Wizerunek solisty instrumentalisty jako medialnego celebryty w kulturze XXI wieku / the Image of a Solo Instrument Player as a Media Celebrity in the 21st Century', *Notes Muzyczny* 7, no. 14 (2020): 10.

⁴⁵ On this matter see also Philip Auslander, 'Musical Persona: The Physical Performance of Popular Music', in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology*, ed. Derek B. Scott (London: Taylor and Francis, 2009), 303. Other examples include Noola K. Griffiths, 'The Effects of Concert Dress and Physical Appearance on Perceptions of Female Solo Performers', *Musicae Scientiae* 12, no. 2 (2008): 273–90; Friedrich Platz and Reinhard Kopiez, 'When the Eye Listens: A Meta-Analysis of How Audio-Visual Presentation Enhances the Appreciation of Music Performance', *Music Perception* 30, no. 1 (2012): 71–83.



Figure 1.1 Typical indoor staging of an Astanova's video: 'Lola Astanova – Chopin's Nocturne in C sharp minor' (29 October 2021).

although some are in outdoor settings (mainly imaginary locations for piano playing, like the seashore, Figure 1.2).⁴⁶ If we build on Kathrin Peters's and Andrea Seier's analysis of the home dancing video spaces of teenagers, we could interpret Astanova's settings as examples of Foucauldian heterotopias: 'as equally private *and* public, actually existing *and* utopian, performative *and* transgressive spaces' (Figure 1.3).⁴⁷ The aesthetic addressed in both the indoor and outdoor videos is peculiar; it doesn't negotiate or blur the boundaries between an elitist and a popular conception of music, but it is something else, new, direct and ephemeral, which would be problematic in other medial contexts, like television

⁴⁶ LOLA ASTANOVA, 'Lola Astanova – Ocean Etude', *YouTube video*, 00:03:12, 4 October 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYlyqvmzv30>; LOLA ASTANOVA, 'Lola Astanova – Inspirit', *YouTube video*, 00:06:18, 1 August 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3fZoKSIHbOA>. While the first video closes with an ecological message (#CleanOceans), the second is also clearly intended at the end as a promotion for tourism in Croatia.

⁴⁷ Kathrin Peters and Andrea Seier, 'Home Dance: Mediacy and Aesthetics of the Self on YouTube', in Snickars, *The YouTube Reader*, 199.



Figure 1.2 Astanova's video in an outdoor setting: 'Lola Astanova – Ocean Etude' (4 October 2020).



Figure 1.3 'Heterotopian' indoor setting suggesting an illusory world: 'Lola Astanova – Moonlight Sonata 3rd Movement by Beethoven' (25 July 2019).



Figure 1.4 Three grabs with different outfits from the video ‘Chopin Project’ from Lola Astanova, *The Chopin Project (short dresses and high heels)* (28 January 2017).

or cinema, because it eschews longer narrative contextualization.⁴⁸ But its selections are an important factor in managing relationships and interactions among performers and audiences precisely because of this immediacy.

Rarely are two videos performed in the same outfit. One video includes a potpourri of fragments from twelve different Chopin compositions, played ‘while wearing different sexy dresses and shoes.’⁴⁹ Here, interaction with the virtual audience is activated by a request to vote for ‘your favorite one’, although it’s not clear what exactly has to be voted for: favourite dress, shoes, composition or the most successful combination of the three? (Figure 1.4). The relation between performance and outfit in classical music and its effects (influence) on reception has been the subject of several musicological investigations concerning the ‘roles of concert dress and physical attractiveness on audience perceptions of performance quality’ (Noola K. Griffiths), self-representation according to gender stereotypes (Marcia J. Citron) and dress as part of cultural practices associated with the music being played (Nicholas Cook).⁵⁰ Griffiths stresses the fact that, as ‘women do wear revealing clothes much more so than men, a danger is that they run the risk of being regarded as powerless and

⁴⁸ Corinna Herr, ‘“Pop-Appeal” oder mehr? Klassische Musik bei YouTube’, *Musiktheorie: Zeitschrift für Musikwissenschaft* 33, no. 4 (2018): 330.

⁴⁹ Piano in High Heels, ‘Lola Astanova, The Chopin Project (short dresses and high heels)’, *YouTube video*, 00:11:41, 28 January 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-pTeR7bzmAA>.

⁵⁰ Griffiths, ‘The Effects of Concert Dress and Physical Appearance on Perceptions of Female Solo Performers’, 274; Marcia J. Citron, ‘Feminist Waves and Classical Music: Pedagogy, Performance, Research’, *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 8, no. 1 (2004): 47–60; Cook, ‘The Domestic Gesamtkunstwerk, or Record Sleeves and Reception’.

passive objects [. . .] for the male gaze, with little or no attention given to their musical skills'.⁵¹ Indeed this is one of the topics of discussion in the 'media conversations' posted to Astanova's videos: here, fans argue that critics judge her negatively and with envy because of her appearance (her attire in particular is very different from the traditionally more conservative dress adopted by many classical musicians).⁵² In the discussion under a vlog on Astanova with the catchy title 'The whole truth about Lola Astanova' in a YouTube channel held by Italian pianist Christian Salerno,⁵³ for instance, one user (Mimose97) affirms that Astanova 'takes advantage of her beauty, certainly adding that extra something to make people like her' and that 'those who criticise her do so out of envy'.⁵⁴ User design club adds: 'She is one of the best pianists in the world! And she has courage to spare. Courage to be free. Free to dress as she likes. Society is not yet ready to see and accept woman's freedom, to see a bit of breast and a bit of thigh without thinking badly of it.' Indeed, Astanova's atypical attire is hardly a new thing. In the past, classical musicians like Joanna McGregor and Nigel Kennedy have preferred more informal dress, while Vanessa Mae and Yuja Wang are renowned for their glamorous looks. More critically oriented users, on the other hand, are rarely scandalized by her look. Instead, they compare her technical and artistic skills unfavourably to those of other concert pianists. This is what user Vero Maestro states in a comment to the same vlog: 'I care about the music and as far as I'm concerned she could also play naked or in a coat. I'm simply saying that, compared to Martha Argerich, Ashkenazy, Pollini, Gilels, but also to very young Russian pianists like Kharitonov or Trifonov, well, no contest.'

Referring to performances of experimental art music on YouTube, Juana Zimmermann emphasizes the potential to hear music which would otherwise never be heard on stages made of wood and PVC: the same could be said for Astanova's populist video performances, which remain, not only thanks to her dress code but also because of the audiovisual settings, unimaginable in many traditional concert venues.⁵⁵ Astanova's performances differ from

⁵¹ Griffiths, 'The Effects of Concert Dress and Physical Appearance on Perceptions of Female Solo Performers', 275.

⁵² Manovich, 'The Practice of Everyday (Media) Life', 40. Manovich uses this concept to designate a particular communicative situation, a communication around a piece of media, addressing the media object and also other users taking part in the communication in different spaces and times.

⁵³ Christian Salerno, 'Tutta la verità su Lola Astanova', *YouTube video*, 00:13:19, 26 March 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i4NpsBOxaWL>.

⁵⁴ Translation by the author.

⁵⁵ Juana Zimmermann, 'Vom Konzert zu YouTube: Auf dem Weg zu einer Kulturform des Hörens?', *Positionen: Texte zur aktuellen Musik* 112 (August 2017): 15.

'traditional' live performances, since other contexts of meaning are suggested and constructed through the moving image in ways often untranslatable beyond the digital realm. What counts as live experience changes in conjunction with technological development.⁵⁶ Auslander, for instance, describes two 'new forms of liveness': 'online liveness' and 'group liveness'. These are closely linked, because the experience of liveness 'is not limited to specific performer-audience interactions but refers to a sense of always being connected to other people, of continuous, technologically mediated temporal co-presence with others known and unknown'.⁵⁷ The recipients of Astanova's Chopin Project, for example, participate with the content through their comments and votes. By interacting through the digital machine, they have not only the illusion of feedback but also of a subjective and personal encounter with her 'musical persona'. This tearing apart (fragmentating) and reconstructing (reassembling) of materials generates, according to the characteristics of digital technologies, a new idea of liveness and an invitation for further experimentation. Musicians such as Astanova, then, are traditional artists who reinvent themselves as 'digital artists'. Rather than perform for a live audience, they address tablet or mobile phone screens; and rather than offer a traditional ninety-minute concert, they adhere to the quick-fire, perceived short attention spans of the online community.

Astanova's persona arises through a combination of elements, including her repertoire, settings, clothes, (self-)sexualization, gestures, marketing and choice of performance partners. As a result, defining her persona in a succinct way is difficult. Gabryelczak-Paprocka, for instance, describes her as a 'femme fatale at the piano' who addresses the male imagination and as a character with a modern style (innovative in relation to the expected concert hall canon) that makes her resemble American pop stars like Beyoncé and Nicole Scherzinger.⁵⁸ Indeed, a critical blog entry about Astanova written by a young male classical music journalist states that there is obviously not only a market for music with an erotic touch, but also one for eroticism with a musical touch.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ See Lucile Desblache, *Music and Translation: New Mediations in the Digital Age* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2019) for different approaches to the relation of music and translation (performances in a digital space are also able to be interpreted as a form of translation).

⁵⁷ Philip Auslander, 'Digital Liveness: A Historico-Philosophical Perspective', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 34, no. 3 (2012): 6.

⁵⁸ Gabryelczak-Paprocka, 'The Image of a Solo Instrument Player as a Media Celebrity in the 21st Century', 14.

⁵⁹ Malte Hemmerich, 'Bitte immer die Beine filmen!', <https://www.niusic.de/artikel/bitte-immer-die-beine-filmen-lola-astanova>.



Figure 1.5 'Lola Astanova – Etude Op. 25 No. 12 (Ocean) by Chopin' (1 August 2020).

Astanova's 'musical persona' as a 'digital artist' moves close to the realm of an online influencer: by being almost exclusively present in digital spaces, she has developed specific strategies of self-representation that use the vernacular tools of online social media culture, including a meticulous attention to appearance, outfits and performance settings, which often give rise to imagined spaces and scenarios (Figure 1.5). In so doing, she appeals to a wide range of audiences and popularizes repertoires in ways akin to strategies favoured by popular music artists; but at the same time, her performances could be said to diminish other aspects of the performed pieces, which are often fragmented and heavily edited.

As Gabryelczak-Paprocka notes, Astanova's way of appearing and performing is designed in such a way as to catch the eye and to emotionalize her music and image, with her videos sometimes looking like advertisements;⁶⁰ her upload of Liszt's *La Campanella* (Figure 1.6) might easily be used as a car or perfume

⁶⁰ Gabryelczak-Paprocka, 'The Image of a Solo Instrument Player as a Media Celebrity in the 21st Century', 16.



Figure 1.6 Two grabs from a music video using advertising aesthetics: ‘Lola Astanova – La Campanella’ (21 May 2019).

advertisement, for instance.⁶¹ Consequently, Astanova, again acting like net influencers, also selects different ways to market her performances, selling only through digital shops like iTunes or streaming through services like Spotify.⁶² As a result, her music is not attached to physical objects, like CDs and records. Rather, it exists only in the digital space, enacting what Sheila Whiteley and Shara Rambarran call ‘post-CD, post-vinyl forms of music dissemination [. . .]

⁶¹ LOLA ASTANOVA, ‘Lola Astanova – La Campanella’, *YouTube video*, 00:05:37, 21 May 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRZ5X5pPNis>.

⁶² See ‘[Discography]’, <https://www.discogs.com/artist/6538766-Lola-Astanova>, for a list of her releases; resp. ‘[Love in the Time of Covid]’, <https://onerpm.link/loveinthetimeofcovid>, as her last production.

and the destruction of the “long form” of albums.’⁶³ In 2021, she even began to sell a non-fungible token (NFT), a unique art piece which also grants lifetime access to any public performances by her anywhere in the world, making herself, to put it exaggeratedly, into an online commodity. Evidently this kind of marketing strategy is tightly tied to the shift of performance medium from the typical ways of selling music – through artefacts like CDs or seats at a concert – to those appropriate to an exclusively online presence. Against the background of a larger cultural shift towards streamed music, Astanova’s strategies are therefore not surprising; users get in touch with her through digital platforms and will also buy her performances there.

Since I state that her ‘musical persona’ (the ‘digital artist’) is tightly linked to the main medium of her representation and self-representation, I will now try to identify one of the main means to convey and express this ‘musical persona’. The meanings created through the performances and the terms used to create them are, in Astanova’s case, fully in line with the times: as analysed, two of the main features of her YouTube performances are their fragmentary nature and their visual staging, with the body and the outfit of the performer as well as the setting of the performance pushing themselves into the foreground. These features are reminiscent of the ubiquitous practice of the photographic selfie.

Instead of a Conclusion: (Fragments) of a Theory of Musical Selfie

Sumanth Gopinath and Jason Stanyek have presented a theory of the musical selfie based on ideas introduced by Foucault and Tia DeNora and on parallels in the contemporary practice of the photographic selfie. They identify three types of musical selfie (each of them connected to a digital application): playlists, headphone listening and self-produced video recordings of musical performances.⁶⁴ Astanova’s musical agency could be understood as an example of this last type, even if an essential component of Gopinath’s and Stanyek’s definition of the musical selfie (the face as a possibility and as a potential of the sonorous output) is mostly missing in her clips, which mainly focus on body

⁶³ Whiteley and Rambarran, ‘Introduction’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Virtuality*, 9.

⁶⁴ Sumanth Gopinath and Jason Stanyek, ‘Technologies of the Musical Selfie’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Music in Digital Culture*, ed. Nicholas Cook, Monique M. Ingalls and David Trippett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 89–118.

and outfit.⁶⁵ Obviously, these musical selfies trigger not only musical perception (and reception); they are also part of the new online performance concept and the emergent strategy to define a 'musical persona'. On the one hand, musical selfies can ensure absolute control over the image of the performer and guide the audience's gaze through the visual dimension of the videos. On the other hand, they allow something peculiar to arise, something impossible to achieve on the large stage (except in cases when performers are filmed in close-up and streamed simultaneously on big screens). This sense of immediacy and presence contributes to the subjective positioning and intimacy an audience can feel.

The digital self (i.e. the 'digital artist') is defined only in connection with other components of digital culture, like the users, digital sharing, 'algocracy', surveillance and so forth. The immediacy of the interaction between digital agents, its speed and its uncensored appearance, leads to a new dimension: what is new in a digital culture, to paraphrase Paul Sanden and as some of the analysed YouTube videos have shown, is the possibility to rip apart, fragment and reconstruct the traditionally intended paradigms of liveness (the ways of defining a performance) according to the particularities and peculiarities of digital spaces and the opportunities afforded by digital technologies.⁶⁶ In a cultural environment characterized by and increasingly comfortable with the logic of fragmentation, permutation and collage, more and more recipients appreciate this erosion of the traditional performance paradigm, and artists therefore consciously begin to experiment with these new concepts of liveness. For sure they have to find more than captivating strategies, since the 'digital culture machine' – to use a term from Andreas Reckwitz – is characterized by the overproduction of cultural formats and counteracted by a scarcity of attention on the part of the recipients, which ultimately leads to a struggle for visibility.⁶⁷ Given these considerations, the brevity of Astanova's uploads (and in particular the ones uploaded by fans) becomes a fundamental feature. For the most part, the videos do not exceed the one-minute mark and thus do not overburden the audience's attention span. This can open the music to broader and different audiences.

⁶⁵ See Giovanni Stanghellini, *Selfie: Sentirsi Nello Sguardo Dell'altro* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2020) for a psychoanalytical exploration of the relationships between selfie and body perception in contemporary society.

⁶⁶ Paul Sanden, 'Rethinking Liveness in the Digital Age', in *The Cambridge Companion to Music in Digital Culture*, 181.

⁶⁷ Andreas Reckwitz, *The Society of Singularities* (Cambridge; Medford: Polity, 2020); see in this regard Nikolaus Urbanek, 'Herausforderungen spätmoderner Musikphilosophie', in *Perspektiven der Musikphilosophie*, ed. Wolfgang Fuhrmann and Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2021).

Massimo Mantellini interprets the 'death' of the camera as a trigger of new ontologies of images. Referring to the low resolution of pictures taken with phones or similar devices, he asks why we let camera use subside in favour of smartphone cameras. His answers are simple and striking: because we are interested in the fragment, because indeterminacy fascinates and inspires us more than an established truth and because the camera has at some point been perceived by everyone as an obstacle to quickly sharing those fragments.⁶⁸ Carol Vernallis notices something similar in relation to YouTube: 'YouTube is vast and uncharted [. . .]. But hopefully the reader will agree that part of what separates YouTube from other media are the clips' brevity and the ways they're often encountered through exchange with other people: a clip's interest derives from its associations with colleagues, family, friends, and contexts within communities.'⁶⁹ Similar to a photographic selfie, videos seek to convey immediacy and catchiness in order to capture and hold the audience's attention. In turn, this attention can convert into feedback, which generates more hits and thus more publicity for the artist. Even if this recognition happens only in the form of a quick click, the smallest unit assuring the presence of reception, or in superficial and ephemeral comments, as for example like and dislike icons, YouTube's algorithms use this data to recommend and promote the video to other users.⁷⁰

The musical selfie defines the phenomenon of 'digital artists' in the context of contemporary musicking. Felix Stalder identifies three aspects (cultural forms) as characteristic of the culture of digitality (of the 'digital condition'): referentiality, communality and algorithmicity.⁷¹ 'Digital artists' like Astanova draw on these characteristics in their musical selfies by selecting, alluding to and recombining (all facets of referentiality) fragments of music history. These are fundamental agencies for the production of meaning and the constitution of the self as well as a strategy for, to return to Stalder, 'inscribing oneself into cultural processes'. But only, he reminds us, through a 'collectively shared frame of reference [. . ., i.e. communality,] can meanings be stabilized, possible courses of action determined, and resources made available.'⁷² Algorithmicity, ultimately,

⁶⁸ Massimo Mantellini, *Dieci Splendidi Oggetti Morti* (Torino: Einaudi, 2020), 59.

⁶⁹ Carol Vernallis, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press USA, 2013), 9.

⁷⁰ It's important to note that, since November 2021, the number of dislikes for an upload on YouTube is no longer publicly visible.

⁷¹ Felix Stalder, *The Digital Condition*, with the assistance of Translated by Valentine A. Pakis (Cambridge UK, Malden MA: Polity Press, 2018).

⁷² Ibid., 5.

is jointly responsible for the distribution and spread of musical selfies. It is also responsible for this chapter: only through ‘automated decision-making processes that reduce and give shape to the glut of information’⁷³ did I come across Astanova, which YouTube suggested to me as I searched for Chopin examples for my music history classes.

‘Digital artists’ and their musical selfies will increasingly come to the fore and offer themselves as source material for musicologists. Even if not persuaded by their aesthetic value, as musicologists we cannot look the other way and pretend they do not represent an important gatekeeping role for music history. In fact, they provide direct access to the cultural resonances of our immediate surroundings and what music means to a contemporary public. New kinds of ‘musical personae’ expressing themselves through musical selfies pave the way for a new culture of liveness, as Ignazio Macchiarella writes: ‘It looks like music is not (is no longer) something that one listens [to], but more and more something to own via smartphones and digital devices’, with the goal of stimulating ‘media conversations’, likes and dislikes.⁷⁴ For sure, music videos on YouTube have several functions: serving as part of archives, as a label’s promotion and so forth. But uploading music videos and interacting with them is mainly part of what Macchiarella describes as the ‘contemporary musiking [*sic*] process’.⁷⁵

Let’s return to the idea of the ‘digital artist’. In a blog interview from 2009, Astanova was asked how ‘YouTube, with its extraordinary library of music and musicians, changed the concert artist’s life today?’ In her answer, she defined YouTube as ‘an amazing way to communicate with the audience directly, without intermediaries and outside the sometimes intimidating atmosphere of a concert hall’, allowing ‘for an entirely different relationship between the artist and the listener and for a much closer, much more personal experience’.⁷⁶ Maybe this personal experience is oxymoronic as it suggests a dialogic relationship between artists and audiences (in the form of both followers and trolls) and between media scholars and cultural historians. Oxymoronic because this relation wants to be personal in the realm of the virtual and vice versa. This short-circuit situation for me as a musicologist and music addict is stimulating. Selfies are made for instant use. They are enhancements of presence and witnesses of immediacy –

⁷³ Ibid., 6.

⁷⁴ Macchiarella, ‘Making Music in the Time of YouTube’, 6.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁷⁶ ‘[Interview with Lola Astanova]’, <https://derricksblog.wordpress.com/2009/10/14/my-interview-with-lola-astanova/>.

but considering them as historiographic sources also makes them an integral part of cultural memory, and this is one of the questions the historical, artistic and philological sciences will increasingly have to deal with.⁷⁷

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⁷⁷ For an overview of the importance of memory studies for music historiography see Melanie Unseld, 'Erinnern – in einem Meer von Vergessen: Über einige Bedingungen von Musikgeschichtsschreibung', in *Rued Langgaard: Perspektiven*, ed. Juri Giannini (Wien: Hollitzer Wissenschaftsverlag, 2021).

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Quare(-in) the Mainstream

YouTube, Social Media and Augmented Realities in Lil Nas X's *MONTERO*

Emily Thomas



In life, we hide the parts of ourselves we don't want the world to see. We lock them away. We tell them no. We banish them. But here, we don't. Welcome to Montero.¹

—Lil Nas X, aka Montero Lamar Hill

These words, which open the music video for 'MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)' (26 March 2021), invite us into *MONTERO*, the transmedial pop-rap world of Lil Nas X's debut album, which was released on 17 September 2021 following a marketing campaign that spanned many months. Uploaded first to the artist's YouTube channel, the music video can be experienced as a discrete form. But it also plays with the platform's aesthetics of participation, DIY processes, mash-up and its interoperability with other social media platforms to develop its themes and metaphors across numerous interconnected paratexts. Lil Nas X has uploaded various audiovisual responses to and remediations of the official music video to his YouTube channel. Other responses have spread across cybermedia and beyond, moving through social media platforms, from Facebook and Twitter to Instagram and TikTok, and out into live performances, interviews, billboards, adverts and artefacts.

¹ dot, "LIL NAS X MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name) Meme. – TIKTOK COMPILATION" YouTube.

Real name Montero Lamar Hill, 23-year-old Lil Nas X was raised by separated parents in a traditional, religious household in Georgia. As a teenager, he struggled internally with his sexuality and spent much time alone on the internet. It was during this time that he became increasingly adept at navigating the new media landscape. One of his early projects included the successful Nicki Minaj fan, or ‘stan,’ account on Twitter (@nasmaraj).² It was here that Lil Nas X worked out how to orchestrate virality and initiated his own carefully calibrated plan to gain notoriety as a singer. After dropping out of college in 2018 to pursue music, Lil Nas X recorded the country-trap hybrid ‘Old Town Road’ (2018), which he used to make himself one of TikTok’s earliest and biggest success stories. In his own words, he ‘promoted the song as a meme for months,’ intentionally tapping into popular internet trends such as TikTok challenges and Twitter memes.³ The song eventually went viral due to the #YeeHaw challenge, a viral trend in which TikTok users transform into cowboys by drinking ‘yee yee juice’ and listening to ‘Old Town Road’. One of the song’s remixes with Billy Ray Cyrus is now the longest-running number one in US Billboard history (at nineteen weeks) and the highest-certified single of all time. Initially perceived by some as a one-hit wonder, Lil Nas X is now a Grammy Award winner and one of *TIME* magazine’s ‘Most Influential People of 2021’.⁴ His success has in part been driven by controversial moments, initially generated by accident and later designed as part of his marketing strategy. In 2018, ‘Old Town Road’ was removed from the *Billboard Country Charts* for not being country enough, a decision that sparked worldwide debates about racism and genre: by 2021, Lil Nas X intentionally baited a lawsuit from Nike to serve the wider narrative of *MONTERO*.

Although Lil Nas X has been heralded by reviewers as a ‘musical trailblazer’ with a sixth sense for controversial ‘marketing and memes,’ his *MONTERO* project is not simply an exploration of cybermedia’s transmedial possibilities. Rather, it uses the intertextual, post-media possibilities of social media and beyond to produce a powerful and arresting intervention into the dynamics and politics of

² Although Lil Nas X initially denied his involvement with this fan page, an investigation by *New York Magazine* later exposed the connection: Brian Feldman, ‘Before “Old Town Road,” Lil Nas X Was a Tweetdecker,’ *New York Magazine*, 5 April 2019, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/04/lil-nas-x-was-a-popular-twitter-user-before-old-town-road.html>.

³ *The New York Times*, ‘How Lil Nas X Took “Old Town Road” from TikTok Meme to No 1 | Diary of a Song,’ *YouTube video*, 00:06:56, 10 May 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ptKqFafZgCk&ab_channel=TheNewYorkTimes.

⁴ *TIME*, ‘TIME100: Most Influential People of 2021,’ *TIME*, 15 September 2021, <https://time.com/collection/100-most-influential-people-2021/>.

Here, I explore how Lil Nas X has used YouTube and other new media platforms to promote *MONTERO* as a vehicle of queer celebration and argue that his intersectional subject matter is mirrored by an intersectional approach to web 2.0's participatory and transmedial spaces. Lil Nas X's ability to navigate

¹¹ Robert Jones Jr., 'X Factor (or 'You Was Never Really Rooting for Me Anyway)'; *Son of Baldwin*, 23 July 2021, <http://www.sonofbaldwin.com/2021/07/23/x-factor/>.

multiple media landscapes positions him as a new breed of audiovisual artist rather than a stand-alone pop star. In her work on new media, Carol Vernallis has noted that music, when presented in an audiovisual context, becomes an important cultural signifier.¹² We can see this emergent, cultural signification at play in *MONTERO*, where the album's radical quareness and 'newness' arises through the combination and intertextuality of sound and image. With content and its delivery so densely intertwined, *MONTERO* forges a new mode of utterance for LGBTQIA+ communities, not only propelling quareness into mainstream, popular culture but also undoing the conventions of earlier forms of queer audiovisuality. These works, such as Derek Jarman's *Edward II* (1991) and Larue Lynd's *R.S.V.P.* (1991), were part of what became known as New Queer Cinema (NQC).¹³ In 2013, B. Ruby Rich suggested that NQC, which had begun to reach mainstream audiences around the turn of the twenty-first century, had experienced the demise of its boundary-pushing, ideology-challenging elements.¹⁴ NQC's success, she argues, means it has now 'dispersed itself in any number of elsewheres' and thus lacks the 'concentrated creative presence and focused community responsiveness of its origin movement'.¹⁵ I suggest that *MONTERO* refashions the aesthetics, styles and audiovisual articulations of NQC, splintering its practices and ideologies across new media platforms to enable new and radical expressions of quareness to arise. Rather than showcasing what Rich has described as the 'cuddlier' and 'squeaky clean' LGBTQIA+ identities in popular culture, Lil Nas X has used the new media landscape to subvert dominant definitions of race and sexuality and typical systems of oppression.¹⁶

Notably, there is a wider cultural rupture taking place in both cinema and music, wherein quare representations are becoming increasingly common. Take for instance Francesca Royster's research on 'maverick' quare performers, who push the norms of blackness by 'entangling it with sexuality and gender, through eccentric performances' and the platform of popular music.¹⁷ Examples include musician Todrick Hall, whose song 'Nails, Hair, Hips, Heels' (2019) appears as

¹² Carol Vernallis, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 228.

¹³ B. Ruby Rich, 'New Queer Cinema', *BFI*, 25 June 2017, <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/new-queer-cinema-b-ruby-rich>.

¹⁴ B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 263.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 263, 282.

¹⁷ Francesca T. Royster, *Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 3.

Eric dances joyfully and puts on make-up in Season 3 of *Sex Education* (2021). Discussing Lil Nas X's overt gayness in popular culture, Hall writes, 'I love the fact Lil Nas X is showing up to these spaces where it would have never been welcomed.'¹⁸ Composer Nicholas Britell's 'chopped and screwed' version of Jidenna's 'Classic Man' (2015) in Barry Jenkins's film *Moonlight* (2017) operates in a similar way, by reflecting the quare experiences of Chiron, the film's main protagonist.¹⁹ Working against the mainstream heterosexual lens, these minority-mediated representations have the potential to reconfigure power relations in groundbreaking ways.

Lil Nas X feeds into and extends this proliferation of celebratory quare representation. By collating *MONTERO* across new media platforms in increasingly innovative and complex ways, his quare messaging is reaching fans at an unprecedented speed. That is not to say he did not also use 'offline' forms of marking: in fact, he distributed a series of eye-catching parody billboards around America with captions such as 'GAY? YOU MAY BE ENTITLED TO FINANCIAL COMPENSATION! VISIT WELCOMETOMONTERO.COM'.²⁰ In her work on racial politics, Sarah J. Jackson argues that Black celebrities have the unique potential to challenge how mainstream media maintains existing structures of suppression.²¹ *MONTERO*'s rhizomatic transmedial configuration, which, as we shall see, extends in numerous directions at once – both online and off – paves the way for multiple perspectives. The choice of YouTube as the project's technological conduit is deeply significant. Promoted as a democratized and open space that encourages multiple voices through user interaction, the platform allows Lil Nas X to promote his self-proclaimed 'gay agenda' through the parody and remediation of popular cultural forms, including music videos, vlogs, celebrities' pregnancy announcements, Twitter feeds and Instagram stories.²² *MONTERO*'s remediations come in many forms: through intertextual

¹⁸ Topher Gauk-Roger, 'Todrick Hall Made "Conscious Decision" to Create Content for "People Who Have Been Underserved"', *People*, 15 July 2021, <https://people.com/music/todrick-hall-conscious-decision-to-make-content-for-underserved-people/>.

¹⁹ Dale Chapman, "'Let Me Show You What That Song Really Is': Nicholas Britell on the Music of *Moonlight*", in *Transmedia Directors: Artistry, Industry and New Audiovisual Aesthetics*, ed. Carol Vernallis, Holly Rogers and Lisa Perrott (Bloomsbury: London, 2020), 306.

²⁰ Amy Houston, 'Ad of the Day: Lil Nas X Offers Financial Compensation to Haters in Montero Billboards', *The Drum*, 17 September 2021, <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2021/09/17/ad-the-day-lil-nas-x-offers-financial-compensation-haters-montero-billboards>.

²¹ Sarah J. Jackson, *Black Celebrity, Racial Politics, and the Press* (Routledge: New York and London, 2014), 2–3.

²² Patrick Benjamin, 'Lil Nas X Thanks the "Gay Agenda" for VMAs Win', *Dazed Digital*, 13 September 2021, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/54104/1/lil-nas-x-thanks-the-gay-agenda-for-vm-as-win>.

references to other media forms, via the convergence of discrete videos to forge a multiplatform world reachable via a variety of access points and through the blurring of the real and the virtual. But if the fixed linear forms of NQC are fragmented across social media to accommodate intersectional quareness in *MONTERO*, what does this mean for the idea of narrative or the development of argument? And how can entrenched political and social viewpoints be challenged through fragments that can be approached in any order?

YouTube: *MONTERO*'s Home Planet

The intricately connected *MONTERO* world(s) flow across social media platforms, with each contributing something unique by way of what Henry Jenkins calls 'additive comprehension', a key pillar of transmedia storytelling.²³ And yet, the original music video and enduring core of the project resides on YouTube, as do several of the video's earliest remediations. Four music videos support *MONTERO*: 'MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)' (co-directed by Lil Nas X and Tanu Muino); 'SUN GOES DOWN' (co-directed by Lil Nas X and Psycho Films, 2021); 'INDUSTRY BABY' (directed by Christian Breslauer, 2021) and 'THAT'S WHAT I WANT' (directed by STILLZ, 2021). All four storylines were conceptualized and written by Lil Nas X. The videos make up the project's core and have each racked up millions of views. The first video debuted at No. 1 on Billboard's Hot 100, receiving 45 million views in the four days following its April release: it currently stands at 455 million views (as of April 2022). 'INDUSTRY BABY' became Lil Nas X's third number one hit on Billboard's Hot 100 stands and has attracted 329 million views. 'THAT'S WHAT I WANT' and 'SUN GOES DOWN' have 108 million and 39 million views, respectively. While all four videos contain a plethora of visual repetitions and continuations, sonically, they are all self-contained. Each YouTube video is accompanied by a visualizer, which deals with other aspects of the *MONTERO* pluriverse, such as celestial bodies, smart cities, Japanese gardens, medieval landscapes and post-human bodies.²⁴

²³ Henry Jenkins, 'Transmedia Storytelling 101', *Henry Jenkins*, 21 March 2007, http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html.

²⁴ Matthew Jordan Miller, 'The *MONTERO* Syllabus', *Matthew Jordan Miller*, 19 September 2021, <http://www.matthewjordanmiller.com/blog/montero-syllabus>.

Each video uses remediated themes and metaphors to subvert dominant social paradigms and unlock multiple quare meanings.²⁵ In her research on transmedia, Vernallis has found that music videos typically advance ‘despicable images of militarised, criminalised, hypersexualised and overcommodified performers of colour’.²⁶ Turning the tide against historically negative representations of gay, Black performers in music video, Lil Nas X refashions images that have typically excluded quareness. Grappling with religion, high school, prison, college and marriage, Lil Nas X satirizes dark social realities and inscribes these images with quare rebellion. Thanks to YouTube’s possibilities as a fluid, constantly remediating platform, these music video images operate in tandem with one another seamlessly.

After the launch of ‘MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)’ on YouTube, its striking imagery caused the internet to erupt into dispute and debate and the video generated over one million comments (as of April 2022). The reasons are clear to see. Taking direct inspiration from Luca Guadagnino’s 2017 film of the same name, the song and video deal with Lil Nas X’s longing for a man who remains closeted and uncomfortable with his sexuality. The musician is explicit in his sexual desires, singing, ‘I want that jet life from fuckin’ and flyin’, shoot a child in your mouth while I’m riding’. The music video plays on the lyrics’ overt sexual references. Packed with Christian and Roman motifs, references to Dante’s *Inferno*, the imagery of Hieronymus Bosch and cryptic messages in Greek and Latin, the video retells mythological and religious stories through the eyes of a quare protagonist. The cover art operates in tandem with the video, depicting Lil Nas X as both God and Adam in a remediated image of Michelangelo’s ‘The Creation of Adam’. In an interview with *TIME* magazine, Lil Nas X explained his intention:

I wanted to use these things that have been around for so long to tell my own story, and the story of so many other people in the community – or people who have been outcast in general through history. It’s the same thing over and over.²⁷

Comprised of three acts, the video follows Lil Nas X’s journey from paradise – *MONTERO* – which is a disquieting version of the Garden of Eden, to an ancient Christian-inspired trial where he is stoned to death with butt plugs for being gay.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Vernallis, *Unruly Media*, 157.

²⁷ Andrew R. Chow, ‘Historians Decode the Religious Symbolism and Queer Iconography of Lil Nas X’s “Montero” Video’, *TIME*, 30 March 2021, <https://time.com/5951024/lil-nas-x-montero-video-symbolism-explained/>.

The video comes to rest with his celebratory descent to hell, where he gives Satan a lap dance, kills him and claims his throne. Lil Nas X's dramatic embodiment of 'dancing with the devil' is not only a fearless parade of his gay agenda; it is an empowering defiance of homophobia typically associated with Christian ideologies. Alicia Fox Lenz and Jessica Dickinson Goodman have suggested that the video's final act resembles the initial phase of the Harrowing of Hell, a doctrine in Christian theology that details the period between Jesus Christ's crucifixion and his resurrection.²⁸ The doctrine states that Christ descended into hell, triumphed over the devil and brought salvation to the innocent soul's captive there.²⁹ With Lil Nas X acting as Christ, 'MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)' therefore playfully remediates Christianity by quare-ing its key mythological frameworks. His willing and joyful descent into hell indicates that he is happier embracing his homosexuality in hell than he would be if he remained closeted and in heaven. As he jokingly tweeted, 'y'all love saying we going to hell but get upset when we actually go there lmao'.³⁰

This devil scene is integral to *MONTERO*'s transmedial, paratextual worldbuilding. Lenz and Goodman point out that the Harrowing of Hell storyline returns in the 'INDUSTRY BABY' music video, but there is also a key continuation of this storyline in the music video for 'SUN GOES DOWN'.³¹ This video begins with Lil Nas X floating meditatively in the air, dressed in all white with a cross as an earring. Either time travelling or visiting an alternate reality, the artist transports himself into another realm to guide his younger self through issues of closeted sexuality, internalized racism and suicide. After witnessing young Montero's struggles, Lil Nas X intervenes in his school prom and leads him to self-acceptance and peace. His white, celestial outfit and powers, alongside his success in helping his younger self, portray him as a Saviour and guardian. Acting as a Christ-like figure, young Montero is thus saved from his version of hell, a life in which he hides his sexuality for the comfort of heteronormative society. Once again, Lil Nas X subverts religious doctrines that typically exclude homosexuality and instead tells a story of quare acceptance. Montero's salvation

²⁸ MythSoc, 'Lil Nas X's Montero: A Visual Mythology', *YouTube video*, 00:46:20, 25 August 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDMLinqrOio>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ MONTERO (@LilNasX), 'Y'all Love Saying We Going To Hell', *Twitter*, 26 March 2021, <https://twitter.com/lilnasx/status/1375452461817688065?lang=en>.

³¹ Lil Nas X, 'Lil Nas X – SUN GOES DOWN (Official Video)', *YouTube video*, 00:02:53, 21 May 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3BVFY9wnTw&ab_channel=LilNasXVEVO; MythSoc, 'Lil Nas X's Montero: A Visual Mythology'.

at the end of 'SUN GOES DOWN' is therefore a direct continuation of Lil Nas X's quare-ing of the Harrowing of Hell. While both videos can be read as separate entities with individual storylines, then, Lil Nas X has developed key themes in order to spread his quare universe across his YouTube channel.

Following the release of 'SUN GOES DOWN', *MONTERO*'s narratives continued to expand on YouTube via a newly uploaded prelude to the 'INDUSTRY BABY' music video. A powerful example of transmedia storytelling, this prelude acted as a key component of the 'Satan Shoes' controversy, which moved the narrative from YouTube into the real world. Following the media frenzy that derived from Lil Nas X's sexual descent into hell, he released a limited run of fake *Nike* trainers. Collaborating with MSCHF, the artist released 666 pairs of Satanic-themed shoes, all of which supposedly contained a drop of human blood. A lawsuit ensued, and it soon became clear the effect was an intentional effort to maximize the video's controversy. From here, Lil Nas X's story moved back to YouTube via a fake apology video, which comically referenced the typically insincere apology style of vloggers following a scandal. It can therefore be considered a 'memetic video', a term defined by Limor Shifman as 'a popular clip that lures extensive user engagement in the form of parody, pastiche, mash-ups or other derivative work'.³² Memetic videos are a core aspect of *MONTERO*'s promotional campaign. Months later, he took to multiple social media platforms to express mocking concern that he may be sent to prison following a court case with *Nike*. In actuality, the court case was posted to YouTube and acted as a fictional prelude to 'INDUSTRY BABY', which included a 'FREE LIL NAS X' campaign and website. Ironically, Lil Nas X is ultimately sent to prison for being gay, for, as the prosecuting lawyer played by Lil Nas X states in the prelude, 'this is about much more than shoes'. After being asked 'does yo mama know you gay', Lil Nas X responds, 'yes'.³³ The courtroom reacts in shock, and a jury member also played by Lil Nas X exclaims, 'yeah lock him up, throw away the key'.³⁴ Notably, all the main characters in the prelude are played by Lil Nas X: in fact, he plays the majority of characters, including the antagonists, in his YouTube videos, many of whom belittle and criticize the real artist, suggesting that he remains in control of his own narrative. As the prelude finishes, the viewer hears a teaser of 'INDUSTRY BABY' alongside the announcement of the song's release

³² Limor Shifman, 'An Anatomy of a YouTube Meme', *New Media & Society* 14, no. 2 (2011): 190.

³³ Lil Nas X, 'Lil Nas X – INDUSTRY BABY (Prelude)', *YouTube video*, 00:02:03, 19 July 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5QLFrE2qSZo&ab_channel=LilNasX.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

date, mug shots of Lil Nas X and closing credits that comically cite Lil Nas X as the sole actor for each character. The prelude is therefore another example of his ability to critique social justice systems in engaging and comical ways that promote his quare agenda. Integrally, it demonstrates his awareness that YouTube allows artists to engage in a range of diverse direct-to-fan experiences that have the potential to increase engagement.

The 'INDUSTRY BABY' prelude thus flows seamlessly into the 'INDUSTRY BABY' music video, which also assimilates aspects of the Harrowing of Hell storyline from *MONTERO*'s first video. The song, featuring Jack Harlow, acts as Lil Nas X's 'victory lap' as he lists his successes in the face of adversity and chants 'I'm the industry baby'.³⁵ Produced by Take a Daytrip and Kanye West, the song's brass fanfare and trap beat serves to bolster Lil Nas X's assured confidence. Taking place three months after the prelude in the fictitious Montero State Prison, the video is awash with intertextual references. Inspired in part by Frank Darabont's 1994 film *Shawshank Redemption*, the video acts as a social commentary on racial and ethnic disparity in US prisons. Incidentally, Lil Nas X has a habit of remediating films to bolster his quare messaging, as seen in his *Marvel*-inspired album trailer.³⁶ Once again, Lil Nas X subverts typical depictions of quare men. Dressed in all pink uniforms, the men treat prison as a playground, dancing naked in the shower provocatively and lifting weights on the prison grounds. Discussing the video, Lil Nas X explained his intention to show himself 'breaking free from the shackles society places on you' by making an overly masculine place 'gay asf'.³⁷ After discovering a hammer hidden inside 'The Book of Montero', which incidentally flashes with the colours of the LGBTQIA+ rainbow when opened, Lil Nas X creates an escape route. A particularly powerful example of worldbuilding occurs when Lil Nas X knocks the prison guard unconscious; the white male officer is on his phone, watching the Satan scene from the 'MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)' video. Here, YouTube aesthetics have enabled the remediation of content to shine a new, quare light on culture, while playfully turning a typically hostile environment for men like himself, into one of joy and freedom. In a final act of community liberation, Lil Nas X frees his

³⁵ Lil Nas X, 'Lil Nas X, Jack Harlow – INDUSTRY BABY (Official Video)', *YouTube video*, 00:03:56, 23 July 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UTHLKHL_who&ab_channel=LilNasXVEVO.

³⁶ Lil Nas X, 'Lil Nas X – MONTERO (Album Trailer)', *YouTube video*, 00:00:53, 29 June 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0A_e8rKlBKA&ab_channel=LilNasX.

³⁷ Lil Nas X, 'Lil Nas X – The Making of "Industry Baby" (Vevo Footnotes) ft. Jack Harlow', *YouTube video*, 00:04:00, 14 October 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0dkJUweVWKk&ab_channel=LilNasXVEVO.

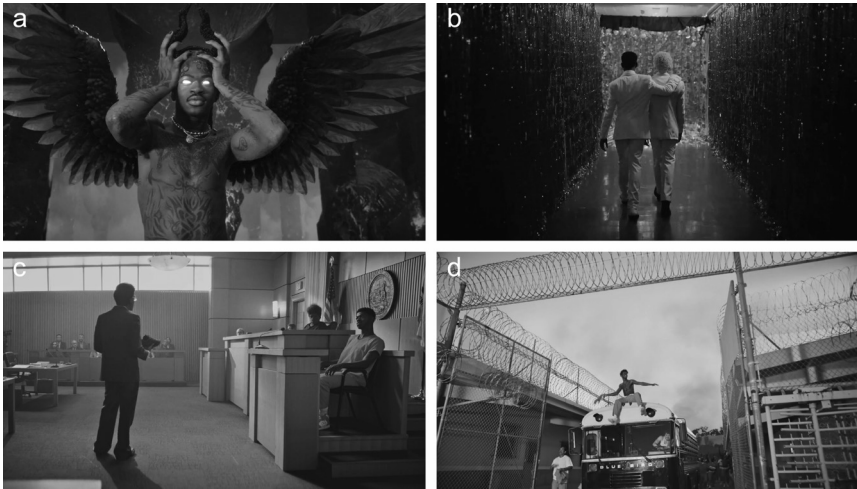


Figure 2.1 *MONTERO's 'Harrowing of Hell' storyline in 'MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)' (Lil Nas X and Tanu Muino, 2021), 'SUN GOES DOWN' (Lil Nas X and Psycho Films, 2021), 'INDUSTRY BABY (Prelude)' (Tony Yacenda, 2021) and 'INDUSTRY BABY ft. Jack Harlow' (Christian Breslauer, 2021).*

fellow prisoners, leading their souls out of incarceration and thereby continuing the Harrowing of Hell and his role as Saviour (see Figure 2.1).³⁸

After escaping from prison in 'INDUSTRY BABY', the story continues elsewhere, once again reminding the viewer that YouTube's aesthetics of remediation, subversion and challenge are key motivators for *MONTERO's* expressive modes. In a YouTube video announcing the album's release date, a news skit starring Lil Nas X playfully parodies news channels that harbour an unconcealed dislike for Lil Nas X, such as *Fox News*, by detailing how the 'power bottom' and 'talentless homosexual' escaped from prison.³⁹ Perhaps borrowing the self-referential strategies from Lady Gaga and Beyoncé's music video for 'Telephone' (2010), the video shows Lil Nas X listening to his next single on his car radio while driving through the desert, still clad in his prison outfit: as the song gradually moves into the underscore, a road sign indicates that 'Montero' is the next stop. The short video comes to an end after Lil Nas X enters a telephone booth with a mystical, floating figure above it. After entering

³⁸ MythSoc, 'Lil Nas X's Montero: A Visual Mythology'.

³⁹ MONTERO (@LilNasX), 'LET'S FUCKIN GOOO! WE MADE FOX NEWS!', *Twitter*, 30 March 2021, <https://twitter.com/lilnasx/status/1376728380087824387?lang=en-GB>; Lil Nas X, 'LIL NAS X PRESENTS "MONTERO" THE ALBUM', *YouTube video*, 00:01:29, 26 August 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8uVhpW1c544&ab_channel=LilNasX.

a number, he is transported back to the *MONTERO* universe, falling through the sky in an array of LGBTQIA+ colours as the album's release date appears in the background.⁴⁰ Perhaps unsurprisingly considering Lil Nas X's habit for expanding the *MONTERO* universe across YouTube, the following video is an announcement of the album tracklist and starts where the previous video left off. Lil Nas X continues his fall from the telephone booth and lands in his designated floating silhouette position at the centre of the album's cover art, thus finally arriving in *MONTERO*, before his descent continues.⁴¹

It is therefore unsurprising that the fourth and final *MONTERO* music video, 'THAT'S WHAT I WANT', released on the same day as the album, continues with Lil Nas X falling out of the sky. Taking place in yet another interrelated realm of *MONTERO*, the artist this time finds himself part of an American Football Match at Montero State University.⁴² Like him, and echoing the pink prisoners of the previous video, his teammates are all dressed in pink, and one in particular garners the attention of Lil Nas X. In football environments, homophobia is often used as a form of what Jake Ashton et al. refer to as 'symbolic violence' and an instrument of control, so this setting is significant.⁴³ After the game, Lil Nas X has passionate sex with a teammate in the changing rooms, another place typically aligned with masculinity, breaking open a *Durex* condom, perhaps to promote safe sex and dispel the 'societal racism and HIV stigma' often experienced by gay, Black men.⁴⁴ While much of the video follows Lil Nas X's love story, it is revealed that his lover is married to a white woman, with whom he has a child. In a notably quare ending, the artist is seen dressed as a bride at the altar, crying and alone. Discussing *Moonlight*, Johnson argues that the ending of the film is decidedly quare rather than queer.⁴⁵ Instead of the two protagonists having sex and reconciling, the viewer is given something a 'little

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Lil Nas X, 'LIL NAS X PRESENTS 'MONTERO' THE ALBUM TRACKLIST', *YouTube video*, 00:01:11, 1 September 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwvKhA-L5bs&ab_channel=LilNasX/.

⁴² Lil Nas X, 'Lil Nas X – THAT'S WHAT I WANT (Official Video)', *YouTube video*, 00:02:41, 17 September 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QDYDRA5JPLE&ab_channel=LilNasXVEVO.

⁴³ Jake Ashton, Derek Van Rheenen and Laura Pryor, 'American College Football and Homophobia: An Empirical Study', *Journal of Education and Culture Studies* 4, no. 3 (2020): 171.

⁴⁴ Joyell Arscott, Janice Humphries, Elizabeth Merwin and Michael Relf, "'That Guy is Gay and Black. That's a Red Flag.'" How HIV Stigma and Racism Affect Perception of Risk Among Young Black Men Who Have Sex with Men', *AIDS and Behaviour* 24 (2020): 173.

⁴⁵ E. Patrick Johnson, 'In the Quare Light of the Moon: Poverty, Sexuality and Makeshift Masculinity in *Moonlight*', *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 43, no. 3/4 (2019): 79.



Figure 2.2 Falling Into *MONTERO*: ‘LIL NAS X PRESENTS “MONTERO” THE ALBUM’ (Todd Strauss Schulson, 2021), ‘LIL NAS X PRESENTS ‘MONTERO’ THE ALBUM TRACKLIST’ (Richard Selvi, 2021), ‘THAT’S WHAT I WANT’ (STILLZ, 2021), ‘WILL MONTERO GET WHAT HE WANTS? | Maury Show’ (Andrew Povich, 2021).

off kilter, disavowing a happy ending.’⁴⁶ Like the protagonist of *Moonlight*, Lil Nas X wishes to be loved intimately and engages Black queer sexuality and gender in complex ways.⁴⁷ Following the release of ‘THAT’S WHAT I WANT’, Lil Nas X doggedly continued with his transmedial worldbuilding. On 17 November 2021, he collaborated with Maury Povich to parody *The Maury Show*, an American tabloid talk show famous for chronicling dramatic relationship issues with lie detectors and paternity tests. Proceeded by a trailer that recaps what had previously happened on ‘Montero’, the twenty-one-minute episode was posted to *The Maury Show*’s official YouTube channel.⁴⁸ Again bringing *MONTERO* out of cybermedia through reference to the non-fictional talk show format, the parody details the aftermath of Lil Nas X’s discovery that his lover in the music video is married with a child (see Figure 2.2).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Lil Nas X, ‘LIL NAS X GOES ON THE MAURY SHOW’, *YouTube video*, 00:01:54, 17 November 17, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZZazFJTUp0k&ab_channel=LilNasX; TheMauryShowOfficial, ‘WILL MONTERO GET WHAT HE WANTS?’, *YouTube video*, 00:21:40, 17 November 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGX8T_4fY_o&t=239s&ab_channel=TheMauryShowOfficial.

Quare Afrofuturism and YouTube's Expanded Storyworlds

Navigating Lil Nas X's YouTube channel is like stepping into different parts of a quare, Afrofuturist world. Coined by Mark Dery in 1994, the term 'Afrofuturism' refers to what he calls an 'African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future' (or past), like those seen in the visual world(s) of the *MONTERO* universe.⁴⁹ Afrofuturist aesthetics play an important role in quare musical culture, in which Black people can create and inhabit spaces where they are free to express a range of sexualities beyond cisgender heteronormativity.⁵⁰ As noted by Gayle Murchison, 'there is a long rich black quare music tradition to which Afrofuturism has been central.'⁵¹ From Sun Ra to Drexciya, and to more contemporary artists such as Todrick Hall and Janelle Monáe, Lil Nas X's *MONTERO* is rooted firmly in this tradition, for he too 'creates post-civil rights worlds', in which African Americans have 'full social privileges' and 'inhabit spaces welcoming a range of emancipated black sexualities'.⁵²

When considering Lil Nas X's transmedial worldbuilding through his YouTube music videos, parodies and visualizers, and his satirical cross-referencing to the world beyond cybermedia; it is useful to extend this theoretical framework into 'Afrofuturism 2.0', a concept that positions the term within our contemporary social media and technological landscape. Along these lines, Matthew Jordan Miller has labelled *MONTERO* a 'sacred black geography, a speculative space for liberation', and an 'innovative transmedia incursion into the cultural zeitgeist of "genre"', that traditionally marginalizes quare Afrofuturist voices.⁵³

The Afrofuturist worlds of *MONTERO*'s music videos extend out to his visualizers. An audio visualizer, commonly referred to as a visualizer, is a term used to describe animated imagery based on a piece of music. For *MONTERO*'s songs without official music videos, Lil Nas X uploaded an audio visualizer. Each audio visualizer explores a different realm of the *MONTERO* universe. In his extensive bibliography entitled 'The *MONTERO* Syllabus', Matthew Jordan Miller compiled a list of Afrofuturist themes explored within the videos and visualizers,

⁴⁹ Mark Dery, 'Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose', in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 180.

⁵⁰ Gayle Murchison, 'Let's Flip It! Quare Emancipations: Black Queer Traditions, Afrofuturisms, Janelle Monáe to Labelle', *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 22 (2018): 79.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Matthew Jordan Miller, 'The *MONTERO* Syllabus'.

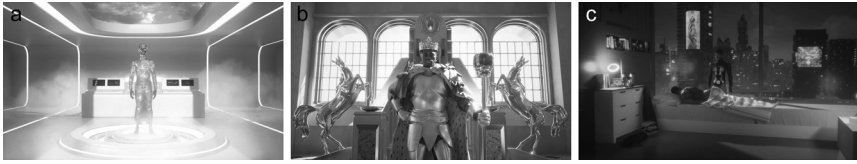


Figure 2.3 Audiovisualizing MONTERO: ‘ONE OF ME ft. Elton John’ (Chris Bjerre, 2021), ‘DOLLA SIGN SLIME ft. Megan Thee Stallion’ (Richard Selvi, 2021), ‘LOST IN THE CITADEL’ (Richard Selvi, 2021).

explaining that they connect ‘the expansive special imaginary’ of Lil Nas X.⁵⁴ As noted by Murchison, ‘more than just imagining black futures, Afrofuturism also offers a way of engaging the past.’⁵⁵ This is replicated in the visualizer for Lil Nas X’s ‘DOLLA SIGN SLIME ft. Megan Thee Stallion’ (2021), which depicts a medieval world in which the animated Lil Nas X is king. Others, such as ‘ONE OF ME ft. Elton John’ (2021) and ‘LOST IN THE CITADEL’ (2021), grapple with futuristic images of post-human bodies and smart cities reminiscent of those seen in his music video for ‘Panini’ (2019) (see Figure 2.3). ‘LOST IN THE CITADEL’ includes several images from the *MONTERO* promotional campaign, such as the album cover itself refashioned onto skyscrapers. In his Afrofuturist visualizers, then, Lil Nas X uses past and present stories to reclaim the future, thereby further expanding his cinematic universe outwards and across YouTube.

Returning to NQC and the destabilizing of heteronormative structures through narrative film, we can see here what a powerful and intersectional intervention Lil Nas X made into the quare landscape by using YouTube as his primary communicative platform. The ‘scared black geography’ that he charts represents a radical undoing of cinema’s classical structures. *MONTERO* does not offer a single, coherent world. Rather, it uses the specificities of YouTube as an interactive and disjunctive space to offer multiple simultaneous story fragments, connected through intricate, subtle details. While the examples above are striking, several more delicate themes cross between his uploads: butterflies, a metaphor for spiritual rebirth, transformation, change and hope; the artist’s silhouette floating in mid-air, which appears before his descent to hell, on the back of the pink prison attire and in his album announcement video, becomes a metaphor for social freedom. Other themes move between cybermedia and the real world: the Nike fiasco, references to album artwork in his music videos and

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Murchison, ‘Let’s Flip It!’, 81.

visualizers and the use of the artist's highly controversial kiss with his dancer at the BET awards appearing as a poster, covering the escape route in 'INDUSTRY BABY'.

In her work on transmedia music, Paola Brembilla has noted that a synergy between narrativizing music, cross-marketing, branding and industry practices can form a 'storyworld' that 'fosters fan engagement and social discourse'.⁵⁶ *MONTERO*'s visual repetitions and allusions activate fans not only by asking them to seek small nuggets of information from various spaces on YouTube and beyond but also by encouraging them to hunt for more subtle repetitions, or what Nick Romano refers to as Lil Nas X's 'Easter Eggs'.⁵⁷ Focusing on the album's artwork, which is heavily inspired by John Stephens's artwork 'Genesis II' and an image taken from *SpongeBob SquarePants*, Romano finds 'hidden gems' across the *MONTERO* world(s) but particularly within the music videos.⁵⁸ Romano and several Twitter users have dedicated considerable time to hunting for these 'Easter Eggs'.⁵⁹ Such interactive engagement and the labour required to connect the multiple strands of *MONTERO* positions the project within Jenkins's broad notion of worldbuilding, in which an 'encyclopaedic impulse in both readers and writers' is encouraged through ambiguity, as 'we are drawn to master what can be known about a world which expands beyond our grasp'.⁶⁰ Although inviting fans to follow his visual trails, however, Lil Nas X keeps his world 'beyond our grasp' through audiovisual self-remediation, uploading several different versions of his songs and music videos to YouTube that complicate a clear passage through the project. One example is 'MONTERO but ur in the bathroom of hell while lil nas is giving satan a lap dance in the other room' (2021), a slowed-down, reverbed and 'meme-like' interpretation that would typically be made by a fan.⁶¹ 'MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)' exists as six official and self-made remixes of which one, what he calls a 'lo-fi beats' version, was a particularly smart marketing move (see Figure 2.4).⁶² 'lofi hip hop radio – beats to relax/

⁵⁶ Paola Brembilla, 'Transmedia Music', in *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*, ed. M. Freeman and R. Rampazzo Gambarato (New York: Routledge, 2019), 83–4.

⁵⁷ Nick Romano, 'Lil Nas X's *Montero* Album Art is Full of Easter Eggs for Fans', *Entertainment*, 1 September 2021, <https://ew.com/music/lil-nas-x-montero-album-cover-easter-eggs/>.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., etalk (@etalk), 'Here Are All the Easter Eggs in Lil Nas X's "Montero" Album Art', *Twitter*, 31 August 2021, <https://twitter.com/i/events/1432766327698116610>.

⁶⁰ Henry Jenkins, 'Transmedia Storytelling 101'.

⁶¹ Lil Nas X, 'MONTERO but Ur in the Bathroom of Hell While Lil Nas X is Giving Satan A Lap Dance in the Other Room', *YouTube video*, 00:02:17, 28 March 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=54KlB1Fp9Ww&ab_channel=LilNasX.

⁶² Lil Nas X, 'Lil Nas X – MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name) but it's lofi and something you can study to lol', *YouTube video*, 00:03:31, 9 April 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dgh-zQJICbU&ab>

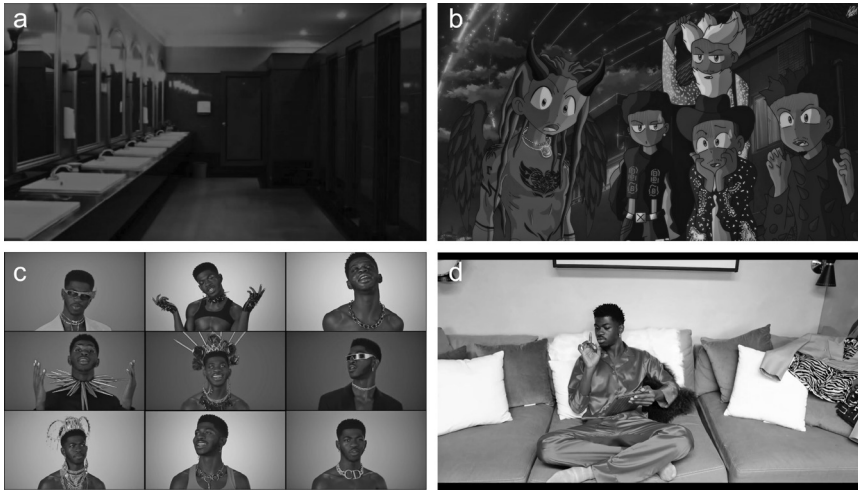


Figure 2.4 Self-remediations in Lil Nas X's 'MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name, 2021)': 'MONTERO but ur in the bathroom of hell while lil nas x is giving satan a lapdance in the other room' (Lil Nas X and Tanu Muino, 2021), 'MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name) but it's lofi and something you can study to lol' (Lofi Version by L. Dre, Zeuz Makes Music, 2021), 'MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name) (But Lil Nas X Makes All The Sounds With His Mouth)' (Adrian Per, 2021), 'MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name) [Official Video except it's not the official video at all]' (David Dickenson, 2021).

study to' is a *YouTube* genre phenomenon that attracts millions of listeners.⁶³ The artist's self-remediated versions of his songs and music videos also serve as a way to troll his fans, as can be seen in his supposedly 'uncensored' version of 'INDUSTRY BABY'.⁶⁴ The music video's promise of nudity 'trolled' viewers who, expecting to see the men naked, instead were greeted by a slow buffered image of the prison shower for most of the video. These clever social media marketing strategies did not go unnoticed by fans, as one user commented: 'this man just finessed thousands of streams with the title'.⁶⁵ As a result, the designation of 'marketing genius' crops up in numerous think pieces that discuss Lil Nas X and his promotional work for *MONTERO*.⁶⁶

_channel=LilNasX.

⁶³ Justin Wang, 'Lofi Hip-Hop Radio: Beats to Relax / Study To', *The Word: The Stanford Journal of Student Hip-hop Research* 1, no. 1 (2020): 13, <https://ojs.stanford.edu/ojs/index.php/theword/article/view/1705/1326>.

⁶⁴ Lil Nas X, 'Lil Nas X, Jack Harlow – INDUSTRY BABY (Uncensored Video)', *YouTube video*, 00:03:56, 28 July 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1EiP7QVNY&ab_channel=LilNasX.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Jamie Beatty, 'The Marking Genius of Lil Nas X', *Embryo Digital*, 16 September 2021, <https://www.embryodigital.co.uk/the-marketing-genius-of-lil-nas-x/>.

These strategies play into music industry practices which, since the rise of YouTube and music streaming services, have had to fundamentally change to adapt to new forms of distribution, monetization and fan engagement: as Jessica Edlom has noted, the contemporary musicians' methods now 'resembles more that of a skilled entrepreneur'.⁶⁷ Acutely aware of social media's cross-promotional possibilities, Lil Nas X's marketing techniques are yet another reason why he can be considered more than just a musician: he is also a highly skilled marketer and entrepreneur. Take when he posted a thirty-second clip to YouTube in the run-up to the first music video's release: 'my label took my phone again :(. . .' Here, Lil Nas X appears to be recording a low-quality video from what some joked was a 'Samsung fridge', or 'microwave', in the comments. He explains that his label has taken his phone 'again', so this is the only means by which he can communicate. He tells viewers he desperately needs their help to get to '100k pre-saves', so his label will allow him to 'release the song and video on the same day'.⁶⁸ The video, which has garnered 320,000 likes (as of 13 April 2022), is a key example of how YouTube can provide an important participatory extension to an artist's professional boundaries, as it has altered and obfuscated the one-way flow of communication between fans and artists. While combining professional and DIY practices to promote himself in ways that directly buy into Gen Z's humour, the artist also builds deeply complex paratexts made possible by YouTube's specificities as an accessible, democratized space, into what Simon Reynolds describes as a 'field of cultural practice'.⁶⁹

'I'm the Product of the Internet': Traversing the Media Swirl

While YouTube acts as *MONTERO*'s launchpad, its world does not exist within the confines of a single platform. The content found on YouTube is fluidly interrelated to the rest of his transmedia empire. Lil Nas X's presence on Twitter, TikTok and Instagram has been prolific. His use of new media even bleeds out into his live performance, as seen in his 2022 *Grammy Award*'s performance when

⁶⁷ Jessica Edlom, 'Authenticity and Digital Popular Music Brands', in *Popular Music, Technology, and the Changing Media Ecosystem: From Cassettes to Stream*, ed. Tomas Tofalvy and Emilia Barna (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 132.

⁶⁸ Lil Nas X, 'My Label Took My Phone Again: . . .', *YouTube video*, 00:00:32, 14 March 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aErlAkVYpZM&ab_channel=LilNasX.

⁶⁹ Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), 59.

he chose to flash up social media content relating explicitly to the ‘Satan Shoes’ controversy.⁷⁰ Taking to Twitter, he discussed his controversial promotional campaign, explaining that he had ‘9 months to plan this rollout. y’all are not gonna win bro’ and that he ‘do[es] not mind being desperate when it comes to my dreams.’⁷¹ As noted by Edlom, ‘it is absolutely necessary to be on social media and interact in order to build up an audience’, and Lil Nas X’s *MONTERO* campaign had a complete, working understanding of the necessity to make new media into what Eric Skelton describes as ‘a key part of the whole experience.’⁷²

On each platform, Lil Nas X curated new content that aligned itself perfectly with Gen Z, through his authenticity, self-deprecation, irony, eclecticism of persona and weird humour. Whether it was through the creation of audio memes on TikTok, ‘trolling’ haters on Twitter or posting ‘thirst traps’ on Instagram, he consistently achieved what Crystal Abidin describes as ‘post-based virality’ through his DIY approach.⁷³ Intensively posting memes on all social media platforms was a key element of Lil Nas X’s campaign. Although memes can be seen as ‘trivial pieces of pop culture’, Limor Shifman argues that they in fact play ‘an integral part in some of the defining moments of the twenty-first century.’⁷⁴ Not only are memes a testament to the persistent reworking of texts by internet users, they also ‘shape and reflect social mindsets’ and thus act as tools for negotiating ‘socio-cultural norms.’⁷⁵ As new media platforms enable young people to become politically engaged in a way that is entertaining, educational and accessible, *MONTERO*’s quare agenda and its saturation of new media has vast potential to reconfigure heteronormative power relations. The ease by which Lil Nas X navigates the ‘media swirl’ – which Vernallis understands as the collision of and interrelations between media styles and aesthetics – demonstrates his acute understanding that the demand for audiovisual content

⁷⁰ Lil Nas X, ‘Lil Nas X – DEAD RIGHT NOW/MONTERO/INDUSTRY BABY (64th GRAMMY Awards Performance)’, *YouTube video*, 00:04:56, 26 April 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GfjicS3txO4&ab_channel=LilNasXVEVO.

⁷¹ MONTERO (@LilNasX), ‘I Had 9 Months to Plan This Rollout. Y’all Are Not Gonna Win Bro’, *Twitter*, 29 March 2021, <https://twitter.com/lilnasx/status/1376568409295491081?lang=en-GB>; MONTERO (@LilNasX), ‘I Hate When People Tell Me I’m Desperate for How I Promote My Music’, *Twitter*, 15 March 2021, <https://twitter.com/lilnasx/status/1371535745916145665>.

⁷² Eric Skelton, ‘Lil Nas X Is Even Better at the Internet than We Thought’, *Complex*, 9 April 2021, <https://www.complex.com/music/lil-nas-x-internet-marketing-essay>; Jessica Edlom, ‘Authenticity and Digital Popular Music Brands’, 132.

⁷³ Crystal Abidin, ‘Mapping Internet Celebrity on TikTok: Exploring Attention Economies and Visibility Labours’, *Cultural Science Journal* 9, no. 3 (2020): 79.

⁷⁴ Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2013), 6.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 4; Noam Gal, Limor Shifman and Zohar Kampf, ‘“It Gets Better”: Internet Memes and the Construction of Collective Identity’, *New Media and Society* 18, no. 8 (2016): 1700.

in popular culture continues to grow exponentially and is integral to remaining in the mainstream.⁷⁶

The 'Satan Shoes' controversy is perhaps the most radical way Lil Nas X used social media platforms to build his YouTube world outwards by saturating his other social media channels with Satan-related content. On Twitter, he tirelessly responded to critiques, somehow remaining comical while simultaneously exposing racism and homophobia. Responding to Governor Krisi Noem's criticism of the shoes, for instance, he wrote: 'ur a whole governor and u on here tweeting about damn shoes. do ur job!'.⁷⁷ He also reappropriated famous memes and altered their captions to fit *MONTERO*'s context.⁷⁸ Before unveiling the prelude for 'INDUSTRY BABY', he posted promotional videos on TikTok with captions such as, 'when you have court on monday over satan shoes and might go to jail but your label tells you to keep making tiktoks'.⁷⁹ Unsurprisingly, his tireless promotion generated countless fan interactions. A prime example of transmedia storytelling, the 'Satan Shoes' controversy flowed seamlessly into the prelude and its subsequent 'FREE LIL NAS X' campaign and website. As music fans and social media users, we are used to cross-navigating screens and interacting with several things at once, having been immersed in the 'media swirl' for some time. Lil Nas X understands this acutely and, in his own words, uses 'all these tools to my advantage'.⁸⁰

Ensuring fans would continue to click through the *MONTERO* universe, Lil Nas X courted controversy with his next promotional move: his fake pregnancy and the birth of *MONTERO*. Mimicking celebrities like Beyoncé and Kylie Jenner's pregnancy reveals on Instagram, Lil Nas X announced, in *People Magazine* on 2 September 2021, that he was pregnant, and that his baby was due on the album's release date.⁸¹ Following a series of announcement photos, he chronicled his pregnancy on YouTube, with a baby shower, a video of his water unexpectedly breaking on 'THE MONTERO SHOW' (2021), and

⁷⁶ Vernallis, *Unruly Media*, 3.

⁷⁷ MONTERO (@LilNasX), 'Ur a Whole Governor and U on Here Tweeting About Damn Shoes. Do Ur Job!' *Twitter*, 28 March 2021, <https://twitter.com/lilnasx/status/1376245938226798594?lang=en>.

⁷⁸ MONTERO (@LilNasX), 'Me and Satan on the Way to Nike Headquarters', *Twitter*, 30 March 2021, <https://twitter.com/LilNasX/status/1376701932824313860>.

⁷⁹ Lil Nas X (@lilnasx), 'When You Have Court on Monday over Satan Shoes and Might Go to Jail but Your Label Tells You to Keep Making Tiktoks', *TikTok*, 16 July 2021, https://www.tiktok.com/@lilnasx/video/6985332920915414278?lang=en&is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1.

⁸⁰ Mike Wass, 'How Lil Nas X Singlehandedly Revived the Event Video'.

⁸¹ Brianne Tracy, 'Lil Nas X Reveals He's Pregnant – with His Album – in the Over-the-Top Announcement Photos', *People*, 2 September 2021, <https://people.com/music/lil-nas-x-reveals-hes-pregnant-with-his-album-announcement-photos/>.



Figure 2.5 Lil Nas X's 'Pregnancy' (2021): 'NO ONE SHOWED UP TO MY BABY SHOWER :(' (director unknown, 2021), 'THE MONTERO SHOW' (Lee Cherry, 2021), 'LIL NAS X GIVES BIRTH' (Adrian Per, 2021).

a video in which he gives birth to the album in hospital (see Figure 2.5).⁸² He then seamlessly transformed the 'FREE LIL NAS X' website's URL into a baby registry, on which fans could donate to different charities, once again using the transmedia landscape to obfuscate myth and reality, gain publicity and subvert gender conventions.

While Lil Nas X remediated his own videos on YouTube, creating versions and parodies that complicated a clear passage through his world, as we saw above, the artist also chose various other mediums to adapt these versions further. His *Twerk Hero* game, for instance, used the aesthetics and style of *Guitar Hero* to extend the Garden of Eden (or Montero) scene from the album's first music video into a participatory space in which players must 'grab the booty and hit the incoming temptations!!!'⁸³ Just as humorous, his *The Book of Montero* exists within a browser as a refashioned Bible, using lyrics from the song 'MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)' as a form of scripture.⁸⁴ *The Book of Montero* later reappeared in the 'INDUSTRY BABY' music video as the object that conceals the tools used for the prison escape.

By adapting his YouTube content for different platforms, then, Lil Nas X has deepened and exercised his audience's engagement and the response has been extremely positive, at least in marketing terms. For instance, at the time of writing (April 2022), 'MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)' has been used in 2.1 million TikTok videos. On the app, the song became the soundtrack to LGBTQIA+ acceptance, as queer youth borrowed from the video to narrate

⁸² Lil Nas X, 'No One Showed Up To My Baby Shower :(', *YouTube video*, 00:00:50, 16 September 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FeFMMo_upbQ&ab_channel=LilNasX; Lil Nas X, 'Lil Nas X – THE MONTERO SHOW', *YouTube video*, 00:09:37, 17 September 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZ0-Cdtj4KU&ab_channel=LilNasX; Lil Nas X, 'LIL NAS X GIVES BIRTH', *YouTube video*, 00:01:40, 17 September 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v7C0OVhvofl&ab_channel=LilNasX.

⁸³ 'Twerk Hero: Lil Nas X', *Montero Call Me By Your Name*, <https://www.monterocallmebyyour.name/>.

⁸⁴ 'The Book of Montero', *The Book of Montero*, <https://www.thebookofmontero.com/>.

their own joyful descents into hell.⁸⁵ Lil Nas X reposted a number of these to his own TikTok channel, thus blurring the boundaries between fan and artist once again.⁸⁶ He also offered monetary awards of up to \$10,000 to incentivize fans to participate in his #PoleDanceToHell challenge.⁸⁷ Thus, the *MONTERO* rollout functioned in a way that allowed fans to participate and traverse the transmedia landscape with ease. Jenkins has famously used the term ‘convergence’ to describe this process, referring to ‘the flow of content across media platforms, the cooperation between media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences who would go almost anywhere in search of entertainment experiences.’⁸⁸ Convergence is a key aspect of *MONTERO*. By eroding the one-to-one relationship that used to exist within a medium, new media have fostered a greater sense of community and communication.⁸⁹ Lil Nas X capitalizes on this sense of community by ensuring the *MONTERO* world bleeds out onto different platforms as a coalescence of ideas that celebrate the LGBTQIA+ community.

With YouTube acting as its launchpad, each aspect of *MONTERO* is designed to be a part of a larger cosmogenic space that requires further enquiry and deepens audience engagement. Researchers may want to continue surveying how dominant social paradigms can be combatted through propelling NQC practices onto new media platforms in ways that directly impact LGBTQIA+ people. Rich once said that NQC works are ‘irreverent, energetic, alternatively minimalist and excessive. Above all, they’re full of pleasure. They’re here, they’re queer.’⁹⁰ Rich’s comments on NQC works are inscribed into the *MONTERO* universe. Lil Nas X’s intricate, maximalist ways of navigating YouTube and its embedded place within the new media landscape, coupled with his overt articulations of queerness through popular culture, have resulted in an audiovisual work that is truly radical.

⁸⁵ dot, ‘Lil Nas X MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name) Meme – TIKTOK COMPILATION’, *YouTube video*, 00:07:01, 1 April 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=drmkrvlFaw0&ab_channel=dot.

⁸⁶ Lil Nas X (@lilnasx), ‘Original Sound – Lil Nas x’, *TikTok*, 2 April 2021, <https://www.tiktok.com/@lilnasx/video/6946652550036770053>; Lil Nas X (@lilnasx), ‘Lil Nas X Dropping by – John’, *TikTok*, 4 April 2021, <https://www.tiktok.com/@lilnasx/video/6947371456556698885>.

⁸⁷ Lil Nas X, ‘#PoleDanceToHell’, *Instagram*, 31 March 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CNEFIY2lqA0/>.

⁸⁸ Henry Jenkins, ‘Welcome to Convergence Culture’, *Henry Jenkins*, 19 June 2006, http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2006/06/welcome_to_convergence_culture.html.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Rich, ‘New Queer Cinema.’

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‘Social Composing’ and ‘Contextual Music’

Transmedial Relations through New Media in Jagoda Szmytka’s *LOST PLAY*

Weronika Nowak



I remember it like it was yesterday. Nothing had caused so many extreme emotions among the audience of the ‘Warsaw Autumn’ International Festival of Contemporary Music for a long time. I don’t recall any other work in the Festival whose stage effects overwhelmed the audience as much as those used in the ATM Studio performance of Jagoda Szmytka’s *LOST PLAY* on 25 September 2015. Against a background of ‘reruns’ of avant-garde hits and premieres, the Festival’s inclusion of *LOST PLAY*, one of Szmytka’s most expansive works, seemed to buck its traditional programming style. Based on a singing talent contest, the work drew on the common vocabularies of Poland’s autumn TV schedule, introducing pop culture into the world of avant-garde music. It seemed no coincidence that, while *LOST PLAY* was being performed, the TV show *Dancing with the Stars* was being recorded in the same building.¹ While reviews of the performance voiced widespread confusion, Tadeusz Wielecki, the Festival’s director, hailed Szmytka as a ‘dynamistatic’ figure.²

¹ Marcin Trzęsiok in Szymon Borys, Karolina Dąbek, Agnieszka Grzybowska, Jakub Krzewiński, Wojciech Michno, Magdalena Nowicka and Justyna Rudnicka, ‘Rozmowy o festiwalu’, *Warsaw Autumn*, http://archiwum.warsaw-autumn.art.pl/files/2015/11/Rozmowa_dziewi__ta.pdf.

² Antoni Beksiak, ‘Braki i nadmiary’, *Dwutygodnik.com*, October 2015, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/arttykul/6149-braki-i-nadmiary>; Krzysztof Dziuba, Weronika Nowak and Ewa Szczecińska, ‘Dynamia-Statyka’, *Ruch Muzyczny* 10 (2015): 62–3; Krzysztof Stefański, ‘Refleksje z Warszawskiej Jesieni’, *Niby-tygodnik*, 7 October 2015, <http://nibytygodnik.pl/2015/10/07/refleksje-z-warszawskiej-jesieni/>; Tadeusz Wielecki in *Warsaw Autumn*.

Szmytka is a Polish–German composer specializing in multilayered, performative and conceptual audiovisual works. She often uses mixed media, amplification and electronics, and many of her works focus on identity in the age of social media. Szmytka's concept of music is based on the principles of diversity, inclusivity and play, and she questions the traditional understanding of music by extending its disciplinary boundaries in several ways.³ The first is through what she calls 'social composing', the process of creating music with people, for people and about people.⁴ Next is her idea of 'contextual music' that appeals to different senses, thought processes and diverse audiences and connects sounds, words and images in various ways to initiate a multimodal response.⁵ Finally, Szmytka spreads her work across numerous environments, combining urban spaces with traditional concert halls and using site-specific techniques and virtual platforms.⁶ *LOST PLAY* is one example of the implementation of these ideas. Two weeks after the Festival premiere of the work, its virtual premiere took place on Szmytka's official YouTube channel: on 8 October 2015, four videos were published as fragments of a professional audiovisual production of the live performance lasting about ninety minutes. Further fragments were posted on YouTube at the end of January 2016, making up a playlist of twenty-eight videos lasting between one and five minutes.⁷

Still fresh in the Festival's history was Szmytka's 2012 performance of *happy deaf people*, scored for amplified cello, chamber ensemble and electronic sounds. Although this exploration of sonic perception by people with hearing impairments is very different from *LOST PLAY* in many ways, both works experiment with a multimodal and bodily way of experiencing music: in *happy deaf people* through hearing, touch and intellect; in *LOST PLAY* through the different forms of sight evoked by various visual media. *LOST PLAY*'s visual and sonic elements came under the overarching creative control of Szmytka, whose attempts to manage even the smallest detail of the work resemble Stockhausen's model of total composition. As she explains, the work is an integrated audiovisual composition in which the images take on a significant aesthetic role: 'they are

³ Jagoda Szmytka in private correspondence with the author, 2 October 2021.

⁴ Jagoda Szmytka, 'Społecznościowe komponowanie', *YouTube video*, 00:18:00, 29 October 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K056jUtt8Y>.

⁵ Jagoda Szmytka, 'Muzyka kontekstualna', *YouTube video*, 00:15:33, 29 October 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKM4FjktSdE>.

⁶ Szmytka in private correspondence, 2 October 2021.

⁷ Jagoda Szmytka, 'LOST PLAY [LOST]', YouTube playlist (twenty-eight videos), 8 October 2015 to 31 January 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCwjmcC6drA&list=PLpoSgJkK5-PnV-Rgf1nSBjcsUMtxKdHxH&ab_channel=JagodaSzmytka.

neither a “staging addition” nor “video addition,” but a medium equivalent to sound.⁸

LOST PLAY builds on ideas introduced in Szmytka’s earlier works, mainly those created between 2011 and 2014, such as *sky-me, type-me* (2011), *for hand and voices* (2013), *GAMEBOY* (2014) and *LIMBO LANDER* (2014). These pieces already demonstrate cross-genre exploration and are concerned with fluid and nomadic identities in the era of technological expansion, especially among the millennial generation, the creative role of the composer-performer-listener and the blurring of private and public spaces. *LOST PLAY*’s development of these ideas is made explicit in the expanded stage work’s tagline: ‘Switch on the Find My ID application, use the LOST mode, and find your identity.’⁹ Like her earlier projects, *LOST PLAY* deconstructs binaries through a blurring of the real and physical with the illusory and virtual, the natural (non-staged) and the artificial (staged), the offstage and onstage, the performed and what simply is: the aim, she explains, is to blur the characters, the environment and the genres.¹⁰ This blurring of boundaries through the use of moving-image technologies positions Szmytka’s work within a line of avant-garde play particularly apparent in new music theatre. As early as the 1960s, composers such as Luigi Nono, Giacomo Manzoni and Mauricio Kagel have exposed the gaps between aesthetic categories and art forms through volatile interdisciplinary relationships and contexts.¹¹ In her work on screen media and opera, Holly Rogers shows how these interdisciplinary boundaries were collapsed, in large part, through the inclusion of large screens on the opera stage, which augment the music, libretto and acting through footage of pre-recorded newsreels and live closed-circuit feeds of the auditorium.¹² More recent opera stagings have used screens in different ways and Gundula Kreuzer notes that, while the genre has always been characterized by spatial and conceptual mobility, twenty-first-century technology ‘allows opera to transgress, break down, or creatively adapt the seeming divide between

⁸ Jagoda Szmytka in private correspondence, 8 October 2021.

⁹ Jagoda Szmytka, ‘Commentary on “LOST PLAY”’, in 58th ‘Warsaw Autumn’ International Festival of Contemporary Music Programme Book, ed. Beata Bolesławska-Lewandowska, Wojciech Bońkowski, Krzysztof Kwiatkowski, Ewa Radziwon-Stefaniuk, Adam Suprynowicz and Elżbieta Szczepańska-Lange (Warsaw: Warsaw Autumn, 2015), 265.

¹⁰ Jagoda Szmytka, *Introduction to “LOST PLAY”* [unpublished document], 12, 4.

¹¹ See, for example, Robert Adlington, ‘Music Theatre Since the 1960s’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth Century Opera*, ed. Mervyn Cooke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 225–43; and Eric Salzman and Thomas Desi, *The New Music Theatre: Seeing the Voice: Hearing the Body* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹² Holly Rogers, ‘Audio-Visual Collisions: Moving Image Technology and the Laterna Magika Aesthetic in New Music Theatre’, in *New Music Theatre in Europe: Transformations Between 1955–1975*, ed. Robert Adlington (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 79–100.

the live and the digital'.¹³ Mervyn Cooke has identified three main types of new audiovisual relations: opera on film and film adaptations of opera; opera in film, presenting opera as a theme; and opera as film through the emergence of the television opera genre.¹⁴

While new music theatre and opera on and in film expands the genre's boundaries through television, film and video, Szmytka introduces the global, networked and participatory world of YouTube and social media into the mix. Her commentary in the Festival's programme book explains that *LOST PLAY* was part of a larger project called *LOST*, which extended through a number of formats and platforms, including film, the internet, performance and the literary arts:¹⁵

- *LOST in TRANSIT* – web series
- *www.LOSTdotLOST.com* – website
- *LOST EXTRA* – live events
- *LOST in BLUE* – Facebook page
- *LOST Magazine*
- *GAME of LOST* – short graphic novel with texts.¹⁶

What are the characteristics of the different formats? What are the relations between them? What is the genre of *LOST PLAY*? Witnessing its live performance or the recordings posted to YouTube did not provide simple answers to these questions. Instead, the *LOST* project's audience had to become active and 'reflective collectors', threading through the different formats and access points according to their will. Here, I investigate the relationship between the various formats of the *LOST* project and its processes of transmedial storytelling, tracing the transference of *LOST PLAY* from live performance to virtual

¹³ Gundula Kreuzer, 'Operatic Configurations in the Digital Age', *The Opera Quarterly* 35, nos. 1–2 (Winter–Spring 2019): 132–3.

¹⁴ Mervyn Cooke, 'Opera and Film', in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Opera*, 267–90. For more on opera and film, see Marcia J. Citron, *When Opera Meets Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Jeongwon Joe and Theresa Rose, *Between Opera and Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁵ The composer's commentary can be considered another extension of the *LOST* project. It contains a lot of information about the interpretative contexts of the work, short biographies of the protagonists and the structure of the performance. Another of the extensions is the 'Introduction' to *LOST PLAY* written by Szmytka in the form of a thirty-one-page document, including information about other *LOST* formats, instrumentation, creative strategies, arrangement of stage, set design, costumes and references.

¹⁶ Szmytka, 'Commentary on "LOST PLAY"', 262. Not all the formats indicated in the commentary were created, some of them have expired or have not been finally published as *Game of LOST*. The website *www.LOSTdotLOST.com* has expired, and the '*LOST*' Magazine is only a 'rhetorical procedure': Szmytka in private correspondence, 8 October 2021.

spectacle through the intermediary platform of YouTube. I argue that YouTube was central to the success of *LOST* in two main ways: first, it served as a tool for strengthening and modifying the transmedial and hypermedial strategies used in the live performance and enabled the convergence between different types of narrative gaze; and second, it activated its virtual audience in a way that fundamentally transformed the creative possibilities of new audiovisual composition.

Media Convergence and Dispersed Worlds

LOST PLAY is a central part of the *LOST* project and as a live cross-genre performance consists of many formats, with spoken or instrumental passages and songs (original, avant-garde and pop-rock covers).¹⁷ With a clear division between sung and spoken fragments, the structure of *LOST PLAY* resembles the structure of a typical traditional opera, and yet the passages and songs spread beyond their staged boundaries and into cyberspace in the form of a YouTube playlist. The protagonists' (contestants') comments and conversations serve as recitatives, while their songs are akin to pop cultural arias. One example is 'Self-Love', a cover Eric Carmen's 'All by Myself' made famous by Celine Dion in 1996. In *LOST PLAY*, the song is performed by Edit Selfie Smart, who imitates the vocal and bodily gestures that dominate both Carmen's and Dion's music videos. It is likely that *LOST PLAY* only enjoyed one live performance due to its demanding technological requirements. The set involves several digital screens, for instance, on which the contestant's avatars, shots of the protagonists and older analogue monitors are shown as both pre-recorded footage and live-stream feed. The identity of the characters, in large part played by only two performers – Frauke Aulbert and Sebastian Berweck – is determined by the information provided on the screens: some of the protagonists and the avatars of the contestants appear only virtually, on the screens.

Another paratext of the *LOST* project is *PLAY PARALLEL*, a cross-genre presentation with live stream that was performed at the Media Theater in

¹⁷ *LOST PLAY* features covers of songs such as 'I Want to Break Free' (1984) by Queen, 'Das Model' (1978) by Kraftwerk, 'All by Myself' (1975) by Eric Carmen and 'Blue Velvet' (1963) by Bobbie Vinton. The covers are rearranged and often include new lyrics. The use of numerous references to other works is a sign of a new referentiality: Mathias Bonde Korsgaard, 'Music Video Transformed', in *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics*, ed. Claudia Gorbman, John Richardson and Carol Vernallis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 501–21.

Germany's ZKM Karlsruhe at the same time as *LOST PLAY* was performed in Warsaw. It presented the song contest from the ATM Studio in the form of a live-stream video (with muted voice, which was replaced by electric guitar), a debate with media artist Ludger Brümmer and a block of commercials. In the same place, and at a similar time, *Play Park Lost ID* was opened – an extension of *LOST* that allows the audience to take photos in selfie booths, give interviews and play computer games.

While *LOST PLAY* and *PLAY PARALLEL* required that the audience was present at a specific time and place, other paratexts were pre-recorded and ordered. The performers, for instance, also appear in a web series called *LOST in TRANSIT* (posted to the composer's YouTube channel, 30–31 January 2016), which forms a vital extension to the multi-format structure of *LOST PLAY*.¹⁸ Other paratexts are based on material or internet phenomena such as the Facebook page *LOST in BLUE*, which includes photos and memes that reveal extra information about the contestants, their inspirations and interests. Although this page is not central to *LOST PLAY*, it bolsters the live performances with backstories and additional information that develops the process of media convergence and worldbuilding. While some of the project's components, like *LOST in BLUE*, operate as discrete entities and are conceived as, and remain, virtual events, others converge in complex ways, initiating new forms of audience behaviour and innovative collisions between virtual and live spaces.

In the face of media convergence, transmedia storytelling has become a popular model for creating art, based on the process of worldbuilding across various media and paratexts in which, according to Henry Jenkins, each makes 'a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole'.¹⁹ All forms of media are fair game for transmedia artists, from written texts to comics, artefacts, computer games and Twitter accounts. Each combination and convergence of elements, notes John McGrath, offers 'an experience of [various] formats' and 'imbues multimodal artists with an expanded and transmedia vocabulary'.²⁰ In his work on Laurie Anderson's transmedial audiovisual work, McGrath shows how the

¹⁸ Jagoda Szmytka, 'LOST in TRANSIT', YouTube playlist (four videos), 30–31 January 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grd_xzMajxs&list=PLpoSgJkK5-PlG4cjK8bgBbLOroAs5lDYI&ab_channel=JagodaSzmytka.

¹⁹ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 97–8.

²⁰ John McGrath, "How Does a Story Get Told from Fractured Bits?" Laurie Anderson's Transformative Repetition', in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Popular Music Video Analysis*, ed. Lori A. Burns and Stan Hawkins (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), 237.

repetition of motifs across different media forms creates new resonances as meanings snowball as they move through platforms, genres and contexts.²¹

As a technology that blurs the ontological boundaries of sound and image at both the level of construction and reception, digital media adds a specific fluidity to transmedial storytelling. Carol Vernallis has referred to the ‘intensified media swirl’ and ‘intensified audiovisual aesthetics’ of new media, which constantly borrows and augments the stylistic peculiarities of other media forms, arguing that YouTube often operates as the catalyst for these convergences.²² These blended boundaries pave the way for new approaches to the continuity or discontinuity of narrative, as Lisa Perrott writes: ‘While narrative continuity remains for some directors an important facet of transmedia, narrative discontinuity, audiovisual discontinuity and “loose continuity” also provide important strategies for transmedial artists with avant-garde leanings.’²³ In creating a discontinuous, fragmented narrative, an important role is played by the use of technology as what McGrath calls a ‘tool of electronic mediation.’²⁴

Although there has been growing interest recently in transmedia storytelling among avant-garde artists such as Anderson, for whom it offers creative and aesthetic freedom, it nevertheless remains a strategy used mainly by pop artists to achieve greater artistic and promotional success.²⁵ Concept albums can be considered one of the most sophisticated transmedia pop culture products. Lori Burns, for instance, writes about the multidimensionality and far-reaching interpretative and cultural potential of the concept album, which she refers to as a form of ‘concept spectacle.’²⁶ Using Coldplay’s 2011 concept album *Mylo Xyloto* as an example, Burns joins Perrott and McGrath in addressing the complex process of creating, developing and mediating storyworlds through a combination of different modalities, materials and narratives.²⁷

In the face of YouTube and new media and the increasingly complex, dispersed and participatory worlds of transmedia storytelling, consumer behaviour is also

²¹ Ibid., 239.

²² Carol Vernallis, Holly Rogers and Lisa Perrott, ‘Introduction’, in *Transmedia Directors: Artistry, Industry and New Audiovisual Aesthetics*, ed. Carol Vernallis, Holly Rogers and Lisa Perrott (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 2, 3.

²³ Ibid., 16.

²⁴ McGrath, ‘How Does a Story Get Told from Fractured Bits?’, 236.

²⁵ See, for instance, Lori Burns, ‘The Concept Album as Visual-Sonic-Textual Spectacle: The Transmedial Storyworld of Coldplay’s *Mylo Xyloto*’, *IASPM*, 6, no. 2 (2016): 111; and Lori Burns, ‘Multimodal and Transmedia Subjectivity in Animated Music Video: Jess Cope and Steven Wilson’s “Routine” from “Hand. Cannot. Erase.”’ (2015), in *Transmedia Directors*, 333; McGrath, ‘How Does a Story Get Told from Fractured Bits?’, 238.

²⁶ Lori Burns, ‘The Concept Album as Visual-Sonic-Textual Spectacle’, 94.

²⁷ Ibid., 102.

changing towards a freer space that allows activated audiences, notes Jay Rosen, to make their own decisions about the degree of their media involvement: 'The people formerly known as the audience' are no longer only consumers of the one-directional broadcast system; they are also 'more able' and 'less predictable'.²⁸ This 'less predictable' online audience can influence online transmedial content by copying, remediating, modifying and sharing it in new ways.

Music for 'the Eyes, Ears and Mind'

'The people formerly known as the audience' of the *LOST* project are presented with various discontinuous fragments and are invited to navigate through them in a variety of ways. While the list above outlines the main points of entry available, there are numerous other elements that refer to other formats, like broadcast TV and computer games. *LOST PLAY*, for instance, takes place around a song contest and thus explicitly positions itself in relation to popular reality TV shows like *Idol* and the *Eurovision Song Contest*. Five singers take part in the song contest: Fräuelin Millenia Transit, Edit Selfie Smart, BB Blue Touch, Taylor von Ready-to-Wear and Yago Smith. The work falls into sections, called units (the five singers appear during the song contest unit, for instance), which are separated by adverts dominated by glitch sound effects (advertisement unit). The whole performance is framed by a monologue, presented by Szmytka who first appears live (overture unit) and then pre-recorded (prologue unit).

Many of the units are intensely intertextual. During the competition, a documentary recording of the computer game *Second Life* (2003) is presented, featuring avatars for each character. Avatars are also shown when the characters are introduced by the host (played by the composer herself) in a process that recalls the character selection process common in gaming and references the pre-game show. The same convention also applies to the compere, Freddie No-Comment, when he remarks on and evaluates the contestants' performances. The sample of fake applause that he turns on resembles a sitcom effect. During the break between performances, the contestants give interviews to a talk show host, Sebbi Joseph Screensaver, which, together with the presence of a band playing covers of famous pop and rock songs, provides a nod to the TV format of *The*

²⁸ Jay Rosen, 'The People Formerly Known as the Audience', in *The Social Media Reader*, ed. Michael Mandiberg (New York and London: New York University Press, 2012), 13–16, 15.



Figure 3.1 Sebby Joseph Screensaver and Millenia Transit during late-night show unit, *LOST PLAY* by Jagoda Szmytka (2015).

Late-Night Show (late-night show unit, Figure 3.1). Intertextuality also drives the web episodes of *LOST in TRANSIT*, which were originally shown during the live performance before being uploaded to YouTube (either as a separate playlist or in the *LOST PLAY* playlist). The episodes adhere to an amateur DIY style typical of post-internet creativity. The characters perform various activities (they pose for photos, travel by taxi, walk, etc.) in various urban spaces (web series unit, Figure 3.2).

The *LOST* project, like *LOST PLAY*, embraces its transmedial specificities by using the cultural codes embedded within each technology so that, to quote Jenkins again, ‘each medium does what it does best.’²⁹ The transmedia storytelling developed within the idiosyncratic world of *LOST* gives meaning to the content introduced by the formats and the complex relations between them. In *LOST PLAY* itself, elements of the various formats of the *LOST* world meet as allusions and quotations. For example, one of the singers, Millenia, works as a flight attendant and her passion for travel is alluded to by placing her avatar in an airplane and a Tokyo-like setting, while the blue wig that BB Blue and some of the instrumentalists wear during the song contest connects to the imagery of the web series. While the hierarchy of influence between the formats is complex, and it is difficult to determine the exact source of the references, most allude to the familiar formats of the TV song contest and the late-night chat show. *LOST*

²⁹ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 98.



Figure 3.2 Still from *LOST in TRANSIT* (episode 1), *LOST PLAY* by Jagoda Szmytka (2015).

PLAY can be considered the mothership of the *LOST* project, the centre of the accumulation and most intensive exchange of content. At the same time, the storyworld of *LOST PLAY* consists of micro-narratives created by the content of individual songs. The original songs, created by Szmytka, are avant-garde in style: they have a free structure without a clear division into verses and refrain, make use of unconventional sound effects (created through electronics and extended playing techniques) and require a diverse range of vocal techniques (singing, speaking, whispering). The popular music covers, on the other hand, offer more conventional song structures and vocal techniques. And yet, while each is chosen to showcase the personalities of each contestant, taken together they provide a coherent sonic narrative.

The collision of various formats in the *LOST* world is fundamental to its success. Experiencing a transmedial storyworld involves a complex and sometimes disorientating integration of disparate text: our experience of these worlds, Jenkins points out, depends on 'the order in which we get story information. [. . .] Facing multiple points of access, no two consumers are likely to encounter story information in the same order.'³⁰ The different access points of

³⁰ Henry Jenkins, 'The Aesthetics of Transmedia: In Response to David Bordwell (Part Three)', *Henry Jenkins: Confessions of an Aca Fan*, 15 September 2009, http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2009/09/the_aesthetics_of_transmedia_i_2.html.

LOST pose both a liberation and challenge to our normal modes of audiovisual perception as Szmytka writes:

For me, music is not only sound. It must be directed not only to the ear but also to the eyes and mind [. . .]. The transmedia projects in which I specialise are characterised by a combination of many media and approaches. [. . .] It's primarily a way to attract people, allowing them more freedom of reception by multiplying the access points. When there is a strong relationship between multiple elements, the audience brings its own experiences, adding more meanings. [. . .] We live in the age of access, where everyone can find out easily and for free on the Internet. [. . .] Derrida's dream has come true: we live in a world of multiple perception flowing through numerous channels.³¹

Many of the *LOST* project's extensions provide a 'freedom of reception' by functioning as discrete units with their own specificities and emotional prompts that operate independently of other formats as well as part of the larger whole. This is important for transmedial success, as Jenkins notes: 'each franchise entry needs to be self-contained.'³² The memes and stills from *LOST in BLUE*, for instance, can trigger laughter, annoyance or outrage, whether you know who's who in the song contest or not.

The Transmedial Flow of *LOST*

While many of the units of *LOST* can be experienced as discrete objects, the project nevertheless coalesces into different narrative possibilities. The experience of participating in the *LOST* world through the performance of *LOST PLAY* can be compared to clicking through TV channels. Continuity occurs through the hostess's announcements, which act as structural seams between the immersive television segments. Their visibility, as well as the increasing irregularity of the sequence of unit-formats in the show, generates a post-Brechtian distance from the content presented in the formats. Like internet browsing, audience members are constantly jolted from their immersive TV-viewing trances and made aware of the structure and format of delivery, an awareness further heightened by distributing *LOST PLAY* in the form of a playlist on YouTube.

³¹ Jagoda Szmytka, 'Voilà! That's My Life – Interview with Marie Lobrichon', <https://festival-aix.com/fr/blog/actualite/voila-thats-my-life/>. Translation from French by the author.

³² Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 98.

The structural disintegration of narrative directly influences the storyworld in several ways. First, this process infiltrates the structural, dramatic and aesthetic levels of the entire work: in the middle of the show, the hostess disappears, Freddie increasingly forgets the order of the contestants and the competition remains unresolved. Second, the narrative disintegration is reinforced by music through glitch, the interruption of singing by growling and the interjection of electronic effects generated by a sampler in the form of an alarm and error signals that destabilize sonic continuity. Unlike most of the performance, for instance, the last song is not a cover version but an original composition full of computer-generated onomatopoeic effects (e.g. 'click', 'boom') and the names of internet phenomena (e.g. 'hash tag', 'flicker') that refer to the internet as a space of creative freedom. At the end of the piece, Szmytka offers a monologue, in which she points to parallels between her and each contestant and speaks of living in different geographical and cultural contexts in order to pull together the disparate strands.

LOST's YouTube playlist not only provides a global access to the project; it also encourages a more selective mode of access to the world of *LOST* via *LOST PLAY*. Although arranging videos in a playlist according to the chronology of performance, placing order numbers in their titles and signing each video with the composer's name may indicate a desire to exercise authoritarian control over the form and content of the videos in digital circulation, the form of a playlist hinders such regulation. YouTube users can watch the *LOST PLAY* playlist according to the chronological order of the performance or decide for themselves which videos to watch and in what order; it is also possible to watch videos in a loop or in a random flow. The playlist multiplies the access points to *LOST PLAY*, breaking the long structure of the show and its full-size video production into a series of audiovisual microforms, which leads to more combinations in the order of information and ensures that individual YouTube consumers will receive information in a different order than if they experienced the work through the strictly one-directional structured form of a live performance/full-size version of its recording. As Jonathan Leal notes, 'Our hypermodern geographies are being shaped by more screens than we can track; the techniques and qualities of meaningful formal representation are changing as our world modulates.'³³ In a sense, the multiple screens present in the live performance resemble the multiple

³³ Jonathan Leal, 'On Colour Magic: Emil Nava's "Feels" and "Nuh Ready Nuh Ready"', in *Transmedia Directors*, 177.



Figure 3.3 Edit Selfie Smart during the song contest, *LOST PLAY* by Jagoda Szmytka (2015).

screens and options of YouTube's interface, introducing a new-media-inspired distributed gaze onto the stage (Figure 3.3).

YouTube users can also focus solely on a particular format, which is facilitated by a separate playlist for the web series. They can also skip videos or watch them repeatedly. Thanks to all these playback options, users are afforded a creative influence over the shape and continuity (or discontinuity) of the narrative and on the structure of the digital spectacle, which assumes a polyvalent character. The existence of different structural versions of this digital spectacle is evidenced by the different number of views of individual videos. It seems that most users follow the chronological order of the show, at least up to a point: the first videos are the most popular, with subsequent ones far less so (the first video has 676 views, the last only 160).³⁴ It can also be assumed that the aesthetic and format preferences of users constitute an important criterion for the selection of videos; after all, the most popular are audiovisual recordings from the song contest, which resemble music videos (the first song has the most views: 2,723); much less popular are those based on other formats, including the web series (100–200 views). As a whole, though, YouTube offers a fundamental transmedial experience to the audience. The screen-shaped thumbnails – suggested video to watch – enter the space of the computer screen of the user; at the same time, they enter the narrative space of the world of *LOST PLAY*. As visual counterpoints, the thumbnails accompany the

³⁴ All view count data as of 28 February 2022.

view of the selected video and the playlist itself, fuelling the process of distributed semiosis hinted at by the Festival's multiscreen staging. One click on the site map can initiate the process of new transmedial narratives.

The shift in the mode of media participation described by Rosen above is pertinent to the way *LOST PLAY* is experienced as a virtual, mobile and audience-led event very different to the fixed spectacle experienced by the physical audience at the ATM Studio. During the live event, audience interaction was limited to picture taking, laughter and applause. While examples of collapsed audience-performer spaces can be found throughout the avant-garde and experimental music traditions (Luciano Berio's *Passaggio*, from 1962, is one of the earliest examples) and in reinterpreted stagings of classical operatic repertoire (like the dramatic interpretations of Peter Konwitschny), or in interactive, digital performances (like Michel van der Aa's 2015 *The Book of Sand*), it is rare to find audiences activated between live and virtual performances.

Switch on the Opera Box

LOST PLAY's confusion of the live and the virtual has ramifications for the conventions of opera performance and its associated cultural practices. The work's theatrical specificity as a live performance, defined through its materiality (props, costumes, scenography, lighting) and the presence of performers (musicians-singers-actors), was already complicated by the presence of pre-recorded and live-recorded screened images on stage. This whole event was then subjected to a second layer of 'screenification' through its transposition into a virtual online spectacle, a modulation through YouTube that shifts the narrative gaze from what Ralf Remshardt calls 'stage seeing' to 'camera seeing'.³⁵ While Remshardt associates this shifting gaze with the decline of the opera genre and its replacement in contemporary culture by film, *LOST PLAY* demonstrates just how innovative and positive this movement can be. The use of specific moving-image techniques in the pre-recorded and live-streamed stage projections in the live performance, and the transference of the show to YouTube, which includes shots from different angles, zooms and overlapping images, allowed the three-

³⁵ Ralf Remshardt, 'The Actor as Intermedialist: Remediation, Appropriation, Adaptation', in *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*, ed. Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt (New York: Rodopi, 2006), 41.

dimensional space of the stage to be easily transferred to the two-dimensional space of the screen. This collision of the two types of narrative gaze shows how difficult it has become to separate live and mediatized performance, between which, as Philip Auslander argues, there is no essential, *a priori* distinction.³⁶

Another aspect of *LOST PLAY*'s operatic identity is the voice, which remains a key element of the work. Unlike the other formats, such as the series in which the characters remain silent, here each character's voice undergoes electronic manipulation through amplification, filters and effects. While post-production techniques and software make pre-recorded YouTube material easy to manipulate in a convincing way, in *LOST PLAY*, live singing is modified in *real* time, thus simultaneously preserving and mediating typical operatic conventions. The measure of contestants' success is not, however, how they overcome the technical difficulties of the vocal parts but rather how they combine voice and body to create a charismatic stage persona. The stage persona of Edit Selfie Smart performing 'Self-Love', for instance, bears the hallmarks of a diva and references those apparent in Dion's music video – sonically through the use of vibrato and a quasi-operatic voice and visually through the gesture of a raised hand. Edit's voice is extended by a microphone, which becomes her fetish: she stops singing and starts to tenderly touch her body with the microphone, which emphasizes her narcissistic personality. Freddie notices this, admitting, 'I think you are the type of person who even takes a picture of your own voice'. In the context of YouTube, thanks to the visual use of the microphone, the sudden switch of modality in the creation of Edit's persona from sonic to visual gains new resonance. This draws our attention to the fact that – as YouTube users – we can repeat this gesture by muting the voice in the video; but to listen only to the voice without the image, we have to use computer tricks or buy a premium subscription. The fact that this can be done faster by closing our eyes restores the acting force of the simplest bodily gesture. By performing them, we can resist the compelling power of the screen and the image.

The Transmedial Rhizome

The transmedial world of *LOST* is fuelled by the fusion and transmission of content between numerous formats that influence each other, creating a

³⁶ Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 2008).

dense, rhizomatic network of mutual relations, with *LOST PLAY* at the centre. Its newness comes from the inclusion, within this rhizome, of social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook. The creation of a virtual spectacle enables new media connections and convergences to arise, expanding the transmedial vocabulary of the work and introducing new layers of meanings into the narrative. In a virtual spectacle, the transmedial and hypermedial strategies used in live performance can be modified (e.g. developing the narrative through a series of short audiovisual forms instead of the long form of a live performance) or enhanced (e.g. screen motif proliferation or narrative discontinuity).

Developing the transmedia world of *LOST* via *LOST PLAY*, with its swirl of references to other screen media forms, relies on what Leal describes as the 'desensitising visual homogeneity' of contemporary culture and its technical democratization.³⁷ The numerous links between genres and formats, between live and virtual spectacle and the stories presented within and across them, strengthen the integrity of *LOST*'s world and, in a way at odds with the title of the project, allow us to find ourselves in it. Szmytka's incorporation of YouTube forges a carnivalistic space for aesthetic experimentation that opens up new relations between film and new media, stage and camera seeing and the different forms of audience behaviour required for each. Around this transmedial network lurks the cultural ghost of opera, whose traditional boundaries, although radically deconstructed, become porous and open to new possibility.

Although access to the world of *LOST* is no longer possible through some formats, its creation remains a work in progress. Audiences can continue to access the playlists and are free to manipulate its structure and modify its parameters. Collecting individual fragments of the *LOST* world opens up numerous meanings and interpretations, depending on the cultural competencies, media experiences or aesthetic preferences of a given 'collector'. This living, open-ended nature of the *LOST* world continues to develop. After the premieres of *LOST PLAY*, several new 'updates' of the *LOST* system were created, including *ENTER LOST LEVEL* – a two-day performative installation with a selfie booth, DIY station and two computer game stands on display at the Ostwall-Museum in Dortmund. For eight years, Szmytka organized and curated the *PLAY* mobile city festival in Frankfurt and Offenbach am Main, based on introducing art into the everyday life of residents and presenting what she calls interdisciplinary 'conceptual concerts' in various city spaces.³⁸ In each of these spaces – both networked and

³⁷ Leal, 'On Colour Magic', 171–2.

³⁸ Szmytka in private correspondence, 2 October 2021.

real – the composer gives over creative control of her work to her audiences. She invites them to enter and exit from a variety of angles, to stay as long as they like and to explore the world through different platforms and audiovisual textures to produce a new form of deconstructed, multimedial spectacle.

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YouTube Logics and the Extraction of Musical Space in San Juan's La Perla and Kingston's Fleet Street

Ofer Gazit and Elisa Bruttomesso¹



Over the last decade, YouTube has brought unprecedented visibility to Caribbean music, with reggaeton and reggae attracting mainstream attention in US and European media.² Two music videos in particular became emblematic of a trend to imbue YouTube videos with the potential to bring about positive economic and social change: Puerto Rican Luis Fonsi's 'Despacito' ft. Daddy Yankee (dir. Carlos Perez, 2017) and Jamaican Koffee's 'Toast' (dir. Xavier Damase, 2018).³ When it was released, 'Despacito' broke several viewing records and was purported to have played a part in boosting Puerto Rican tourism, while positive representations of reggae singer Koffee within the context of downtown Kingston have been regarded as important not only for cultivating a safe and welcoming image for the

¹ Ofer Gazit conducted the interviews with Pablo Rodriguez, conducted fieldwork in Puerto Rico, conducted the analysis of 'Despacito' and wrote the full and final draft of the chapter. Elisa Bruttomesso conducted and translated the interview with Rafael Ruiz. Both authors conducted the research on Fleet Street and Life Yard together. The authors would like to thank Pablo and Rafael for their time during the uncertainty of the Covid-19 pandemic.

² Wayne Marshall, 'Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About "Despacito"', *Vulture*, 22 August 2017, <https://www.vulture.com/2017/08/everything-you-ever-wanted-to-know-about-despacito.html>.

³ Javier Hernández-Acosta, 'A Bottom-up Strategy for Music Cities: The Case of San Juan, Puerto Rico', in *Music Cities: Evaluating a Global Cultural Policy Concept*, ed. Christina Ballico and Allan Watson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 138; Kim-Marie Spence, 'Caribbean Creatives and the Intelligent Economy', in *Intelligent Economies Developments in the Caribbean*, ed. Stacie Ann Wilson (Santa Rosa, CA: Informing Science Press, 2021), 165. Luis Fonsi, 'Luis Fonsi – Despacito ft. Daddy Yankee', *YouTube video*, 00:04:41, 13 January 2017, <https://youtu.be/kJQP7kiw5Fk>; Original Koffee, 'Koffee – Toast (Official Video)', *YouTube video*, 00:03:05, 16 November 2018, <https://youtu.be/p8HoEvDh70Y>.

neighbourhood but also for challenging the misogynistic reputation of Dancehall reggae. While some research exists on the impact of YouTube music videos on tourism, such as Sehwan Oh et al.'s work on K-pop and the Korean travel industry, the impact of high-visibility YouTube videos on Caribbean music scenes remains underexplored.⁴ Considering the mass circulation of Caribbean music videos in the United States and Europe, we investigate the online and algorithmically intensified manifestations of what Jocelyne Guilbault and Timothy Rommen have called the 'touristic imperial gaze and imperial audition.'⁵ Through this theoretical framework we examine the case of La Perla neighbourhood in San Juan Puerto Rico, where 'Despacito' was shot, and Fleet Street in Kingston, Jamaica, where 'Toast' was filmed. Through analysis of the videos in relation to these locales, we ask: how do local residents participate in the political economies of YouTube videos?⁶ What is the effect of high-visibility videos on the neighbourhoods in which they were shot? What is the potential of YouTube visibility to bring about positive economic and social change to these locales? In other words, what does it mean to be 'seen' according to the musical economies of YouTube? We argue that, despite optimist claims for the potential of mass-viewed YouTube music videos to bring about positive economic and social change to local music scenes, visibility alone does little to bring about such transformation. Instead, it often implicates local scenes in the economic logic of YouTube, where 'freely' circulating cultural 'content' is used as backdrop for advertisements intended primarily for North American and European tourists.

Caribbean Music Videos and the 'Touristic Imperial Gaze'

Caribbean popular music videos have increasingly been implicated in the commodification of place and local identity. In their work on the cultural production of Caribbean music videos, Murali Balaji and Thomas Sigler argue that

⁴ Sehwan Oh, Joong Ho Ahn and Hyunmi Baek, 'The Effects of Social Media on Music-Induced Tourism: A Case of Korean Pop Music and Inbound Tourism to Korea', in *Asia Pacific Journal of Information Systems* 25, no. 1 (2015): 119–41.

⁵ Jocelyne Guilbault and Timothy Rommen (eds.), *Sounds of Vacation: Political Economies of Caribbean Tourism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 3.

⁶ 'Despacito's' video was circulated through the hosting platform Vevo, a partnership between the Big Three record labels (Universal, Sony and Warner) and Alphabet, YouTube's parent corporation. In addition to YouTube, Vevo makes its videos available on a variety of other platforms. Significantly, during the first year after its release, 'Despacito' did not appear on MTV's main channel or participate in any of MTV's awards. It was aired on the Spanish-speaking MTV Tres. Associated Press, 'Why "Despacito" Wasn't Nominated for a VMA', *Billboard*, 14 August 2017, <https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/despacito-video-not-nominated-for-vm-a-reason-7898328/>.

the content of contemporary work is largely defined by a transnational exchange of production and consumption and the commodification of local signifiers of culture, language and place.⁷ In the Caribbean, where music is a crucial part of the tourism industry, music videos circulating through online platforms become digital tourist destinations, where representations of local culture, scenery and identity are consumed through what John Urry has described as the viewer's 'tourist gaze'.⁸ Low-income neighbourhoods that maintain community-based mural art, for instance, have become crucially important sites of Caribbean tourism: prized by visitors as being 'authentic' and 'uncommercial' destinations, such neighbourhoods have become significant backdrops for popular music videos.⁹ Because both live and recorded music are performed in public spaces in many Caribbean cities, this kind of physical and virtual visibility places DJs, performing musicians and local dancers within sites of the 'touristic imperial gaze and imperial audition' becoming integral to local economics. For Jerome Camal, these two key terms – 'gaze' and 'audition' – express the tropes, desires, fears and imaginations 'through which North American and European visitors construct and consume the soundscapes of Caribbean destinations'.¹⁰ If low-income urban environments, public arts projects and the visual and sonic dimensions of Caribbean musicking are crucial sites of Caribbean tourism, the neocolonial political economies they reproduce are never more present than in their online manifestations as highly visible, transglobal YouTube videos. The relationship between YouTube videos as loci of the 'touristic imperial gaze' and the lasting impact this algorithmically multiplied gaze has on the locales in which they were shot, positions audiovisual songs like 'Despacito' and 'Toast' as significant networked manifestations of local and global representations of particular cultural moments.

'Despacito'

'Despacito' (2017) is a song written by Puerto Rican pop star Luis Fonsi, reggaeton artist Daddy Yankee and lyricist Erika Ender. The music video, shot

⁷ Murali Balaji and Thomas Sigler, 'Glocal Riddems: Cultural Production and Territorial Identity in Caribbean Music Videos', *Visual Communication* 17, no. 1 (2018): 91–111.

⁸ John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* (London: Sage, 1990).

⁹ See Jonathan Skinner and Lee Jolliffe, *Murals and Tourism, Heritage, Politics and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2017); and Malte Steinbrink, "'We Did the Slum!' – Urban Poverty Tourism in Historical Perspective", *Tourism Geographies* 14, no. 2 (2012): 213–34.

¹⁰ Jerome Camal, 'Touristic Rhythms: The Club Remix', in *Sounds of Vacation*, 88.

in one day in La Perla neighbourhood on the outskirts of San Juan, and at the nearby bar La Factoria, was directed by Carlos Perez. Speaking about the video's concept, Perez explains that they wanted the video to 'be like a day in a life inside the culture of Puerto Rico'.¹¹ In order to capture the nuanced collaboration between Fonsi, a Puerto Rican-born, Miami-based star of Latin pop, and Daddy Yankee, the reggaeton pioneer still living on the island, Perez wanted a place that was both romantic and urban. He settled on an area of social housing that contrasts sharply with the rest of Old San Juan's hotel-studded coastline: 'We knew the textures of the barrio that we wanted would be there,' he explains; 'Also, the Malecon in La Perla is very unique. It's the only place where public housing is literally on the water.'¹² The video highlights the juxtapositions between San Juan's poorly maintained but vibrantly coloured public housing and the beauty of the Caribbean Sea throughout, with shots moving from the neighbourhood's coastal path to its urban interior, before finally coming to rest in a bar where the track succumbs to the (apparently) diegetic sounds of the singers and percussion (Figure 4.1).

The success of 'Despacito' was instant, reaching 5.4 million YouTube views within twenty-four hours.¹³ By July 2017, it had become the most watched YouTube video ever and La Perla the world's most-viewed neighbourhood. This quickly drew the attention of business leaders and politicians; just eight months after the release of the video, in August 2017, the then governor of Puerto Rico, Ricardo Rosselló, declared Luis Fonsi a tourism ambassador. Jose Izquierdo, the director of the Puerto Rican Tourism Company, said in a press statement, 'We will unveil the land of "Despacito"'.¹⁴ Online news outlets reported an increase of 45 per cent in Google searches for 'Puerto Rico', while others report an actual 45 per cent rise in tourism itself (see Figure 4.2).¹⁵ However, these headlines remain unconfirmed and appear to have been boosted by a misleading but arguably understandable campaign by the Puerto Rico Tourism Company (PRTC).

¹¹ Ronny Courtens 'Cut With FCP X: "Despacito" Gets Over 4 Billion Views on YouTube', *Fcp.co*, 23 October 2017, <https://fcp.co/final-cut-pro/articles/2008-cut-with-fcp-x-despacito-gets-over-4-billion-views-on-youtube-and-is-nominated-for-best-music-video-in-the-2017-latin-grammy-awards>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Griselda Flores, 'Luis Fonsi Talks Anatomy of "Despacito"', *Billboard*, 18 January 2017, <https://www.billboard.com/music/latin/luis-fonsi-despacito-daddy-yankee-interview-7661716/>.

¹⁴ Suzette Fernandez, 'Luis Fonsi Named Puerto Rico's Tourism Ambassador', *Billboard*, 15 August 2017, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/latin/7905040/luis-fonsi-puerto-rico-tourism-ambassador-despacito>.

¹⁵ James Draper, 'Despacito boosts Puerto Rico tourism by 45 per cent', *Daily Mail Online*, 29 August 2017, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/travel/travel_news/article-4833254/Despacito-boosts-Puerto-Rico-tourism-45-cent.html.



Figure 4.1 La Perla's Malecon.

Despite the unprecedented success of 'Despacito', tourism in Puerto Rico did not increase dramatically between January and August 2017. In fact, a report by the *Washington Post* shows that hotel occupancy and income from tourist taxes actually decreased slightly compared to previous years, while traffic to online travel sites also remained constant. There does not appear to have been a clear 'Despacito' effect.¹⁶

However, what did create a clear and significant rise in interest in Puerto Rico was not 'Despacito' but a catastrophe of historic proportions, one which decimated the country's tourism industry. Just three weeks after Fonsi was appointed tourism ambassador by the PRTC, the island was hit by Hurricanes Irma and Maria, leaving La Perla and countless other neighbourhoods in ruins and without electricity and running water for months. A comparison between the Google search numbers for 'Despacito' and 'Puerto Rico' reveals that, for a brief moment in the weeks following the hurricanes, the term 'Despacito' was surpassed by searches for 'Puerto Rico'. When these search

¹⁶ Madline Friedman, 'No, "Despacito" is Not Actually Driving a Boom in Tourism to Puerto Rico', *Washington Post*, 17 July 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2017/07/18/no-despacito-is-not-actually-driving-a-boom-in-tourism-to-puerto-rico/>.

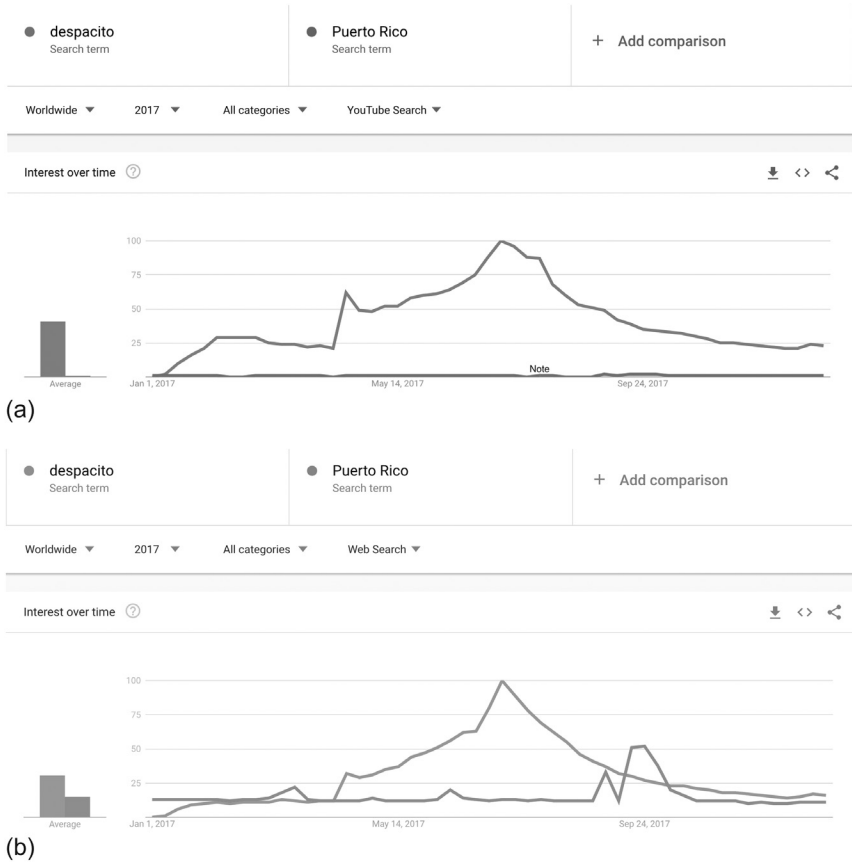


Figure 4.2 YouTube (a) and Google (b) searches for ‘Despacito’ versus Puerto Rico in 2017.

numbers began to decrease by early October, it became clear that neither the international success of ‘Despacito’ nor the heightened news visibility in the wake of Hurricane Maria had done much to help the island’s ailing economy, the dire humanitarian crisis or the devastated infrastructure in any tangible way. Rather, these increased hits appeared only to enrich the marketing strategies of various media companies who used the island’s theatre of poverty and distraction as a backdrop for advertisements. Mass global visibility, in other words, did not translate into tangible benefits for the local population.

Part of this translation issue was due to the economic logic of YouTube, which operates not only at the macro or industry level but also via everyday

economic interactions such as the ‘touristic imperial gaze’.¹⁷ The second scene of ‘Despacito’, for instance, was shot at La Factoria, a bar and live music venue above La Perla on Calle San Sebastian. It depicts a crowd dancing to live music at the packed nightclub. The scene’s gendered, sexualized and racialized representations of dancers (what Perez referred to as ‘dirty dancing, Latin style’) are transferred onto the lived reality of La Factoria’s weekly live salsa dance floor, which is now advertised as the ‘Despacito bar’ in travel guides and websites.¹⁸ Pablo Rodriguez, one of the co-owners of the bar, explained that having live music and local dancers is crucial to the bar’s success: ‘The Factoria always has locals *and* tourists [. . .] I like to keep it accessible for people that want to see good salsa, but can’t afford to pay for expensive drinks, so we do it for free’; ‘The [locals] come in and for me, honestly the assistance, just to have them there . . . the tourists that like to see the locals, and maybe learn how to dance’.¹⁹ In La Factoria, local dancers perform ‘a day in the life of Puerto Rican culture’ as presented in ‘Despacito’, in exchange for the free ‘service’ of live music. They are neither the customer nor the product but rather ‘content providers’ whose knowledge of dance and sexualized and racialized bodies help sell the locale as a product. Rodriguez laments the neighbourhood’s growing dependency on tourists, noting that, as a result of the famous music video, music scenes that are not tagged as a ‘free’ service struggle to sustain themselves: ‘If you pay or even if it’s free sometimes, it’s complicated to bring people to see live music. For the tourists, it’s easier . . . they can go to La Factoria, we always have music, but it’s not the best for the local music scene in PR; people [here] don’t want to pay’.²⁰

From the lyrics ‘Despacito, Vamos a hacerlo en una playa en Puerto Rico’,²¹ through the video’s colourful scenes of urban poverty and hypersexualized dance club routines, ‘Despacito’ capitalizes on YouTube viewers’ ‘imperial gaze and audition’, attaching, to again quote Guilbault and Rommen, ‘local sounds and rhythms to black bodies, loudness, and exuberant sexuality’.²² The video uses the expectations and imaginaries of ‘potential’ tourists online to generate billions of clicks and views. And yet, in so doing, it also raises the hopes of local residents for financial relief at a time of severe debt crisis and climate disaster.

¹⁷ Guilbault and Rommen, *Sounds of Vacation*, 3.

¹⁸ Leila Cobo, *Decoding Despacito* (New York: Vintage Book, 2020), chap. 18, Kindle.

¹⁹ Pablo Rodriguez, personal communication with Gazit, 14 April 2020.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ According to Erika Ender, when Fonsi approached her with the idea for the song (which they later co-wrote), this was the only line he had completed. It can be translated as ‘Slowly, Let’s Do It On The Beach in Puerto Rico’; Cobo, *Decoding Despacito*, chap. 18.

²² Guilbault and Rommen, *Sounds of Vacation*, 25

When such imperial fantasies are transferred into the lived reality of La Perla and La Factoria, local residents retain their ‘music video’ position as a backdrop to an economic exchange that capitalizes on their presence, knowledge and looks, while excluding them from any of the financial benefits. However, while claims for ‘Despacito’s’ economic impact on Puerto Rican residents may have been overblown, its impact on the Latin music industry was nonetheless profound. As we show in our next case study, optimistic assessments regarding the power of music videos to bring about economic relief to local residents may have more to do with the agency of residents themselves than with the number of YouTube hits.

‘Toast’

While ‘Despacito’ holds a problematic relationship with the location of its shoot, ‘Toast’ has had a more favourable impact. Several recent studies have pointed to the relationship between the Jamaican music industry, what Kim-Marie Spence calls ‘the platform economy’, and tourism development in downtown Jamaica.²³ Grammy Award-winning reggae singer Koffee has been particularly celebrated for the ways in which she challenges gender norms and the representation of women in the reggae industry. Significantly, her challenges are presented through the positive representation of downtown Kingston’s low-income neighbourhoods.²⁴ ‘Toast’, the video responsible for Koffee’s fame and downtown Kingston’s sudden global visibility, was produced by Izy Beats and Walshy Fire and filmed by London-based director Xavier Damase. It was uploaded to Vevo and YouTube on 16 November 2018. Since its release, the song has been viewed approximately 195 million times on YouTube alone. The video was shot on Fleet and Orange streets, often celebrated for their importance in Jamaican music history.²⁵ Like ‘Despacito’, ‘Toast’ represents a fictional ‘day in a life’ of the locale, but rather than feature a catalogue of ‘Jamaicanisms’, it focuses on a series of youth activities, including playing football on a flooded concrete field, doing wheelies on a motorbike, bleaching dreadlocks and boxing. Most prominently,

²³ Kim-Marie Spence, ‘Caribbean Creatives and the Intelligent Economy’, 148.

²⁴ Chevy R. J. Eugene, ‘Towards a Framework for Caribbean reparations’, in *Journal of Eastern Caribbean Studies* 44, no. 3 (2019): 54–77.

²⁵ Ramona Samuels, ‘Downtown Kingston to Become Music and Tourism Mecca in Jamaica’, *Caribbean National Weekly*, 3 January 2022, <https://www.caribbeannationalweekly.com/entertainment/downtown-kingston-to-become-music-and-tourism-mecca-in-jamaica/>.

it features Koffee herself, singing about the importance of gratitude and riding her bicycle in red work overalls around Paint Jamaica, a community street art initiative featuring elaborate colourful murals. This focus on the local urban community and simple youth past times positions 'Toast' against the sexualized constructions of women in many Caribbean YouTube videos geared towards the 'touristic imperial gaze'. Instead, it seeks to represent (and commodify nonetheless) a positive image of women and a safe and welcoming image of downtown Kingston.

Created in 2014, Paint Jamaica – where 'Toast' was shot – has since become a popular site for shooting video clips in a city with a storied musical legacy but few suitable film-shoot locations. The growing popularity of 'Toast' and other videos filmed on Fleet Street gave Paint Jamaica increased visibility, and it began to attract tourists. As a result, travel guides and organized bus tours now invite tourists to visit the site as part of a growing flood of reggae tourism in downtown Kingston, citing Koffee, Chronixx and other artists who made videos there as major draws.²⁶ Rafael Ruiz, a videographer who works mainly in the reggae music industry, explains Fleet Street's attraction: 'In Fleet Street', he says, 'foreign production crews started to film local musicians. Local people realized that if they had a restaurant and all of this was well arranged, [. . .] people could come, have a juice, take some photos and then leave. And this [has] benefits.'²⁷ With the increased number of film crews coming to Paint Jamaica, local residents decided to open the Life Yard collective, a small co-op organization. They transformed an area just in front of the murals at Fleet Street 41-44 into a community vegetable garden and built a small restaurant that hosts tourists and supplies the community with affordable food. 'The restaurant charges a certain amount of money to those who live there, and twice as much to those who come from abroad', Ruiz explains, 'which I don't see as inappropriate as it keeps on being cheap for tourists.' Ruiz does not consider what is happening to Fleet Street to be touristification. 'What I see in Fleet Street is a worthy project, it ensures the attractiveness of the space, without changing it and its surroundings and basically with no capital investments. It makes it attractive for young reggae tourists.' For him, one of the crucial points is that the place grew organically, from the shared needs of the residents.

²⁶ Spence, 'Caribbean Creatives', 165.

²⁷ Rafael Ruiz, personal communication with Bruttomesso, 1 April 2020.

By focusing on positive representation, community art projects and social issues, 'Toast' offers a digital version of a fairly recent kind of niche tourism, one which caters specifically to politically and ideologically minded viewers.²⁸ Yard Life similarly seeks to attract a new kind of social and politically conscious tourist. To what extent, then, does Life Yard follow YouTube's economic logic? While the murals and street art made Fleet Street into a site of increased social media visibility, the murals themselves are not dependent on tourists for their existence, nor are they framed as a 'service' given for 'free'. Instead, local residents provide food to both citizens and tourists at a price that is proportional to their economic abilities and relationship to the place. In addition to the community garden and restaurant, Life Yard leads tours through the community and hosts the Paint Jamaica Open Air Gallery. It also provides afternoon day care and school tutoring for the children of the neighbourhood. In seeking to commodify representations of positive social actions, and to a degree actually promoting positive social change, both 'Toast' and Yard Life can be seen as related manifestations of a growing market-driven, (often) platform-based, social justice economy.²⁹ As our conversation with Ruiz makes clear, the mass circulation of YouTube videos filmed at Paint Jamaica does not benefit the local residents directly. Rather, the online touristification of social action that stands at the base of their mass visibility became its own source of income for local residents, who began selling a worthy 'cause' to politically minded tourists.

The 'Entrepreneurization' of Everything

When we consider YouTube's Caribbean music videos as sites of the 'touristic imperial gaze', we cannot help but wonder about the centuries-old legacy of using emblems of racialized and gendered social inequality as sites of entertainment and leisure; about music videos as sites in which poverty itself is transformed into a tourist attraction and assigned advertisements further monetize neocolonial relations via a vastly unequal data and streaming 'platform' industry. What, then, is the obligation of YouTube to the places whose colourful scenery and depleted infrastructures generate hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue through the

²⁸ Luh Sin, Harng, Tim Oakes and Mary Mostafanezhad, 'Traveling for a Cause: Critical Examinations of Volunteer Tourism and Social Justice', *Tourist Studies* 15, no. 2 (August 2015): 119–31.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 119; Koffee's recent contract as 'Brand Ambassador' for Mastercard is part of this growing trend.

performance of online poverty tourism? What is its responsibility to a place whose scenes of destruction by rainfall and wind have grossed inordinate sums of money into YouTube's accounts?

Despite claims for the contributions of music tourism to the economic fabric of Caribbean cities, when such tourism takes place online, the direct economic benefits are not likely to reach local residents without a concerted effort and intervention on their part.³⁰ In La Perla, for instance, online visibility is not synonymous with political or economic agency for residents. And yet, an online presence can be translated into local economic agency, as we see in Kingston. The locales and communities that serve as background to hypervisible online products, like Life Yard, highlight the hazards embedded in dependency on contemporary social justice tourism and the spectacle of the 'Caribbean every day'. These recognitions must be historicized in relation to centuries-long legacy economic logics of the 'imperial gaze' and the more recent 'entrepreneurization' of everything. YouTube did not invent this logic – it merely exploits it on a new, global scale.

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³⁰ Ballico and Watson, *Music Cities*, 6.

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Pedagogy and Interpretation

Watching It All through a Screen

YouTube as a Teaching Aid for Music Composition

João Ricardo



With a good internet connection and the appropriate devices, we can read, write, upload, react to and interact with YouTube's musical content. Online masterclasses, recitals, tutorials and instructional videos have ensured greater accessibility to the craft of music by, writes Daniel Albert, 'extending learning to where students "live"'.¹ These videos have afforded new modes of engagement with the craft of composition, song writing, orchestration and recording and production technology: as music education scholar Christopher Cayari emphasizes, YouTube has also 'affected the musical art form' itself.² In this short case study, I focus on the distance and e-learning pedagogical resources available to the contemporary composer looking to support and supplement their traditional or institutional education and to music lovers and freelance students seeking bespoke instruction on particular styles and techniques.

Although online teaching has not always been well received, as it can restrict direct contact between students and teachers and offer generalized content, Albert Sangrà, Dimitrios Vlachopoulos and Nati Cabrera appraise e-learning as 'a natural evolution of distance learning, which has always taken advantage of the latest tools to emerge in the context of technologies for structuring

¹ Daniel Albert, 'Social Media in Music Education: Extending Learning to Where Students "Live"', *National Association for Music Education* 102, no. 2 (November 2015): 31–2.

² Christopher Cayari, 'The YouTube Effect: How YouTube has Provided New Ways to Consume, Create, and Share Music', *International Journal of Education & the Arts* 12, no. 6 (July 2011): 24.

education.’³ These e-learning evolutions have been explored by higher education institutions, many of which now offer various remotely delivered programmes, particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 lockdowns. Berklee College of Music was one of the first to open up an official online provision. In 2002, the university launched Berklee Online, an award-winning distance learning programme that offers undergraduate and master’s-level degree programmes; short courses on Music History, Music Theory, Harmony and Orchestration; as well as classes on software like Ableton Live, Pro Tools, Finale and Sibelius. The modules are a combination of pre-recorded lectures and live synchronous provision. According to their website, the popularity of these courses is today higher than ever, exceeding 18,000 annual enrolments and providing academic education to more than 75,000 students from 164 countries.⁴ At a fraction of the price of *in loco* classes, such provision offers major economic and geographical advantage and provides access to an expanded range of communities that may not be able to attend Berklee in person for various social reasons. In their work on virtual and online learning, Alex Ruthmann and David Hebert note that such provision provides ‘environments that enable instant multimedia communication and responsiveness between musicians, teachers, and students’, thanks to the possibilities afforded by new technologies.⁵

Like online higher education provision, YouTube makes access to music learning affordable. Although the platform’s provision is very different from the slick, often live provision offered by universities, Katie Lai has shown that both academics and students rely on YouTube to supplement their learning, using the platform, in many cases, ‘as their habitual primary place for self-learning.’⁶ In particular, Lai notes that it is the opportunity to repeat instruction through re-viewings and the variety of topics presented from a range of different perspectives that many music students find particularly useful.⁷ While YouTube is notable for its beginner instrumental tuition, it has also become a varied depository for composition instruction that ranges from explanation of harmonic

³ Albert Sangrà, Dimitrios Vlachopoulos and Nati Cabrera, ‘Building and Inclusive Definition of E-Learning: An Approach to the Conceptual Framework’, *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* 13, no. 2 (April 2012): 146.

⁴ ‘Study Music Online With Berklee’, *Berklee Online*, <https://online.berklee.edu>.

⁵ Alex Ruthmann and David Hebert, ‘Music Learning and New Media in Virtual and Online Environments’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Education*, ed. Gary McPherson and Graham Welch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 572–3.

⁶ Katie Lai, ‘How Are Our Undergraduates Using YouTube? A Survey on Music Students’ Use of YouTube and the Library’s Multimedia Collection’, *Music Reference Services Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (December 2013): 199–201.

⁷ Lai, ‘How Are Our Undergraduates Using YouTube?’, 206–7.

progressions or twelve-tone composition, the exemplification of specific textures and chords and the detailed illustration of instrument capabilities and extended techniques.

YouTube offers a different form of engagement from the progressive, overarching structures of university courses like Berklee Online. Rather than engaging in overarching programme designs that spread over months or years, YouTube users can pick and choose from an enormous number of pedagogical videos: some, largely on official channels, follow a progressive structure, but most offer short tutorials on specific techniques or ideas. Users must therefore wade through a variety of different teaching styles to design their own fragmented course structures. And yet, the music composition classes found on YouTube are highly varied and the disparate quality of teaching that spreads through the platform's user-generated content (UGC) can hinder coherent or well-founded pedagogy.⁸ In fact, film scholar Alexandra Juhasz draws attention to a lack of depth, expertise, order and coherence in many of YouTube's pedagogical videos. While it may be exciting to learn from new and varied people, she writes, 'on YouTube, amateurs' rule, experts are deflated, and authority is flattened'.⁹

Although the uncontrolled landscape of UGC can lead to misinformation and inaccuracies, the coexistence of multiple coexistent voices can nevertheless cater for most points of interest. Cayari remains cautious and posits a metaphorical line that divides educators into 'enthusiasts or skeptics'.¹⁰ Conversely, Kirstin Dougan, in her research into the perception of YouTube's pedagogical music provision, shows how many music teachers, despite their reservations, praise the platform for its ease of use, convenience and permanent availability and regularly implement its tuition videos into their research and teaching.¹¹ YouTube's interface, while not as interactive as the live synchronous lecture, nevertheless enables a two-way flow of information through comments, evaluation and discussions that extend to other forums and chat rooms. But how do we choose a video? Or ensure that such choices are appropriate? How can students choose videos on their own for critical academic thought? And how can we verify the security of the videos in teaching and learning environments?

⁸ Janice Waldron, 'User-Generated Content, YouTube and Participatory Culture on the Web: Music Learning and Teaching in Two Contrasting Online Communities', *Music Education Research* 15, no. 3 (March 2013): 259.

⁹ Alexandra Juhasz, 'Why Not (to) Teach on YouTube', in *Video Vortex Reader: Responses to YouTube*, ed. Geert Lovink and Sabine Niederer (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2008), 139–40.

¹⁰ Cayari, 'The YouTube Effect', 22.

¹¹ Kirstin Dougan, 'YouTube Has Changed Everything'? Music Faculty, Librarians, and Their Use and Perceptions of YouTube', *College and Research Libraries* 75, no. 4 (2014): 585–6.

Following an adaptation of Janice Waldron's categorization of YouTube's music learning and teaching videos by content,¹² I offer some examples of videos and content creators who focus on compositional method and explore how composers can acquire and engage with relevant skills and experiences, skills which, as Heidi Partti argues, are 'likely to be even more pressing in the current world of digital communication and social media.'¹³

Professional and Semi-professional Performances and Seminars

One way to ensure reliable content is to engage with videos uploaded by renowned institutions and voices. Although YouTube usually offers only a fraction of the full materials provided by on-site conservatoires and universities (the rest of which usually sits behind a paywall), these videos can be useful. While Berklee provides remote academic guidance through its official channels, other institutions extend instruction geared specifically towards YouTube users. The London Symphony Orchestra (LSO), for instance, Britain's first independent, self-governing orchestra, populates its official YouTube channel with an array of videos. Among these are seminars aimed at composition students, which touch on issues like techniques for composing with string instruments.¹⁴ In one video, uploaded in 2016, the orchestra's principal second violinist and three other string players explain, through various repetitions of the first bars of the second movement from Schubert's String Quartet No. 14 ('Death and the Maiden', 1824), different techniques, timbres and effects, such as *flautando*, *sul ponticello* and *col legno tratto*. This video has been viewed almost 70,000 times and all user comments are extremely positive.

Other channels focus closely on specific issues. The channel Extended Techniques for Music Composition, for instance, includes a series of videos called 'Instrument Demonstrations: Micromodules on Extended Techniques for

¹² Janice Waldron, 'Conceptual Frameworks, Theoretical Models and the Role of YouTube: Investigating Informal Music Learning and Teaching in Online Music Community', *Journal of Music, Technology and Education* 4, no. 2–3 (February 2012): 194.

¹³ Heidi Partti, 'Reports from the Field: The Multiple Affordances of Social Media for Classical Music Composers', in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Media and Music Learning*, ed. Janice Waldron, Stephanie Horsley and Kari Veblen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 228.

¹⁴ London Symphony Orchestra, 'A-Level Music | Composition | String Techniques With David Alberman', *YouTube video*, 00:19:08, 22 February 2016, <https://youtu.be/ux3Z3yAK-UE>.

Music Composition Courses' recorded for students at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (August 2021). This series offers numerous short videos, mostly between three and six minutes long, that demonstrate and explain – through both practice and notation – what kinds of extended techniques are available to composers writing for cello (*finger nail tremolo*,¹⁵ *ricochet*,¹⁶ etc.), violin (*tapping*,¹⁷ *double harmonic*,¹⁸ etc.), horn (*pitch bends*,¹⁹ *multiphonics*,²⁰ etc.), clarinet (*timbral trills*,²¹ *flutter tongue*,²² etc.) and flute (*whistle tones*,²³ *jet whistle*,²⁴ etc.).

'MUSIVUS', an initiative of the Associação Portuguesa de Compositores (APC), offers yet another approach to composition pedagogy. This series of YouTube videos present composers and performers in discussion of their collaborative music projects: in one, Christopher Bochmann and pianist Ana Telles analyse and dissect *ESSAY VIII* for solo piano.²⁵

¹⁵ Extended Techniques for Music Composition, 'Finger nail Tremolo – Extended Techniques for Cello and Double Bass', *YouTube video*, 00:01:57, 23 August 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v64aY_76M7o.

¹⁶ Extended Techniques for Music Composition, 'Arpeggio or Ricochet Between the Bridge & Tailpiece – Extended Techniques for Cello and Double Bass', *YouTube video*, 00:01:14, 23 August 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5smYjm9yQY>.

¹⁷ Extended Techniques for Music Composition, 'Tapping – Extended Techniques for Violin', *YouTube video*, 00:01:12, 23 August 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Q9FiV37BEk.

¹⁸ Extended Techniques for Music Composition, 'Double Harmonic Tremolo – Extended Techniques for Violin', *YouTube video*, 00:03:51, 23 August 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t7wILJeJZTs&t=88s>.

¹⁹ Extended Techniques for Music Composition, 'Pitch Bends with Stopped Horn – Extended Techniques for Horn', *YouTube video*, 00:03:16, 23 August 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zitxZ4qBhtg>.

²⁰ Extended Techniques for Music Composition, 'Multiphonics – Extended Techniques for Horn', *Extended Techniques for Music Composition*, 23 August 2021, 04:22, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IqdWIX94IOk>.

²¹ Extended Techniques for Music Composition, 'Timbral Trills – Extended Techniques for Clarinet and Bass Clarinet', *YouTube video*, 00:03:44, 23 August 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k8F2gUZYOWk>.

²² Extended Techniques for Music Composition, 'Flutter Tonguing on the Clarinets – Extended Techniques for Clarinet and Bass Clarinet', *YouTube video*, 00:03:29, 23 August 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vNPRgTsGIBA>.

²³ Extended Techniques for Music Composition, 'Whistle Tones – Extended Techniques for Flute, Alto Flute and Piccolo', *YouTube video*, 00:04:47, 23 August 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72pPofeqICQ>.

²⁴ Extended Techniques for Music Composition, 'Jet Whistle – Extended Techniques for Flute, Alto Flute and Piccolo', *YouTube video*, 00:03:26, 23 August 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZdflopGpwoQ>.

²⁵ APC Associação Portuguesa de Compositores, 'MUSIVUS – ciclo II – sessão III [Christopher Bochmann & Ana Telles]', *YouTube video*, 01:25:02, 6 September 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0x1JnRqNYSQ>.

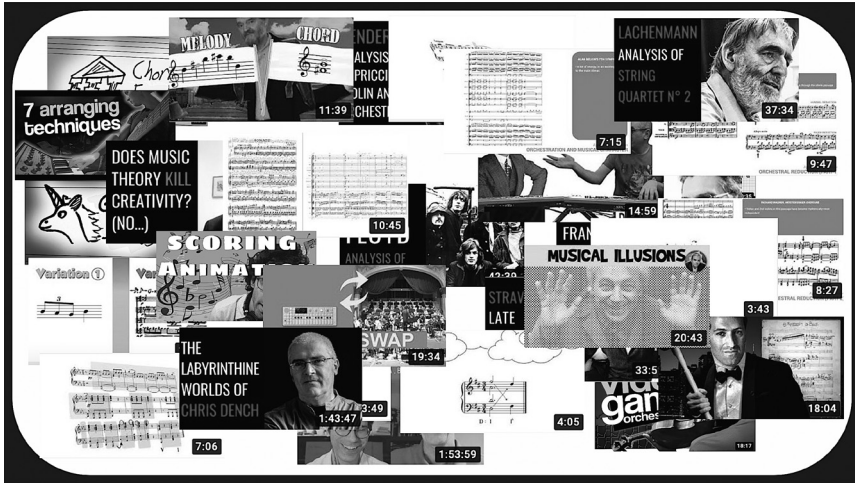


Figure 5.1 Various YouTube video thumbnails on music composition subjects.

Professional Musician-Instructors

Although uploaded to YouTube, the performances, lectures and seminars discussed above were not designed with the sole intention of online consumption. Other educators and experienced musicians have created teaching videos with YouTube's Web 2.0. characteristics in mind: interactive content, frequent updates and new uploads and a reliable and meaningful connection with other users. Broad-ranging videos, which are often less focused on formal theory or analysis, are particularly common: some of these are featured in Figure 5.1 and in the small playlist accompanying this text. But there are also some with a particular focus on compositional practice, in which seasoned composers upload materials regarding technique and craft.

Three contrasting examples are useful here. David Bruce who completed a PhD in composition at King's College London has been sharing pedagogical videos on YouTube since 2017. These focus primarily on Western art music, offering information about music history, analysis and composition. One video, for instance, analyses how other composers have used Fibonacci Numbers in their work;²⁶ another demonstrates how to produce variations from one

²⁶ David Bruce Composer, 'How Composers use Fibonacci Numbers & Golden Ratio | Composing with Fibonacci', *YouTube video*, 00:08:03, 12 January 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yAy8e5RDXw>.

single melodic phrase.²⁷ Composer, oboist and professor of music analysis Samuel Andreyev runs a music analysis channel that offers structural tools for composition students through the dissection of music from Brian Ferneyhough²⁸ to Johann Sebastian Bach,²⁹ from Pink Floyd³⁰ to Tom Waits,³¹ and through interviews with other musicians and composers. With nearly 50,000 subscribers from over 160 countries, his channel is regularly updated with videos each reaching around 30,000 or 40,000 views.

Alan Belkin's YouTube channel is slightly different. A retired Canadian composer, teacher, organist and pianist, Belkin's channel boasts over 30,000 subscribers. The channel's pedagogical videos on composition, harmony, counterpoint, orchestration and analysis are primarily positioned for composers. Although the videos are shorter than those offered by Bruce and Andreyev, these episodes resemble concise lectures, as they feature a voice-over discussion of various audio examples. The episodic nature of his content also ensures a gradual and in-depth engagement with the topics, and there are dozens of videos that focus on Applied Harmony,³² Analysis for Composers³³ and traditional Counterpoint.³⁴ Significantly, the first YouTube uploads of each of these three teachers were original compositions. It was only later that they began to diversify their output to include pedagogical content.

Amateur Peer-To-Peer Performances

While professional seminars recorded and uploaded to YouTube and pedagogical videos made specifically for the platform offer complimentary forms of teaching, channels that create and share scoring videos demonstrate the relationship

²⁷ David Bruce Composer, 'Embrace the Dark Side | Better Notes #1 | Composing Advice', *YouTube video*, 00:07:58, 5 February 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zJT9YmcmGvY>.

²⁸ Samuel Andreyev, 'Brian Ferneyhough's String Trio: Analysis', *YouTube video*, 00:37:24, 14 December 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bec1B3h3F4g>.

²⁹ Samuel Andreyev, 'J. S. Bach, Actus Tragicus: Analysis', *YouTube video*, 00:31:48, 1 January 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1IlaM_vXQc&t=17s.

³⁰ Samuel Andreyev, 'See Saw by Pink Floyd: Analysis', *YouTube video*, 00:42:39, 13 July 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLEwuo5R-tQ>.

³¹ Samuel Andreyev, 'Underground by Tom Waits: Analysis', *YouTube video*, 00:30:44, 17 April 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8R8XH9jcOy8>.

³² Alan Belkin, 'Applied Harmony #31 - Diatonic Modulation Part 1', *YouTube video*, 00:03:44, 2 February 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XUbs5XsxLM>.

³³ Alan Belkin, 'Analysis for Composers #27 - Analyzing Orchestration', *YouTube video*, 00:12:30, 25 May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YkG0fRtwmsY>.

³⁴ Alan Belkin, 'Counterpoint #22 - Conclusion', *YouTube video*, 00:08:07, 17 December 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJBYPVsyVuI>.

between text and its realization. These videos feature recordings accompanied by the corresponding moment in the score and embody the sense of community that characterizes Web 2.0.³⁵ These channels and videos provide unpublished scores and unreleased recordings of contemporary music, submitted by the composers themselves. Often, the scores offered are impossible to access in other circumstances, and the promotion of sharing is significant. Community is also generated as amateurs and professionals gather together virtually to study scores, discuss pieces and specific moments, analyse techniques and engage with composers, performers, mediators and other users. As Waldron points out, users can share audio recordings of themselves or others, 'enabling people to see, hear, and thus more easily understand and connect what musicians are actually doing when they perform'.³⁶ Scoring videos not only follow the scores: for instance, they occasionally make use of a split screen to show a simultaneous performance of the music heard.³⁷

While channels containing twentieth- and twenty-first-century scoring, videos have been hit with legal restraints resulting in many being removed, those that remain provide a unique resource for discovering and studying music and scores. They not only impact the online community but have also influenced the diversity of concert goers and music lovers, as one anonymous user on Reedit explains: 'There are people like me who might now see the name Lili Boulanger on an orchestral programme and actually consider going, whereas I probably wouldn't have done before.'

YouTube's resources for music pedagogy, then, are diverse, interactive, communal and sometimes problematic (Figure 5.2). And yet, as teaching tools that can increase access to compositional process and to new music in such a way that it can spread way beyond the online community, these videos can generate significant impact. As Partti says, they have become integral to 'technologically savvy twenty-first-century new music composers' and their audiences.³⁸ They can be used in a variety of ways: students can treat the videos as part of a reading session with colleagues who share the same interests and are keen to communicate their views in a digital space, for instance; they might also

³⁵ George N. Gianopoulos, 'Toru Takemitsu – A Bird Came Down the Walk for Viola and Piano (1994) [Score-Video]', *YouTube video*, 00:07:59, 2 May 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YhI93aygqXU>.

³⁶ Waldron, 'Conceptual Frameworks, Theoretical Models and the Role of YouTube', 190.

³⁷ Score Follower, 'Celeste Oram – Sanz cuer / Amis, dolens / Dame, par vous [m/score]', *YouTube video*, 00:12:23, 18 June 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nu8TXFFwyfo>.

³⁸ Partti, 'Reports From the Field', 229.



Figure 5.2 Testimonies regarding the usefulness of scrolling scores from various YouTube videos.

contact the content creator for questions or feedback, in the same way as they might approach a classroom teacher. But there's a lack of reliability regarding content and content creators, due to YouTube's UGC foundations and lack of peer reviewing, as is standard with written academic texts; thus, research regarding this material is important when accessing these videos. Be that as it may, there's no denying that YouTube's provision of composition pedagogy represents an important and integral part of a contemporary musician's everyday life and craft.

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The New Language of Music Theory in the Digital Age

John Moore



In November 2019, Julianne Grasso delivered a paper to the 42nd Annual meeting of the Society for Music Theory in Columbus Ohio (SMT42) entitled ‘Like, Comment, and Subscribe: Amateur Music Theory as Participatory Culture’. The paper primarily focused on YouTubers who create music theory content, an interest born out of her observations that many of her theory students were turning to this type of online material to supplement their learning outside of the formality of their college-level courses. Sections of the talk were live-tweeted during the event. What followed was a flurry of controversy. Grasso received tweets from both content consumers and creators in the Music Theory YouTube (MTYT) community that criticized her referral to music theory YouTubers as ‘amateurs’, a designation widely perceived as having derogatory connotations. Following the furore, Grasso contacted some of the YouTubers she had discussed in her paper to clarify her meaning and intent and in turn opened up a dialogue between the comparatively insular world of academic music theory with the more public space occupied by the MTYT creators. Speaking about the incident in a subsequent chapter co-written with prominent music theory YouTuber Cory Arnold aka 12tone, Grasso explains that the use of the word ‘was incorrectly, but understandably, interpreted as an insult’: the term was not intended to be pejorative but rather ‘[the] goal was to elucidate a vibrant music theory community outside of the walls of the conference, not alienate it’.¹

¹ Julianne Grasso and Cory Arnold, ‘Music Theory YouTube’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Public Music Theory*, ed. J. Daniel Jenkins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 3.

This incident was significant for several reasons. First, Grasso's paper was the earliest real scholarly acknowledgement of the MTYT community in a formal setting. Second, the backlash against Grasso showed the fervency with which both creators and consumers on MTYT are willing to defend their community. And last, it highlighted the fact that, as Grasso and Arnold write, 'academic music theorists and "public" YouTube music theorists [have] some work to do if they [want] their communities to work together.'² Three years on from Grasso's run-in with the MTYT community, the picture is more optimistic, with collaborations and partnerships between academics and YouTubers becoming increasingly regular, from music theory professor Philip Ewell's appearance in one of Adam Neely's videos to the live-streamed panel discussion between MTYT creators and university academics hosted by the UK's Society for Music Analysis (SMA).³ Here, in recognition of the size and scope of this flourishing online community, with its dedicated followers now numbering in the millions, I explore Music Theory YouTube videos and their place within the wider Music Theory Digital Ecosystem. Two case studies, Adam Neely and Hack Music Theory, reveal both the positive contributions of general-interest music-theoretical content, as well as the potential pitfalls of hosting such work within a user-generated space where there is no formal oversight. With general-interest music theory channels generating such momentum online, does this suggest refreshed possibilities for the dissemination of music-theoretical research through an accessible, free and potentially democratized platform like YouTube?

YouTube's Music Theory Spaces

The term 'Music Theory YouTube' is a catch-all term, now generally accepted, to describe the kind of content found on channels such as Adam Neely, 12tone, Rick Beato, 8-bit Music Theory, Signals Music Studio, Nahre Sol, Amy Nolte and a host of others. Videos uploaded to these channels range from discussion of the fundamentals and nuts and bolts of music practice (scales and modes, rhythm, chords, timbre, texture, form, etc.) to more academic forms of music analysis

² Ibid.

³ Adam Neely, 'Music Theory and White Supremacy', *YouTube video*, 00:44:01, 7 September 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kr3quGh7pJA&ab_channel=AdamNeely; Society for Music Analysis, 'SMA Study Day Roundtable – Adam Neely, 12tone, Julianne Grasso, William O'Hara, John Moore', *YouTube Video*, 01:47:45, 26 March 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VT9QS96Hq7U&t=3278s&ab_channel=SocietyforMusicAnalysis.

(which includes different methodologies for understanding how music works). They can teach a specific musical skill (perhaps instrumental or compositional) where theory is used to help elucidate meaning, or where some specific aspect of music theory is explored and discussed in detail; or they can focus on larger issues, as in Rick Beato's 'What Makes This Song Great' series, or Cory Arnold's 'Understanding Music' series, which combine music analysis and theory to shed light on the inner working of popular music.⁴ While these channels tend to emphasize theory and analysis, however, they often also offer other music-based content: Neely, for instance, frequently posts 'Gig Vlogs' which document his work as a professional musician in Manhattan as well as a variety of musical educational material including bass guitar lessons, original compositions, arrangements and collaborations with other musicians and YouTubers, while Nahre Sol's YouTube series 'As Digested by a Classical Musician' documents the learning of styles with which she is unfamiliar through the lens of her training as a concert pianist and composer.⁵

While there are channels that provide content that is much more aligned with music theory and/or analysis 'courses', much in the same way that there are innumerable instrumental tutors on YouTube who provide lesson-by-lesson instruction on musical instruments, these examples from MTTYT's most well-known creators are typically stand-alone videos. Some creators have recurring video sequences with similar formats, such as Neely's 'Q and A' series, but these are not typically the video formats for which the channel is best known. In their work on MTTYT content, Grasso and Arnold have outlined a helpful set of video categories. Table 6.1 outlines the categories that the authors have identified along with a condensed description which I have adapted from their chapter. From this list, it is clear that the goal of these videos is rarely a didactic, linear approach to music theory tuition, but rather music theory is used as a tool to create compelling educational content. This is very similar to other educational YouTube channels such as Numberphile.⁶ Numberphile is devoted to mathematics and offers videos that typically focus on a particular mathematical concept, or a specific number, and explore its interesting properties with mathematicians, who are also often

⁴ Rick Beato, 'What Makes This Song Great? Ep. 1 Blink -182', *YouTube video*, 00:08:28, 24 January 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TU--X0pC12o&list=PL54ggFZMKOzQn72ZzPO3hnUVIj78Zuuee&ab_channel=RickBeato; 12tone, 'Understanding Comfortably Numb', *YouTube video*, 00:06:53, 1 September 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K6HCykbHtBM&list=PLMvVESrbjBWqIFknEG7ZeTk69soXSvU2J&ab_channel=12tone.

⁵ Nahre Sol, 'The Blues, As Digested by a Classical Musician', *YouTube video*, 00:10:54, 31 July 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AibHJB_jlBI&ab_channel=NahreSol.

⁶ Numberphile YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/c/numberphile>.

Table 6.1 Typologies of Music Theory YouTube Video Content Adapted from Julianne Grasso and Cory Arnold, 'Music Theory YouTube', in *The Oxford Handbook of Public Music Theory*, ed. J. Daniel Jenkins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), online

Category	Description
Utilitarian	Creator teaches an aspect of music theory to help improve performance on some non-theoretical skill, typically composition, improvisation or performance.
Expositional	Explanation of music-theoretical concept.
Analytical	Focuses on analysis of a particular piece(s).
Explorational	Creator poses a question; uses music theory to guide viewers towards a compelling answer.
Narrative	Tells a story incorporating music theory to convey their point.
Participatory	Actively involves the audience.

academics employed in higher education. Like the MTYT videos, Numberphile does not aim necessarily, point out Grasso and Arnold, to 'address a specific need, but rather to share a general love of learning and of their chosen field'.⁷

The top creators in MTYT articulate their 'love of learning' in different ways, both in terms of the videos' content and their audiovisual and editing styles. These differences are clear to see when comparing Neely's style with that used on the Hack Music Theory channel. These two channels display distinct visual styles and attitudes towards the music-theoretical establishment. Neely, one of the most popular content creators on MTYT, is academically trained, having graduated from the Berklee College of Music in 2009 with a BA in jazz composition and the Manhattan School of Music with a master's degree in jazz composition in 2012. Now a professional bass guitarist, composer and YouTuber with a dedicated subscriber base of over 1.5 million, he offers, explains his YouTube tag, 'video essays, lessons and vlogs on new horizons in music and music theory'.⁸ And, in accordance with YouTube's algorithms for retaining a high search position, he 'brings you a new video every Monday exploring what music means, and what it means to be a musician'.⁹ When he joined YouTube in 2006, Neely's posts mostly consisted of cover versions and arrangements of popular music and jazz, followed shortly after by tutorial content, primarily for bass guitar. By 2010, he had started to also upload music theory videos. At this time in YouTube's

⁷ Grasso and Arnold, 'Music Theory YouTube', 5.

⁸ Adam Neely, 'YouTube Channel – About', <https://www.youtube.com/c/AdamNeely/about>.

⁹ Ibid.

history, the production value of the platform's user-generated content was less slick than the quality that would emerge over the following decade, and Neeley's early videos reflect this DIY aesthetic. However, by 2015, he had begun to shift away from a no-cuts, one-camera, unedited style to a more visually sophisticated approach, making use of multiple camera angles and edits, and inserting musical examples (often utilizing art-music notation), and other visual aids. This shift reflects a general trend across the YouTube landscape. As mobile and audiovisual technologies became both more accessible and easier to manage, YouTube's users were able to experiment with more accomplished textures, creating professional-looking work that can be seen across other educational channels, like Veritasium (science and general interest), Sixty Symbols (physics and chemistry) and Vsauce's MindFeld (the brain, consciousness and human behaviour).¹⁰

As Neely's video skills became more nuanced, and his subscriber base increased, his visual style became more easily codified. Since 2016, his best-performing videos fall into the 'Narrative' or 'Explorational' categories identified by Grasso and Arnold (Table 6.1): in these videos, Neely explores a topic, poses a question and then guides viewers towards a compelling answer through

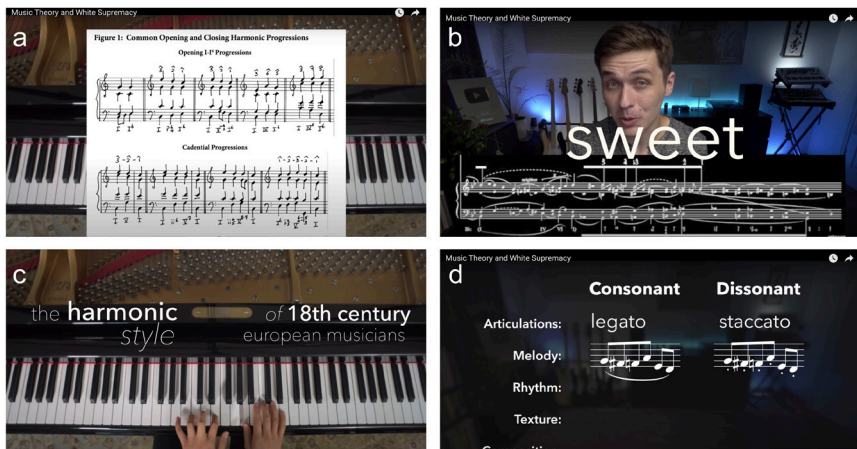


Figure 6.1 Selection of frames from Adam Neely's 'Music Theory and White Supremacy' (7 September 2020).

¹⁰ Veritasium, YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCHnyfMqiRRG1u-2MsSQLbXA>; Sixty Symbols YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/sixtysymbols>; Vsauce, YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/c/vsauce1>.

music theory; in other examples, he tells a story which uses music theory as an explanatory tool. The filming and editing style of these videos is extremely accomplished, packed with audiovisual simultaneities, animations, multiple camera angles, cuts and musical examples. Neely's delivery and content mirrors this knowing, clever social media texture by juxtaposing (or fusing) academic literature and his own analyses with inside jokes and memes, and framing everything with relatable references to popular culture and internet aesthetics. This mix of academic and popular vocabulary solidifies the sense of community fostered among his million and a half subscribers.

One particularly persistent meme that has become almost synonymous with Neely's channel is his frequent use of 'the lick' (sometimes spelled *licc*), which appears throughout his channel in various guises. A jazz cliché of seven notes, which has been a staple of the genre throughout its history, the lick firmly entered the social media swirl in 2011, when jazz composer Alex Heitlinger uploaded a short video montage of examples from various different eras, style and performers.¹¹ This short stock musical phrase, which continued to move through the wider Music Theory Digital Ecosystem (MTDE) as a meme, appears in Neely's introductory jingles, in a video in which he plays the lick for five hours via live stream and is included as part of his personal merchandise, such as T-shirts, hoodies and stickers.¹² The lick's clear presence throughout jazz history (and beyond) and, more recently, through cyberspace acts as a familiar sonic tag that stitches Neely's videos into the two worlds – music and YouTube – he inhabits. While his subscribers enjoy the thematic constancy, the musical repetition can draw in potential viewers who might be less familiar with his work but who are 'in on the joke' of music theory meme culture across other digital spaces.

Neely's 2020 video 'Music Theory and White Supremacy' embodies many of his channel's most well-known and persistent features and is a striking

¹¹ Alex Heitlinger, 'The Lick', *YouTube video*, 00:01:33, 13 November 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krDxhnaKD7Q&ab_channel=AlexHeitlinger. While often attributed to Heitlinger, by Neely and others, Heitlinger's video stems from a Facebook group in which users would share their own 'finds' of 'the lick'. As of 2022, it would appear that the original group either no longer exists or has become private; however, there remain several Facebook groups devoted to the lick such as: 'is this the licc', <https://www.facebook.com/groups/411728895953530>.

¹² MTDE refers to the digital communities of interest that exist across multiple online social media sites including, but not limited to, YouTube, Reddit, Facebook and Twitter, that share an interest in music theory. Members of this community include followers of popular YouTube music theory creators such as Adam Neely, 12tone, Rick Beato, 8-bit Music Theory, Signals Music Studio, Nahre Sol, Amy Nolte and a host of others. They may also follow music theory pages and forum discussions such as the popular r/musictheory 'subreddit' on Reddit.com; 'Adam Neely – Merchandise', <https://adam-neely-merchandise.creator-spring.com/>.

example of how a YouTuber can intervene in current academic debates. In a plenary session on 'Re-framing Music Theory' at the Society for Music Theory 42nd Annual Meeting in 2019, music theory professor Philip Ewell delivered a talk entitled 'Music Theory's White Racial Frame'. In his talk, Ewell argued that cultures of toxic whiteness exist at the heart of music-theoretical institutions and practices and, in particular, critiqued the work of nineteenth-century German music theorist Heinrich Schenker. Schenker's analytical theory, commonly referred to simply as 'Schenkerian Analysis', is a mainstay of many music-theoretical curricula in higher education institutions, particularly in the United States. (In)Famously difficult to understand, and perilously tricky to master, Schenkerian analysis is based on musical hierarchies and, in essence, aims to uncover the 'deep structure' or *Ursatz* in tonal music of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The problems with Schenker, as outlined by Ewell, are twofold. First, the ultimate goal of a successful Schenkerian analysis, as he saw it, was the exegesis of 'masterpieces' or works of 'genius', and his analytical output consists exclusively of white, male, German composers. Second, Ewell argues that Schenker's own views on race were intensely problematic and that he was 'a highly racialized individual, and often mentions race in his plentiful writings on politics, culture, nationhood, music, and art'. Indeed Ewell devotes an entire section of his article on this subject to 'Schenker's Racism'.¹³ Ewell's SMT42 address, and its subsequent publication, sparked a furious controversy that stretched far beyond the confines of the music theory world and got attention in the mainstream press.¹⁴ It is therefore hardly surprising that it would eventually attract the attention of the MTT community.

Created in the aftermath of this 'scandal', Neely's video clocks in at over forty minutes, which, while longer than many of his usual offerings, is not necessarily unusual for these types of 'Narrative' and/or 'Explorational' videos. With its characteristic snappy editing style and featuring a cameo appearance from Nahre Sol, the video outlines Neely's own take on the 'Schenkergate' argument. Interspersed throughout is an interview with Ewell himself and together the two theorists interrogate the ethnocentrism of Western music theory and its perceived reluctance to divorce itself from what Neely describes as 'the harmonic style of 18th century musicians' and move towards a more inclusive and diverse

¹³ Philip Ewell, 'Music Theory and the White Racial Frame', *Music Theory Online* 26, no. 2 (2020), <https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.20.26.2/mto.20.26.2.ewell.html>.

¹⁴ Michael Powell, 'Obscure Musicology Journal Sparks Battles Over Race and Free Speech', in *The New York Times*, 15 February 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/14/arts/musicology-journal-race-free-speech.html>.

system of music-theoretical thought.¹⁵ The video instantly generated a swarm of controversy through the MTYT community, which resulted in Neely changing its original title – ‘Music Theory is Racist’ – to the one it still holds today. ‘Music Theory and White Supremacy’ is one of the most significant in Neely’s output for a number of reasons. First, it actively engages with a current academic music-theoretical debate which would presumably not have been known to a significant proportion of the Neely’s subscribers who were not currently affiliated in some capacity with the academic establishment. Second, it actively critiques and acknowledges the limitations and internal issues present within music theory, the very thing upon which Neely’s channel and livelihood are built. And third, it is a formal acknowledgement of the race and gender discrepancies present both within music theory academia and within music theory on YouTube, two spaces heavily dominated by white men.

Neely’s critique of music theory is nuanced and rooted in academic scholarship, current musicological and music-theoretical debate and personal experience. It is an acknowledgement of the imperfections of the system upon which he bases much of his content, an acknowledgement that he frequently makes in many of his videos. Neely paints music theory as a flawed system but recognizes that it is a system that much of his viewership want to know more about, either for personal enjoyment, entertainment, education or academic study. It is important to note this before we move on to our next example, Hack Music Theory, whose goal seems to be the tearing down of the current music-theoretical establishment rather than a considered elucidation of its perceived shortcomings.

Founded by husband-and-wife duo Ray and Kate Harmony, the Hack Music Theory YouTube channel and companion website hackmusictheory.com bills itself as a ‘fast, easy and fun way to make music’, free from the shackles of more ‘traditional’ classical and/or jazz systems of music theory education which Ray describes as ‘irrelevant and overcomplicated’.¹⁶ When compared with the delivery on Neely’s channel, Hack Music Theory’s is more didactic and takes the form of lessons rather than the explorational or narrative approach often employed by Neely. Typically, their content belongs to Grasso and Arnold’s ‘Utilitarian’ category. The *modus operandi* of the Hack Music Theory system – or ‘Revolution Harmony’ as Ray refers to it – is a process of music theory education

¹⁵ Neely, ‘Music Theory and White Supremacy’.

¹⁶ ‘Hack Music Theory – About’, <https://hackmusictheory.com/about>.

which uses a digital audio workstation (DAW) and midi roll to illustrate the concepts being discussed, rather than Western music notation.¹⁷ The description of their work on their website reads more like a manifesto than the description of an educational YouTube channel:

Popular music (electronic, hip-hop, indie, metal, etc.) is super cool, but most of it is also super predictable! This is because the current music education system focuses on classical/jazz. Those genres are irrelevant for most modern songwriters and producers though, and as a result, they don't study music and choose to compose by ear instead.

However, making music by ear is precisely what's causing all the predictable songs these days, as our ears will always lead us to what we've heard before. So, if we want to make great music that stands out, we need to use theory! But, traditional theory is irrelevant and overcomplicated. This is the dilemma that popular music is currently trapped in.

Our solution is Hack Music Theory, an online platform for songwriters and producers to learn relevant, simple theory hacks, which can instantly be applied to making cool music that's also creative and clever! So, get involved now by downloading our free book, and join over 175,000 like-minded music makers in the Hack Music Theory community.

It is clear that the Hack Music Theory system taps into a common understanding of music theory as a discipline with strong ties to perceived institutional elitism, and that their system aims to subvert these. This intention chimes with Grasso's reaction to the SMT42 controversy, where she tells us that music theory content creators are 'fostering popular music theory discourse, which also feeds into a kind of "counterculture" that is built from negative reactions to academic music theory course experiences'.¹⁸ Hack Music Theory's description of 'traditional' theory as 'irrelevant and over complicated' as well as their frequent references to its perceived ineffectuality in their videos are clear evidence of this: 'the current music education system focuses on classical/jazz. Those genres are irrelevant for most modern songwriters', they write.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Julianne Grasso (@juliannegrasso), 'I suggested that these "AMT's" are fostering popular music theory discourse, which also feeds into a kind of "counterculture" that is built from negative reactions to academic music theory course experiences (see @darkmusictheory) (10/17)', Twitter (13 November 2019, 3:16 am), at <https://twitter.com/juliannegrasso/status/1194454076311949313?s=20&t=uWpGQ2Pz1fSnheJpHjci-Q>.

¹⁹ 'Hack Music Theory – About'.

These ‘countercultural’ or anti-establishment tendencies are a key part of the channel and are at least partly responsible for its success on YouTube. Having gained experience at the Ealing, Hammersmith and West London sixth form and further education college, and self-published several books in PDF form available to purchase from hackmusictheory.com, Ray describes himself as an award-winning lecturer and critically acclaimed author in both Hack Music Theory’s online promotional material and YouTube videos. These credentials legitimate his status as a music educator and engender a sense of authenticity around his ability to authoritatively speak about music theory while at the same time being vague enough to imply a rogue existence within the Higher Education sector – potentially exploiting the transatlantic linguistic ambiguities around the terms ‘lecturer’ and ‘college’ – and therefore success to the secret world of the music theory ‘decoder ring’ that William O’Hara describes.²⁰

Their system of music theory pedagogy is in many ways anti-establishment, tapping into the commonly held beliefs of the viewership of the channel that chime with Harmony’s own views on the ineffectuality and irrelevancy of ‘traditional’ theoretical education. It is interesting therefore to note that, while reacting *against* the practices of the music theory establishment, Harmony reinforces his authority by continually referring to himself in terms of the very institutions his system claims to mistrust. In other words, one of the key ways in which Harmony establishes his authenticity to his viewership is by painting himself as an ‘insider’ from the world of music theory education. O’Hara has written that the ‘insider’ or the ‘maverick’ is ‘emblematic of an entire subgenre of contemporary nonfiction’ in that ‘it posits that everything has a “hidden side,” a secret explanation waiting to be exposed to the public by someone who is in the know.’²¹ Harmony deliberately and consistently presents himself as that *someone*.

This notion of establishing authenticity and credibility through institutional affiliation or professional experience is by no means unique to Hack Music Theory: in fact, it is a common trope among many music theory content creators on YouTube who explicitly discuss their careers and backgrounds in their videos, in their ‘About’ sections, and/or on companion websites. Neely, for instance, writes on his website that he

²⁰ William O’Hara, ‘Music Theory and the Epistemology of the Internet; or, Analyzing Music Under the New Thinkpiece Regime’, *Analitica: Rivista online di studi musicali* 10 (2018), <http://www.gatm.it/analitica/index.php/analitica/article/view/184/156>.

²¹ Ibid.

graduated *summa cum laude* with a BA in Jazz Composition from the Berklee College of Music in 2009, and graduated with an MM in Jazz Composition from the Manhattan School of Music in 2012, studying under Jim McNeely. He has since worked as a bass player and educator in New York City with artists like Shubb Saran, Zac Zinger, Aberdeen, the NYChillharmonic, the 8-bit big band, J-Music Ensemble and many others.²²

Furthermore, in his ‘Gig vlogs’, Neely discusses a specific aspect of music theory or performance, while documenting his lived experience as a professional musician in New York City. He also frequently promotes the various music projects with which he is involved and documents many aspects of the writing and production of the music he creates through his YouTube channel. The latter maintains a strong level of engagement with his fans regarding his musical outputs that are independent of his YouTube channel, establishing his credibility as a reliable source of authority on music theory as well as his status as a working professional musician and composer.

Turning now to the music-theoretical content of Hack Music Theory’s YouTube channel, I want to focus more closely on how they operationalize their ‘notation-free popular music theory revolution’. In other words: the theory behind Hack Music Theory. Despite their revolutionary claims, much of the music theory used on the channel is fairly ‘traditional’ in nature and aligns with most of the theories of classical and jazz harmony, which the same channel describes as ‘irrelevant’ and ‘over complicated’. In their video ‘246 Rule for Better Melodies’, Ray and Kate discuss melody writing over a chordal accompaniment (Figure 6.2). The theoretical framework behind this is fairly conventional: resolutions to chord tones from suspensions; cautioning viewers to ensure that the seventh or leading tone rises to the tonic; and several other common theoretical tropes now standard to most formal Western music-theoretical educational systems. In the opening, Ray says the following:

most songwriters and producers don’t know music theory and as a result they actually end up following the rules without even knowing it. But when everyone follows the rules, that’s boring. So we created the two four six melody rule as a way to actually break the rules that result in boring melodies.²³

²² Adam Neely, ‘Adam Neely – Bio’, <http://www.adamneely.com/about>.

²³ Hack Music Theory, ‘246 Rule for Better Melodies’, *YouTube video*, 00:11:56, 5 June 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TbDU5EmbsPw&ab_channel=HackMusicTheory.

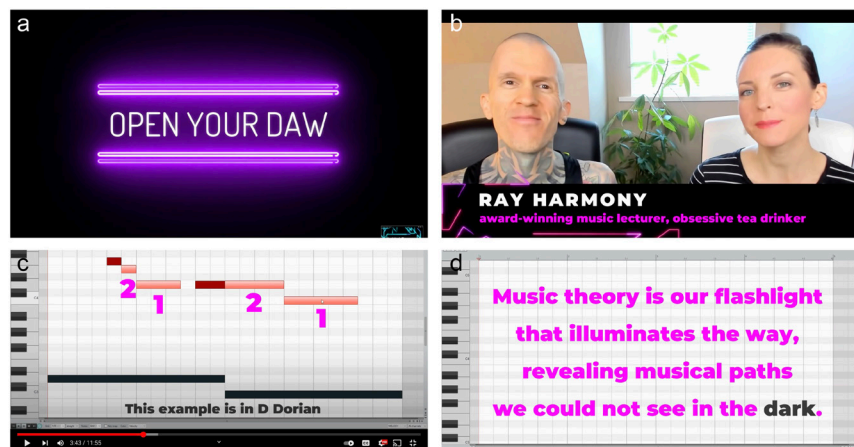


Figure 6.2 Selection of frames from Hack Music Theory's '246 Rules for better Melodies' (5 June 2020).

Aside from the obvious contradiction of creating a rule 'to break the rules', the theoretical basis for these assertions often remains unclear. The numerals used in the video's title refer to scale degrees, and the general thesis of this tutorial is that use of scale degrees 2, 4 and 6 creates a greater level of interest in the melodic pattern rather than basing melodies around degrees 1, 3 and 5 (chord tones which align with the underlying triadic harmony they have provided). They discuss various ways in which one can resolve these temporary dissonances to harmonic notes and also make specific reference to scale degree 7 which they refer to as a 'whole different beast'. They then discuss the treatment of the seventh scale degree:

Let's talk about that unique non-harmonic note: the 7. Also known as the leading note [...] the gravitational pull on this note is far more than on any other non-harmonic note. The 7 is absolutely desperate to claw its way up to the root, and it's willing to do anything to get there. Now we love going against the stream and not resolving the 7 because taking it somewhere other than the root note creates incredibly strong emotions in the listeners; a warning though: those emotions will include shock.²⁴

The upward resolution of the seventh scale degree is one of the cornerstones of tonal harmony and is a concept that is taught in Western music-theoretical

²⁴ Ibid.

traditions at quite an early stage. This therefore would appear at odds with the Hack Music Theory ethos of going against the established principles of the Western classical and jazz systems of music theory education. Furthermore, the creators seem to equate counterintuition or ‘shock’ in the melodic pattern as a fundamentally positive thing. While I am certainly not arguing that using non-harmonic pitches in the construction of a melody for the purposes of creating musical interest *cannot* be a useful compositional strategy, to use some abstract conceptualization of ‘music theory’ as the basis for this is a controversial move.

In this video, as in many others on the channel, the creators make further reference to the idea of music theory as a unified body of hidden knowledge. They also pit knowledge of music theory against the realization of musical processes ‘by ear’, stating that ‘Songwriters and producers are making music by ear, but our ears will always lead us to the most predictable option.’²⁵ This furthers the notion of O’Hara’s ‘secret decoder ring’ and operationalizes music theory as a means through which individuals can unlock secrets or access hitherto hidden information:

for most songwriters and producers making music feels like a mysterious and often frustrating journey through the dark, but it doesn’t have to be like that. Music theory is our flashlight that illuminates the way, revealing musical paths we could not see in the dark.²⁶

Yet more references to ‘secrets’ that can only be decoded by the insiders of the Hack Music Theory system.

While I have outlined some of the potential theoretical discrepancies in the work of Hack Music Theory channel, one of the more interesting and positive aspects of their videos is the near-complete absence of musical notation. Across their output, the pair make specific reference on multiple occasions to the fact that their content is aimed at songwriters and producers, and consequently they chose to illustrate the music-theoretical concepts in their videos using a midi roll on a DAW. This gives rise to the channel’s slogan: ‘It’s time to open you DAW to *Hack Music Theory*’. This aligns with their manifesto to subvert the traditional processes of music theory education, which typically focuses on the analysis of classical, jazz and popular music using Western musical notation. The sight of a midi roll will doubtless be familiar to many of those who view their videos regardless of their musical background, given that DAWs come preinstalled on

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

many modern computers (Garageband on Apple's Mac for instance) and the interface associated with this software is also used – sometimes in a slightly modified form – in many music-related games and applications such as *Synthesia* (2006) and *Guitar Hero* (2005). The use of midi roll as a tool for *music theory* education is not one that is widely used in formalized settings and is normally the preserve of courses on music technology and/or production.

Who Speaks and Who Listens

The videos uploaded to Neely's channel and Hack Music Theory represent just a small proportion of MTYT content and an even smaller section of MTDE as a whole. These case studies, however, raise some pertinent questions: who has the right to teach online? How do we know who to listen to among the billions of videos vying for our attention? Is it necessary for our teachers to come from more conventional positions of authority? The answers to these questions are constantly changing and being challenged by MTYT and the wider MTDE. The new languages of music theory online have provided refreshed vocabularies as creators explore music-theoretical concepts and rename and reinvigorate existing concepts and terminologies to ensure as wide a viewership as possible. This has not only generated a fundamental shift in what music theory *is* or could be but also in how it is operationalized in YouTube's radically democratized space. The platform challenges the dialogic space of the classroom or lecture theatre by offering reactionary forms of participation via comments, likes and shares, but also through remediated content in the form of blog posts, reaction videos and so on. Additionally, the growth of online participatory culture and the ways in which these creators actively engage with their fanbase across multiple digital spaces give MTYT content a vibrant and active role within cyberspace. Creators speak with viewers across multiple platforms, field questions from fans, create collaborative videos with other creators, critique user submissions of music for analysis and position their work as an extension of, or reaction against, music theory within academia. While music theory as it currently exists in the academy is not without fault, and certainly has its own internal issues to deal with, the growth of this digital ecosystem in which music theory is a lively and exciting field of enquiry with a massive following has the potential to invigorate the academic study – in terms of both content and pedagogical practices – of music theory.

However, the lack of editorial scrutiny in this user-generated space means that the potential for questionable or unreliable music-theoretical content is significant. It can become increasingly difficult to differentiate between productive and misleading content when production values remain high which can lead users to be lured by the professional quality of the videos rather than by the credentials of those in front of the camera. And yet, creators like Neely are challenging the notion that only academics employed by formal education institutions have the ‘authority’ to teach music theory: while there exists inaccurate information on YouTube, the platform also forges the way for multiple perspectives, opinions and practices.

The general picture of the MTYT community’s future and the wider MTDE is generally an optimistic one. In just the last few years, the divide between music theory in the academy and in digital spaces has begun to decrease. In March 2021, a study day organized by the SMA, in association with the University of Liverpool, entitled ‘Teaching Music Theory in the Digital Age’, brought together scholars from across the world, affiliated and non-affiliated enthusiasts, students, educators and musicians to discuss the issues around music theory education and pedagogy in the digital age. The day included a live-streamed round table discussion featuring Neely and Arnold alongside academics O’Hara, Grasso and myself. This was an important event in terms of establishing points of dialogue and common interest between music theorists in the academy and in digital spaces and shows the significant impact the online music theory community is having beyond the confines of the internet.

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Aspects and Appeals of the Lyric Video

Carol Vernallis, Laura McLaren, Virginia Kuhn and
Martin P. Rossouw



Introduction (Carol Vernallis)

This chapter aims to capture aspects of the lyric video. These videos are hard to discuss partly because they've received almost no scholarly or journalistic attention.¹ Lyric videos are endemic – nearly every pop song has one – and they're often made by fans using inexpensive downloadable software and uploaded to YouTube. Many of the clips with high view counts, often produced professionally or by prosumers, are aesthetically striking. The Chainsmokers's 'Closer' (2016), the most popular lyric video of all time, has 2.7 billion views (while the song's more traditional, official music video has 422 million: see Figure 7.1c). For a comparison, music videos with success on the *Billboard* (pop) charts typically accrue hundreds of millions of views; clips like 'Despacito' (Luis Fonsi, 2017) and 'Baby Shark' (Pinkfong, 2016), at the highest end, have 7.1 and 10.4 billion views (see Figure 7.1b).

We might start by defining the lyric video, but this is challenging. Instead, we might fix a description for music video, but that's difficult, too, as it has changed platforms and contexts across four decades. If we focus on commercial pop clips, we might note that a clip most often comes out of a collaboration among musicians, industry practitioners and record company personnel. The visual track is designed

¹ See Laura McLaren, 'The Lyric Video as Genre: Definitions, History, and Katy Perry's Contribution', Master's Thesis, Ottawa: University of Ottawa, 2018; Mathias Bonde Korsgaard, 'SOPHIE's "Faceshopping" as (Anti-)Lyric Video', *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* 13, no. 2 (2019): 209–30.



Figure 7.1a–c Early and more recent examples of lyric video – The Fleisher Brothers’ ‘By the Light of the Silvery Moon’ ([1931] 1 June 2020), ‘Baby Shark’ (18 June 2016) and The Chainsmokers’s ‘Closer’ (29 July 2016).

to sell the song. Videos are often short and must accomplish many things: highlight the star, draw attention to the lyrics and underscore the music. To teach listeners what’s memorable about a song, the image might emphasize the shift from verse to chorus or showcase an unusual timbre, rhythm or melodic contour. The visual track might point to one or two musical features at a time, like a guide. For while music envelopes us, visual features more often focus our attention momentarily, especially if they’re showcasing the song. Music videos are capable of eliciting a sense of being ‘alongside’ (they may facilitate a viewer-encounter that can be said to resemble a dancer’s exploration of herself and others). They can create, a kind of engagement that differs from narrative cinema’s modes of absorption and immersion. Music videos are often brief, open, heterogeneous, elliptical, poetic or strange.² Thinking about lyric videos through this framework is helpful, too, but for both we will need more capacious definitions. With the internet’s expansion, post-classical, audiovisually intensified film segments on YouTube like the children’s musical limerick ‘The Llama Song’ (2006) and ‘Autotune the News’ where newscasters ‘sing’ their stories accompanied by Fruity Loops tracks all might be called music videos. Indeed, perhaps we might simply define a music video as an audiovisual text we recognize as such.³

So how should we define a lyric video? A rough description might be: a clip that includes some text or signs from another symbolic system, like sign language or pictograms, placed on-screen alongside music or a soundtrack. An instrumental cover of a song with printed text fits this category, and much else besides (I am fond of YouTube fan-made mash-ups of *Pride and Prejudice* [Joe Wright, 2005] with Taylor Swift songs with Korean subtitles. I can’t read the subtitles, but I feel they contribute a lot).

² See Carol Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

³ Carol Vernallis, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video and the New Digital Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 147, 148.

The popularity of lyric videos is easy to explain. A record company can commission and release a clip more quickly and cheaply than a performance-based video. The musicians might be unavailable. The artists may have released more material than can be set to image. And if someone on the production team – musicians, the director, representatives or representatives of the label – is unsure which song might be a hit, a lyric video might serve as a probe.

Viewers' engagements also provide a context. Young people listen to music videos in many different situations, but viewing music videos on YouTube is the most common mode. When a young person multitasks, the lyric video, appearing perhaps as a minimized window, may still relay content while requiring less focus. Within a population of listeners, some are more predisposed to attend to the lyrics and others less so. And in some cases, larger groups of listeners may wish to track the lyrics carefully. Some may want to grasp the references to Ariana Grande's exes in 'Thank You, Next' (2019). It seems that the song suggests a listener do this.

YouTube singalongs composed of a bouncing ball over lyrics at the bottom of a screen count as lyric videos and take us back to the beginnings of sound cinema (e.g. the Fleisher Brothers *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, 1931, see Figure 7.1a). Laura McLaren notes below the importance of Bob Dylan's 'Subterranean Homesick Blues' (1965), a *cinéma vérité* film by D. A. Pennebaker in which Dylan holds placards of the song's lyrics while standing in an alley. Prince's 2008 'Sign of the Times' is an early example of an artful, full-fledged lyric video. Another early, aesthetically gripping clip is R.E.M.'s 'Fall on Me' (2009). Over black-and-white footage of stone quarries, railroad tracks and electrical lines, often screened upside-down, large, brick red, sans serif text is superimposed. A study of album covers' typeface has shown that text can shape a listener's experience.⁴ The fatness and redness of the centrally placed text in 'Fall on Me' provides a ground against the song's and image's instability. Michael Stipes's singing trails and runs ahead of the band's accompaniment, and the typography is syncopated as well, amplifying questions about balance and equilibrium. This gives us a first insight into a lyric video's aesthetics. Features of the text alone – colour, thickness, size, shape and placement – can help communicate the song's and musicians' vision.

Around 2015 there was an explosion of striking clips on YouTube. Maybe these were the result of a peak in the genre's development, an economic or

⁴ Tara Venkatesan, Qian Janice Wang and Charles Spence, 'Does the Typeface on Album Cover Influence Expectations and Perception of Music?', *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* (2020): 1931–3896.

political shift (a bit earlier, *Billboard* started tracking YouTube views as part of a song's chart success, and lyric videos could improve a song's rank), or a fad (one or two gripping clips may have impressed other artists, who then wished to produce some, too). There were Kendrick Lamar's 'i' (2014), Sia's 'Cheap Thrills' (2016), Ed Sheeran's 'Shape of You' (2017) and Taylor Swift's 'Look What You Made Me Do' (2017).

Today, some companies are devoted solely to lyric video production (and budgets can range from \$500 to the many thousands). 3D animation is a popular approach. Since 2017, a drive to create subgenres has emerged. Tate McRae's 'Chaotic' (2022) is pitched as a visualizer (a lyric video with the simple visual construct of an enactment within a single, stationary shot). The Chainsmokers's 'Do You Mean' (2019), however, is a traditional music video with text on the bottom, and it's called a lyric video. Maybe one shouldn't seek consistency.

The genre, one senses, has its own aesthetics. Neuroscience studies have shown that particular parts of the brain respond just to printed text – it's localized in the Broca's area, parieto-temporal and occipital-temporal regions (on the left side of the brain if you're right-handed).⁵ How then do sound, image, lyrics and printed text function when they occur together? Neuroscience calls this process multisensory integration and has recently identified an important mid-brain module called the super colliculus where signals are weighted and integrated. But more needs to be discovered: historically, neuroscience has focused on one perceptual modality at a time like vision, sound or text (I have been writing on how neuroscience can subtend our theories of audiovisual aesthetics, as described by Nicholas Cook, Michel Chion and Claudia Gorbman, which have tended to focus on narrative film).⁶

Neuroscience should help us understand how a lyric video works with our senses of association, expectation and memory. Even the simplest lyric videos seem interconnected and parasitic on other internet content. Part of YouTube's pleasure is the ways a media artefact links to other materials, making multiple perspectives possible. With YouTube, we can know a performer and a song as concert footage, talk show appearances, Grammy Award performances, TikTok

⁵ Michael Klein, Jonathan Grainger, Katherine L. Wheat, Rebecca E. Millman, Michael I. G. Simpson, Peter C. Hansen and Piers L. Cornelissen, 'Early Activity in Broca's Area During Reading Reflects Fast Access to Articulatory Codes From Print', *Cerebral Cortex* 25, no. 7 (July 2015): 1715–23.

⁶ Carol Vernallis, Holly Rogers, Selmin Kara and Jonathan Leal (eds), *Cybermedia: Explorations in Science, Sound and Vision* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021); Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, translated by Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Nicholas Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

realizations, dance studio re-enactments, cover artists' versions, car karaoke singalongs and so on. Here, lyric videos slot right in.

To understand a music video's typography, we might consider how lyrics work in music videos: a line of lyrics often breaks into fragments, with a few words or phrases jutting out (a viewer's attention while watching a music video may be drawn quickly among gestures, shifting colours, editing, musical hooks, etc.). These fragments can take on a totemic quality – a mysterious poetic power. Lyrics also often conflict with the song, pointing in a different direction, as does the image. Each can describe something but is also to some extent blank (the music often yearns for something, which is often left undescribed, creating gaps in knowledge, and the lyrics, too, e.g. who's 'my baby'?; the images, as well, often feature blank or strange settings). What are the relations among the singer's voice, the lyrics and the printed text? Does the singer's absence bear some resemblance to Chion's acousmatic sound, an off-screen voice with a ghostly, disembodied quality?⁷ Perhaps too one could claim that lyric video's printed text works as a kind of mask. Like a face covering that's part of a costume, the mask suggests a second potential character or identity. The mask bears the traces of the face; it's moulded to it, it's an imprint, but the self is also hidden from us, inaccessible. Sometimes this serves a song well. When lyrics are more universal, one singer may not be able to visually embody it. Here the typography asks us to fill in a wider context. Perhaps like the novel, poetry or comics, lyric videos ask the viewer to interpolate a world and a vantage point. Consider these two clips: Avicii's 'Wake Me Up' (2013) and Zedd and Alessia Cara's 'Stay' (2017). In both, the image is simply in longshot with widescreen panoramas of nature. In one, the lyrics, 'wake me up when it's all over, when I'm wiser and I'm older', are set with chipped-off and fragmented sans serif. In the other, 'make it on your own, but we don't have to grow up, we can stay forever young' appears in broadly horizontal, tiny Futura font (similar to what one might see as part of an eye exam – perhaps helping a viewer question her vision and think about ageing). Music video director Marcus Nispel once told me that there's no such thing as a best music video for a song; all are just various interpretations. But here, the text seems to serve the videos especially well.⁸

Tracking the remediation of an individual lyric video is easier than the form as a whole. TikTok as a complementary example shows how. TikTok shares an

⁷ Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 193.

⁸ Interview with director, 1994.

affiliation with Tom Gunning's 'cinema of attractions,' which were often early films that featured viscerally exciting events (like a first filmic experience of a train coming into a station) rather than a narrative.⁹ Some TikToks also share features with early YouTube prosumer clips, like 'Charlie Bit My Finger' (2010) and 'The Badger Song' (2010). Still, TikTok has its own aesthetics, and the same is true with lyric videos. Music videos and lyric videos, for example, are their own genres, with overlaps and particularities. Music videos might seem linked to karaoke, but lyric videos' connections seem intuitively stronger (and today there's a large variety of self-identified styles of karaoke on YouTube). But lyric videos encompass much more than those that remind us of karaoke.

Remediation of individual lyric clips, however, is easy to identify and especially common, because artists like to preserve their brand – whether their ambiance, style and/or perspective. Music video directors, when they're commissioned to make a video, commonly study a musician's oeuvre – photographs, press releases, reviews, music videos, album covers and so on – to reaffirm their corpus or help the artist(s) find a new direction. So Ed Sheeran's official 'Shivers' (2021) might draw a lot from the 'Shape of You' lyric video (2017). In both, overly enlarged, quotidian objects come forward, and space shifts between flatness and depth, with a wry, gentle humour. Prosumers are equally attentive to this phenomenon. The fan-authored *Bridgerton* mash-up for Ariana Grande's 'Thank U, Next' (2020) and a much simpler lyric video with but a single colour background (2018) and the official video (2018) all use the same kooky newspaper cut-outs for text (see Figure 7.5a)

The lyric videos described in the next sections remediate web content. Laura McLaren shows how Katy Perry's 'Chained To The Rhythm (Lyric via YouTube) ft. Skip Marley' (2017) nods to her bubblegum pop aesthetics; the clip also puns on the singalong's bouncing ball. Virginia Kuhn shows how the typography of the 'Let's Play "Alexander Hamilton"' (2017) lyric video resembles the placement of actors in the *Hamilton* stage musical and film (see Figure 7.2c). The typography may also be remediated in H.E.R.'s lyric video 'I Can't Breathe' (2020), a moving document of the protests surrounding George Floyd's murder (see Figures 7.2a and 7.2b). And Martin Rossouw suggests that Taylor Swift's video for 'exile' (2020), featuring Bon Iver, showcases her fondness of the woods; the typography reflects her often understated, graceful persona. My lyric mash-ups from period

⁹ Tom Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde', *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 31–40.



Figure 7.2a–c Intertextuality – (a–b) H.E.R.’s ‘I Can’t Breathe’ (Shane Adams, 2020) and (c) a screenshot from the chorus of *Hamilton*, the musical (Lin-Manuel Miranda, 2015).

romance films form an enormous, underground subgenre, with clips sharing the same aesthetics. Fans like to use the same clips, often with the same typography.

The Lyric Video and YouTube (Laura McLaren)

As Carol Vernallis demonstrates, lyric videos form a diverse collection of texts that range from black-and-white film to colourful animation, static text to kinetic typography and fan edits to professional production. Not only do they draw from various media formats and styles, they are also often representative of the media content and stylistic trends of the time. In fact, I would argue that much of the challenge in defining the lyric video as a genre is that lyric videos are permeable texts that are reflective of their position in time and (digital) space. My goal here is to highlight the significance of YouTube in particular in the development of the lyric video as both an accessible publication site and as a locus from which to draw material.

While there are a few early videos that could be considered proto-lyric videos, including the Bob Dylan ‘Subterranean Homesick Blues’ film clip (1965), the establishment of YouTube spurred a surge in online lyric video output.¹⁰ The collective nature of the video-sharing site allowed for ‘prosumers’, or what Vernallis has elsewhere referred to as ‘consumers who do production’, to create and upload videos for popular songs as a way to interactively engage with the lyrics, often combining them with images from other media such as film and TV.¹¹

¹⁰ This film clip, which served as the opening segment for the D. A. Pennebaker documentary *Don’t Look Back* (1967), is also considered to be one of the first music videos. Other examples include R.E.M.’s ‘Fall on Me’ (1986) and Talking Head’s ‘(Nothing But) Flowers’ (1988), ‘Praying for Time’ (1990) by George Michael and Prince’s ‘Sign o’ the Times’ (1987).

¹¹ Carol Vernallis, ‘Music Video’s Second Aesthetic?’, in *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics*, ed. John Richardson, Claudia Gorbman and Carol Vernallis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 465.

Early prosumer lyric videos emerged shortly after YouTube was established; they were typically created using basic editing software and featured the song's lyrics alongside a photo of the artist, the album cover or any other related image(s). Likely in response to these unofficial videos, several musicians began to release their own lyric videos starting in 2010, most notably Cee Lo Green's iconic 'Fuck You' lyric video.¹²

The link between prosumer lyric videos and the trend of lyric videos being uploaded on an artist's official YouTube channel is exemplified by 'Katy Perry – California Gurls ft. Snoop (Lyric Video)' (2010).¹³ This video is likely the first official lyric video ever released by a mainstream artist, despite containing several flaws, including mistranscribed words, inconsistent punctuation and incorrect capitalization, none of which were uncommon for a prosumer video at the time (see Figure 7.3a).¹⁴ It was uploaded the same day as the 'California Gurls' single was released, making it seem as if the video was created and uploaded hastily, without advance listening or an authorized copy of the lyrics to refer to. While it is possible that this was an official video that followed prosumer conventions, the immediate improvement in the quality of lyric videos that followed it leads me to question its authenticity as an official product. Rather, it seems likely that it was made by a prosumer and Perry's creative team appropriated it in order to maintain control of the 'California Gurls' release material.¹⁵



Figure 7.3a and b Katy Perry's 'California Gurls ft. Snoop (lyric video)' (7 May 2010) and 'Chained To The Rhythm (Lyric Video) ft. Skip Marley' (10 February 2017).

¹² Cee Lo Green, 'Cee Lo Green – FUCK YOU', *YouTube video*, 00:02:58, 19 August 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CAV0XrbEwNc>.

¹³ Katy Perry, 'Katy Perry – California Gurls ft. Snoop (Lyric Video)', *YouTube video*, 00:03:55, 7 May 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CTVJTt-Gfx8&ab_channel=KatyPerry.

¹⁴ One example of inaccurate text is: 'I like ass hanging out / bikinis, with kinis, martinis' (2:54) instead of 'All that ass hanging out / bikinis, zucchinis, martinis'.

¹⁵ McLaren, 'The Lyric Video as Genre', 34–5.

The lyric video may seem simple and straightforward due to its prioritization of text, yet the genre's positioning within the YouTube virtual space, as well as in the larger industry of music production and consumption, allows it to draw inspiration from other forms of media, including film, poetry, liner notes and even other YouTube genres and channels.¹⁶ An example of this can be found in Katy Perry's lyric video for 'Chained To The Rhythm (Lyric Video) ft. Skip Marley' (2017), which alternates between scenes of a miniature kitchen where several elaborate, yet miniscule meals are being prepared and of a hamster watching TV on a lounge in the adjoining living room. This video points to two distinct genres of videos that were popular on YouTube around that time. By including elements from 'tiny food' and 'tiny hamster' videos, 'Chained to the Rhythm' benefits from their popularity, specifically that of the popular account Walking With Giants who created the miniature food for the video (see Figure 7.3b).¹⁷

Not only are lyric video producers and directors borrowing styles and inspiration from broader YouTube content, most are also concurrently working in multiple forms of visual media production, including music videos, commercials and animated shorts. Adult Art UK, Everyone's Favourite and Yes Please Productions are all examples of smaller art and animation studios that have been hired to make lyric videos for well-established performing artists like Ed Sheeran, Rita Ora and Florence and the Machine, respectively.

According to video producer Thomas King (Everyone's Favourite), lyric videos can be exciting opportunities, though they can be challenging to produce due to the many genre and industry restrictions. In my recent interview with him, he explained, 'you get almost no direction, almost no time, sometimes no feedback and you have a completely concrete deadline, and potentially millions of people [who] will be watching it. Also the visuals can't jar with the music, they must be complementary.'¹⁸ In King's experience, the budgets and timelines for lyric video productions can be much lower and shorter than other animation projects, claiming that he often has less than two weeks to complete the projects, without having the financial flexibility to hire additional animators. The smaller budgets allocated to lyric video production are both a positive and a negative aspect of the industry; the demands of lyric video creation are more accessible

¹⁶ Katy Perry, 'Katy Perry – Chained To The Rhythm (Lyric Video) ft. Skip Marley', *YouTube video*, 00:03:55, 10 February 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8gsGhdZDC-0&ab_channel=KatyPerryVEVO.

¹⁷ McLaren, 'The Lyric Video as Genre', 102.

¹⁸ Thomas King, email message to author, 2 March 2022.

for independent artists compared to larger-scale music videos. However as King notes, ‘I think they have somewhat devalued the work of illustrators and animators, by creating a precedent of getting detailed, long animations made extremely cheaply.’ Nevertheless, he values the genre as an artform and claims that the artistic freedom that he is given, as well as the time crunch, frequently forces him to go by instinct and that ‘the imagery has to come from some deep association inside’, thus creating more of an intuitive response to the music, which ultimately helps the viewer/listener connect to the song in a new and interactive way.

Kinetic Typography (Virginia Kuhn)

If, as noted, lyric videos borrow from other forms in the YouTube ecosystem and beyond, those that employ the technique of kinetic typography – words that move on-screen and often form an image that corresponds to the content of the words – are utterly intriguing for their ability to help us attend to the song visually as well as sonically. These videos join the affective dimensions of the visual with the verbal language of the lyrics. Early examples of kinetic typography include a 2007 animation of one of Samuel Jackson’s infamous speeches from *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994); the speech takes place as Jackson and John Travolta’s characters are debt collecting for their boss, Marsellus Wallace.¹⁹ The words move in time with Jackson’s utterance and those that are shouted appear larger, while the timid responses from one of the cocky-cum-scared white boys are pictured as thin, tiny words that are trumped by the next shouted words by Jackson. In another visualization of the same speech, the debtor’s words accumulate into the shape of a gun pointed directly at his own head (see Figure 7.4b).²⁰

This kinetic typographic technique, engaging as it is, takes on an even livelier tone in lyric videos, given the addition of music that helps sweep the words along to the rhythm, creating the potential for a deeper engagement as they are sung and visualized synchronously. The difference between these moving lyrics and those that are relatively static is stark when one considers them side by side. For example, the kinetic typography of ‘Let’s Play “Alexander Hamilton”’ (2017) employs a

¹⁹ manosanta, ‘Pulp Fiction as Kinetic Typography’, *YouTube video*, 00:00:57, 23 February 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wF8f8w6HPoo>.

²⁰ gonedo, ‘Pulp Fiction in Kinetic Typography’, *YouTube video*, 00:00:49, 23 October 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4FlcS9_LXho.

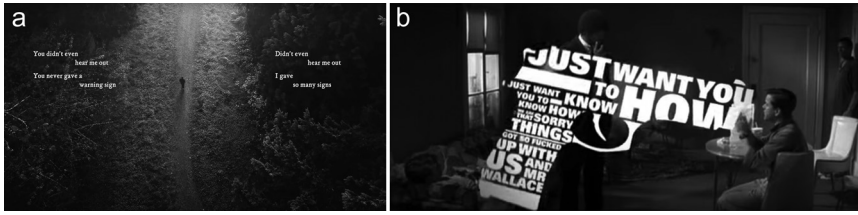


Figure 7.4a and b Kinetic typography for a scene from (a) Taylor Swift's 'exile' (2020) and (b) *Pulp Fiction* (Samuel Jackson collects a debt for Marsellus Wallace: Quentin Tarantino, 1994).

multichannel approach that visually represents all the singers from the eponymous song of the musical smash *Hamilton* (Lin-Manuel Miranda, 2015).²¹ The movement of the words is timed to the musical track, and as each new singer joins the group, the previous singer's lyrics persist, temporarily motionless until called upon again. The movement of the words seems to punch up the beat, even as the melody softens the flow of the phrasing, forming a coherent whole; the oral and visual registers combine and exceed the impact of either register on its own. The technique creates a wonderful sense of unity which is difficult to describe (particularly on the static page of this book) until one encounters the same song with static lyrics.²² This is especially the case during the chorus, when all of the singers are represented by a different set of lyrics in different quadrants of the screen; the song just feels bolder and richer when viewed this way (see Figures 7.2c and 7.4b).

Visualizing the song this way is not only pleasurable to view; it can be analytically productive, revealing, for instance, how little Hamilton actually sings in this song, as one commenter noted. Unlike a recording of the musical, the emphasis is on the song's structure, rather than on the individual actor/singers, the costuming or the production design. But these kinetic typographic lyric videos also call attention to something that goes relatively unremarked in the economy of video essay production that separates them from their theatrically released counterparts in film: that is, words do wonderful and interesting things in digital space. But most video editing software has precious little emphasis on words (calling them 'titles', which reflects their presumed supplemental quality).

So, while video editing tools are increasingly democratizing the production of video, kinetic typography remains relatively difficult to produce, requiring

²¹ Eric Loyer, 'Let's Play "Alexander Hamilton" (multichannel lyric video)', *YouTube video*, 00:03:56, 15 March 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Kc1d3kpljA>.

²² Isaac Eden, 'Alexander Hamilton W/Lyrics', *YouTube video*, 00:03:54, 27 April 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FX30cO4f26g>.

specialized knowledge of visual effects. However, this barrier of entry is shifting with Stepworks, the open-source tool with which ‘Let’s Play “Alexander Hamilton”’ was created and which is freely available for use. Both the ‘Let’s Play “Alexander Hamilton”’ video and Stepworks were created by Erik Loyer, the lead designer of the multimedia authoring platform, Scalar. Loyer also made a demo video which has ‘step-by-step’ directions for creating content with Stepworks.²³ Unlike tools created by media conglomerates or tech giants, these tools are built by artists and scholars. And they foster critical media engagement in a media-saturated world as anyone with the desire can make their own videos and contend with the rhetorical choices that go into video production. Indeed, since lyric videos are meant to be viewed, these choices reveal themselves and can be emulated or deviated from.

Perhaps most importantly, like all lyric videos, those done with kinetic typography force us to attend to the full screen and text within it. They demand a kind of reckoning with the spatiality of the screen and the temporality of video. Coming to terms with these two forces may pry open a more complex way of making and thinking. The screen’s spatial palette is also ephemeral, slipping by in fresh new ways, and creators might lean into this compelling style. For example, one might work against the notorious F reading pattern charted in online environments where readers read less and less (horizontally) across the screen as they move (vertically) down the screen.²⁴ A creator might focus on the bottom right corner or perhaps scroll the text upwards or on a diagonal. All of these choices help foster both verbal and visual fluency. The best of these pieces uses an economy of text that is often quite poetic. In today’s overwhelmingly visual culture, not only do lyric videos force us to listen with both our ears *and* our eyes; they literally shift the visual focus to the words themselves reminding us of the importance of the verbal, even after the turn to the visual.

Remediation and Expressive Space (Martin P. Rossouw)

In concert with the technique of kinetic typography, then, lyric videos often also showcase the expressive affordances of the *space* within which its kinetics

²³ For the Stepworks demo, visit Eric Loyer, ‘How to Make Multi-Channel Lyric Videos with Stepworks,’ *YouTube video*, 00:23:13, 15 March 15 2017, <https://youtu.be/GM32mS1PjN8>. Scalar authoring platform is available at: <https://scalar.me/anvc/>.

²⁴ See, for instance, this overview of the study which used eye tracking to establish reading practices online: <https://digital-freelancer.org/blog/f-shaped-pattern-explained>.

play out – that is, the effects to be gained from *where* precisely in the video's frame the lyrics pop up, pulsate and pass through. Lyric videos that tap into this expressive modality thus add a further dimension to what we would normally refer to as 'following' the lyrics: more than just reading along with the words that are uttered in song, the notion of following the lyrics now registers also more directly as having to *literally follow* the presentation of words – in a concretely spatial sense – by tracking their location and locomotion across different areas of the frame.

The movement of words in lyric videos tends to be tied to rhythm and vocal phrasing. But the placement of those words in screen space is hardly ever tethered to the music alone. This brings us back to the theme of remediation: it is often the lyric video's remediation of non-musical cultural forms and media that motivates its expressive use of space. Take what is perhaps the most common subject of such remediation: writing on a page. In the postage-themed lyric video of Burna Boy's 'Wonderful' (2020), for example, the upward scrolling of its cursive text is motivated by placing it on a letter emerging from an opened envelope.²⁵ Or, in Olivia Rodrigo's 'brutal' (2021), animated handwriting is superimposed over shifting fragments of a scrapbook/diary that dictate where in the frame the lyrics get to be 'written down.'²⁶ Of course, a remediated 'page' is but one way of motivating such spatial play. The screen space can just as well be rendered as a 'landscape' for the lyrics, as we encounter in Coldplay's 'Atlas' (2013): owing to its remediations of cartography, this video hovers over a sprawling cosmic landscape that plots the lyrics of the song along particular contours of an imaginary map.²⁷ But this only begins to scratch the surface, for the intermedial underpinnings behind the use of space in lyric videos may still be far more complex and layered – and sometimes even *combine* the spaces of a 'page' and a 'landscape'.

An especially poignant case in point is Taylor Swift's 'exile' (2020), featuring Bon Iver.²⁸ Of the many things that lyric videos tend to remediate – not only handwritten notes, doodles and maps, as we've seen, but also photos, cut-outs, album art, CD booklets, graffiti, comics, video games and opening

²⁵ Burna Boy, 'Burna Boy – Wonderful [Official Lyric Video]', *YouTube video*, 00:03:32, 26 June 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYBWrQumfVg>.

²⁶ Olivia Rodrigo, 'Brutal (Lyric Video)', *YouTube video*, 00:02:24, 21 May 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hM2U8cb8lhI>.

²⁷ Coldplay, 'Coldplay – Atlas (Hunger Games: Catching Fire) (Official Lyric Video)', *YouTube video*, 00:03:59, 6 September 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lh3TokLzzmw>.

²⁸ Taylor Swift, 'Exile (Feat. Bon Iver) (Official Lyric Video)', *YouTube video*, 00:04:46, 24 July 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=osd0LjUNFnA>.

credits in movies – the video most notably foregrounds its intermedial kinship with *concrete poetry*.²⁹ This means that ‘exile’ is significantly less fixed on the expressive potentials of typographic form and its kinetics. Rather, like concrete poetry, it concentrates on the placement and arrangement of the visible word within what’s perhaps best referred to as ‘typographic space’ (see Figure 7.4a).³⁰

Now the likes of Rudolf Arnheim would note that even a blank square harbours certain hidden structures that bestow expressive potentials upon specific spots and areas within it.³¹ Yet those potentials only multiply when put into ‘exile’: as is often the case in lyric videos, the screen space in which the lyrics get laid out here is never like an empty, flat page to begin with. These lyrics hover over striking drone photography, a looping shot of a landscape bifurcated by a single path walked by a solitary figure in the woods. At once a God’s-eye view and a backdrop, this scene imbues the typographic space of the video with a dynamic sense of layering and dimension. It makes concrete our experience of the expressive ‘geography’ of the screen and indeed also the inscriptive ‘geo’ (earth) ‘graphein’ (writing) occurring *on-screen*. It provides a map that heightens the valence of words according to *where* they appear (as when the vocalized line, ‘So I’m leavin’ out the side door’, for instance, noticeably lights up *opposite to* the previous line, and consequently on the *opposite side* of the frame). Hence, alongside both the photographed scene and the narrative conveyed by the lyrics, the very arrangement of the text in screen space gains its *own* – ‘narratographic’ – dramatic charge.³²

The ensuing, playfully unpredictable dance of words on-screen makes clear, however, the extent to which following the lyrics here ultimately still boils down to the ongoing *movement* of this ‘concrete poetry’, constantly shifting and rearranging itself across the central dividing vertical. Phrases and lines sometimes build into ‘stanzas’, but they still come and go, thus taking us here, then there; forward and back; from this side to that. We thus have a resultant game of visual tag that calls attention to yet further intermedial connections at

²⁹ Padraic Killeen, ‘Moving Words and Movable Type: Lyric Videos and Remediation’, *In Media Res*, 3 October 2018, <http://mediacommons.org/imr/content/moving-words-and-movable-type-lyric-videos-and-remediation>.

³⁰ On ‘typographic space’, see Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London & New York: Methuen, 1982), 123, 126–9.

³¹ See Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 1–5.

³² For more on the notion of ‘narratography’, that is, ‘the reading of an image and its transitions for their own plot charge’, see Garrett Stewart, *Framed Time: Toward a Postfilmic Cinema* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 7.

work in ‘exile’ and thereby its expressive use of space. It remediates not only the back-and-forth duet between Swift and Justin Vernon but also the experience of a specific kind of looking – as if we’re reading an optometrist’s chart, exercising our saccades, watching a match of pong – when we listen to this turn-based song with Tay-Tay and play eye-tennis to follow along.

Lyrical Mash-Ups (Carol Vernallis)

I’ve become devoted to prosumer mash-ups of period romance films accompanied by Taylor Swift songs with Spanish subtitles streamed on YouTube. Why? YouTube’s algorithm discovered I enjoyed these lyric videos and started feeding me links. This subgenre, which started in the early 2000s, is otherwise hard to find – the titles often simply list characters’ first names (e.g. ‘Jo & Laurie’; see Figure 7.5a).

These mash-ups feature the star and her paramour, walking together, kissing or dancing. They lack the sturdiness – the sense of craft, line and form – that encourages multiple viewings, but the first few have given me some affectively rich experiences. The glossy film excerpts look fabulous, but because they’re disjunct, they edit poorly. The performers don’t move in perfect sync with the songs. Each cut destabilizes me, and then I wait for the song to fill in the faces. Within these confines I seek a connection – and for an instant it’s there – in a glance or head-turn. Suddenly the music colours the characters and I witness an intense emotion I wish I could possess. I assume I share this sensation, but I have the best access to it; its sharpness would break the arc of an actor’s performance across a scene.



Figure 7.5a and b Fan-made lyric videos involving historically based romance dramas – a *Bridgerton* mash-up for Ariana Grande’s ‘thank u, next’ (27 December 2020) by Lilac Edits and a setting of *Call Me By Your Name* (Luca Guadagnino, 2017) with Taylor Swift’s ‘August’ (4 August 2020) and Portuguese subtitles by Essenciais Swift.

Because the actors can't hear the song, the song drives the experience. A different song, colour grade or edit would suggest a different mode of inhabiting the world. Swift has produced some of the most beautiful mash-ups. My favourite, 'August', a setting of *Call Me By Your Name* (Luca Guadagnino, 2017), is tainted by the Armie Hammer scandal (so readers may choose to watch others, including *Bridgerton* or Marc Webb's *500 Days of Summer*, 2009; see Figure 7.5b). In all of these, the actors' expressions and gestures reflect beautiful, refined and often romantic emotions. But the incompletely witnessed rupture against unfolding processes suggests beauty is continuously lost, tossed into the past. And the typography creates additional losses. In music videos, lyrics fragment into isolated totems (as noted above). The yellow Spanish subtitles unfold as a constant, dogmatic partner. They seem the most prescient – they're marking some upcoming point – unavailable to me (as a non-native speaker) as well as to the performers. Past, present and future are all out of reach unless I can hold onto these tiny shards and find them again in my life. To come to a better understanding, I run experiments to see what roles the text, lyrics, images and music play. I've developed a method for this: I open two YouTube windows, keeping the original image in one and streaming a variety of soundtracks in the other. I then reverse the process (maintaining the soundtrack as a constant and running different imagery, including that with different typography, in the second window). Is it the yellow of the subtitles and/or the language that I find so moving? (Yes for both: yellow, not white; Spanish, not English or Chinese.) The text's placement? (Yes, not centre frame – these can suggest characters' thoughts.) The period costumes and settings? (Yes, not recent.) The actors? (Yes, not *Gone Girl*'s opaque Rosamund Pike – the song embosses these actors' open, chiselled faces.) The singing? (Yes, not Lana del Rey or Billie Eilish.) The singing? Now I see Swift's craft more fully. It's blank, beautiful, empty, yet fragile, like the performers and the subtitles; she could make lovely ASMR recordings.

My experience feels true to YouTube. A clip strikes me, and even with the viewer commentary below, I don't sense a way to grasp hold of and share my experience. It'd be great for us to make and speak about these enigmatic clips and carry their heightened moments into our lives.

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This chapter has sought to provide new perspectives on a genre that's ubiquitous, important and influential. A concise definition of the lyric video remains elusive (clips referenced early in this chapter, like 'The Llama Song' and 'Baby

Shark', could be called lyric videos). The genre embraces a range of media, including global cinema, the musical, children's entertainment and the civil rights documentary. Lyric videos also reflect cultural values: working relatively independently, the four of us scholars have produced a chapter that reflects some of the political struggles and inequalities we're facing today.³³ Lyric videos are rich with possibilities for artistic expression and viewer engagement. It's a genre that fans, prosumers and professionals all participate in. It's exciting to read these videos and imagine where the genre will go.

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³³ I've noticed that in this chapter those clips reflecting Black experience featured protest or simply text, and the rest seemed to reflect white privilege and escapism. I find the lyric video with text shaped as a gun from *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), in some contexts, could be seen as a trigger. I've done some work with facial recognition and film trailers. One Black-identifying student I shared the project with reported that he experienced anxiety over these images, and the Affectiva facial scans corroborated his experiences. I think a larger study could be worthwhile. My assumption is that others within groups who experience threat would feel similarly. See Carol Vernallis, Dani Oore and Jim Buhler, 'Facial Recognition, Big Data, and Close Readings: Tracing the Asset in the *Bourne* and *Snowden* Trailers', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 37, no. 5 (2020): 431–55.

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Music Listening and Circulation

The Circulation of User-Appropriated Music Content on YouTube

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The 2021 data from the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI) shows that YouTube represents 49 per cent of all music listened to online in Canada.¹ While it is important to temper these figures because the IFPI does not consider all platforms (especially local, alternative or decentralized ones), it is clear that YouTube is a major player not only in music listening but also in music discovery and sharing. This is not a new thing. As early as 2007, the categorization of content as ‘music’ involved between 23 per cent and 30 per cent of all YouTube’s videos.² Founded in February 2005 and quickly acquired by Google in October 2006 for \$1.65 billion, YouTube’s primary goal was to allow users to post their personal videos. However, a more complex business model quickly emerged, and the platform became a media hub in which professional and amateur content are open to monetization through advertising. Patrick Vonderau has shown how much music matters to this business model, pointing out that it may have been used as a key sales hook for the 2006 Google takeover.³ Music remains integral to YouTube, sometimes providing the main reason for a video’s existence and at others providing an illustrative or atmospheric backdrop for other media.

¹ IFPI, IFPI issues Global Music Report 2021, <https://www.ifpi.org/ifpi-issues-annual-global-music-report-2021>.

² Xu Cheng, Cameron Dale and Jiangchuan Liu, ‘Understanding the Characteristics of Internet Short Video Sharing: YouTube as a Case Study’, *ArXiv*, abs/0707.3670 (July 2007), <https://arxiv.org/abs/0707.3670>.

³ Patrick Vonderau, ‘The Video Bubble: Multichannel Networks and the Transformation of YouTube’, *Convergence* 22, no. 4 (April 2016): 361–75.

Unlike most of its competitors in the music streaming market as identified by the IFPI (Spotify, Apple Music, Deezer, etc.), YouTube allows its users to upload content even if they do not own the rights. To comply with industry standards and to redistribute the revenue from video monetization to the rights holders, YouTube uses ContentID, an audio content recognition system that charts both newly added and pre-existing uploads. ContentID is a tool designed to cross-reference the audio tracks of videos with information stored in databases and then to act according to the instructions of the rights holders: the main options include publish, monetize or block. This approach impacts the balance of the music industry, as Guillaume Heuguet notes: ‘monetization introduces a novelty: it invites rights holders to identify how their works – or fragments of their works – circulate in order to leave them online and recover potential advertising revenues.’⁴ Even with this system in place, it remains unclear how much music content is actually on YouTube, however. ContentID’s inclusion of songs already residing on the platform does not seem to be systematic, largely due to the amount of data that needs to be analysed. And as Heuguet shows, YouTube’s public data does not provide sufficient guidance to quantify the unidentified music content.⁵

So far, most of the research linking YouTube and music has focused either on the modes of online music consumption or on the computer infrastructure of music circulation, and only scant attention has been paid to the particularity of the platform’s diverse music forms and their influence on listening. However, the ability for users to circulate music they did not create across YouTube has many consequences. Although study of this diversity is still in its infancy, researchers have begun to explore how the platform’s music has been catalogued. In 2015, for instance, Lassi A. Liikkanen and Antti Salovaara pointed out that several identical versions of music tracks with the same visual content could be found on the platform.⁶ This shows that some users are copying content already online, which is at odds with the idea of user-generated content (UGC) officially promoted by the platform. Some of the content is copied from official sources (the official artist YouTube channels, for instance), but a lot of it is reproduced

⁴ Guillaume Heuguet, *YouTube et les métamorphoses de la musique* (Paris: Ina Etudes Et Controverses, 2021), 112. Translated from French by the author.

⁵ Guillaume Heuguet, ‘Vers une micropolitique des formats’, *Revue d’anthropologie des connaissances* 133, no. 3 (2019): 817–48.

⁶ Lassi A. Liikkanen and Antti Salovaara, ‘Music on YouTube: User Engagement with Traditional, User-Appropriated and Derivative Videos’, *Computers in Human Behavior* 50 (September 2015): 108–24.

from non-official channels. Obviously, one of the particularities of listening to music on YouTube is that the YouTube player is an audiovisual tool. Thus, all music content is technically video with sound, even if the visual component is simply a still image (a record sleeve cover or visual placeholder). In their work, Liikkanen and Salovaara address the variety of online music-based video, identifying twelve subgenres of audiovisual material. They organize this material into three main genres (traditional, user-appropriated and derivative), noting that most of this content is not broadcast by official channels but rather by a range of amateur users.⁷ The authors conclude that the particularity of music listening on YouTube rests largely on the reappropriation of official content by the platform's users. The term 'appropriation' in this context refers to the agency of users when engaging with YouTube, particularly in the ways in which music can be recirculated, with or without changing its visual form.

Here, I explore the diversity of musical forms on YouTube to better understand music-sharing practices. Using examples from the Songs of the Year category, as awarded by the Québec Association for the Recording, Concert and Video Industries (ADISQ), I explore the movements of particular songs across YouTube's cultural landscape, charting their variations, re-visualizations and remediations. How do the practices of rights holders and ordinary people differ? What can we deduce about the uses of music from the different visual forms it takes on YouTube? And what does the multiplicity of forms tell us about the circulation of music online? This work is part of a larger research project that seeks to understand the roles that ordinary people (fans or not) assume in the circulation of music.

Technology and the Circulation of Music

YouTube benefits from the propensity of listeners to circulate music beyond the control of artists, and technological innovation has been a major part in enabling this unofficial form of distribution. As Jonathan Sterne has noted, the recording industry has been largely built around the technologies for recording and copying music.⁸ The control of these technological devices and processes, which enable particular forms of circulation, constitutes an essential dimension

⁷ Liikkanen and Salovaara, 'Music on YouTube', 121.

⁸ Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2003).

of the music industry and its development. However, people and organizations outside the industry have constantly seized opportunities to circumvent this control, sometimes for profit, sometimes without regard for the economic implications. Tensions about the free circulation of music involving rights holders versus listeners and non-industry intermediaries go back at least to the fake books (compilations of tablatures and scores, usually offering only lyrics, melody and chords) that circulated at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the modern music industry was in its infancy.⁹ While the circulation of fake books was useful for young artists and small ensembles, it posed a threat to the early music business and the publishing industry, a threat that grew greater with the development of music reproduction technologies. With the advent of portable recording technology came the bootleg, whereby illegal recordings of live music were made available to the public. As an early form of fandom, the bootleg is a form of parallel economy, giving collectors, enthusiasts, fans and entrepreneurs access to live alternative versions of songs. While these practices of collecting and sharing can be disruptive for artists and labels, if we appropriate Christopher Small's idea of musicking as an ensemble of relations surrounding music, illegal forms of dissemination can be seen as an integral part of music culture.¹⁰ Tape recorder, cassette technology and later the CD enabled the first forms of music's massification: these technologies enabled music to be copied at home and reformulated into mixtapes and playlists, an activity that Ricardo Dias, Daniel Gonçalves and Manuel Fonseca understand as an early step towards participatory broadcast activity.¹¹

Although the struggle for control over the circulation of recorded music dominated the twentieth century, as Mark Neumann and Timothy Simpson have shown, the rise of the MP3 and music streaming led to what Tristan Mattelart describes as the 'fight against piracy' in contemporary peer-to-peer (P2P) culture.¹² P2P processes operate in ways that are not systematically monetary. Jon Cooper and Daniel M. Harrison, in their in-depth study of the communities

⁹ Barry Kernfeld, *The Story of Fake Books: Bootlegging Songs to Musicians* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2006).

¹⁰ Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

¹¹ Ricardo Dias, Daniel Gonçalves and Manuel Fonseca, 'From Manual to Assisted Playlist Creation: A Survey', *Multimedia Tools and Applications* 76, no. 12 (2017): 14400.

¹² Mark Neumann and Timothy Simpson, 'Smuggled Sound: Bootleg Recording and the Pursuit of Popular Memory', *Symbolic Interaction* 20, no. 4 (November 1997): 319–41; Tristan Mattelart, 'Piracy Cultures| Audiovisual Piracy, Informal Economy, and Cultural Globalization', *International Journal of Communication* 6 (April 2012): 16.

that brought P2P platforms to life, have shown that social relations, exchanges and discussions constitute a fundamental dimension of the circulation of online music, while Tushar K. Nandi and Fabrice Rochelandet write that ‘contribution behaviour is not well explained by an utilitarian approach. In contrast, it can be motivated by social influence. In particular, these practices are embedded in a social context.’¹³ In their work on music exploration in the digital age, Steven J. Tepper and Eszter Hargittai show that listeners, despite the networked search resources available to them, still tend to rely on recommendations from their social circles – often through mediated environments – partly because sharing interests and tastes develops reciprocity, trust and facilitates conversation.¹⁴ Following this logic of sociality, Martin Tétu asserts that P2P and the participatory web have created cultural archives for users who can co-curate their musical and cinematographic interests and make them accessible.¹⁵ Nevertheless, access to YouTube content is not as free as it at first appears. As a private service, YouTube can intervene in content (e.g. with ContentID) and its discoverability (through algorithms applied to content recommendation). Access rules may also change, and the development of the paid services YouTube Premium (2014) and YouTube Music (2015) could signal a shift towards subscription that may, in the future, limit access. In addition, in a 2011 study, Matthias Prellwitz and Michael L. Nelson noted how much of the platform’s content is unstable as videos can disappear due to copyright issues or are deleted by users who also may leave the platform altogether.¹⁶ This is a major challenge for media academics exploring the early histories of YouTube, as Susan Aasman notes: ‘We don’t even know what is there now; let alone what was there in the early years.’¹⁷ The data presented here was collected in October 2021. It would be interesting to replicate the research in a few years to explore these evolutions further.

¹³ Jon Cooper and Daniel M. Harrison, ‘The Social Organization of Audio Piracy on the Internet,’ *Media, Culture & Society* 23, no. 1 (January 2001): 71–89; Tushar K. Nandi and Fabrice Rochelandet, ‘The Incentives for Contributing Digital Contents over P2P Networks: An Empirical Investigation,’ *Review of Economic Research on Copyright Issues* 5 (2009): 31.

¹⁴ Steven J. Tepper and Eszter Hargittai, ‘Pathways to Music Exploration in a Digital Age,’ *Poetics* 37, no. 3 (June 2009): 227–49; Raphaël Nowak, *Consuming Music in the Digital Age* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

¹⁵ Martin Tétu, ‘Des vertus culturelles du piratage à l’ère numérique : ou comment le peer-to-peer peut contribuer à la circulation du patrimoine québécois et à la diversité culturelle,’ *Éthique publique. Revue internationale d’éthique sociétale et gouvernementale* 14, no. 2 (2012): 125–43.

¹⁶ Matthias Prellwitz and Michael L. Nelson, ‘Music Video Redundancy and Half-Life in YouTube,’ in *Research and Advanced Technology for Digital Libraries*, ed. Stefan Gradmann, Francesca Borri, Carlo Meghini and Heiko Schuldt (Berlin Heidelberg: Springer, 2011), 143–50.

¹⁷ Susan Aasman, ‘Finding Traces in YouTube’s Living Archive: Exploring Informal Archival Practices,’ *TMG Journal for Media History* 22, no. 1 (November 2019): 37.

While a lot of content is disappearing on YouTube, the amount of continuously added content also contributes to the difficulty of understanding the place of music on the platform. Nick Prior notes that behaviours and uses related to music are embodied differently on different platforms, according to their media specificities.¹⁸ While Spotify, a specialized music streaming service, is based on data transfer technology and attempts to curtail the circulation of music beyond its platform, for instance, YouTube's sociotechnical system encourages the sharing of all content, especially music, which speaks to the sociality of P2P culture. The videos are largely organized by uncoordinated users. YouTube has enabled new forms of music fandom by affording not only affinity spaces for musical subcultures and communities to gather in but also the means to respond to the circulation of music through memes and parodies, comments, shares and likes as we have seen in this book's Introduction. When information about the ways in which music is circulated and consumed on YouTube is translated into data, however, it becomes clear that, despite its initial appearance as a site of democratized activity, YouTube in fact positions many of its videos in such a way as to monetize them by making them more visible.

This process is complicated because YouTube owes much to the free labour of its users, who feed the platform with content. In 2000, Tiziana Terranova noted, 'The new Web is made of the big players, but also of new ways to make the audience work.'¹⁹ For her, free labour does not necessarily have to be understood as exploitation: rather, value can be extracted from the seduction of participation in these environments. As we shall see below, this form of value construction can be found throughout YouTube, but especially in the creation of lyric videos and the translation of pre-existing songs into different languages – activities that are undertaken voluntarily and disseminated for the collective benefit. While the platform has been lauded as a space for UGC, then, it is also defined by user-*appropriated* content – by the reuse and remediation of previously uploaded material through a process of what John Hartley refers to as 'redactive creativity'.²⁰ This form of remediation affords new challenges for the circulation of music. Where before, the copying of music on tape or CD created a rupture

¹⁸ Nick Prior, *Popular Music, Digital Technology and Society* (London: SAGE Publications, 2018).

¹⁹ Tiziana Terranova, 'Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy', *Social Text* 18 (June 2000): 37.

²⁰ John Hartley, *Television Truths: Forms of Knowledge in Popular Culture* (London: Blackwell, 2008); José Van Dijk shows how YouTube has moved to the reappropriation of existing material in *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 119.

between music professionals and music listeners, YouTube's algorithms and processes of monetizing videos forge a complicated interplay between music production and reproduction – an interplay that relies not only on professional recording practices and the marketing strategies of record labels but also on the recirculation and reappropriation of this material by amateur YouTubers and the community-building work of P2P culture.

Forty-One Years of Song of the Year

In their attempts to qualify music content on YouTube, Xu Cheng, Cameron Dale and Jiangchun Liu, as well as Liikkanen and Salovaara, focus on videos based on their popularity. This approach makes sense when seeking to understand the distribution of popular contemporary content but is less useful when faced with the totality of YouTube's videos, which includes a significant amount of archived, older and less accessed content. To enable a coherent comparative nucleus within such diversity, I focus here on the ADISQ's Songs of the Year awards from the Gala's launch in 1979 until 2019, when this study started. This major event recognizes the excellence of Quebec artists working in the music industry and reflects the cultural particularity of French-speaking Quebec within Canada. While several categories have been present since 1979, others have been added or renamed over time. Today there are thirty-four artistic categories and twenty-two industry ones. Each winner receives a Félix, a trophy named after the singer-songwriter Félix Leclerc. The nomination and awarding procedures have changed over time, although the representatives of the music industry have retained a prominent share of the voting process.²¹ I have chosen here to concentrate on forty-one years of the Song of the Year category because it generates a coherent corpus that nevertheless offers an interesting diversity of artist, period and style. The songs awarded are not necessarily the most popular in terms of sales or professional critical reception.²² Rather, the selection procedure for the nominees of the Song of the Year category is based on several criteria: songs must be present in the top part of recognized charts (sales or radio); each artist can include just one song in each contest; and artists cannot receive more

²¹ To better understand some of the recent dynamics in Quebec music industry, it would be relevant to make a history of the ADISQ Gala and its different evolutions, as much for the categories as for the nomination and selection criteria.

²² The ADISQ Gala has been and is subject to criticism on the criteria for nomination, selection, composition of the Academy, diversity and representation.

than three Song of the Year Félix Awards in their career. The final voting process is shared between the members of the ADISQ Academy and the public.²³ Taken together, these varied criteria and the combination of professional and public opinion provide access to a rich variety of music content.

For each winner, I input the artist's name as well as the official title of the song into YouTube's search engine.²⁴ Results were then classified according to the number of views, starting with the largest number.²⁵ This approach bypassed the organization of results by a YouTube suggestion algorithm (by default, results are organized by relevance, a criterion that is part of YouTube's business model). The ten videos were then selected for each year, for a grand total of 409 videos, because there are only 9 different versions of the winning song of 1998 online. Data compilation was done manually, as the use of data absorbing tools is not allowed on the platform. Following Liikkanen and Salovaara, my selection approach was based on the 'music first' principle, which allowed for the inclusion of all videos in which the specific track appeared, even if the visual content was not produced by the artist or their rights holders: all videos whose soundtrack corresponded to a version of the song realized by the artist (or partially by the artist) were also included. In addition to the title, the link to the video, the name of the contributor account and the link to the channel, the information was collected into the six categories outlined in Table 8.1.

A Real Diversity of Content and Channel Types

The most-viewed video of our corpus is Celine Dion's 1995 winning entry 'Pour que tu m'aimes encore'. The official music video, uploaded by the authorized channel, has received 146,042,222 views (as of October 2021). The total number of views of the top 10 results for this song is also the highest of the corpus: 223,312,492. These figures represent a clear break with the rest of the corpus, which has a combined total of only 197,358,245 views. The total of the 1995 top ten is thus higher than the total of all the other years under consideration. The least viewed video – Kevin Parent's 'Fréquenter l'oubli' (1998) – has only 89

²³ Details of the procedures can be found here (rules for 2019): <https://www.adisq.com/medias/pdf/fr/Regl19.pdf>.

²⁴ The list of winners is available here: https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prix_F%C3%A9lix_de_la_chanson_de_l%27ann%C3%A9e.

²⁵ Note here that the way views of music content are counted on YouTube is an issue in itself as shown by Heuguet in *YouTube et les métamorphoses de la musique*.

Table 8.1 Table of collected information

Views	Number of views
Date	Upload date
Source	Type of channel
Official	Linked to an official artist channel, an account directly managed by the artist, an official channel of a record company, a distributor or a professional broadcaster. To get an official artist channel, the user need to meet certain criteria and have access to a YouTube partner manager, which usually requires a well-established record label or distributor.
Topic channel	Generally described as “auto-generated channels”, named “Topic channels” by Google and identifiable by the indication Topic in the search list, these channels are generated automatically by drawing tracks from distributors’ catalogs.
Unofficial	Linked to an unofficial channel.
Audio description	
Official audio	Original award-winning song or alternative studio version by the winning artist.
Live version	Live version of the song performed by the winning artist. Cover versions by other artists or amateurs are not considered, unless the winning artist participates.
Karaoke	Instrumental version, often a re-orchestration, performed or not by the winning artist. Karaoke has been considered, unlike covers, because of the existing legal requirement in Canada for karaoke bar operators to pay a royalty to SOCAN, the copyright collective. Their circulation on YouTube have a potential impact for right-holders.
Other (specify)	Unknown sound, remixes, play-overs, etc..
Video description	
Official still image	Record cover, press photo, and any image officially released by the artist or its management.
Official music video	Official music video.
Live (TV performance)	A recording made during a live television performance. The copy on YouTube can come from multiple sources (VHS, DVD, digitized video, etc.).
Live (professional recording)	A recording made at a concert by a professional crew or person. The copy on YouTube can come from multiple sources (VHS, DVD, livestream archive, etc.). The recording is judged as professional based on the quality of the shots, editing and audio processing.

(Continued)

Table 8.1 (Continued)

Live (personal recording)	A recording made at a concert by an audience member. The copy on YouTube can come from multiple sources (mini-DV, digital camera, mobile phone, etc.).
Slideshow	Montage of images either from the winning artist, personal images, or other images.
Lyrics	Lyrics of the song.
Karaoke	Lyrics displayed as the song progresses in order to help users sing along.
Translation	Translation of the lyrics into another language.
Choreography	Choreography performed to the music. Includes dance, lipsync, lipdub, etc.
Film clip	Film clip containing the music or serving as an illustration of it.
Unofficial still image	Still image that does not meet the criteria for official images.
Other (specify)	This category gathers all other forms of visual content that appear less than 3 times.
Production	
Professional	All official videos are professional. It also includes professional recordings, official music videos, official still images, etc. posted by unofficial channels.
User-appropriated	This category gathers all the content appropriated by the users, as soon as their intervention on the content is visible or audible.

views, while the lowest total for all relevant top ten releases is for Daniel Lavoie’s ‘Tension, attention’ (1984), with 51,779 views.

If we consider the number of relevant videos present in the first ten results, official channels account for 22.49 per cent of the total videos in the corpus. If we then look at the total number of videos viewed, it appears that, on average, 37.29 per cent are linked to official channels. This shows us two things: most music content is on regular user channels; and videos linked to official channels generally have more views than others. However, these averages hide a great diversity of cases: four awarded songs have no official channels in their top ten versions while seven have more than 90 per cent of content from official sources (with 99.17 per cent for Patrice Michaud in 2017 for his song ‘Kamikaze’). As can be seen in Figure 8.1, a trend appears with a greater number of official versions over time in the total number of videos viewed. Thus, if the corpus is separated

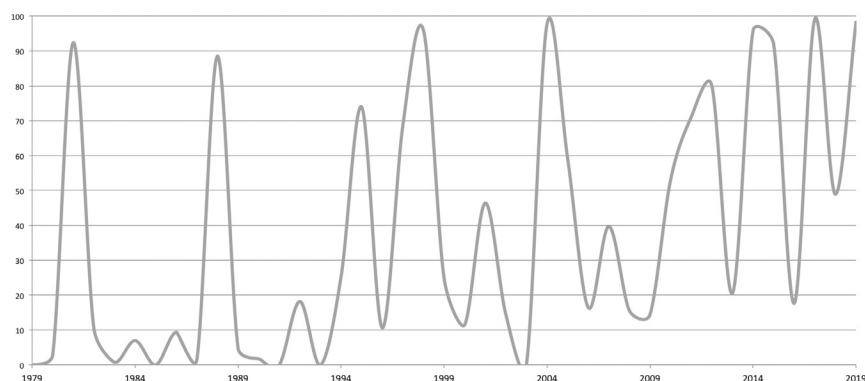


Figure 8.1 Evolution of the percentage share of official videos in all videos, in total views per winning song.

into two parts, from 1979 to 1999 and then from 1999 to 2019, the figure rises from 25.56 per cent for official versions for the first era to 49.59 per cent for the second. This trend is independent of auto-generated channels, whose influence is randomly distributed over the years.

The majority of the videos (55.75 per cent) in this corpus present an audio version of the song that has been commercially released. Next are live audio versions, which amount to 30.80 per cent. Some date from the commercial release of the winning song, while others are more recent. Some are professionally captured, for example on a TV set, while others are recorded with non-professional equipment by YouTubers themselves. This diversity greatly contributes to the experience of listening to music on YouTube while also giving testimony to the social uses of music content sharing. In parallel with the development of YouTube, there has been a democratization in the tools for capturing live music, notably with the first consumer digital cameras allowing video and especially with the arrival of ultra-portable smartphones equipped with good-quality video and audio recorders. The different recording devices are easy to identify. Professional recordings are often glossy, stable and edited with the sound recorded separately (often directly on the sound mixer). In terms of aesthetics, these videos offer a close-up, accurate concert experience that has been regulated by the artist and/or record label. Our corpus includes videos not only from stadium concerts and large festival stages but also from smaller venues and more intimate gigs. Fifteen videos, for example, were captured during intimate performances, sometimes held in unusual places and intended to be videoed, like the version of 'Je veux tout' by Arian Moffatt on the music channel Le HibOO (see video 1 on this chapter's playlist) or the

outdoor version of Alex Nevsky's song 'On leur a fait croire' recorded especially for the music media, Quai Baco (see video 2).²⁶ Loïc Riom, in his thesis on Sofar Sound, a company specializing in the organization of small concerts in unusual places, sees these practices not only as a form of promotion but also as a new way of experiencing live music.²⁷ Amateur footage, on the other hand, is often captured on a handheld device and can offer shaky, low-quality sound and image. Taken from the audience, amateur video operates as a testimony to the personal experience of the audience. Embedded in these videos is valuable information about the reception of music as a lived, cultural phenomena. Next, and making up 7.33 per cent of the songs of the corpus, are instrumental versions dedicated to karaoke practice. Even here, there is a lot of diversity: there are versions ripped from VHS or DVD, instrumental covers and MIDI renditions. Finally, 6.11 per cent of the corpus presents altered, partly missing or damaged music content.

Figure 8.2 shows the distribution of the different categories present in the number of videos. Some include several characteristics, so the addition of the different categories exceeds the total number of videos. The three most represented categories are official still images (16.14 per cent of the videos in the corpus), professional recordings of live music (15.16 per cent) and lyric videos (14.67 per cent). Music video constitutes only 8.31 per cent (but not all the winning songs have an official music video). The 'professionals or user-appropriated' criterion seemed important to consider to refine the data processing. Figure 8.2 reveals the diversity of forms that visualizations of music on YouTube can take. For this research, official videos, posted by official channels, were considered 'professional'. This category also includes professional recordings, official music videos and official still images posted by unofficial channels. The user-appropriated category gathers all the content appropriated by users as soon as their intervention on the content is visible or audible. There are versions that are difficult to classify, for example, music videos made by the artist years after the official version and with very small budgets or videos of image editing with a very professional touch but linked to fan channels.

The term 'user-appropriated content' covers a great diversity of forms. Sometimes, a montage of still images or animated gifs will visualize a song's

²⁶ Hib00 d'Live #056, 'Ariane Moffatt/ Je veux tout', *YouTube video*, 00:04:04, 25 April 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ckFONlwMtE>; Quai Baco, 'Alex Nevsky – Session Acoustique – "On leur a fait croire"', *YouTube video*, 00:03:36, 30 January 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WOhW8-OmLBU>.

²⁷ Loïc Riom, 'Faire Compter La Musique. Comment Recomposer Le Live à Travers Le Numérique (Sofar Sounds, 2017–2020)', Thèse de doctorat, Université Paris sciences et lettres, 2021.

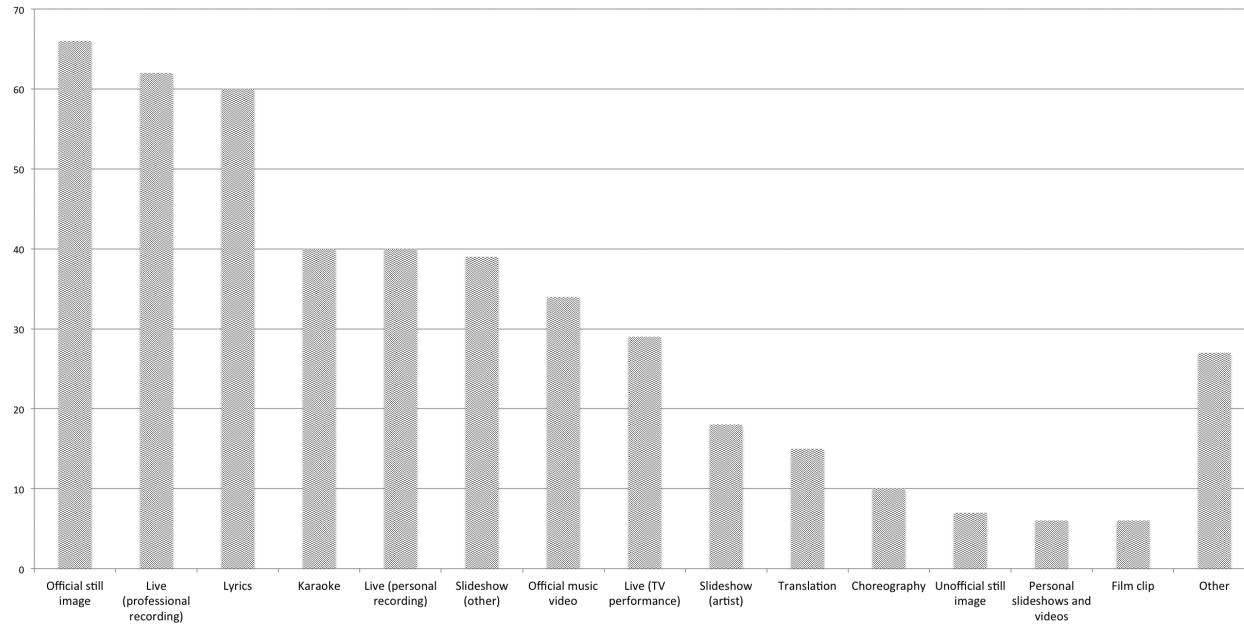


Figure 8.2 Type of video content in number of videos.

lyrics, as in a version of 'Le Blues du Businessman' (1979) by Claude Dubois where every sentence is visually – and literally – illustrated (see video 3).²⁸ In other examples, the slideshow is inspired by the theme of the song: romantic songs are often illustrated by sunsets, angels, couples and sparkling roses, as can be seen in Martine St Clair's 'Ce soir l'amour est dans tes yeux' (1986; see video 4).²⁹ The first three results for the song 'Hélène' (1989) by Roch Voisine, which total 14.5 million views, are slideshows of romantic images. The official video clip has so far reached only 1.1 million views.

Contributors can be really creative: for instance, user Tortue Thérèse made a mix of images of funny cartoon turtles and Mario Pelchat for his song 'Je n'aime plus' (2000; see video 5),³⁰ while user Caro Dave used stock and news images to construct a narrative about arrogance for Gerry Boulet's 'Un beau grand bateau' (1990; see video 6).³¹ Finally, songs can be used by users as a sonic backdrop for slideshows of personal images or videos, for example, the montage of wedding videos placed on top of Nicola Ciccone's 'J'taime tout court' (2004; see video 7), which also includes the lyrics.³² Another example of this practice is found in a video montage of a young St Bernard dog named Kong, which has been synched to Kevin Parent's 'Father on the Go' (1997; see video 8) and the song renamed 'St. Bernard – Kong on the Go'. He can be heard barking during an instrumental part.³³ The really popular lyrics videos are also a space for user's creativity. Some appropriated visual versions of songs simply include lyrics written on fixed images that scroll more or less along the song, as in 'La désise' (2001; see video 9) by Daniel Boucher,³⁴ while others show a high level of creativity and include background images and changing typography: for instance, user kiki2212 has made a complex lyric video for Les cowboys fringants' 'Les étoiles filantes' (2005) that includes animation following the lyrics, personal and archive pictures (see video 10).³⁵

²⁸ Jeannette LeBlanc, 'Le Blues du Businessman – Claude Dubois', *YouTube video*, 00:04:21, 11 May 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W8165QAJxqE>.

²⁹ Brigitte Clovet, 'ce soir l amour est dans tes yeux', *YouTube video*, 00:06:15, 15 October 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BfE-niMPilw>.

³⁰ Tortue Thérèse, 'Belle version(rare) – Je n'aime plus – Mario Pelchat', *YouTube video*, 00:03:02, 26 May 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B9_sR2FA6ps.

³¹ Caro Dave, 'Un beau grand bateau', *YouTube video*, 00:03:58, 2 September 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FOThkvBXlp0>.

³² Eric B, 'Mariage de catou (13juillet 2013)', *YouTube video*, 00:03:49, 28 July 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xz5WeOJsCYg>.

³³ rythmeskong, 'Saint-Bernard – Kong On The Go', *YouTube video*, 00:03:55, 5 September 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMFM8eOnFDs>.

³⁴ MrMononk, 'Daniel Boucher – La Desise (4Mots).mp4', *YouTube video*, 00:02:26, 21 January 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VXp4WG8wVq8>.

³⁵ kiki2212, 'LES ÉTOILES FILANTES lyrics – Les cowboys fringants QUÉBEC', *YouTube video*, 00:04:31, 21 May 2008, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_JmWGw0bc5s.

In terms of the number of videos in the top ten results per year, 49.39 per cent appear professional, while 50.61 per cent include user-appropriated content. In terms of the number of views, however, professional content accounts for an average of 60.33 per cent of views, compared to 39.67 per cent for user-appropriated content. Within this data, the evolution of the proportion of user-appropriated and professional content does not seem to be related to the age of the songs. Thus, the progressive integration of YouTube into the distribution and broadcasting networks of the music industry does not produce a marked increase in the share of professional-looking content. It is important to note that ContentID works based on the audio track. All official audio is supposedly found by ContentID and the monetization made from advertisement goes to the right holders, even if they do not own the channel that hosts the video. As mentioned above, however, Heuguet suggests that some user-appropriated content escapes YouTube's algorithms.³⁶ And this, without even considering the content from live audio that can't technically be recognized by ContentID because live rendition of songs differs too much from the versions in its databases.

Music First

These viewing figures suggest that the social dimension of YouTube's videos appears through the practices of uploading and appropriating content produced by others. Nearly half the videos analysed bear marks of user intervention. Based on the identified categories, Figure 8.3 provides a visual representation of user appropriation of content. The boundaries between the different forms are not fixed, with user-appropriated content occupying an open space between official versions and UGC.³⁷

As we've seen, official still images with official sound are among the most common forms of visualized music on YouTube. This is a classic form of music presentation that links the work to its classic sales medium: the album cover. If it is logical to see the players of the music industries (artists, labels, distributors) among the main uploaders, the fact that users share these forms can be surprising, mainly because the exact same content often already exist on the same platform in better quality. On each video, a settings menu allows

³⁶ Heuguet, *YouTube et les métamorphoses de la musique*.

³⁷ It is important to note that this representation is based on the chosen data and does not cover all the diversity of user-appropriated music content on YouTube.

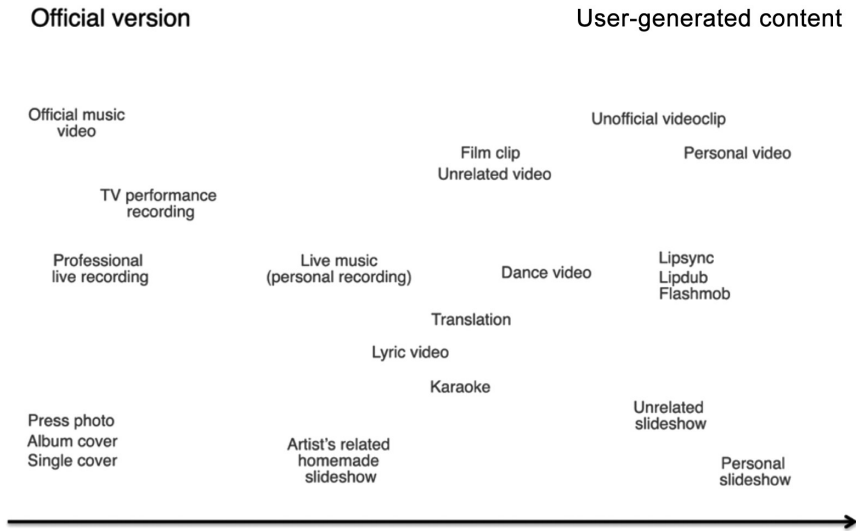


Figure 8.3 A visual representation of YouTube's user-appropriated content.

the user to adjust the quality of the video: from 144p to 2160p. This indicator allows the user to not only know the maximum possible quality of the video but also to adjust it according to the connection speed. It is important to remember here that the quality of the music streamed depends largely on the access to a consistent internet speed. Recently posted official content allows high quality while some older videos are restricted to the lowest quality through compression, which has a visual and auditory impact. This is particularly the case for the oldest videos in the corpus. Added at a time when uploading speeds were much slower, users tended to choose low-quality videos. Low-quality videos, then, can sometimes act as a sort of time marker by revealing the upload age. The two oldest videos in the corpus, for instance, both date from 2006 and are presented with a limited quality (240p max): the official video for Les cowboys fringants' 'Les étoiles filantes' (2005) posted to their official channel (see video 10) and a live performance of the song 'Évangéline' (2006) by Annie Blanchard, recorded for a TV special (see video 31).³⁸ The equipment used to film the footage can also lead to low-quality uploads. The fan channel MarieMaiNews, for instance, offers

³⁸ oskin83, 'Evangeline a la fureur', *YouTube video*, 00:05:26, 15 October 2006, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p8Znh9Mux_4.

videos of Marie-Mai's television appearances filmed with her phone (including video 11, a performance of 'Sans cri ni haine', the 2012 Song of the Year winner).³⁹

The numbers here are interesting. A lot of low-quality video versions of songs from this corpus have high viewing numbers, suggesting that users do not select versions of the songs according to the quality of the videos. This is particularly the case when songs are uploaded – sometimes in multiple versions – by users before the label or artist joins YouTube in an official capacity. Official video uploads become important for several reasons: they enable record companies to control the quality of their music outputs and their viewing figures. As mentioned, ContentID allegedly allows rights holders to make money from all the versions recognized by the algorithm, even if they are present on unofficial channels and even if their quality is bad. This encourages the multiplication of identical or near-identical versions.

The relatively low presence of official music videos (8.31 per cent of the total) can be explained by the fact that not all the selected songs have a music video. In the 1980s and 1990s, the production of official music videos was not systematic, especially since not all the winning songs were popular hits. However, the research above shows that users produce their own visualizations of music, whether or not an official version exists. Sometimes new versions are compiled from other videos, as in Marc Dupré's 'Ton départ' (2016; see video 12), in which a montage of images unrelated to the artist evokes the lyrics and the atmosphere of the song.⁴⁰ In other cases, the contributors themselves act in the new music video as in this version of Jean Leloup's 'Paradis City' (2015; see video 13) made by young women in a school setting.⁴¹ The name of the course, the school and the year are indicated in the new title: 'Art dramatique JJB 2015'. Some videos play into contemporary YouTube trends. For example, there is an anime music video (AMV) version of Diane Tell's 'Si j'étais un homme' (1981).⁴² AMVs are composed from sequences extracted from one or several animated works chosen according to the song and edited in synchronization with the music to produce the equivalent of a classic music video.

³⁹ MarieMaiNews, 'Sans cri ni Haine – Marie-Mai – Pénélope McQuade', *YouTube video*, 00:03:42, 19 April 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBBcANV65P0>.

⁴⁰ nono942002, 'Ton départ – Marc Dupré', *YouTube video*, 00:03:33, 2 January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=svjX96pV0mY>.

⁴¹ Rosalie Filiatrault, 'Paradis City – Jean Leloup (Art dramatique JJB 2015)', *YouTube video*, 00:02:56, 24 October 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ByJ9o7XRdW4>.

⁴² Fruitydu50, 'Ariel, la petite sirène Si j'étais un homme Amv disney', *YouTube video*, 00:04:46, 6 November 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6s0-C_cO8hE (the uploader does not allow the integration of this video in a playlist).

Official audio can also be found in certain content where the involvement of users is strong, as is the link with the artist: slideshows of images of the artist, lyrics videos and translations are common examples. The lyric video is a very popular form, and it emerges from an audience requirement that is not well met by the cultural industries: this is one example of YouTube offering extra content and paratexts not readily available from record labels and official distributors. About 14.67 per cent of the videos in the corpus contain lyrics, sometimes coupled with photos of the artists and various images. For instance, a contributor named SingleMomTV shared a slideshow for Marjo's 'Les Chats Sauvages' (1987; see video 14) that included pictures of flowers, butterflies, rain on the streets and a picture of the artist in addition to lyrics for the song.⁴³ There are also user-made translations (3.67 per cent of the videos). This corpus, for instance, includes English, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, Korean, Chinese and Russian translations of the Quebecois songs. Some couple lyrics with translations, as seen in a version of Bruno Pelletier's 'Le temps des cathédrales' (1999; see video 15), in both French and Korean.⁴⁴ This kind of video sharing is based on three complementary logics: to help understand the song and the artist's approach; to animate online communities and sociability spaces; and to encourage participation through singing. The forms of the videos or the commitment of the creators are not necessarily related to their popularity; thus, the most-viewed video (2,182,637 views) for 'Ton départ' (2016) is a lyric video created by user Izabel Paquette, which features a mountain background unrelated to the lyrics of the song and a black text that un-scrolls as the lyrics are heard. During an instrumental interlude, a still image from a soap opera appears, without explanation (see video 16).⁴⁵ Seven of the most-viewed videos of the forty-one winners are versions with lyrics while two artists, Marie-Mai (2012) and Diane Tell (1981), have released YouTube versions with official lyrics that are the most viewed of their songs (see videos 17 and 18).⁴⁶ Karaoke versions are another example (9.78 per cent) of YouTube's articulation of

⁴³ SingleMom TV, 'Marjo – Les Chats Sauvages with lyrics', *YouTube video*, 00:04:27, 20 December 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0FUHDGnk28>.

⁴⁴ chanson playlist, '노트르담드파리: 대성당들의 시대, le temps des cathédrales – bruno pelletier 가사 (lyrics/paroles)', *YouTube video*, 00:03:23, 24 August 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBYA_OXd2rs.

⁴⁵ Izabel Paquette, 'Ton depart marc dupre lyric video', *YouTube video*, 00:03:37, 15 December 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gY25_WL3x9I.

⁴⁶ MarieMaiOfficielFR, 'Marie-Mai – Sans Cri Ni Haine (Lyrics Vidéo Officielle)', *YouTube video*, 00:03:34, 22 February 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olFLIDJVhos>; Diane Tell, 'Diane Tell – Si J'étais Un Homme (Paroles)', *YouTube video*, 00:04:59, 3 March 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3PITIHjg_P4.

new and participatory spaces that enable a continual remediation of content. These vary greatly in terms of genre, from very minimalist MIDI versions to official instrumental tracks. Some channels specialize in karaoke and offer both simple and more professional videos: for instance, the channel *karaokejukebox*, which produces music videos with what appear to be amateur actors, like in a version of ‘J’t’aime comme un fou’ (1983; see video 19) by Robert Charlebois.⁴⁷ This channel, found seven times across the results, uses its YouTube videos as promotional material for DVDs, and thus only excerpts and not full songs are accessible on the platform.

‘Broadcast Yourself’ with Someone Else’s Music

If we add professional recordings, television recordings and personal videos to the list, about one-third of the corpus is based on live music. Personal videos of live music are particularly interesting because the quality of video and sound tends to be extremely low, and they operate more as mnemonic devices rather than videos to be listened to, as can be seen in a phone-recorded concert version of ‘Paradis City’ (2015; see video 20), in which the videographer is heard singing along (a regular phenomenon on this type of video).⁴⁸ The live videos of Kevin Parent, who won the award in 1996, 1997 and 1998, captured by the audience are also interesting: examples show the audience singing along (see video 21) and performing duets with other artists, like Éric Lapointe (see video 22).⁴⁹ These videos are not suitable for audiophile appreciation, but they give an idea of the artist’s live performance style. The individual contributions of uncoordinated users result in a substantial database.

Twenty-five out of forty-one songs have at least one live version recorded by an audience member in the top ten most-viewed videos. This database of live videos did not develop in a centralized way and its extension was not initially controlled by either YouTube or the music industry, although a progressive involvement of professionals in this segment can be seen over time: in this

⁴⁷ *karaokejukebox*, ‘J’t’aime comme un fou “Robert Charlebois”’, *YouTube video*, 00:01:16, 21 April 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zpDTxRhYyow>.

⁴⁸ *sangpoetique*, ‘Jean Leloup – Paradis City live grand théâtre québec 28 mai 2016’, *YouTube video*, 00:02:36, 29 May 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwEhh7Vy0GM>.

⁴⁹ MARTIN ROBILLARD, ‘kevin parent seigneur expo de Sain Hyacinthe 2015’, *YouTube video*, 00:05:58, 30 July 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zfcIT4s1VW0>; Nancy Forcier, ‘Kevin Parent et Eric Lapointe – Fréquenter l’oubli’, *YouTube video*, 00:03:24, 11 June 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s3e68TkGYWc>.

corpus, since 2013, there is at least one official live version in the top ten videos in terms of number of views. The democratization of mobile devices made it easier to record and share live music, and these videos often focus on the experience of being at a concert, rather than on the quality of capture. In this sense, concert video becomes less a collective archive and more a record of each user's activity. At the same time, filmed concerts have become increasingly integrated into the promotional activities of artists or events.⁵⁰ The titles of the videos often inform the location, date and occasion of the performance, which helps to contextualize these archives. Recordings of television performances have several important variations. Some videos were recorded on VHS, for example, one video of Celine Dion's 'Une Colombe' (1985; see video 23).⁵¹ In cases like this, it is possible to identify the television channel via the station logo, as in one television version of Ginette Reno's song 'Je ne suis qu'une chanson' (1980; see video 24).⁵² Many TV appearances from all eras of this research are reposted to YouTube. The posting of live content online can be understood as a way for fans to position themselves as cultural intermediaries, blurring the boundaries between producers, consumers and broadcasters.⁵³ The sharing of concert videos on digital social networks also falls under the umbrella of expanding music scenes in digital spaces.

Apart from concert videos, there are not many videos from the corpus that include diegetic – or real-world – sound taken from the location shoot. One example is a video in which we can see and hear a child in a car singing over Nicolas Ciccone's 'J't'aime tout court' (2004; see video 25);⁵⁴ while another shows a user playing drums over Patrice Michaud's 'Kamikaze' (2017; see video 26).⁵⁵ This can be explained in part by the fact that users will not necessarily indicate the name of the song and artist on this kind of video and that the automatic referencing of music tracks does not link all video content to audio tracks, especially when they are in the background or of poor quality. However, music is sometimes used as a soundtrack for choreographed films: dance, lip dub, flash mob or lip-sync. For

⁵⁰ Fabian Holt, 'Les vidéos de festivals de musique : une approche « cérémonielle » de la musique en contexte médiatique', *Volume !* 142, no. 1 (May 2018): 211–25.

⁵¹ Ester Cunha, 'Celine Dion – Une colombe', *YouTube video*, 00:03:10, 24 February 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kBz2pVzNINY>.

⁵² PopFranco8090, 'Ginette Reno "Je ne suis qu'une chanson" TV, 1980', *YouTube video*, 00:05:07, 5 December 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cB7jp3Dt0U8>.

⁵³ Steven Colburn, 'Filming Concerts for YouTube: Seeking Recognition in the Pursuit of Cultural Capital', *Popular Music and Society* 38, no. 1 (January 2015): 59–72.

⁵⁴ specimen1995, 'Je t'aime tout court', *YouTube video*, 00:01:46, 26 February 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JMWWhgYbzJg>.

⁵⁵ Mathieu Minville, 'Patrice Michaud – Kamikaze – Drum Cover', *YouTube video*, 00:03:46, 20 January 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulgrnIFSWXs>.

example, in video 27, a sports coach organizes a flash mob dance to celebrate the launch of a shopping mall sports, choreographed to 'J'taime comme un fou'.⁵⁶ In this video, the voice of the coach is heard motivating the participants by quoting the lyrics and the music. In video 28, the entire primary school Émile Nelligan from the city of Kirkland film perform an ambitious lip dub for Marc Dupré's 'Nous sommes les mêmes' (2013).⁵⁷ These examples sit on the border between user-appropriated content and user-generated content because they are not primarily intended to be listened to, even if they use the official audio. This is one of the challenges of quantifying appropriated content: there are many blurred cases in the formats. Think, for example, of alternative music videos shot by amateurs, of montages mixing artists and various images or of 'duets' created when amateur musicians sing along with the original audio, as we saw in the 'Kamikaze' drumming video.

While the methodology used for this research did not enable the systematic categorization of the channels themselves, this would be very interesting work to do in the future. Partial exploration seems to suggest that music videos uploaded or created by YouTube users are not often put online in the coherent or usual way we would expect: collections include little thematic development, and there are only rarely clear orientations to the channels. Instead, channels tend to mix diverse musical content, in terms of artists, genres and eras. In addition, the channels often also display videos not necessarily related to music, with uploads including personal videos, excerpts from reports, sports montages and so on.

This study of the ADISQ Gala song corpus, then, highlights the role of visualized music on YouTube as a practice not controlled by the music industry: a significant portion of the content on YouTube, once extracted from official uploads, is driven by users, becoming subjective and individual and offering a glimpse into the cultural and social ways in which music operates at a given moment in time. Crucially, there is rarely any evidence that users are aware of the implications of their uploads. One exception can be seen in a video uploaded by a contributor who justified posting an instrumental version of a song by Marc Dupré (2013; see video 29) by writing, 'It wasn't on YouTube and it cost \$4. So, it's here for those who are interested'.⁵⁸ Also rare are cases where the contributor seems to take ownership of the song, but this is the case in a karaoke video of

⁵⁶ BoutiqueEnForme, 'Flash Mob Lancement de la Boutique En Forme avec Josée Lavigueur', *YouTube video*, 00:03:54, 24 March 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZRh6nKtrs9s>.

⁵⁷ Émile Nelligan, 'Lipdub Émile Nelligan (Marc Dupré – Nous sommes les mêmes)', *YouTube video*, 00:03:54, 11 June 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_0w1_AHfLFU.

⁵⁸ Translated from French by the author. jesonnic2000, 'nous sommes les mêmes (instrumental)', *YouTube video*, 00:03:16, 18 October 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TADeYPMRnDE>.

'Kamikaze' (2017; see video 30) where the uploader, Michel Roy, changed the title to 'Patrice Michaud Kamikaze (Producer Me Michel Roy)'.⁵⁹

A Diversity of Forms

YouTube's technical and economic model flourishes when hosting as much content as possible; and it does not have to deal *a priori* with the rights to share these works or fragments of works. As a result, users are encouraged to upload not only personal videos but also appropriated and copied content, which allows an extraordinary diversity of music forms, modes of circulation, types of participation, examples of technology and methods of engagement. This research into the ADISQ Gala's Song of the Year distribution across YouTube reveals how music circulates through various strata of the platform. Although it was not here possible to systematize the information on the indexing of pieces in ContentID, it seems, judging by the automatic fields including copyright information that appear in the video description, that many videos – particularly the older ones – are not indexed: live versions (30.80 per cent of the research corpus' videos) are also, generally, unindexed if they are not in a distributor catalogue. Although the remuneration of rights holders remains low on YouTube, the amount of copyrighted music is probably underestimated. Why then is YouTube not treated like Napster or those who have been deemed pirate sites in the recent past? Part of the reason lies in YouTube's weight in the digital economy following its purchase by Google in 2006, which has forced the music industry and its artists into legalizing content by monetizing it. Only one artist out of the forty-one – Nicola Ciccone, winner of the 2004 award – seems to have blocked all unofficial versions beyond a certain number of views. All the others seem to accept the cohabitation of user-appropriated and official content due to the presence of ContentID. In Quebec, several initiatives from the music industry and research groups have advocated a better indexation of online music to stop distribution platforms from benefiting from uploaded content while promoting its free circulation.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Title of the video translated by the author. Michel Roy, 'Patrice Michaud Kamikaze (Producteur Moi Michel Roy)', *YouTube video*, 00:03:44, 25 November 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uz-g_K84LOc.

⁶⁰ For instance, some really helpful resources are made available by the non-profit organization Metamusic: <https://metamusic.ca/about>.

The circulation of music on YouTube, then, covers practices both professional (labels, distributors, artists, etc.) and amateur, whose uploading practices do not necessarily pay heed to copyright or standard music industry rules. This type of sharing practice can be found throughout the history of bootlegging, as Clinton Heylin has shown: according to him, the motivations of audiophiles who record and share are founded on the desire to make unpublished music available to a wider audience.⁶¹ Since the beginnings of remote music broadcasting and music reproduction, technical developments in the circulation of music have been accompanied by new modes of sharing by collectors, fans and ordinary listeners. In their research on P2P networks, published in 2009, Tushar K. Nandi and Fabrice Rochelandet concluded that one of the more efficient ways to fight against piracy is to make legal circulation more accessible.⁶² In his work on the circulation of Quebec music on P2P platforms, Tétu shows that, by participating in the online offer without necessarily having the right to do so, P2P users do not seek to replace the music industries but rather to complete the available cultural offer.⁶³ It is therefore necessary to distinguish between entrepreneurs who make an economic profit from the distribution of music outside the control of the music industry and contributors who circulate works in versions that complement what the music industry makes available. These sharing practices develop in tandem with the technical capacities enabled by the sharing devices. Thus, it is not the sharing practices that pose a threat to artists but rather the monetized profits from the circulation of online music that should be properly identified and redistributed to rights holders.

This phenomenon is not only related to the digital: historically, it has not been the music industry that dictated the technologies that ensure the circulation of music. In most cases, the appearance of new technologies in music is accompanied by new players in the music market. Several examples can be found in the history of recorded music. For instance, the CD was developed in 1982 partly by Sony, then mainly a technology company. Apple developed the iPod, the most popular MP3 player of its time, two years before entering the music market with iTunes and then with Apple Music. It is therefore important to keep in mind that, since 2006, it is Google that develops YouTube. And that Google, via YouTube, is now an actor in the music market. The control over the circulation of music has not

⁶¹ Clinton Heylin, *Bootleg: The Secret History of the Other Recording Industry* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995).

⁶² Nandi and Rochelandet, 'The Incentives for Contributing Digital Contents over P2P Networks,' 19–35.

⁶³ Tétu, 'Des vertus culturelles du piratage à l'ère numérique.'

rested solely in the hands of the music industry, let alone the artists. Before streaming technologies, and thanks to the mobilization of the actors of the music industries, new modes of music circulation came with forms of compensation that brought money to artists and music industry companies: blank cassettes, CDs and DVDs were taxed, and part of the advertising revenues for private radio stations was assigned to the societies of rights holders, for instance. But today, is there a really fair mechanism that allows redistribution to the musicians and rights holders in the YouTube era?

This research demonstrates that the publication of videos is, in part, driven by the desire to share the mediated object as a means of expression. The communication of musical taste and recommendations is a process that accompanies the circulation of music.⁶⁴ Discovering and sharing are dimensions of cultural experience in the same way as listening to music is. It is the practices linked to the attachments of the listeners that enable musical objects to pass into culture, and it is the digital social networks and audiovisual platforms that allow sharing that have become the new cultural spaces for music creation, distribution and engagement.

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⁶⁴ Sylvain Martet, 'Les disques des parents', *Volume !* 18, no. 2 (December 2021): 135–48.

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Musical Playlisting and Curation on YouTube

What Do Algorithms Know about Music?

Vinícius de Aguiar



In a book first published in 2001, before the massive popularization of streaming technologies, philosopher and musicologist Peter Szendy concluded his history of listening with the following remarks on digitally networked music and listening in online spaces:

the digitalization [*sic*] of sound is today preparing the way for a new era of listening. [...] For the digitalization [*sic*] of sound drastically changes *in fact* the criteria of listening as the works of music composed them. [...] The digitalization [*sic*] of sound and the fact of its being networked gives texts an unprecedented discriminating capacity for musical flux. Operations ‘external’ to the musical (to so-called ‘pure’ music) are now endowed with the ability to create signifying segments in the course of the music’s flow.

Digitalizing [*sic*] sound is thus a form of equipment, an unusual *instrumentation* of (the organ of) listening. [...] it allows music to be indexed, annotated, on a scale unknown until today. And this change of scale is not only quantitative; it is also qualitative, it may even touch music’s mode of existence, for us.

This era of listening [...] is also the era when listeners become authors. [...]

I say not only that listening is a matter of words [...] but above all that it is a matter of *touching*. Long-distance or immediate touching, by networks or by manipulations, it matters little: listening *with our fingertips*.¹

¹ Acknowledgements: I would like to thank the organizers of the conference *YouTube and Music: Online Culture and Everyday Life*, namely Joana Freitas and João Francisco Porfirio, as well as Holly

YouTube's beginnings in 2005 provided the perfect audiovisual space for a radical undoing of traditional listening practice, and by the end of that year, Szendy's hypothesis had begun to be realized on a large scale. The ability to listen via mobile media, and to index, annotate, tag and label music through various types of screens, had made it possible to listen '*with our fingertips*'. In turn, this confluence of touch with listening began to draw audiences into an era of digital streaming technology that enables 'listeners [to] become authors' – or rather, in participatory, audiovisual spaces like YouTube, to become *curators*. Ben Ratliff, jazz and pop critic for the *New York Times*, positions this idea of curated listening within what he describes as 'an age of musical plenty'.² According to him, not only is (nearly) every song always available somewhere on the internet, but they are (almost) always accessible regardless of where you are. But how do we find and discover songs in such a bewildering age of 'plenty'? How to make sense of them? How to organize them? And what is the criteria of relevance? After all, in the age of streaming, listening to music is not an isolated activity. It is one that involves searching, filtering, selecting, combining: curating. It is not by chance, then, that the act of 'playlisting', be it done by user or platform, has become a vital part of the contemporary experience of listening to music.

The Curation of Networked Listening

The aesthetic curation of music into lists, styles and genres has dominated the writing of music history: during the twentieth century, the process of recording mixed tapes, constructing radio playlists and DJing brought this cataloguing of musical material into popular culture. Cybermedia added a networked, global and participatory edge to these previous activities. YouTube's early years promoted a liberation of music consumption and an exciting activation of the listener-curator. The 'age of musical plenty', then, seemed not only to provide unprecedented accessibility to all types of music but also to allow listener-curators a freedom to pass all available musical content through very personal

Rogers, for organizing this book. I would also like to thank João Pedro Cachopo and Jonas Wolf for their insightful comments after my presentation and the editors who kindly helped me to improve the first drafts. Finally, I wish to thank the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT); part of the research done for this article was funded through the scholarship PD/BD/128480/2017.

Peter Szendy, *Listen: A History of Our Ears* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 135–6. Italics in the original.

² Ben Ratliff, *Every Song Ever: Twenty Ways to Listen in an Age of Musical Plenty* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016).

lines of orientation. And yet these movements are not always as free as they appear to be.

Szendy is right when he points out that listeners, when faced with the overwhelming amount of musical material spread over numerous platforms, will have the opportunity to ‘author’ or curate their own listening experiences more than ever before. And yet, since the publication of his archaeology of listening at the turn of the twenty-first century, online spaces have become dominated by tech giants who use powerful and cutting-edge artificial intelligence (AI) to produce recommender systems that automatically profile, classify and match users and content according to various parameters. YouTube’s recommender system uses this information to generate bespoke music recommendations for each user; it generates, in other words, its own orientations of listening. ‘Assistive playlists’, ‘collaborative playlists’, ‘personalised playlists’ and ‘mood and genre playlists’ help to organize YouTube’s musical material into easily navigable structures. But what aesthetic criteria are these processes based on? Do YouTube’s recommendations undermine the ability to ‘author’ or curate our own listening experiences by imposing predetermined groupings, canons and narratives on users?

Musical choices have always been culturally and historically situated, and taste develops from within a network of historical, social and geographical influences. Automatic profiling and recommender systems can both develop and antagonize these influences, as music critic Sasha Frere-Jones notes: ‘the anonymous programmers who write the algorithms that control the series of songs in these streaming services may end up having a huge effect on the way that people think of musical narrative – what follows what, and who sounds best with whom.’³ Here, I investigate the ways in which YouTube’s orientations of listening are generated by AI-powered sorting processes that might mimic or undermine socially constructed patterns of taste. Changing the focus from *what* we listen to on YouTube to *how* we listen to it reveals a recommender system that constantly and systematically privileges musical content that is annotated, labelled, tagged and preselected according to economic criteria for its capacity to maximize the amount of time we spend on the platform. Moreover, that process is primarily done automatically by computers and this threatens to negatively impact the listener’s autonomy.

³ Sasha Frere-Jones, ‘You, The D.J.: Online Music Moves to the Cloud’, *The New Yorker*, 7 June 2010, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/06/14/you-the-d-j-2>.

Filter Bubbles and Echo Chambers: The Programmability of Human Listening

There is a growing body of literature connecting platforms and their algorithms to phenomena such as bias, echo chambers and filter bubbles.⁴ A prominently voiced apprehension about YouTube concerns the ways in which it privileges content that generates quantitative engagement, which can lead users towards ever more radical political positions.⁵ However, phenomena such as echo chambers, which channel users into ever-narrowing focal points, might also be a problem for music listening. As Massimo Airoidi found in his 2021 investigation into algorithms and musical genre: ‘Digital consumers’ cultural tastes have been portrayed as increasingly liquid and individualized. This study tells a different story. Our empirical analyses show that YouTube users’ patterns of interaction with music videos significantly reflect pre-existing genre divisions.’ According to Airoidi’s research, YouTube’s algorithms not only reproduced traditional genre distinctions; they actively reinforced culturally entrenched ‘taste boundaries’.⁶ In their 2020 study of Spotify, Ashton Anderson et al. reported similar findings. According to them, Spotify users who rely more often on the platform’s recommender system than their own focused searches tend to show a ‘reduced consumption diversity’ in the long run, while users who engage with diversified content tend to do so without the aid of the recommender system.⁷ In another study, Rasmus Pedersen shows that the way Spotify curates music through its recommender system tends to push ‘users toward treating music as a quality of the situational environment’.⁸

So far, investigation into the experience of listening to music on YouTube has focused on the positive effects of diversification, democratization, participation and so on. And yet, the way in which YouTube’s recommender system filters musical content also constrains choice, diminishing listener autonomy and radically reducing exposure to difference. One of the main issues with the AI

⁴ For example: Natascha Just and Michael Latzer, ‘Governance by Algorithms: Reality Construction by Algorithmic Selection on the Internet’, *Media, Culture & Society* 39 no. 2 (2017): 238–58.

⁵ For example: Zeynep Tufekci, ‘YouTube, the Great Radicalizer’, *The New York Times*, 10 March 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/10/opinion/sunday/youtube-politics-radical.html>.

⁶ Massimo Airoidi, ‘The Techno-Social Reproduction of Taste Boundaries on Digital Platforms: The Case of Music on YouTube’, *Poetics* (2021): 10.

⁷ Ashton Anderson, Lucas Maystre, Rishabh Mehrotra, Ian Anderson and Mounia Lalmas, ‘Algorithmic Effects on the Diversity of Consumption on Spotify’, in *Proceedings of The Web Conference* (2020): 2155.

⁸ Rasmus R. Pedersen, ‘Datafication and the Push for Ubiquitous Listening in Music Streaming’, *MedieKultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research* 36, no. 69 (2020): 71–89.

systems employed by YouTube and other tech giants is that the algorithms are opaque even to their creators. This is what is known as ‘black box algorithms’.⁹ One can measure the efficiency of the system, but it is difficult, if not impossible, to interpret how the system is reaching those outputs. Although we do not have access to exactly how YouTube’s AI system functions, a paper published by some of the platform’s engineers explaining the architecture of their recommender system goes some way towards explaining what we could call a technological ‘total work of annotation’, to rephrase the famous concept by Richard Wagner, and how it applies to music and listening.¹⁰ The engineers illustrate YouTube’s ability to reduce millions of videos to dozens through their novel ‘deep neural network architecture for recommending YouTube videos’.¹¹ There are several variables here that make this task so challenging: the massive amount of content to be considered; the ability to keep up with fresh content (300 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute); and the difficulty of identifying relevant content in the midst of noisy data. To handle the enormity of the platform, the engineers state that YouTube has achieved ‘dramatic performance improvements’ by employing a deep learning system divided into two neural networks: *candidate generation* and *ranking*.¹² The first network uses information from the user’s history to make the first selection of potential recommendations. The second network then assigns a score to each content selected by the previous network, and this ‘two-stage approach to recommendation allows us to make recommendations from a very large corpus (millions) of videos while still being certain that the small number of videos appearing on the device are personalized and engaging for the user’.¹³

Significant here is the amount of system-generated tagging, labelling, annotating, measuring, tracking and value assigning that occurs beyond the user’s – including the listener’s – control. The engineers note that YouTube’s algorithms constantly tag and annotate both video content and user behaviour:

⁹ For a general introduction to this topic, see Chico Q. Camargo, ‘YouTube’s Algorithms Might Radicalise People – But the Real Problem is We’ve No Idea How They Work’, *The Conversation*, 21 January 2020, <https://theconversation.com/YouTubes-algorithms-might-radicalise-people-but-the-real-problem-is-weve-no-idea-how-they-work-129955>. See also Jarek Gryz and Marcin Rojszczak, ‘Black Box Algorithms and the Rights of Individuals: No Easy Solution to the “Explainability” Problem’, *Internet Policy Review: Journal on Internet Regulation* 10, no. 2 (June 2021).

¹⁰ Paul Covington, Jay Adams and Emre Sargin, ‘Deep Neural Networks for YouTube Recommendations’, in *Proceedings of the 10th ACM Conference on Recommender Systems*, RecSys 16 (New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 2016), 191–8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹² *Ibid.*, 191. Italics in the original.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 192.

‘our models learn approximately one billion parameters and are trained on hundreds of billions of examples.’¹⁴ The annotation is then used to calculate the content that will be delivered to each user. Direct feedback such as ‘like’ is one of the least important features in this context. Rather, the so-called implicit feedback is what is used to train the model. For instance, the system marks ‘click-through rate, watch time, and many other metrics that measure user engagement’.¹⁵ Other examples are the user’s gender, demographic features, logged-in state and age. We could paraphrase Boris Groys and say that, on the internet, the listener remains a content provider; and the content provided by the listener (intentionally or not), based on questions previously and silently asked by the system, is what will shape their future listening experience on the platform, regardless of the specific content chosen.¹⁶

As we can see, YouTube powerfully formalizes not only content, including music, but also behaviour, including music listening. Multiple questions are automatized – for example, ‘how many videos has the user watched from this channel?’¹⁷ – answers are also automatically collected by AI, and the same computational system converts that knowledge into the actual platform as the user experiences it at an individual level, while the rest of the content remains only virtually available. It is this stage that media theorist Lev Manovich refers to as media analytics: that is, a period centred in the ‘automatic computational *analysis* of the content of all media available online as well as online personal and group behaviors [*sic*] and communication’.¹⁸ What is *experienced* as listening by humans is *detected* as relevant data by YouTube’s system. And the function of that data is the same regardless of the content or the human listener that it represents: to make sure that the user will be fed content that will maximize their time on the platform (assuming that this is what is meant by the system having a ‘good performance’).

¹⁴ Ibid., 191.

¹⁵ Ibid., 192.

¹⁶ The original sentence is the following: ‘On the Internet the artist remains a content provider.’ Boris Groys, ‘How to Change the World by Art?’, *Journal of Avant-Garde Studies* 1 (2020): 155.

¹⁷ Covington, Adams and Sargin, ‘Deep Neural Networks for YouTube Recommendations’, 196.

¹⁸ Lev Manovich, ‘100 Billion Data Rows per Second: Media Analytics in the Early 21st Century’, *International Journal of Communication* 12 (2018): 474.

Multiple Content in a Single Form

Most studies of YouTube analyse the content (broadly understood) that circulates on the platform: music, videos, comments, metadata and so on. From this perspective, we witness an exponential proliferation of information about modalities, actors, sounds, influencers, subjects, genres, styles and other variables. In principle, every user can express their aesthetic interests and exercise their aesthetic autonomy no matter how far from the mainstream they are: that is the pleasure of the platform's infinitely long tail.

However, significantly less attention has been paid to the fact that (nearly) all of that limitless *content* – including all the metadata unintentionally created by listeners and viewers – circulates in a very strict *form* (we could even say: a logical form). While data augments radically, the technological infrastructure of the platform, back-end and front-end, remains the same for all styles and communities. The *form* employed by YouTube's systems to collect, analyse and curate the *content* – as was summarized in the last section – is always the same, regardless of both content and user. Thus, while on the one hand, listening in the age of YouTube is marked by a sense of infinite possibility and a call for listeners to become the curators of their own listening experiences, on the other hand, that regime of listening is also characterized by technological constraints over which the listener has no control and that might impact their autonomy. In fact, listeners may not even be aware that their apparent curatorial freedom is, in reality, heavily governed by a preprogrammed formula.

Condensed in a recommender system, data collection and algorithmic decisions are behind whatever is being displayed on the platform, even when the query starts from the user (after all, there will be related content, recommendations, advertisements, etc.). Moreover, as it was presented above, this technological infrastructure is not aimed at diversity, novelty, similarity and coherence; in fact, it is not aimed at anything specific apart from maximizing the time the user spends on the platform, preferably watching every video until the end, engaging with comments, sharing, saving and performing other operations preset by the platform. Thus, the listener will always be confronted with a playlist of recommended material calculated by the algorithms that *incline* the user to simply keep on listening. These recommendations might be formed primarily of pop songs or of a very exotic mix of styles. What unites both cases, however,

is the fact that the selection has followed the logic of one and the same system meant to calculate what songs are likely to keep the user engaged.

The political dimension here cannot be overlooked.¹⁹ Studies on algorithmic bias, echo chambers, filter bubbles and similar phenomena tend to focus on how they influence the public debate about hot topics such as elections, vaccines and war. And, indeed, in comparison to that, relegating to algorithms the task of recommending music could seem like a relatively innocent enterprise. However, that is hardly the case. Following the sociological work of Nancy Hanrahan, it is possible to suggest that, under the disguise of a scientific codification of listeners' taste, the automatization of musical curatorship by YouTube actually helps to induce a very narrow form of listening that ignores all frictions, tensions and alterities that constitute the political – and more specifically, democratic – element of musical aesthetic judgement.²⁰ That is why, regardless of one's personal taste in music, exercising this listening through algorithmic-driven recommendations, specifically in the long run, could lead either to simplified forms of aural consumption, such as listening to background music, or to boring experiences with music in which listeners come to feel that the music available is no longer challenging or exciting.²¹ For example, this is how a user describes his experience with YouTube in the opening of a forum thread: 'there is almost no diversity in the sort of recommendations I get, despite my diverse interests.'²²

In sum, the listener's freedom to choose over limitless content is caught up in a formal system that repeatedly preselects content that has higher chances of keeping the listener engaged. Voluntary and involuntary annotations (i.e. explicit and implicit feedback) are used as clues to reinforce or establish

¹⁹ See, for instance, the following commentaries: diggit magazine, 'Dr. Taina Bucher on algorithmic power, politics and sociality', *YouTube video*, 00:20:36, 8 April 2021, <https://youtu.be/sju30H4iG5Q>; MEDITAGE MÜNCHEN, 'The problem with social platforms' business model | Zeynep Tufekci | MTM19', *YouTube video*, 00:07:17, 23 October 2019, <https://youtu.be/CN9xCx0pS700>; Univention, 'Democratizing the Digital Economy – Keynote Evgeny Morozov at the Univention Summit 2019', *YouTube video*, 00:35:07, 15 February 2019, <https://youtu.be/Efd14ZC7u4U>; RSA, 'How Tech STEALS Your Attention with Franklin Foer', *YouTube video*, 00:6:53, 6 November 2017, <https://youtu.be/Uub3EG3RoZA>.

²⁰ For example, Nancy Weiss Hanrahan, 'Hearing the Contradictions: Aesthetic Experience, Music and Digitization', *Cultural Sociology* 12, no. 3 (1 September 2018): 289–302.

²¹ Evidence for that can be found in recent studies on Spotify, but also in forum discussions about YouTube's recommender system. For example: Pedersen, 'Datafication and the Push for Ubiquitous Listening in Music Streaming', 71–89; Anderson et al., 'Algorithmic Effects on the Diversity of Consumption on Spotify', 2155–65.

²² See, for instance, the various comments in the following forum thread, from eight months ago: logicallyzany, '[D] How Is It That the YouTube Recommendation System Has Gotten WORSE in Recent Years?', Reddit Post, *R/MachineLearning*, 23 July 2021, www.reddit.com/r/MachineLearning/comments/oq33wd/d_how_is_it_that_the_youtube_recommendation/.

listening habits through an automated process over which the listener has no real control. YouTube considers it optimal if the user listens to more music for more time. However, this form of listening, that we could call *quantitative continuous listening*, is just one among many, and thus we cannot say that listeners are offered more autonomy when engaging with music through YouTube.²³ Several forms of listening are deliberately ignored by the platform, such as historical listening, slow listening, diverse listening, exploratory listening, listening to memorize music and so on. That is to say: a listener can curate and relate to music based on various criteria of relevance that fall outside the scope of the ‘optimal’ listening presupposed by YouTube’s recommender system.

Of course, no one is obliged to follow YouTube’s recommendations all the time. In principle, the user is free to critically decide when and how to engage with the platform, which paths to follow, what combinations to promote and so on. However, instead of creating the conditions for users to engage with music in multiple ways, YouTube attempts to promote, through its AI-driven technologies, scenarios in which the system identifies what content and combinations of content are more likely to keep the user active and (cynically) equals the AI-driven results with what the user supposedly wants and/or enjoys the most. More organic, human-driven and diverse modes of engaging with music are not forbidden by the platform; but at the same time, neither are they promoted by it.

Although we still lack a systematic approach to assess the actual impact of YouTube on its users’ listening habits, preliminary evidence suggests that, as hypothesized here, the platform’s recommender system tends to reinforce certain listening patterns. For example, users talk about the necessity to ‘click consciously’ in order to ‘correct’ YouTube’s algorithm when it starts promoting repetitive patterns and, on one reddit forum thread, users debate whether YouTube’s recommender system has become more ‘boring’ lately.²⁴

²³ For analyses of this form of listening promoted by streaming services, see: Pedersen, ‘Datafication and the Push for Ubiquitous Listening in Music Streaming’, 71–89.

²⁴ Taina Bucher, *If . . . Then: Algorithmic Power and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 109. See also the following forum thread: https://www.reddit.com/r/MachineLearning/comments/oq33wd/d_how_is_it_that_the_youtube_recommendation/.

Alternative Approaches

How then to exercise listening autonomy in the age of AI-driven recommender systems? Is it still possible to develop autonomous listening curatorship while using black box algorithms as devices to navigate through musical content in the ‘age of musical plenty’? Can we autonomously use algorithms to explore new modalities of listening and to find new content instead of using them exclusively for quantitative results?

Here, I have suggested that, behind the ever-growing availability and diversification of music and related content on YouTube (comments, playlists, likes, subscriptions, etc.), AI systems designed and employed by the platform play an important role in narrowing down almost infinite content to what will actually be shown to each user before and after their queries. The outcome of this condition is that the listening and aesthetic experience of using YouTube today is not so much characterized by a sense of disorientation associated with freedom; rather, it is marked by a strong orientation coordinated by YouTube’s algorithms to maximize engagement, often through the promotion of similar content.

Media scholars have come across similar issues in various different contexts. Sybille Krämer, for instance, reminds us that although ‘alphanumeric designations foster practical and cognitive transparency and controllability’, in the way algorithms are being used by platforms, ‘[n]either our data nor the unfathomable depths of the interacting machines/protocols beneath the interfaces are transparent.’²⁵ A related issue has been raised by Manovich, who stresses that machine learning technologies can classify and recommend cultural content, but often humans cannot know exactly how the computer has ‘interpreted’ their data.²⁶ Evidently, this opacity jeopardizes the autonomy of whoever is engaging with the AI-powered system. But does it have to be like that? In her groundbreaking 2018 book *If...then: Algorithmic Power*, Taina Bucher suggests that ‘[w]hat’s important is how designers, developers and decision makers think about what algorithms should be optimized [*sic*] for.’²⁷

²⁵ Sybille Krämer, ‘Algorithms – the Heirs of the Alphabet? On the “New Opacity” and the Project of “Digital Enlightenment”’, *Das Neue Alphabet*, January 2019, https://german.yale.edu/sites/default/files/alphabet_august2018hkw_kraemer_engl.docx.pdf. On a slightly related matter, see also: Stanford DLCL, ‘Materia Focal Group Virtual Event with Sybille Krämer’, *YouTube Video*, 1:15:16, 27 April 2021, <https://youtu.be/ykJt1mFe5dc>.

²⁶ Lev Manovich, *AI Aesthetics* (Moscow: Strelka Press, 2018), 12.

²⁷ Bucher, *If... Then*, 154.

Similar efforts can be found in the field of Explainable AI in which the goal is to develop AI systems the logic of which can be ‘understood’ and, therefore, critically judged by humans.²⁸

Another example of alternative uses of AI for music listening can be found in a recent experiment conducted by Spotify.²⁹ Here, the goal was to explain how their system profiled and selected music for each user through its ‘silent data’ – that is, data that is ‘rarely exposed to users in a meaningful way’.³⁰ In this experiment, a few selected ‘extreme users’ had access to the data that supported their profiles, such as ‘top genres’, ‘most diverse genres’, ‘top era’, ‘top city’, ‘top country’, ‘demographics’ and ‘listening by time of the day’. These participants were then invited to imagine how they would engage with the platform bearing in mind these parameters. As expected, users came up with their own interpretation of that metadata and of how it could be used to reshape their listening routines. For example, some participants realized that their listening habits reflected not so much their musical preferences but the context where the music was accessed using that platform (school, work or before sleeping, for instance).³¹

For now, we can only imagine what would happen if, besides having access to data on their own listening habits, users could also play and create their listening experiences within those parameters by, for instance, deciding the weight that each of them should have in how the system chooses and curates their music. While submitting our listening to generic optimization, mechanisms may undermine our listening autonomy, but opening, explaining and playing with YouTube’s black box could allow us to annotate and communicate our listening in creative ways that would be inconceivable if our ‘lines of orientation’ were not digitally networked.

As we can see, when music is transferred from physical and socially shared and regulated spaces to an online space regulated by technoscience, the ways in which listeners relate to music is also bound to change. And on YouTube and

²⁸ On the topic of Explainable AI, see for instance, Cynthia Rudin and Joanna Radin, ‘Why Are We Using Black Box Models in AI When We Don’t Need To? A Lesson From an Explainable AI Competition’, *Harvard Data Science Review* 1, no. 2 (22 November 2019), <https://hdsr.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/f9kuryi8/release/7>.

²⁹ Jordan Wirfs-Brock, Sarah Mennicken and Jennifer Thom, ‘Giving Voice to Silent Data: Designing with Personal Music Listening History’, *CHI ’20: Proceedings of the 2020 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (April 2020): 1–11. See also ACM SIGCHI, ‘Giving Voice to Silent Data: Designing with Personal Music Listening History’, *YouTube video*, 00:10:16, 16 June 2020, <https://youtu.be/Ojfi9FFgMJA>.

³⁰ Wirfs-Brock, Mennicken and Thom, ‘Giving Voice to Silent Data’, 1.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

similar platforms, this change is not so much towards enriching the listener's aesthetic autonomy but rather in encouraging listening habits that are likely to maximize their time on the platform. Thus, it is not a surprise that in the age of streaming, music has come to be regarded by many as a continuous background stimulus that accompanies and helps to set the tone for other activities.³²

However, the issue has nothing to do with listening on online spaces as such but rather with listening in an already regulated online space, guided by standards that wish to ignore or even bypass the complexity involved in the aesthetic judgement of music.³³ Besides commercial interests, there is no reason intrinsic to the aesthetic experience of music as to why we should adopt the quantification of time spent on the platform as the only or even the most significant criteria to evaluate the success of the algorithms employed to help us curate our listening. Advanced AI-driven technologies do not eliminate the necessity and importance of human-driven, individual and social, aesthetic judgement. AI might be another variable, a new tool perhaps, that communities of listeners can employ to exercise their aesthetic judgement. And that is why it should be taken critically. After all, the commercial efficiency of such tools should not overcome the aesthetic, political and even epistemological complexities that constitute our listening orientations at a given moment of history.

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³² More in this topic, see: Pedersen, 'Datafication and the Push for Ubiquitous Listening in Music Streaming', 71–89.

³³ There is an emblematic statement from Eric Schmidt, when he was still the CEO at Google: 'Our mission is to get the best answer [. . .] So if you say, "I want the best music from Lady Gaga," and if we could algorithmically compute that answer, I would want to give it to you right then and there, subject to rules and copyright and all of that.' Evgeny Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013), 244.

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YouTube and the Sonification of Domestic Everyday Life

João Francisco Porfírio



In the current context of the hyper-digitization of daily life, YouTube has an important role. We turn to YouTube when we've lost the instruction manual on how to assemble the Malm bed from Ikea, need guidance on the most effective form of intermittent fasting for weight loss or a recipe for a cake with just three ingredients or are looking for advice on the finest home office chair, vacuum cleaner or breed of dog that best suits our lifestyle. YouTube can also be used to indulge in nostalgia, by accessing, for example, fan footage of the summer festival concert we attended in 2018, Madonna's performance at the 1999 MTV Awards or the opening theme of *Masters of the Universe*, which was on television in the 1980s, long before the advent of YouTube, but which we can now watch again and again. YouTube is also an entertainment platform, not only providing us with videos from other media contexts, such as television, podcasts, films and series but also with specific content from this particular online space through its very own creation, the YouTuber. On YouTube it is also possible to watch other people's lives from a multitude of perspectives, whether through unboxing videos, where new products are opened in front of us, causing multisensory responses to the act of buying new things, or through videos of other people's routines, which help us either to organize or escape from our own daily habits.

Although there is a vast amount of material on YouTube, music videos have remained the most searched for content since the platform was founded in 2005.¹

¹ Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 50–1.

YouTube is a space for music consumption, circulation and many other forms of engagement with musical content: there are official music videos by artists ranging from the mainstream British and North American pop industries and K-pop to Indonesian Gamelan groups and Zimbabwean Mbira ensembles. Countering this professional content is an enormous database of user-generated uploads in the form of live fan footage and videos that remediate pre-existing musical material to produce new content, such as lyric videos and humorous/meme versions of well-known songs. Within this broad set of music videos, one type has remained under the critical radar: music videos produced to integrate into daily domestic routines – falling asleep, taking a bath, cooking dinner, cleaning the house or reading a book.² These videos can be based on music, natural noises – rain, sea, wind, birds, crickets, even frogs – or the sounds of household appliances – vacuum cleaners, refrigerators, washing machines, dishwashers, fans and air conditioners.

Despite garnering vast numbers of followers and, subscribers and generating other forms of networked engagement, these videos have largely gone unnoticed by media scholars and musicologists. Although there is some previous research on specific formats which feature in this group – such as Julie Young's and Ilse Balnsert's work on ASMR videos and Anahid Kassabian's writing on music videos and mobile apps designed for sleep – academic studies dedicated to this kind of content remain scarce.³ Here, I extend these formative explorations to focus on the ways in which these videos fluidly integrate into domestic household activities to circulate like any other goods used in the home. Despite being based on music and sound, I suggest that these compositions are not works of art but usable sonic artefacts for immediate consumption.⁴

² This research is being carried out in the context of a PhD in Musicology at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities of the NOVA University of Lisbon (NOVA FCSH) and is funded by a PhD grant awarded by the Foundation for Science and Technology (BD FCT SFRH/BD/13624/2018).

³ Nitin K. Ahuja, "It Feels Good to Be Measured": Clinical Role-Play, Walker Percy, and the Tingles, *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 56, no. 3 (2013): 442–51; Emma L. Barratt and Nick J. Davis, 'Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR): A Flow-Like Mental State', *PeerJ* 3 (2015): e851; Marisa A. del Campo and Thomas J. Kehle, 'Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) and Frisson: Mindfully Induced Sensory Phenomena that Promote Happiness', *International Journal of School & Educational Psychology* 4, no. 2 (2016): 99–105; Julie Young and Ilse Blansert, *ASMR* (New York: Penguin, 2015); Anahid Kassabian, 'Music for Sleeping', in *Sound Music Affect*, ed. Marie Thompson and Ian Biddle (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 165–81.

⁴ This builds on research developed over the last three years: see, for example, Joana Freitas, João Francisco Porfírio and Júlia Durand, 'Listen, Watch, Play and Relax: YouTube, Video Games and Library Music in Everyday Life During the Pandemic', *Sonic Scope: New Approaches to Audiovisual Culture* 3 (2021); João Francisco Porfírio, "It Almost Smells Like Coffee and Feels Like a Hot Mug in My Hands" – Os Sons da Cozinha na Construção de Conteúdos Audiovisuais, in *Poderes do Som: políticas, escutas e identidades*, ed. José Cláudio S. Castanheira, Dulce Mazer, Pedro Silva Marra, Marcelo Bergamin Conter, Cássio de Borba Lucas and Mario Arruda (Florianópolis: Insular Livros,

I have divided the exploration of this YouTube ecosystem into three sections. First, by establishing the relationship with daily domestic activities, the videos are positioned as products of what Henry Jenkins refers to as convergence and participatory culture and understood as a technology that encourages domestic self-management.⁵ Users of these videos inhabit a blurry space between public and private; and this space, as well the activities performed within it, has become a powerful conveyor for the construction of meaning. The second section focuses on methodology. Here, I outline the process used to track these videos within the vast content of YouTube and discuss the categories that arise from this mapping. In the last section, I analyse the ways in which these (I will hereafter call) *domestic sonic videos* participate in the current economic landscape and circulate as objects that are acquired by users to be consumed in specific moments of their daily lives. Taken together, these three sections formulate a theory of spatial, sonic and user convergence. I suggest that merging of the contemporary mediascape with digital everyday life within this the YouTube sonic ecosystem creates a particular, highly individualized form of interactive domestic soundscaping, in which sonic environments can be tailored to each user and their own personal activities. YouTube, I suggest, is thus a powerful tool in today's hyper-consumerist society that promotes the standardization, commodification and massification of individuality.

Unmute Domestic Daily Life

The study of recorded music to accompany daily activities – and not only as a form of entertainment – is not new. In the late 1990s and early 2000s there were many pioneering and foundational studies on the uses of recorded music in everyday life.⁶ Among these, Tia DeNora's 2000 book *Music in Everyday Life*

2020), 195–212; João Francisco Porfírio, 'Sleep/Relax/Work/Study/Read – YouTube, Sound, and Music in the Construction of Listening Spaces to Fall Asleep', *SoundEffects – An Interdisciplinary Journal of Sound and Sound Experience* 10, no. 1 (2021): 27–41; João Francisco Porfírio, 'Entre Ventoinhas e Máquinas de Lavar – O Ruído Branco na Configuração do Espaço Doméstico', in *Audiovisual e Indústrias Criativas Presente e Futuro Volume 1*, ed. José Gomes Pinto (Madrid: McGraw Hill), 531–46.

⁵ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

⁶ Georgina Born, *Music, Sound and Space: Transformations of Public and Private Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Michael Bull, *Sounding Out the City – Personal Stereos and the Management of Everyday Life* (New York: Berg, 2000); Anahid Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention, and Distributed Subjectivity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Raphaël Nowak, *Consuming Music in the Digital Age: Technologies, Roles and Everyday Life*

is one of the most significant.⁷ Here, the author explores some of the many applications that music can have in daily human life and describes strategies through which music is mobilized as a resource to produce scenes and routines that constitute social existence. In this context, and building on previous research by the musicologist John Sloboda, DeNora defines the existence of six thematic categories for the use of music in daily life: ‘memory, spiritual matters, sensorial matters (for pleasure, for example), mood change, mood enhancement and activities (including activities such as exercise, bathing, working, eating, socialising, sex, reading, sleeping)’⁸

Following DeNora and building on Raphaël Nowak’s research, it is possible to identify several ways in which recorded music in particular can integrate into our daily routines, be it inside or outside the domestic space: from reproduction and broadcasting devices (hi-fi, cassette, record and CD players, television sets, radios, car radios and computers, all of which can be connected to speakers for collective listening or headphones for individual listening) to the physical or virtual objects that generate that same music (cassettes, CDs vinyl records, digital files, radio programmes, television channels and streaming platforms such as SoundCloud, Spotify, Apple Music, Deezer and, of course, YouTube).⁹ In the history of recorded music, from 1877 when Edison invented the phonograph to the present day, there have been multiple technological developments that have enabled music to enter our homes. As recently as the 1980s, cassettes, CDs and records and their respective amplification devices were needed to listen to a specific song. Alternatively, we could wait patiently for a track to be played on the radio or TV. By the 1990s, with the emergence of digital music files and their compression, it became possible to place a series of music tracks on a single device to be listened to whenever and wherever one wanted, enabling the listener to use music as a way of managing space and time.¹⁰ More recently, global access to computers, the internet, smartphones and the growing reach of broadband has allowed immediate access to music and sound. This access has also enabled

(London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Marta García Quiñones, Anahid Kassabian and Elena Boschi (eds.), *Ubiquitous Musics: The Everyday Sounds that We Don’t Always Notice* (Surrey/Burlington: Routledge, 2016).

⁷ Tia DeNora, *Music In Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁹ Nowak, *Consuming Music in the Digital Age*, 14–41.

¹⁰ Bull, *Sounding Out the City*, 55–67.

content to be managed in a personalized way by households and the individuals within them.¹¹

Although the streaming platforms mentioned above are all relevant to this discussion, YouTube, as the second most visited site and the second most used social network in the world, assumes a particular importance.¹² It appeals to users not only by offering subscription-free, simple, speedy access to an enormous range of content but also by providing the means to customize it.¹³ In addition, YouTube's content does not require a specific playback device: anyone with an internet connection and a sound output can access it from a television, computer, smartphone, game console or tablet. This ease of access is supported by easy-to-use search engines that allow users to follow hashtags, descriptions and keywords to find videos for every imaginable requirement, making it almost impossible to imagine any context for which there is no suitable content. Opportunities for users to create and upload content, as well as to engage with it via comments and likes, position them as both consumers and producers, or what Axel Bruns calls *producers*.¹⁴

Within the digitalization and individualization of everyday life, the consumption of music to accompany routine daily activities (one of the categories defined by DeNora for the uses of music in daily life) assumes great importance. YouTube houses various channels dedicated to the production of aural content – both music and sounds – intended to be integrated into daily domestic routines. Although sound is the main feature of these videos, what motivates their production and consequent access by users is the purpose that is attributed to it; the emphasis is on activity – bathing, sleeping, studying and so on – rather than listening *in and of itself*. Sound is thus only one of many sensory elements, along with sight, smell, touch and taste, that collaborate in the construction of domestic space and assign meanings to actions.¹⁵ And YouTube allows particular meanings to arise from sonic content that is created, shared and consumed based on the activity it is intended for.

¹¹ Sandra Marques Pereira, 'Cenários do Quotidiano Doméstico: Modos de Habitar', in *História da Vida Privada em Portugal. Os Nossos Dias*, ed. José Mattoso and Ana Nunes de Almeida (Lisbon: Círculo de Leitores, 2015), 16–47.

¹² Christina Newberry, '25 YouTube Statistics that May Surprise You: 2021 Edition'. *Hootsuite*, 2 February 2021, <https://blog.hootsuite.com/youtube-stats-marketers/?fbclid=IwAR3yDhDr4OS43HqRWyWwBGLfCOkdzGZythwFXpAdM5Fw3GbcYPLjvyOFAM0>.

¹³ In 2018, YouTube launched YouTube Music: a premium paid subscription music streaming platform, quite similar to Spotify.

¹⁴ Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

¹⁵ DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*.

Tidying Up YouTube at Home

Although YouTube's domestic sonic videos are all hosted on the same platform, the channels that produce and share them are varied. Some are exclusively dedicated to producing YouTube content; others are created by individual users, without any economic or commercial pretensions, who compile compositions from other channels into playlists representative of their individual experience. Take for example the moh1321 channel, from a user who is apparently a teenager who shares mostly Minecraft gameplay videos but has a '10 Hours Ambient Soundscapes Relaxation Sleep Mix' video, from 2014, which by March 2022 had 353,595 views.¹⁶ Within these specialized channels are two main approaches to producing and sharing material: original sound is either created and shared by a single person, as it is in the channel Soothing Relaxation,¹⁷ or external composers provide music to be shared through particular channels – a good example here is the channel Yellow Brick Cinema, which is represented by a woman named Margie but hires external composers to create music and soundtracks for the videos she shares.¹⁸ Others are based on melodies by well-known composers such as Beethoven or Mozart to which tags like 'deep sleep' are added. Then there are videos that offer the white noise sounds of fans or dishwashers to aid concentration when reading a book in bed before going to sleep or to mask street noise when meditating on an apartment balcony. There are also compositions that combine music with other non-musical sounds such as the rain, the sea or birds chirping.

The way users search for these compositions is highly variable. Some are loyal followers – therefore, potential subscribers – of specific channels where they know their preferred content is accessible and suitable for their personal habits. These users will most likely have a specific wall of recommendations and subscription alerts on their personal YouTube homepage. Other users have a more random approach and activate the platform's search engines with terms

¹⁶ moh1321 YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/moh1321/featured>; moh 1321, '10 Hours Ambient Soundscapes Relaxation Sleep Mix', *YouTube video*, 09:59:59, 1 July 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8GC57huXLYY>.

¹⁷ 'My name is Peder B. Helland and I make original music for relaxation. All music uploaded on Soothing Relaxation has been produced by me', <https://www.youtube.com/c/SoothingRelaxation/about>.

¹⁸ 'Welcome to Yellow Brick Cinema, the home of the world's best relaxing music. I'm Margie, and our purpose and passion is to help you relax, unwind and rejuvenate through better sleep, reduced stress, greater concentration and improved mental wellness. Our world-class composers produce relaxing music with binaural beats and state-enhancing frequencies to help you relax, sleep, focus, meditate and heal': <https://www.youtube.com/c/YellowBrickCinema/about>.

associated with (debatable) musical genres such as ‘classical music’;¹⁹ everyday tasks such as ‘music for cooking’; rooms such as ‘lounge music’; objects such as ‘refrigerator sound’; and moments of the day such as ‘music for dining’. The search terms might also refer to states of mind such as ‘mood boosting’, more distant landscapes such as ‘rainforest sounds’ or even imaginary scenarios such as ‘sounds of Santa’s workshop’ or ‘sounds of Harry Potter’s magic potions shop’. Moreover, the same track can be used by people in different circumstances because the effect on the individual is not caused by the music but rather by the way it is perceived.²⁰ The way these tracks are used can also vary in terms of how they are listened to: while some are used individually, for example to read a book, others can be used in a group situation, such as during a dinner party with friends. Some domestic sonic videos are listened to attentively, but others serve only as background. The comments on video ‘Classical Music for Reading – Calm Piano (Luke Faulkner)’, for instance, demonstrate how the same video can be received differently by different people.²¹ Despite the video’s claim to create a focused space for reading, Malkia Penelope Ndoole (username) finds that the ‘first song really made me think a lot about things instead of actually reading’. Despite reading being an individual activity in the first place, ruth cañamero (username) explains that ‘My whole family loves this music, and so do I’, suggesting that she and her family listen to this music together. Relax With My Music (username), on the other hand, doesn’t use the music as a backdrop for reading but rather to relax to at a specific time of the year: ‘♡ ♡ ♡ ♡ The pleasant music fits super in the slowly colder and autumnal season 🍂🍁 to make yourself comfortable with a hot cup of tea on the sofa. ☕ Sooooooo beautiful! 😊😍😊😍’.

The variations in production, search methods and reception complicate the categorization and organization of these domestic sonic videos. For cataloguing to be effective, more than one factor needs to be taken into account, for instance, as videos can be collated according to their sonic aspects such as timbre or tempo, formal issues such as duration and the ways that images are used or the ways in which the compositions might be employed in the home. These requirements will be different for each user. In my research, I have searched for and organized

¹⁹ On the internet and in informal/popular contexts in various online circuits, Western art music is generally referred to as ‘classical music’ and is particularly referred to the European canons of classical composition in terms of works and composers.

²⁰ DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 160–2.

²¹ HALIDONMUSIC, ‘Classical Music for Reading – Calm Piano (Luke Faulkner)’, *YouTube video*, 01:46:30, 28 November 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tbkMSoKfjU>.

domestic sonic videos using interdependent methods. Classifications emerged as I carried out the search for content on YouTube, and yet, to begin this search, I had to start from predefined categories. These were sometimes related to musical genres, sometimes to timbre characteristics, sometimes to activities in the domestic space and occasionally to divisions of that same space. Keeping the user's point of view at the forefront of my approach, I combined my own experience as a YouTube user with the information from questionnaires with speculation of the search terms that might be employed by those looking for domestic sonic videos.²² For example, if a user needs sound content to help them sleep, they might search for 'music to sleep' but might also refer to location and write 'music to listen to in bed.' Conversely, instead of starting with the activity, a user could identify a specific type of music and write, for example, 'classical music to sleep' or 'to fall asleep to.' They may prefer non-musical sounds and write 'sounds to fall asleep' or may already know that it is the sound of rain that will generate the desired soporific effect and therefore search for 'sound of rain to fall asleep.' In this way, the diversity of search terms increases exponentially.²³ So, in order to make the search operational, I always started with an idea and then tried to break it down into all possible combinations.

For each of the search terms I put into YouTube's search engine, no filters were applied so the results were sorted by 'relevance'.²⁴ For each search term, I copied the links to the first twenty results regarding only videos or playlists, not channels. The first result that appeared was usually a paid-for advertising video – adverts are usually identified by the term 'AD' – which I subsequently excluded. For each term, the 'number of views' filter was then selected and the first twenty results were also copied. This option was relevant because it included results that had a considerable number of views even though they did not appear in the top twenty in terms of relevance to the search term. These links were then checked one by one in order to integrate the list and give an overview of content that was intended to be used specifically to construct a domestic soundscape.

²² During my research, I have done several questionnaires built using Google forms to gauge the listening habits in household activities. These questionnaires are shared online, mainly by email and on Facebook for people to answer. The main goal was to understand how people manage their soundscape for specific domestic activities and what platforms, devices and content are used for that purpose.

²³ This process is somewhat similar to snowball sampling, where research participants recruit other participants for a test or study. In this case, it is research terms that lead us to think of other related terms that can also show us results that contribute to the sample.

²⁴ The search is always carried out as anonymously as possible. For this, a private Google Chrome window is used and no log in to YouTube is made. This strategy aims to minimize the influence of the algorithm on the search results.

Despite being an extensive list, many of the links were repeated as the same results appeared in different contexts. Only content that was relevant and within the scope of the research was considered. Even though some types of music are used at home for very diverse tasks, such as pop music, for instance, they were only considered if the title of the video or playlist had a precise indication that it was intended for a specific purpose related to domestic space, such as cleaning the house.

During this research, I became aware of the diversity of content that exists and continues to emerge. This diversity has led me to reflect on the various ways in which these products can be organized and described. In order to better characterize each of the videos and place them into specific categories, I have tried to describe each video in terms of three main areas: general features, composition features and usage features. The first area, general features, includes the following:

1. Link – YouTube link that gives access to the video.
2. Title – Title of the video.
3. Channel – Name and link of the channel responsible for publishing the video.
4. Date – a. date of publication; b. date on which the data was noted (as data such as number of views, subscribers and comments vary over time).
5. Comments – number of comments on the video on the date of analysis.
6. Views – number of views of the video on the date of analysis.

The second area, composition features, includes the following:

1. Format – identifies one of three formats of YouTube content: *video* – pre-recorded moving images with sound; *playlist* – a set of videos grouped under the same topic; *live* – a live broadcast with the same features as a video.
2. Duration – for single videos, this notes the duration in hours/minutes; for playlists, it notes the number of videos, duration of each video in hours/minutes, and the total duration of the playlist. This factor does not apply to live streams.
3. Type of content – identifies one of five content possibilities: (1) *music* – sound organization where melodies and rhythms are identified, and these sounds are produced by musical instruments; (2) *soundscape* – a set of sounds from the same place/environment; (3) *sound* – a sound

from a single sound source, for example, a fan; (4) *mixed* – music + soundscape, or music + sound; (5) *ASMR* – a specific model (known as Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) in which a person creates an intimate relationship with the listener, speaks with a whispered voice and makes other sounds by clicking their tongue or hitting hard surfaces with their nails.²⁵ There are some videos with ASMR in the title which do not have a protagonist and are just the sounds of a kitchen or a fireplace, for example. These were not considered to be ASMR in this context, despite being labelled as such in their titles (I return to this point later).

4. *Timbre* – regardless of format, this identifies the timbre or the sound source.
5. *Specifications* – in the case of music, this identifies whether it is original or pre-existing, classical or pop. It also identifies the characteristics of compositional organization like tempo, type of melody, pulse and so on. Even if it is not music, specifications identify characteristics of sound organization, for example, which sounds are more evident and which less present.
6. *Image* – describes the video's visual component.

The third area, usage of the videos, considers the following:

1. *Place* – notes the room for which the composition is thought to be used, for example, the bedroom. It may be for more than one location, or it may not be indicated (neither directly nor by implication).
2. *Time* – moment of the day for which the composition might be used, for example, at night. It may be for more than one period of the day, or it may not be indicated (neither directly nor by implication).
3. *Activity* – activity for which the composition is intended, for example, sleep. It may be for more than one activity, or it may not be indicated (neither directly nor by implication).
4. *Type of use* – individual use, collective use or mixed use. For example, music for meditation will be for individual use, but music for dinner with

²⁵ Nitin K. Ahuja, "It Feels Good to Be Measured": Clinical Role-Play, Walker Percy, and the Tingles, *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 56, no. 3 (2013): 442–51. Emma L. Barratt and Nick J. Davis, 'Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR): A Flow-Like Mental State', *PeerJ* 3 (2015): e851; Marisa A. del Campo and Thomas J. Kehle, 'Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) and Frisson: Mindfully Induced Sensory Phenomena that Promote Happiness', *International Journal of School & Educational Psychology* 4.2 (2016): 99–105; Julie Young and Ilse Blansert, *ASMR* (New York: Penguin, 2015).

friends will be for communal use. Music for sleeping can be individual or it can be mutual if the listener shares the bedroom and the composition with another person at that moment. Use can also be direct or indirect. For example, music to put the baby to sleep will be chosen by the caregiver but it will have effect on the baby.

5. Appointed uses – based on users' comments, identifies if the uses given to the videos are the same as those suggested in the titles and descriptions.

I have organized this data in a spreadsheet. There is one additional field for notes that is relevant but does not fit any of the other parameters. Table 10.1 briefly shows how I organized the information and the parameters used for the description and analysis of the videos.

From this mapping, it is possible to identify the main channels responsible for the circulation of domestic sonic videos and the ways in which audiovisual characteristics are articulated within each space, activity and moment of domestic life. This groundwork is as comprehensive as possible, and yet it can never truly be complete. YouTube is a dynamic platform, where new, old and repurposed domestic sonic videos are accessed and shared by thousands of people every day, making the creation of meaning changeable and volatile. What this mapping does help to reveal, however, is how certain material on YouTube is consumed and articulated with the activities and routines of the domestic space, in the same way as other goods for immediate consumption – as an artefact of capitalist society.

Sounding Home: YouTube and Sound Sales

Building on this mapping and content survey, it is possible to make some initial observations: we can see which channels are more important in terms of media production and sharing through the number of subscribers, views and interactions with users; we can understand the relationship between the sound materials used in these videos and the domestic daily activity they are designed to accompany; and we can identify 'new' sound and audiovisual formats that have emerged from this specific context of content production and circulation. I will now focus on how this content is part of the current scenario of the individualization and digitalization of everyday life. Even though

Table 10.1 Parameters Used for the Description and Analysis of the Videos

General Features	Link			Title	Channel					Date		Comments	Views
Composition Features	Format			Duration	Type of content					Timbres		Specifications	Image
	Video	Live	Playlist		Music	Soundscape	Sound	Mix	ASMR				
Usage Features	Place			Time	Activity					Type of use		Appointed uses	Notes
										Individual/collective	Direct/indirect		

YouTube and some of its shared content responds to individualization, it still standardizes the consumption and production of content for the domestic space. And although YouTube access is free, a specific set of examples shows how the consumption of certain sounds within the domestic space actively contributes to the capitalist logic of what Gilles Lipovetsky has called a 'hyperconsumerist society'.²⁶ As mentioned above, these sonic videos are not works of art but goods for immediate consumption: and they circulate, I argue, as consumer goods. This can be evidenced with reference to 'White Noise' videos, a popular 'new' type of domestic sonic videos that have become more prevalent as YouTube has developed.

- *White Noise*

Michael Hagood has argued that today, white noise is considered a soothing sound.²⁷ It is a droning, repetitive or unfluctuating sound that is usually produced electronically or by everyday objects. White noise can be added to specific devices to mask existing sounds that threaten to disturb domestic comfort or used to produce a consistent sonic wash that supports concentration.²⁸ Varied sound sources are used to produce the white noise of YouTube's domestic sonic videos: washing machines and dishwashers, fans, rain, traffic, the interiors of airplanes and spaceships and hoovers are among the most commonly used. Videos tagged 'white noise' are often lengthy, lasting up to ten hours. They work by creating sonic consistency, so it does not matter if you listen to the beginning, middle or end: the sounds remain the same. Users can leave these videos to play without having to restart them, secure in the knowledge that their sonic monotony and homogeneity will continue to mask unwanted sounds for as long as their chosen activity continues.

Even if not all these sound sources produce what we typically understand as white noise, these videos still refer to *white noise* in the title or description.²⁹ In this content, then, white noise refers to more than a type of sound.³⁰ It has also become a label that is applied to audiovisual products that advertise themselves

²⁶ Gilles Lipovetsky, *A Felicidade Paradoxal: Ensaio sobre a sociedade de hiperconsumo*, trans. Patrícia Xavier (Lisbon: Edições 70, 2006).

²⁷ Michael Hagood, *Hush, Media and the Sonic Self-Control* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 107.

²⁸ Jean-François Augoyard and Henry Torgue, *Sonic Experience: A Guide to Everyday Sounds*, trans. Andra McCartney and David Paquette (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 66–73.

²⁹ Ambience, 'Vacuum Cleaner Sound and Video 3 Hours – Relax, Focus, Sleep, ASMR', *YouTube video*, 03:00:00, 1 February 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KilQtE5Nl90&t>.

³⁰ Porfírio, *Entre ventoinhas e máquinas de lavar*, 531–46.

as applicable to specific domestic activities. These types of domestic sonic videos rely on paratexts – other sounds, images, titles and descriptions – to help build a diverse and individualized meaning for white noise and its diverse sound sources and household uses. There are videos for different situations – to aid sleep or to create a conducive environment for homework – but they share the same basic purpose: to mask sound and encourage relaxation.³¹ However, with such a diversity of sources and uses, the ‘white noise’ label is little more than ‘wrapping paper’ that repurposes sounds that often already exist in everyday life at home, giving them a new context in order to turn them into a ready-to-consume product.³²

YouTube’s vast reach means that White Noise videos, as well as other formats that fall within the context of the present research – such as ASMR or Study With Me – get millions of views and subscribers. The growth of domestic listening communities results from the close relationships that users and content creators establish. Channels have a section called ‘community’, where, among other actions, surveys are used to understand user requirements, leading to the creation of content that meets those needs. In addition, the comments section enables both users and channel owners to comment on the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of certain videos and to share details of their private lives, a reciprocal form of sharing that reinforces the creation of a community around the channel, the video and its function, while also encouraging more content along the same lines.

- *Ads on videos you watch*

Access to YouTube and its videos is free. It is, however, impossible to exclude the platform from a capitalist and industrial logic. An issue common to YouTube and web browsing in general is that it is almost impossible to watch a desired video without having first to watch at least a few seconds of advertising material often unrelated to our interests; in videos of long duration, adverts can appear at intermittent points. As I mentioned, to do this research I always used an anonymous browser window which does not allow the addition of extensions, unlike a normal window that allows you to block ads (like Adblock, or Adblock for YouTube, for example). In addition, YouTube has gained a growing resistance to these tools to persuade the transition to YouTube Premium. On smartphones

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid. Gretchen Larsen and Maurice Patterson, ‘Listening to Consumption: Towards a Sonic Turn in Consumer Research’, *Marketing Theory* 19, no. 2 (2018): 105–27

YouTube's app always has ads. Even if consumed for only a few seconds, Elmira Djafarova and Kristina Kramer have argued that, depending on the effectiveness of the campaign, these adverts can remain in our minds long after the video has finished.³³ When these adverts appear before domestic sonic videos, their presence can be particularly disruptive. The extended length of White Noise videos makes it likely that adverts will appear at regular points, breaking the sound continuity and disturbing the activity they are accompanying. These adverts operate as 'payment' for 'free' video access and are a product of a digitalized commercial logic that associates our personal engagement with YouTube with the purchase of certain products that, most of the time, come at a cost.³⁴

- *Don't forget to subscribe*

Another example of YouTube performing as a capitalistic platform based on neoliberal logic is the profit made by channels from the number of video views they receive in relation to the number of subscribers they attract. This is particularly evident in three specific domestic sonic video channels: Relaxing White Noise with 2.52 million subscribers and 1,240,773,003 views; Soothing Relaxation with 8.96 million subscribers and 2,911,291,764 views; and Yellow Brick Cinema – Relaxing Music with 5.78 million subscribers and 2,245,480,375 views.³⁵ These three channels are among those that appear most often in searches and offer videos suited to mediation and relaxation, focus, concentration and falling asleep.³⁶ Considering the number of views in conjunction with subscriptions, it is estimated that these channels earn profits ranging from €5000 to €233,000 per month.³⁷ Therefore, although users do not pay the channels directly to use YouTube's 'free' content in their domestic space, they nevertheless

³³ Elmira Djafarova and Kristina Kramer, 'YouTube Advertising: Exploring its Effectiveness', *The Marketing Review* 19, nos. 1–2 (2019): 127–45.

³⁴ Lipovetsky, *A Felicidade Paradoxal*.

³⁵ Data collected on 27 January 2022. Link to Relaxing White Noise YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/RelaxingWhiteNoise/about>; link to Soothing Relaxation YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/c/SoothingRelaxation/about>; link to Yellow Brick Cinema – Relaxing Music YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/c/YellowBrickCinema/about>;

³⁶ The Relaxing White Noise channel produces and shares exclusively white noise videos. The other two channels upload videos of music and soundscapes, mostly connected with nature, to be used for mood, relaxation, study or meditation.

³⁷ This data was obtained on 27 January 2022 using the SocialBlade network tool. See details of each of the channels in the links: <https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/relaxingwhitenoise>; <https://socialblade.com/youtube/c/soothingrelaxation>; <https://socialblade.com/youtube/channel/UCwobzUc3z-0PrFpoRxNsZxQ>.

generate income and profit for the channels, which allows them to continue their online activities.

- *Leave your comment*

User comments are closely linked to the number of views and subscriptions a channel receives. My analysis shows that the comments section is used for various reasons by users, and the comments gradually form a pattern in relation to the content: users may voice their appreciation to the channel owners for having solved their problems (falling asleep, for example), comment on how they have used the videos numerous times, request a certain type of sound or specific environment and report that the soundscapes remind them of past situations and people who are far away (such as childhood and the way they felt protected by their parents).³⁸ As a result, these comments encourage other users to engage with specific content based on their recommendations. In so doing, domestic sound video users become active participants in the dissemination of content, able to influence the production and consumption of these products, ensure their continued mass production and standardization and generate capital for the channel hosts.

- *I'll leave the link below*

YouTube is not only a video-sharing platform but also an online space where goods (in many forms) can be traded and/or commercialized. This is evident in the way that videos advertise and encourage the purchase of other consumer goods. An example of this can be found in domestic sonic videos intended to be used during sleep, where in the description one can find links to other products that are featured in these videos that claim to make them more effective. For instance, the SleepySounds channel has a video with rain sounds which states that the soundscape will be a more effective sleep aid when used with a specific pillow: 'This sound is even more effective if you're sleeping on Dream Rite's amazingly comfortable Wondersleep hypoallergenic memory foam pillow: <https://amzn.to/33SCJXa>'.³⁹ Along similar lines, the description of a video of whale sounds for sleep and relaxation on the Jason Lewis – Mind Amend channel

³⁸ Porfirio, 'It Almost Smells Like Coffee and Feels Like a Hot Mug in My Hands', 207–8; Porfirio, 'Sleep/Relax/Work/Study/Read', 37–8. See some user's comments on of the users' comments in footnotes 43 to 46.

³⁹ Link to SleepySounds YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCBrEd81fnW37MwALKloU0ag>; SleepySounds, 'Forest Rain – 9 Hour Soundscape of Rain Falling on Leaves – sleep, ambiance, nature, ASMR', *YouTube video*, 09:00:00, 19 December 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYcdy5XjiY> (see video description).

states that it be more effective if used with headphones and will be even more successful with the SleepPhones headphones that have been created specifically for use during slumber.⁴⁰ The user who wishes to purchase these headphones can insert the code 'MINDAMEND', provided by the channel which, at the time of viewing, offered a discount of \$10.

- *Getting closer to consumers*

Ultimately, YouTube is a platform where anonymous users, multinational companies and professional and amateur artists coexist with the public, forging types of participation and influence that subverts the hierarchies that would exist in other contexts. Taking into account the success that these audiovisual formats have, specifically the White Noise videos, and the role they play in the lives of the people who consume them, they are beginning to be noticed by advertisers and marketers, and consumer goods companies are shifting to these new formats to advertise their products. On Hoover's US YouTube channel, for instance, several videos of the company's vacuums and other household appliances are available.⁴¹ These are essentially short videos, no more than two minutes long, which promote the extraordinary capabilities of their vacuums and household cleaning machines. These dominate the channel but one can also find another group of advertising videos with a much longer duration – between one and three hours – under a playlist entitled 'The Official Hoover ASMR + White Noise Playlist'.⁴² These clips clearly follow the style of other White Noise videos, shared by dedicated domestic sonic video channels. Hoover replicates this format by adding to the title not only the White Noise label but also the ASMR or Lo-Fi Music tags that work as paratexts and reinforce the capacity of this content to mediate the relaxation and concentration of their users, since these formats – White Noise, ASMR and Lo-Fi Music – are some of the main protagonists of home comfort *YouTubeness*.

Just like the White Noise videos from dedicated domestic sound video channels, these adverts often generate thousands of views and a notable amount of comments that allow us to verify the emotional response to them. Some comments can identify and dismiss these videos as nothing more than

⁴⁰ Link to Jason Lewis – Mind Amend YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCrpFW99zAUaJT8cKmqeagkg>; link to SleepPhones: <https://www.sleepphones.com/>.

⁴¹ Link to Hoover YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/HooverClean>.

⁴² Hoover, 'The Official Hoover ASMR + White Noise Playlist', YouTube playlist (seven videos), 11 November 2020 to 5 January 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLJT0HzQNNNT9yaYRCGIqshft7hpNp-0L>.

a marketing strategy: ‘Despite their [*sic*] being a three-hour long ad, I have to acknowledge that these are really well-made videos. Thanks!’ – OldVelcro (username).⁴³ Others meet Hoover’s main purpose (to sell cleaners) and ask which model is being used and mention that a sale for the product may be imminent.⁴⁴ However, the vast majority of comments refer to the extremely relaxing nature of these videos: ‘This calms me down and puts me to sleep 🧘’ from Bobby Escamilla (username); ‘Incredibly grateful for this! Helps massively if I’m focusing on research or relaxing getting ready to wind down!’ – Callum Hobs (username).⁴⁵ There is also a nostalgic strand of comments that include childhood memories and ask Hoover to make videos with specific old models of vacuums: ‘The sound of a hoover will forever be my biggest comfort, from childhood to present 😊 the attention to detail for this video is astounding. Thank you so much’ – clear haze (username).⁴⁶

The emotional responses embedded in these comments accord with the reactions that consumers often have to adverts that look like music videos.⁴⁷ Although their main purpose is not to promote music, these formats are used in people’s everyday lives and, like music, have the ability to give meaning to certain situations, particularly moments of relaxation and comfort. The appropriation of genres such as music video for marketing purposes also

⁴³ ‘This is some next level marketing . . .’ – DatEraa; ‘When you hire millennials to do your marketing?=genius move btw!’ – Big_Pete Bear; ‘This is a long commercial’ – Vcafr0.

⁴⁴ ‘I’m buying a Hoover right now’ – Sean Hamid; ‘What is that hoover vac called’ – Ismayo Solo; ‘I want one, I only use Hoover’ – mila Olsen; ‘This vacuum should come out in 2021’ – Niko Pondexter.

⁴⁵ ‘Been watching these for years and must say the sound is now on my deep sleep list’ – Sealian; ‘Hi Hoover – I normally wouldn’t be into a corporate channel, but I do appreciate you putting this up. It’s great. As you know, some people really, really enjoy the sound of a vacuum cleaner. Ever since I was a kid, it gave me chills. These days I have a YouTube playlist of vacuum cleaner sounds that I put on before bed most nights. The sound gives me a lot of comfort, especially when I’m feeling anxious. [. . .] I’m going to add this to my playlist!’ – Michael H.

⁴⁶ ‘Lol I used to be scared to death of carpet shampooers back when I was little lol’ – Peyton McPherson; ‘I get that this is kind of an advert as well as a wonderful thing but I would still ask if you have any of the more classic models in your museum that you could let us hear as well?’ – Silly Pratt;

‘Hoover you guys are the best!! I really wish you guys could make the Hoover windtunnel V2. As a kid my parents got that vacuum and I know this sounds crazy but my mom passed away back in 2014 and I would remember her playing music and using that vacuum. Having the Hoover windtunnel V2 would give me good memories. I miss so much. Does anyone know how I can get one’ – Rachel. As a consequence, on 17 September 2021, Hoover released a video in this format, where not only does it use the model of an old hoover, but the whole scenario is of a typical North American house from the 1970s and to the title, besides the terms ASMR and White Noise, the term ‘vintage’ was added. Hoover, ‘Vintage 70s Hoover Convertible ASMR | Retro White Noise for Sleeping, Focus | 1 HOUR’, *YouTube video*, 01:03:48, 17 September 2021, <https://youtu.be/gWWCInm-SDw>.

⁴⁷ Joanna Cartwright, Helen McCormick and Gary Warnaby, ‘Consumers’ Emotional Responses to the Christmas TV Advertising of Four Retail Brands’, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 29 (2016): 82–91.

provides consumers with a familiar format that enables a quick and affective connection with the product being sold and increases the possibility of a sale.

Music video-like adverts were born on television, but these 'new' formats were created on YouTube, which today plays an important role in everyday domestic life and is where a great deal of the audiovisual consumption occurs. It is on this platform and around this content that many digital communities form, develop and socialize. However, despite being in digital space, members of these communities still need to buy hoovers. Using these new formats to advertise is just one way for these agents of domestic space configuration to get closer to their potential consumers – through sound.

Individualization and Massification

In writing this chapter I had three goals: to shed light on the domestic sonic video designed to build the household soundscape; to develop a way of collecting and organizing content from such a broad and dynamic platform as YouTube; and to demonstrate how this content is created and consumed. As we have seen, these approaches are as complex, volatile and interconnected as their subject matter. Although domestic sonic videos have been neglected by media scholars and musicologists, they play an important and impactful role in the contemporary mediascape. On the one hand, they are a powerful tool for the personalized management of everyday life; and on the other, they are a key element of participatory culture. Domestic sonic videos allow users to add or remove different sound layers to their everyday routines simply by pressing play or stop. Users can select from a massive amount of sonic content from pre-existent music to white noise in order to mask environmental sounds, to differently soundscape their homes and to evoke distant and peaceful locations. This diversity of sound – which is easily accessible thanks to YouTube's modes of content creation, diffusion and circulation – positions these videos as key elements of participatory culture. Communities are created around specific content, formed by a network of producers and consumers who interact, socialize and circulate content online, and all contribute to the monetization and standardization of domestic soundscapes.

As a result, domestic sonic videos pose a contradiction between individualization and massification. On the one hand, this content, alongside the platform itself, is both a response to and an instigator for the individualization

of audiovisual consumption in today's society. There is a need to find suitable content for the specificity of each moment in which the subject is involved and for what they believe to be their individuality and identity. But on the other hand, content style is becoming increasingly standardized, even though users navigate through the multitude of options according to their personal requirements. I call this contradiction *the massification of individuality*. And it is this paradoxical confluence that makes these videos a ubiquitous element of everyday life. No matter what our domestic routines are, YouTube has the ideal soundscape, contributing to the current circulation of ephemeral goods and allowing sound to be produced, 'wrapped' and consumed like any other domestic object.

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‘Talking’ about Music

The Emotional Content of Comments on YouTube Videos

Alexandra Lamont, Scott Bannister and Eduardo Coutinho



Music seems to be a fundamental, common and somewhat unique human activity, sometimes described as a ‘fundamental channel of communication.’¹ Yet the reasons underpinning its importance to people’s everyday life are often elusive: why do we choose to engage with it at all? Research on the relationship between music and emotion, one of the foundational topics in the field of music psychology, demonstrates that music can express and elicit emotions of varying intensities and qualities, across listeners of all ages and different backgrounds, and in diverse listening contexts.² The broad functions of music listening have been identified as falling into three categories: (1) to regulate arousal/energy (physical and mental) and mood, (2) to achieve states of self-awareness and (3) to explore, express and foster social relatedness.³ All three include a variety of emotion-related uses of music in everyday life. For instance, arousal and mood regulation includes using music for diversion, to achieve a positive mood and to regulate physiological arousal; self-awareness involves the exploration of

¹ David J. Hargreaves, Raymond MacDonald and Dorothy Miell, ‘How Do People Communicate Using Music?’, in *Musical Communication*, ed. Dorothy Miell, Raymond MacDonald and David J. Hargreaves (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1.

² Klaus Scherer and Eduardo Coutinho, ‘How Music Creates Emotion: A Multifactorial Process Approach’, in *The Emotional Power of Music: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Musical Arousal, Expression, and Social Control*, ed. Tom Cochrane, Bernadino Fantini and Klaus R. Scherer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 124–8.

³ Thomas Schäfer, Peter Sedlmeier, Christine Städtler and David Huron, ‘The Psychological Functions of Music Listening’, *Frontiers in Psychology* 4, no. 1 (2013): 6.

and coping with emotions and sentiments, solace, absorption and meaning; and social connections engender a state of well-being. Supporting evidence for this comes from numerous studies using a range of methods and approaches, generating theoretical frameworks and explanatory accounts of *how* music can elicit emotions, often with a focus on the emotions experienced by music listeners.

Understanding how music is experienced and how emotions are evoked requires a consideration of the qualities of the music itself, the characteristics of individual listeners and situational factors.⁴ These aspects are further situated in a broader sociocultural milieu, encompassing a range of influences that contribute to music listening experiences. As such, from a research perspective it is challenging to explore naturalistic engagements with music and collect data that reflects the complexities of musical emotions. However, one promising approach involves the media-sharing platform of YouTube. Amidst a wide range of video material, YouTube serves as a contemporary, popular platform for listening to music: in 2021 it was the world's leading music app.⁵ The platform allows users to leave comments in response to music uploads, describing their experiences, highlighting moments they especially enjoyed and discussing their listening experiences with other users. To find out more about listeners' immediate responses to music, particularly self-selected music, the dynamic nature of YouTube comments provides an excellent source of information as well as a culturally relevant social media environment that has its own frame of reference. As we shall see, the YouTube world has the potential to give us considerable insight into people's thoughts, experiences and emotions while listening to music.

Approaches to Music and Emotion

The relationship between music and emotion has been a foundational focus of music psychology research, dating back to Kate Hevner's work in the 1930s on emotion adjectives to describe responses to music and Leonard Meyer's account from the 1950s of expectations in musical structure and how they elicit

⁴ Hargreaves, MacDonald and Miell, 'How Do People Communicate Using Music?', 8.

⁵ L. Ceci, 'YouTube – Statistics and Facts', *Statista*, March 2022, <https://www.statista.com/topics/2019/youtube/>.

emotional responses in listeners.⁶ A vast amount of empirical research has since been conducted exploring, and more recently explaining, how music generates emotional responses. There are different traditions of research, from the tightly controlled musical stimuli presented in laboratory settings to open-ended phenomenological explorations of how emotion works in everyday settings. We can locate psychological approaches to explaining emotion in music at three different levels: the *hardware* level (e.g. brain, body), the *functional* level (e.g. different types of cognitive processing) and the *phenomenological* level (e.g. feelings, behaviours).⁷

At the *hardware* level, brain imaging studies show that music listening stimulates brain regions involved in reward/motivation and emotional arousal, which are also stimulated by ‘euphoria’-inducing stimuli like food, sex and drugs of abuse. Music can also trigger different types of physical responses which are a key component of emotional response, including changes in cardiac variables (e.g. heart rate), respiration patterns, oxygen consumption or blood pressure via the activation of the autonomic nervous system.⁸ Some listeners also experience peak pleasure in a response labelled musical ‘chills’ which involve overt physical responses such as goosebumps, shivers and tingling sensations.⁹ This response may share characteristics with the Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) phenomenon, an experience of pleasant tingling sensations commonly elicited by videos that carefully combine visual stimulation and certain sound triggers.¹⁰ Indeed, ASMR videos and this international community likely found their origins on YouTube, highlighting the use of the platform for seeking and discussing pleasurable and emotional experiences.

Considering the *functional* level, empirical investigations of music and emotion often choose, create or manipulate musical stimuli and ask listeners to provide behavioural responses to these in controlled environments, such as ratings of liking, preference and emotion. This work regularly aims to test

⁶ Kate Hevner, ‘Experimental Studies of the Elements of Expression in Music’, *The American Journal of Psychology* 48, no. 2 (1936): 246–68; Leonard B. Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1956).

⁷ John A. Sloboda and Patrik N. Juslin, ‘At the Interface Between the Inner and Outer World: Psychological Perspectives’, in *Handbook of Music and Emotion: Theory, Research, Applications*, ed. Patrik N. Juslin and J. A. Sloboda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 75.

⁸ Don A. Hodges, ‘Psychophysiological Measures’, in *Handbook of Music and Emotion*, 281–94.

⁹ Scott Bannister, ‘Distinct Varieties of Aesthetic Chills in Response to Multimedia’, *PLoS ONE* 14, no. 11 (2019): e0224974, 1.

¹⁰ Poerio, Giulia Lara, Emma Blakey, Thomas J. Hostler and Theresa Veltri, ‘More Than A Feeling: Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) Is Characterized by Reliable Changes in Affect and Physiology’, *PlosONE* 13, no. 6 (2018): e0196645, 8.

hypotheses and provide psychological explanations of music and emotion, with a common focus being on links between musical structure and emotional response.¹¹ For instance, Patrik Juslin and colleagues selected pieces of music to explore the effects of possible music emotion induction mechanisms, including memory and expectancy, with participants rating the emotions they felt; music selected to induce memory was linked to higher ratings of nostalgia and happiness, and music selected to include unexpected events resulted in higher ratings of anxiety.¹² Although participants are often asked to make explicit judgements regarding their experience, emotional experiences of music at the functional level can also be explored using indirect measures, such as how information processing is primed by the emotional qualities of music.¹³

A crucial consideration at the functional level is whether the emotional responses are actually experienced by a listener or are instead perceived in music; for instance, music can express a sense of joy through its features and qualities but may be experienced as sad by a listener, possibly due to their associations of the piece with more negative events, material or memories. More recent studies are careful to distinguish emotions perceived in the music as compared with those experienced or felt directly.¹⁴ However, perceived emotion is more stable across situations and individuals, while experienced emotions are less stable.¹⁵ This leads us to the final approach of phenomenology.

Despite the control offered by hardware and functional approaches, self-reported feeling is recognized as the most important form of evidence for musical emotions.¹⁶ At the *phenomenological* level, music and emotion studies include more open-ended enquiries into how music works for different individuals over time. One strand of this work was pioneered by Alf Gabrielsson through an in-depth study of people's most intense experiences of music.¹⁷ Gathering free

¹¹ Sloboda and Juslin, 'At the Interface between the Inner and Outer World', 81–91.

¹² Patrik N. Juslin, Gonçalo Barradas and Tuomas Eerola, 'From Sound to Significance: Exploring the Mechanisms Underlying Emotional Reactions to Music', *The American Journal of Psychology* 128, no. 3 (2015): 299.

¹³ Imre Lahdelma, James Armitage and Tuomas Eerola, 'Affective Priming with Musical Chords is Influenced by Pitch Numerosity', *Musicae Scientiae* 26, no. 1 (2022): 210–12.

¹⁴ Sloboda and Juslin, 'At the Interface between the Inner and Outer World', 76.

¹⁵ Patrick G. Hunter, E. Glenn Schellenberg and Ulrich Schimmack, 'Feelings and Perceptions of Happiness and Sadness Induced by Music: Similarities, Differences, and Mixed Emotions', *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 4, no. 1 (2010): 54.

¹⁶ Marcel Zentner and Tuomas Eerola, 'Self-Report Measures and Models', in *Handbook of Music and Emotion*, 75.

¹⁷ Alf Gabrielsson, *Strong Experiences with Music: Music Is Much More Than Just Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

report data from volunteers over many decades, he was able to characterize the features of these strong experiences, which ranged from physiological through cognitive and emotional to transcendental elements. Many of the descriptions were multidimensional and diverse, touching on several different emotions. For instance, an older woman reported:

I saw a film where Smetana's *Moldau* was played throughout the film. The entire music is so nice. When the piece begins, it goes up, is stormy, calms down to a quieter level, and becomes delightful. All of this beautiful piece of music was with me. It 'played' for me afterwards too. . . . When life is tough and you are sad, this music is a consolation. I think that it's the storm that is heard in the music, then it quietens, down a bit. It is like saying: 'Now it is difficult, it can get better, then calmer'. The music can cry with me, it can laugh with me, it can make me happy, it can make me sad, and it can console me if I am sad.¹⁸

This kind of evidence points to the complexity of emotional response and the significance of music in many individuals' lives. Favourite or preferred music has been shown by Alexandra Lamont and Catherine Loveday to fulfil many different functions, both for those able to make conscious choices about the music they want to hear and for those less able to do so, such as those suffering from dementia.¹⁹ Listening to self-chosen music also has far greater impact on the eventual emotional outcomes, often leading to a greater incidence of chills and brain responses involving the amygdala.²⁰ To better understand the multidimensionality of musical emotions and their meaning, it is essential to integrate the hardware, functional and phenomenological levels of explanation through exploring culturally relevant and representative modes of music engagement. YouTube provides an exceptional case of musical engagement through which complex facets of musical emotion can be explored, given the combination of musical material, written accounts of listener experiences available in comments sections, interactions and discussions between users of the platform and the enduring cultural relevance of the platform.

¹⁸ Ibid., 145.

¹⁹ Alexandra Lamont and Catherine Loveday. 'A New Framework for Understanding Memories and Preference for Music', *Music & Science* 3 (2020): 1–14.

²⁰ Valorie N. Salimpoor, Mitchel Benovoy, Kevin Larcher, Alain Dagher and Robert J. Zatorre, 'Anatomically Distinct Dopamine Release During Anticipation and Experience of Peak Emotion to Music', *Nature Neuroscience* 14, no. 2 (2011): 260–1.

Theoretical Frameworks of Music and Emotion

In psychology, there is currently no single accepted theoretical framework to explain music and emotion. However, different conceptual models are emerging that, to some extent, encapsulate hardware, functional and phenomenological approaches in the field. Patrik Juslin developed the BRECVEMA framework, for instance, with eight underlying mechanisms to explain how music induces emotions.²¹ These are derived from adaptive and evolutionary antecedents, as follows: *brain stem reflexes* (automatic arousal reactions to acoustic changes in music); *rhythmic entrainment* (physical or physiological 'locking on' to common periodicities in music); *evaluative conditioning* (association of music with certain emotions through experience); *emotional contagion* (automatic mimicking of music-expressed emotion by the listener); *visual imagery* (music evoking visual images in the listener's mind); *episodic memory* (music linked to moments in a listener's life); *musical expectancy* (structural patterns in music that confirm or violate expectations, creating tension and release); and *aesthetic judgement* (set of aesthetic criteria differing across individuals, ranging from beauty and novelty, through skill and style, to message or expression of music). BRECVEMA mechanisms evoke musical responses that differ in specificity. More general mechanisms include the brain stem reflex, which does not include anything about specific music or emotions. Some are more culturally shared such as the evaluative conditioning of associations, the patterns of expectancy in different musical cultures or a set of aesthetic criteria used by listeners. Others are more personal and individual, such as the listener's own association of specific pieces with life events.

From a different perspective, Klaus Scherer and Eduardo Coutinho proposed an integrated component process framework, suggesting that both musical and non-musical information conveys emotional meaning that can elicit emotional responses in listeners through various interactive processes or routes for emotion induction, modulated by numerous performance, listener and situational factors.²² These routes are labelled *contagion*, *entrainment*, *empathy*, *memory* and *appraisal*. Contagion refers to emotions that listeners may experience as a result of the emotions that music expresses, but also what the musicians or other listeners express. Empathy is a route underlying emotional responses to music

²¹ Juslin, Barradas and Eerola, 'From Sound to Significance', 283–4.

²² Scherer and Coutinho, 'How Music Creates Emotion', 128–9.

that derive from a rational understanding of how others feel and the ability to take their perspective, as well as an understanding of what music and musicians represent. Entrainment refers to the fundamental tendency to synchronize to temporal patterns of music at mental and physical levels. The *memory* route involves episodic memory (music induces specific emotional reactions associated with past experiences or memories) and associative memory (music cues and patterns convey meaning in other sensory modalities that can trigger, by association, the appearance of images in our minds that share some features with the music). Finally, the *appraisal* route is involved in two key processes: the processing of musical and non-musical information and inference of emotional meaning in the music and the listening context, and in integrating responses that may be elicited in all other routes. Ultimately, appraisals will determine what the unified emotional experience of the listeners is.

This model is similar to BRECVEMA in its inclusion of the routes of rhythmic entrainment, emotional contagion, episodic memory and musical expectancy, and the importance of modulating factors such as the structure of the music, aspects of the performer or music performance and characteristics of the listener.²³ However, it includes both well-established psychobiological processes for emotion elicitation and the role of non-musical information in understanding emotion induction through music and provides a more comprehensive structure to understand and integrate individual and contextual factors as well as explaining interactions between specific processes. We will draw on this model later in relation to the YouTube data.

How Do People Talk about Emotions and Music?

The above models acknowledge social and interactional aspects related to emotional experiences with music, through aspects such as emotional and social contagion, empathy and interpersonal memories. These social and interactional elements may provide the fundamentals for understanding how and why music makes us 'feel' and exploring them may help develop an understanding of music and emotion across key levels of explanation, in relation to existing theoretical frameworks. Unfortunately, these social aspects are less well understood and to date much less studied than the more cognitive aspects of emotional response.

²³ Cf. Hargreaves, MacDonald and Miell, 'How Do People Communicate Using Music?', 8.

We propose that one way of overcoming this limitation is to learn more about the ways in which people share and talk about music. These are activities that people seem to value, and through digital media platforms like YouTube such interaction, and what it can tell us about music and emotion, is highly accessible to investigation. Emotional aspects of music are accessible to most people, and talking about music is a common pastime. Most people seem to be relatively engaged with music, and those more engaged have more access to words to describe their engagement. Qualitative studies show that conversations about important music can be long and in depth, and that people also write a lot about important musical experiences and memories.²⁴

One of the challenges of qualitative enquiries is that they are typically at one remove from the experience being discussed. Interview and diary data are often gathered long after the listening experience, and their quality relies on people accurately recalling events which may have happened many years previously. In an attempt to get closer to the experience itself, experience sampling methodology (ESM) is a way of capturing responses to real-world listening as it occurs.²⁵ Participants in ESM studies are randomly contacted via text messages or mobile prompts and asked to report on their immediate experience, answering questions about whether they are listening to music, what emotions it evokes and so on. Apps such as *MuPsych* can even be used to prompt listeners to make responses before and after choosing to listen to their own music on a personal listening device.²⁶ These provide valuable insight into the how, where, when and why of everyday listening, albeit using quick and simple response formats. As we explain further below, YouTube comments provide a middle ground between these two extremes, with the potential for immediate responses to naturally occurring and self-chosen music listening experiences in free-text format.

YouTube Comments

As a platform designed to encourage reactions, YouTube enables listeners to access a diversity of music in video format and to provide their immediate

²⁴ Alinka Greasley and Alexandra Lamont, 'Musical Preferences', in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Psychology*, 2nd edn., ed. Susan Hallam, Ian Cross and Michael Thaut (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 272.

²⁵ Greasley and Lamont, 'Musical Preferences', 272.

²⁶ Will M. Randall and Nikki S. Rickard, 'Reasons for Personal Music Listening: A Mobile Experience Sampling Study of Emotional Outcomes', *Psychology of Music* 45, no. 4 (2017): 479–95.

responses in the form of likes or text comments. One of the major motivations for posting content (musical or not) on YouTube is to stimulate social engagement,²⁷ and many other social factors such as altruism, empathy, community interest and reciprocity are also highly ranked alongside more individual factors such as learning, self-efficacy and personal gain.²⁸ The popularity and scale of YouTube speaks to its efficacy in generating responses from its audience, and research has begun to explore the nature of these responses. Looking across different types of content, Mike Thelwall and colleagues established some general features of YouTube comments such as emotional tone (usually mildly positive), brevity (fifty-eight characters on average) and type of commentator (more frequently made by millennial males).²⁹

In general, audiences choose to view material on YouTube, and thus engagement can be assumed to be broadly intentional. However, YouTube also provides suggestions and new videos in response to ones the listener has chosen to view. Not everyone posts: only 0.5 per cent of viewers leave a comment.³⁰ However, comments can be informative about responses given the mass user base. Following Thelwall et al., we also focus on the comments themselves as opposed to positive or negative ratings and number of times videos have been liked as a way of getting deeper into the meaning of the music videos for their audiences.

The digital and interrogatable nature of the format also enables substantial datasets to be gathered. The YouTube API allows comments to be selected and downloaded for analysis, and additional software can be used to 'scrape' content to generate large datasets even from a small number of videos.³¹ Different techniques have been applied to the analysis of these large text datasets, drawing on techniques already established for other forms of large text corpora. One of the earliest text analysis programmes still in use is James Pennebaker's Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC), which identifies the content of the

²⁷ Bernardo A. Huberman, Daniel M. Romero and Fang Wu, 'Crowdsourcing, Attention and Productivity', *Journal of Information Science* 35, no. 6 (2009): 765.

²⁸ Sanghee Oh and Sue Yeon Syn, 'Motivations for Sharing Information and Social Support in Social Media: A Comparative Analysis of Facebook, Twitter, Delicious, YouTube, and Flickr', *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 66, no. 10 (2015): 2045–60.

²⁹ Mike Thelwall, Pardeep Sud and Farida Vis, 'Commenting on YouTube Videos: From Guatemalan Rock to El Big Bang', *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 63, no. 3 (2011): 621–2.

³⁰ Ibid., 617.

³¹ Dhiraj Murthy and Sanjay Sharma, 'Visualizing YouTube's Comment Space: Online Hostility as a Networked Phenomena', *New Media & Society* 21, no. 1 (2019): 197.

text in a probabilistic manner.³² LIWC includes emotion words in a relatively straightforward manner alongside other content but is limited when it comes to context. A more context-sensitive approach is the Evaluative Lexicon, specifically designed for evaluative language and better able to judge degrees of emotionality than LIWC.³³

With digital comments, text analysis software can be easily used to screen out undesired content (e.g. non-English comments or spam) and to analyse desired content. For instance, Stefan Siersdorfer and colleagues automatically classified comments as positive, negative or neutral using a programme called SentiWordNet.³⁴ In more complex approaches, sentiment analysis can be extended into comparative opinion mining,³⁵ co-citation analysis³⁶ and network analysis,³⁷ and can be used to establish relevant groupings of comments that shed light on community interests among commenters. Different statistical or learning methods can be used to underpin these analyses, such as naïve Bayes machine learning algorithms or deep neural networks.³⁸

Comments on YouTube Music Videos

Music is only one of the categories of audiovisual content found on YouTube, but given the focus of our research, in this final section we review the very small body of research that has specifically explored comments on music videos. Trisnasari Fraser, Alexander Crooke and Jane Davidson explored comments on

³² James W. Pennebaker, Cindy K. Chung, Molly E. Ireland, Amy L. Gonzales and Roger J. Booth, *The Development and Psychometric Properties of LIWC2007* (Austin, TX: LIWC.net, 2007).

³³ Matthew D. Rocklage, Derek D. Rucker and Loran F. Nordgren, 'The Evaluative Lexicon 2.0: The Measurement of Emotionality, Extremity, and Valence in Language', *Behaviour Research Methods* 50 (2018): 1328–9.

³⁴ Stefan Siersdorfer, Sergiu Chelaru, Wolfgang Nejdl and Jose San Pedro, 'How Useful Are Your Comments? Analyzing and Predicting YouTube Comments and Comment Ratings', *Proceedings of the 19th International Conference on World Wide Web* (ACM: New York, 2010), 893–5.

³⁵ Asad Ullah Rafiq Khan, Madiha Khan and Mohammad Badruddin Khan, 'Naïve Multi-Label Classification of YouTube Comments Using Comparative Opinion Mining', *Procedia Computer Science* 82 (2016): 59–62.

³⁶ Min Song, Yoo Kyung Jeong and Ha Jin Kim, 'Identifying the Topology of the K-pop Video Community on YouTube: A Combined Co-comment Analysis Approach', *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 66, no. 12 (2015): 2581.

³⁷ Murthy and Sharma, 'Visualizing YouTube's Comment Space', 197–8.

³⁸ Khan, Khan and Khan, 'Naïve Multi-Label Classification of YouTube Comments Using Comparative Opinion Mining', 62; Alexandre Ashade Lassance Cunha, Melissa Carvalho Costa and Marco Aurélio C. Pacheco, 'Sentiment Analysis of YouTube Video Comments Using Deep Neural Networks', in *Artificial Intelligence and Soft Computing. ICAISC 2019. Lecture Notes in Computer Sciences*, ed. Leslek Rutkowski, Rafał Scherer, Marcin Kortykowski, Witold Pedrycz, Ryszard Tadeusiewicz and Jacek M. Zurada (Cham: Springer, 2019), 11508.

ten YouTube videos filmed and uploaded during the Covid-19 lockdown of 2020, with content relating to the pandemic.³⁹ Using thematic analysis of the artists' own descriptions and the subsequent audience comments, they developed five themes: interaction, unity, resilience, identity and emotion. The first two directly relate to interaction through the YouTube platform and group responses, the third to pandemic-specific issues of dealing with adversity and the last two were more personal in nature relating to personal and collective identification with the music and references to and expressions of emotion. Connections between people through comments are clearly a key feature of the YouTube platform, and important evidence for the networked nature of comments and discussions comes from studies of K-pop⁴⁰ and of radical racist music.⁴¹ However, Mike Thelwall and colleagues' detailed analysis of replies to comments, which they take as a proxy for density of discussion, suggests that music videos triggered less discussion in general than other types of content (such as sport, news or entertainment). When music was discussed, the content tended to be typically about non-musical elements such as politics, religion or national differences.⁴²

The Present Study

Our multidisciplinary research team came together to attempt an evaluation of the theoretical models of music-induced emotions against people's spontaneous comments (individual and personal) on music which would give insight into their emotional experience. Do people talk about these emotional responses in ways that can be mapped to the existing models? We wanted to explore whether YouTube comments would provide this insight. We were also interested in exploring different approaches to the open-ended textual data and to investigate whether different genres of music might evoke different types of comments.

To do so, we created a small corpus of YouTube comments drawn from two songs, dating from different eras and representing different musical genres. We selected Kings of Leon's 'Use Somebody' from 2008 and the Bangles' 'Walk Like

³⁹ Trisnasari Fraser, Alexander Crooke and Jane W. Davidson, "Music Has No Borders": An Exploratory Study of Audience Engagement with YouTube Music Broadcasts During COVID-19 Lockdown, *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2021): 4.

⁴⁰ Song, Jeong and Kim, 'Identifying the Topology of the K-pop Video Community on YouTube', 2592–3.

⁴¹ Ibid.; Murthy and Sharma, 'Visualizing YouTube's Comment Space', 209–10.

⁴² Thelwall, Sud and Vis, 'Commenting on YouTube Videos', 624.

Table 11.1 Comments Analysed

Song	Total Comments Downloaded	Comments in English	Relevant Comments
Kings of Leon – ‘Use Somebody’	141	114	97
Bangles – ‘Walk Like An Egyptian’	147	133	118

An Egyptian’ from 1986 for our first pass at analysis.⁴³ The music was chosen to reflect different styles, eras and likely fans, while the official and original music video produced and released by the bands on Vevo was chosen for comparability. The comments were obtained through the YouTube API using the package *tuber*⁴⁴ available in the statistical software package R.⁴⁵ In January 2020 we downloaded 295 comments in total for these two songs, to explore machine coding and individual analysis (Table 11.1).

Analysing and Interpreting the Data

Word Frequencies

In an exploratory spirit, we approached this data in many different ways. The first was a simple tally of word frequencies. Word clouds provide a clear overview of the frequently mentioned words, and all words in Figures 11.1 and 11.2 appeared at least more than once (with word size corresponding to frequency). Figure 11.1 includes positive emotion words (like, love), music- and platform-specific words (song, YouTube, voice) and evaluative judgements (best, great, good, amazing) as well as elements of the lyrics (Leon, somebody, can). There are also references to other musicians (Bieber, One Direction). Figure 11.2 shows a slightly different picture, with the lyrics featuring more heavily (walk, like, Egyptian) and specific mention of the band and time period (Bangles, Susanna, Hoffs, 1980s).

⁴³ Kings of Leon, ‘Kings Of Leon – Use Somebody (Official Video)’, *YouTube video*, 00:03:50, 3 October 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gnhXHvRoUd0>; The Bangles, ‘The Bangles – Walk Like an Egyptian (Official Video)’, *YouTube video*, 00:03:22, 7 February 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cv6tuzHUuuk>.

⁴⁴ Gaurav Sood, *Tuber*, R package version 0.9.9 (2020), <https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/tuber/index.html>.

⁴⁵ R Core Team, *R: A Language and Environment for Statistical Computing*, R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria (2021), <http://www.R-project.org/>.

Linguistic Text Analysis

The second approach was to apply a linguistic text analysis software package. Considering the limits of LIWC in relation to context, we decided to apply the more targeted Evaluative Lexicon which is better able to judge degrees of emotionality than other software like LIWC. Version 2.0 contains 1,541 emotional words, derived from Amazon, TripAdvisor and Yelp reviews, movie and TV scripts and Twitter (1.5 billion words, 6.2 million unique words), which have been refined and validated empirically by judges to quantify valence (i.e. positive and pleasantness or negative and unpleasantness), extremity and emotionality. After applying the Evaluative Lexicon 2.0 to our dataset, we obtained the average scores for valence and extremity that are shown in Figure 11.3.

The two songs show a broadly similar pattern of results, with Kings of Leon being slightly more positively valenced and overall slightly more emotional in content. However, all such dictionary-based approaches can only process language that is predefined, and so these results are only based on comments that contain words that appear in the Evaluative Lexicon itself. For Kings of Leon, forty-eight comments (with an average length of 15.65 words) were included

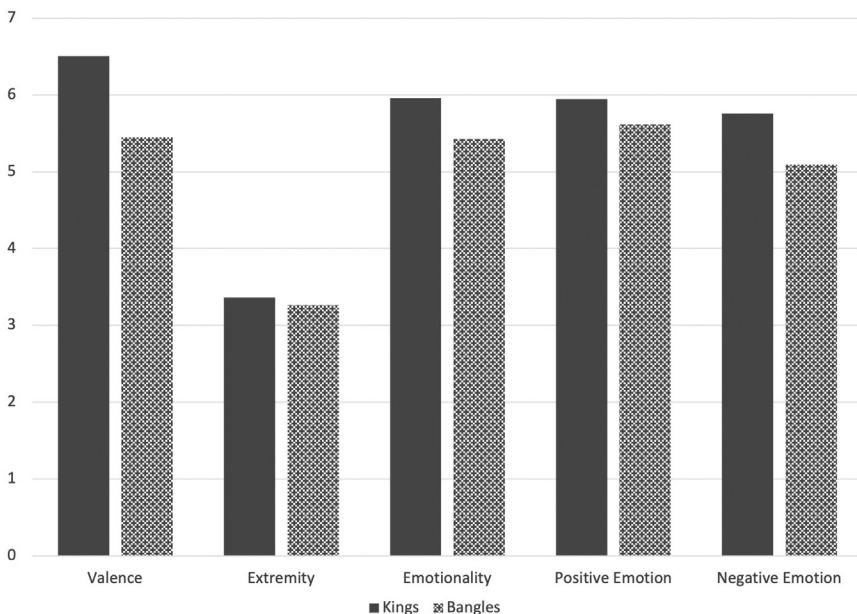


Figure 11.3 Evaluative Lexicon results.

(and ninety-seven comments with an average length of 5.49 words omitted), and for the Bangles fifty-two comments (with an average length of 24.87 words) were included (and 102 comments with an average length of 8.68 words omitted). This shows that comments containing emotional language are longer than those without. Yet not every relevant comment was picked up by the Evaluative Lexicon: for instance, 'This song always takes me back to Australia . . . Nostalgia' for Kings of Leon seems highly relevant in terms of emotions but remains uncoded.

As with other text analysis software, this analysis also fails to identify context as it is based on single words. For instance, 'this song makes me happy' is coded in the same way as 'this song doesn't make me happy'. 'Like' is particularly problematic in the Bangles song as it is contained in the lyrics as well as being used as an evaluation. More significantly, positive language is not always directed towards the song itself. For example, in a social share, the comment for Kings of Leon 'He is good but watch Harry Styles do the first bit! Incredible' scores highly on valence (7.61) but does not represent a positive evaluation of either the recording or the performer, referring to a different performance and artist. The need for human screening had already been highlighted by Khan et al. (2016) who highlighted the ambiguity of open comments in YouTube descriptors of technology reviews. Thus, our next step was to apply a more deductive theoretically grounded approach.

Manual Coding of Data

Using the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of music and emotion discussed earlier, a coding scheme was developed to manually identify key elements of YouTube comments in relation to emotional experiences, mechanisms or induction routes, and key factors highlighted in these frameworks (see Table 11.2 for details). The first step was to screen the language of the comments (we only kept comments written in the English language) and their relevance to this work, that is, if they were associated with the YouTube music video and the commenter's experience of that music. Then, we coded comments based on various aspects that have been deemed important for characterizing the emotional experience of the commenters at various phenomenological levels.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Scherer and Coutinho, 'How Music Creates Emotion', 128–9.

Table 11.2 Coding Scheme for YouTube Comments

Category	Code	Topic of comments
Artists or Performers	<i>Traits</i>	General about artist or performer, not related to the music or performance itself
	<i>Behaviour</i>	Performer behaviour with emotional implications
	<i>Interpretation</i>	How the performer(s) interprets the music (e.g. expressivity)
	<i>Context</i>	Context of the performance (e.g. location, occasion)
Music	<i>Lyrics</i>	Words or lyrics in the music
	<i>Appreciation</i>	Judgements and appreciation of the music
	<i>Perceived affect</i>	Affective qualities perceived in the music
	<i>Sound quality</i>	Production value, mixing or aspects of music presentation
Listener	<i>Behaviours</i>	Emotional behaviour and action tendencies (e.g. music makes the listener want to do something or behave in some way)
	<i>Physiological responses</i>	Physiological responses to music (e.g. 'makes my heart flutter', 'gives me chills')
	<i>Everyday feelings</i>	How the music makes the listener feel in everyday terms
	<i>Aesthetic feelings</i>	How music makes the listener feel in relation to music as an aesthetic object (e.g. moved, wonder, awe, rapture)
	<i>Thoughts</i>	Thoughts triggered by the music
	<i>Memories</i>	Memories evoked by the music
	<i>Identity</i>	How music speaks to or reflects a listener's identity or how they see themselves
	<i>Associations</i>	Feelings or emotions triggered due to associations between music and other topics (e.g. politics)
	<i>Uses</i>	Ways in which listeners used the music
	<i>Social sharing</i>	Sharing the music with other users or comments tagging other users
Other	<i>Source</i>	How listeners found the particular music on YouTube

These include comments that specifically related to the *performers* featured in the YouTube video, the *music* itself and various aspects of the *listener* experience.

After an initial coding exercise, several data-driven codes were added to the coding scheme, namely references to sound quality or presentation of the music, and some aspects related to social media use. Using this coding scheme, two volunteer coders worked through the 215 relevant comments with support from

the authors. Inter-rater reliability was calculated on their coding, which turned out not to be very high.⁴⁷ The rest of our analysis was done using the first coder's data as they were a native English speaker with some cultural knowledge of the two songs under investigation. The theoretical coding presented here includes all the categories, even where data was missing, since it is likely that with different datasets or a larger set of comments some of those missing categories might be found. We present them by high-level category from Table 11.2.

Artist/Performer Comments

The Bangles song evoked a large number of comments about the artist which were not connected to the music or the performance, particularly around Susanna Hoffs ('Damn Hot!'; '2017 and Susana's still smoking hot'). These were also found to a lesser extent in the Kings of Leon song (e.g. 'was lily his girlfriend in this video?'). The performers' behaviours were also frequently noted in this song, which has a particularly evocative video including elements of 'live' performance, dancing from the band and from members of the public. Comments often focused on the physicality of the female band members ('Seriously, this chick band was one of the few who could really rock. I doubt they actually play the instruments live, though . . .'). Interpretation was commonly noted in both songs (e.g. 'I love when he says "use" with a light voice', Kings of Leon), while context again was only commented on in the Bangles song in relation to locating the song in its time (the 1980s) and style (e.g. '1980's post Van Halen David Lee Roth @ 0:11') (Figure 11.4).

Music Comments

Music comments represented the largest proportion of the comments, with most being about the lyrics and judgements or appreciation of the music itself. For Kings of Leon more comments were made involving judgements of the music, whereas for the Bangles there were more comments around the lyrics, with some creative reworkings of the lyrics (e.g. 'The Egyptians – walk like a bangle', 'Walk with an erection . . .'). Comments about sound or musical quality were more frequent in the Kings of Leon song but occurred in both (e.g. 'Need

⁴⁷ Kings of Leon: Cohen's Kappa = .529 (p<.001), 95% CI (.424, .625), Bangles: Cohen's Kappa = .466 (p<.001), 95% CI (.371, .557).

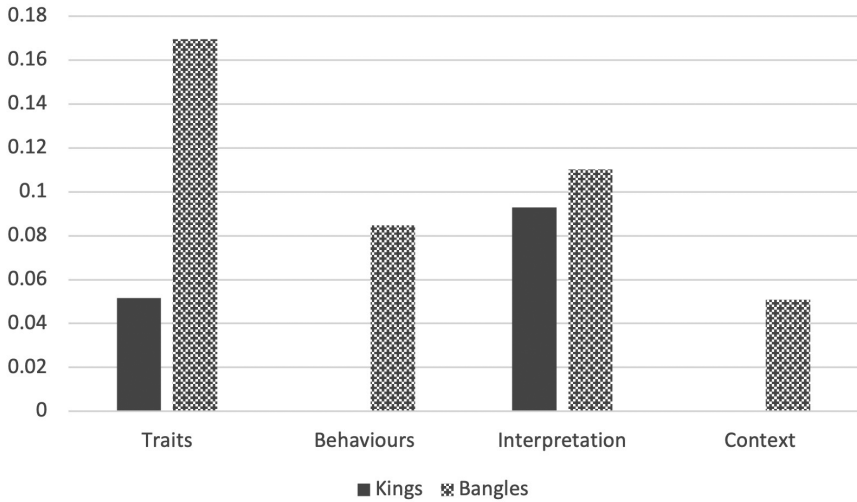


Figure 11.4 Artist/performer.

more tambourine, really explore the sound of the room,' Bangles); interestingly, these were not always positive (e.g. 'how much worse can a rock song get ???', Kings of Leon) (Figure 11.5).

Listener Comments

For the listener comments, most categories were rated similarly across the two songs, with a large number of memories, substantial behaviours and associations (e.g. 'This song always takes me back to Australia . . . Nostalgia', Kings of Leon; 'The fact that my mom knows this song makes this video more good for me', Bangles). What was surprising was the complete absence of comments about physiological responses, since other research has suggested that this is a common feature of immediate response to music.⁴⁸ However, a few comments which might relate to what we think of as physiological responses were coded as behaviours, such as crying (e.g. 'Damn I'm gonna cry – so many painful memories', Kings of Leon). The Bangles song evoked slightly more everyday feelings, but these tended to be short comments such as 'Love this song!' or 'Wow!!'. Non-musical associations included statements of politics (e.g. 'This song would be branded racist and offensive if released today', Bangles) or of opinion outside the song

⁴⁸ Gabrielsson, *Strong Experiences With Music*, 374.

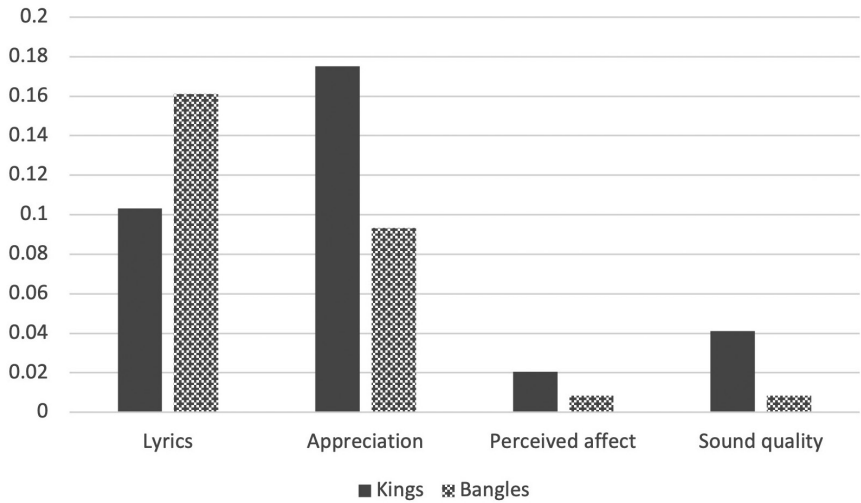


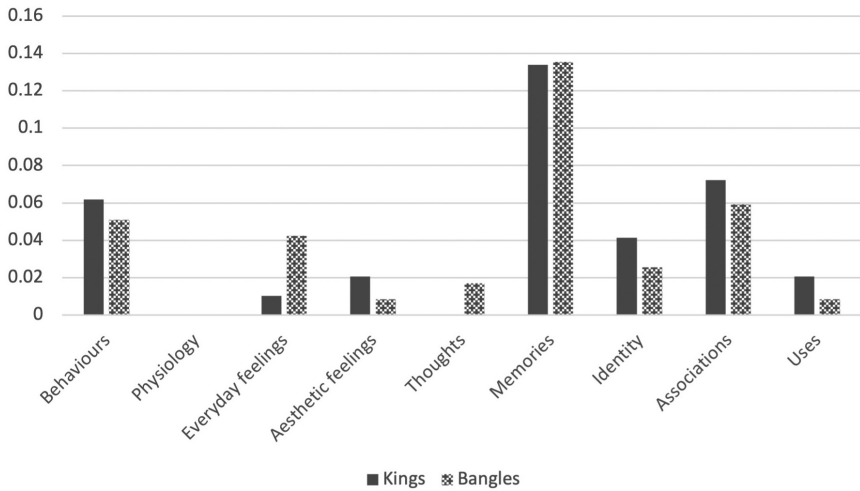
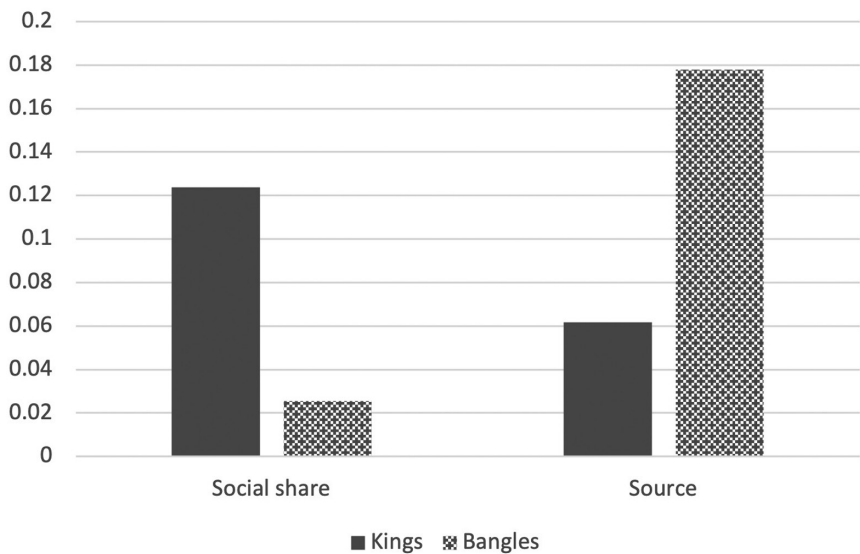
Figure 11.5 Music.

itself (e.g. ‘Random trivia that is not related to Jojo, The Bangles members hated this song, Bangles’) (Figure 11.6).

Other Comments

The other two kinds of response we found were aspects of social sharing and of the source of the particular listening experience, both of which were not predicted by our theoretical approach. Kings of Leon evoked more shared comments between listeners, with more use of the @ symbol (e.g. ‘@Duncan Sands The video came out whilst Diana and Gadaffi were alive!’), while the Bangles evoked far more comments about source which mostly focused on the use of the song in JoJo’s Bizarre Adventure (TV series) (e.g. ‘Not gonna lie jojo brought me here’) (Figure 11.7).

Our coding scheme needed revisiting through the course of the analysis, with the inclusion of the final category of source and social sharing being important for future work that encapsulates the interconnected networks of listeners online. Cultural references need to be included in future work looking at how people talk about music: the unanticipated comments about the reuse of the songs, covers and so on point to the importance of this kind of commentary on music and why it evokes emotion. The non-musical features of responses to music were also not expected and need to be incorporated: our initial framework was based

**Figure 11.6** Listener comments.**Figure 11.7** Other.

only on music but YouTube as an audiovisual medium clearly evokes responses that refer to physical appearance, such as the gendered or sexualized nature of the performers' appearance.

The numerical representation of this data above still belies some of the complexity in the responses that individuals gave, which points towards

an idiographic approach being necessary to really grasp the details of the comments.⁴⁹ A relatively long quote from one of the comments on the Bangles song illustrates this point:

I completely forgot that they got everyday people to do their best Egyptian walks. I was smiling and chuckling every time those happy people came on the screen just having fun trying to walk like an Egyptian. Not a great song, pretty badly dated looks, cringeworthy hair . . . but who cares. All those grinning faces and the sincere goofiness of this song – I can't fault this song, it made a cynical asshole (me) smile and laugh for a couple of minutes. P.S. Susanna Hoff was one of my all time crushes when I was a kid . . . yummy!

This comment refers to a specific moment in the video where the public was involved, the listener's emotional response both in the moment and in their own memory of the song (smiling, chuckling, smile and laugh), a (negative) evaluation of the quality of the song itself and also the dated fashion, alongside a (positive) evaluation of the singer, a memory of an all-time crush and a personally positive evaluation of the song ('can't fault this song'). This mixed bag of emotions and responses is hard to visualize from the general trends shown in the nomothetic analysis across the entire dataset and points to the need to explore online comments in more depth. This also highlights the public nature of online comments. The 'P.S.' postscript is the kind of discursive comment typical of a letter or a diary – intended to be read by others, written to appear unedited and following the format of an important yet somehow subsidiary point.

Furthermore, there are cultural references that are not picked up by the above analysis. The Bangles' song had been used as the closing song in the television anime series *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: Stardust Crusaders* in the mid-2010s. The comments from this song made in 2020 include many references to JoJo and other characters, such as 'Not gonna lie jojo brought me here' (not included in the Evaluative Lexicon coding) or 'Stardust Crusaders Flashback Me: start to cry The next thing youre going to say is IS THAT A MOTHERFUCKING JOJO REFERENCE???' (included as a negatively valenced comment in the Evaluative Lexicon coding but perhaps more intended as a positive response to the song).

This challenge of mixed and polarized emotions is clear from the text comments themselves. The Kings of Leon song, which evoked generally more emotion and more positive emotion from the Evaluative Lexicon results, was

⁴⁹ See similar approach by Alexandra Lamont, 'Emotion, Engagement and Meaning in Strong Experiences of Music Performance', *Psychology of Music* 40, no. 5 (2012): 582.

commented on by different listeners as highly positive ('I love love love love this!') and extremely negative ('How much worse can a rock song get?'). This latter comment suggests, as we considered earlier, that YouTube listeners do not always choose the music they listen to and clearly illustrates that they do not always like it.

Conclusions and Future Directions

The present work has provided us with a starting point for a multileveled and theoretically grounded approach to exploring YouTube comments on music videos. Given the mass of existing data, it would be easy to apply large-scale textual analysis methods such as word clouds or linguistic corpus analysis and this would certainly give an overview of the content of the comments and how they relate to broad emotional categories of positive and negative emotions and of emotional intensity. However, as we posited at the start, understanding emotional responses to music requires a much more nuanced approach. The idiographic data-driven inductive analysis applied by many researchers looking at richer and more reflective narratives such as from interviews is less practical when faced with a large corpus and when data is less rich, and the presence of many irrelevant comments also poses a problem for such an open approach. Thus, we need both combining hardware, functional and phenomenological levels of explanation and existing theoretical frameworks.

The theoretically informed coding scheme developed here, focusing on performative and contextual features, song-related judgements and changes in the listener, allows for a more nuanced approach that first takes into account the importance of context. One important outcome from our (albeit limited) analysis is the richness and sophistication of cultural references around the music itself, and a second related finding is the creative nature of comments. YouTube comment discourse is part of the rapidly changing internet discourse of memes, tweets, jokes and wordplay. A human touch, and one with knowledge of the cultural references underpinning these comments, is vital to avoid missing highly subtle and rapidly changing cultural references and connections. The theoretical scheme also allows for a clearer distinction between elements in the music itself and those evoked in the listener, which is often unclear in research on music, and also adds information about the artist or performer which other research has shown to be an important dimension of musical engagement.

Finally, the importance of social sharing on the internet is one of our unexpected findings but reinforces the points made at the start about the social nature of emotions evoked by music. If people post content on YouTube to stimulate social engagement, it is clear from our analysis that commentators are responding to that call, and as well as the direct personal connections they might reference in their comments, they are also speaking to a hidden audience of other commentators and viewers.

We have set the stage for future research to evaluate a much larger corpus of comments, to explore different types of music (organized by style, era or function) and to evaluate the potential differences between responses to different kinds of visual stimulus (such as filmic video content, live band performance, fan videos or visual imagery disconnected from the music). Comment data can be used to identify musical moments that evoke particular responses, such as through timestamps, to look at chills or peak emotions and their audio features. Text data from other platforms or systems (such as SoundCloud) may facilitate even more precise timing of emotion comments. And finally, the theoretically grounded coding outlined here could be used to select subsets of comments for more in-depth thematic analysis, for instance focusing on performance, lyrics or non-musical features.

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Exploring Time-Coded Comments on YouTube Music Videos of ‘Top 40’ Pop 2000–20

Eamonn Bell

As part of a larger project to understand the way that structural features of the design and implementation of radio technology influences its audiences – calling this the medium’s ‘physiognomy’ – Theodor Adorno opened the mailbags of the radio stations he was studying and a torrent of ‘fan mail’ flooded out.¹ Adorno argued that listeners’ ‘feedback’, their obsequious suggestions for change to the station’s music programmers (whom he accused of the standardization of sound culture as he knew it), masked a desire to assume the position of radio management, despite their apparent antagonism towards it.² Their letters reveal the contradictions that inhere in audience feedback and, usefully, often take music as their starting point. If, as Martin Scherzinger suggests, Adorno’s model of technological critique is robust enough to support a new ‘software physiognomy’, readers interested in the relationship between online audiences, digital media technology, music and mass culture would do well to turn to YouTube: both a top-flight distributor of music in the twenty-first century and a lively forum for user-generated discussion about music and musical culture, hosted in its notorious comment section.³ Here, I explore the intersection of these two functions of this platform. This is possible because YouTube has, since 2008, allowed users to easily create links that navigate directly to a given fragment of an online video: the website detects text comments that resemble valid time codes and renders each time code as a clickable hyperlink. The link skips the user directly to the moment in the video cited and (optionally) starts

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Current of Music: Elements of a Radio Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, English edn. (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 105ff.

² *Ibid.*, 108.

³ Martin Scherzinger, ‘Software Physiognomics: Adorno’s Radio Analytics Today’, *New German Critique* 43, no. 3, 129 (November 2016): 53–72.

playback at that point. These time-coded hyperlinks (e.g. ‘0:45 is my favorite part!!’) are also sometimes called ‘deep links’, because they use the structure of URLs to refer to ‘deep’ within the resource referenced by the hyperlink. Here are some examples of time-coded comments on music videos, all released in 2017:

- On a lyric video for The Chainsmokers and Coldplay, ‘Something Just Like This’ (2017): ‘The melody at 3:34 Shouldn’t be underestimated because thats my favourite part and i repeat many times’
- On a video for ZAYN ft. Sia, ‘Dusk to Dawn’ (2018): ‘If you wanna repeat the best high note of this masterpiece: 5:15’
- On a video for Taylor Swift, ‘Look What You Made Me Do’ (2017): ‘If u play the song at x2 speed, listen to the background music in the chorus it sounds like a snake rattling 2:06 – 2:19 3:06 – 3:19 3:22 - 3:35’

In this chapter, I examine comments like this; following Raynor Vliengdhart et al., I call them time-coded comments (TCCs).⁴ I first describe the historical background to TCCs on the Web and their use to date as a source for musicology. Then, I summarize their use in a large (over 1 million) set of TCCs responding to about 200 popular music videos on YouTube, with the help of a computational text analysis technique called topic modelling. This shows the variety of uses of TCCs by listeners on YouTube and paints a portrait of listening practices during this period which make use of the technological affordances of the platform, what might be called the platform’s software physiognomy. I also examine some non-normative uses of these comments, which push against the prevailing interaction types afforded by YouTube. Finally, I sketch the problems with and potential futures for the use of this kind of information by digital musicologists and other students of online musical culture.

YouTube Comments as a Source in Musicology

A recent report for the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision Archival Studies makes a convincing case for the preservation of YouTube comments specifically as a matter of preserving our digital media heritage, despite the

⁴ Raynor Vliengdhart, Martha Larson, Babak Loni and Alan Hanjalic, ‘Exploiting the Deep-Link Commentsphere to Support Non-Linear Video Access’, *IEEE Transactions on Multimedia* 17, no. 8 (August 2015): 1372–84.

technical, financial and legal hurdles to doing so.⁵ Certainly, the promise of YouTube comments has long been recognized by those interested in understanding and preserving online music cultures. An early example of the sustained and careful use of YouTube comments can be found in Áine Mangaoang's work on the Cebu Provincial Detention and Rehabilitation Center prison dancers in the Philippines.⁶ Amanda Edgar analysed over 5,000 comments and replies underneath recordings of N.W.A.'s 'Fuck tha Police' and pointed out how music and entertainment videos open up the possibility for counterhegemonic discourse within the largely corporate frame of the YouTube comment section.⁷ Edward K. Spencer has provided a compelling case for the usefulness of qualitatively coded YouTube comments to understand the complex relationship between spectral features, somatic response, emotion and the conspicuous consumption of music represented in comments on recordings of electronic dance music (EDM).⁸ While comments with time codes occasionally appear in work like this, they are usually used sparingly and their distinct affordances are rarely taken as the main object of analysis.

This chapter therefore shifts focus away from what we might learn about any one musical setting with the help of TCCs, towards what we can say about the use of TCCs themselves, admittedly within the broad frame of mainstream, Anglophone pop music video consumption on YouTube. Since commenters can use time codes to a specific moment in the parent video rather than to the video as whole, TCCs offer a distinctive precision and temporal resolution above and beyond the average YouTube comment and thus provide even greater potential value for both musicologists and the designers of new information retrieval systems. A closer focus by musicologists on TCCs in reply to music videos is justified, then, because time codes ultimately help commenters reason about their experiences by allowing concrete reference to the sounds they report hearing, without the mediation of transcription or conventional music notation. For example, one user comments on the music video for Fifth Harmony's *Work from*

⁵ Jack O'Carroll, 'YouTube Comments as Media Heritage: Acquisition, Preservation and Use Cases for YouTube Comments as Media Heritage Records' (The Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision Archival studies [UvA], 2019).

⁶ Áine Mangaoang, *Dangerous Mediations: Pop Music in a Philippine Prison Video* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

⁷ Amanda Nell Edgar, 'Commenting Straight from the Underground: N.W.A., Police Brutality, and YouTube as a Space for Neoliberal Resistance', *Southern Communication Journal* 81, no. 4 (7 August 2016): 223–36.

⁸ Edward K. Spencer, 'Re-Orientating Spectromorphology and Space-Form Through a Hybrid Acoustemology', *Organised Sound* 22, no. 3 (December 2017): 324–35.

Home (2016): ‘Who provides the long note at 3:01-3:04? It sounds like Camila at the start and Dinah at the end. Is it both of them?’ User-generated content online is the locus of community knowledge that exists outside of formal institutional settings; for TCCs on music videos and other YouTube videos with significant musical content, this body of knowledge is a genuinely analytical one. Time codes allow users to obtain the referentiality that some musicologists think of as central to music analysis, despite the fact that comments lack the trappings of close readings, such as music examples and measure numbers. As the YouTube platform pushes twenty years of age, a longitudinal study of its TCCs promises a tantalizing glimpse at historical shifts in listening practices, as the last seventeen years of its history have witnessed significant changes in the digital sites of pop music listening and ownership, from self-contained, ‘dumb’ portable media players (such as CD players and MP3 players) to always-connected, always-collecting streaming clients (such as smartphone and desktop applications).

Methodology

In the rest of this chapter, I examine some of the common uses of TCCs by users watching pop music videos on YouTube in a set of over a million TCCs. Topic modelling is a computational technique that summarizes commonalities in a set of textual data by clustering these texts, or documents, based on terms and phrases that each document shares with others.⁹ It helps us reason about large collections of text, based on the ‘topics’ that each text treats. I model 1.2 million TCCs on approximately 200 music videos for pop songs hosted on YouTube in late 2021. These YouTube music videos appeared on a marginally popular playlist entitled ‘Hit Songs 2000 to 2020 – Top Hits 2000 to 2020 Playlist’ posted by the Red Entertainment Group, a Romania-based content curator active on YouTube under the ‘Redlist’ brand. The complete list of videos included in the dataset admittedly reflects a bias towards Anglophone Top 40 popular music, with release dates unevenly distributed over the period from 2000 to 2020. Though the precise criteria for inclusion on this playlist are opaque, this is true of most curated playlists on YouTube and is typical of non-label promotional

⁹ The treatment here of the technical detail of topic modeling and its various implementations is necessarily abbreviated. For a gentle introduction to topic modelling, see Scott Weingart, ‘Topic Modeling for Humanists: A Guided Tour’, *The Scottbot Irregular*, 25 July 2012, <http://www.scottbot.net/HIAL/?p=19113>.

activity on the platform. These comments were collected with the help of the open-source software yt-dlp (a fork of the popular youtube-dl tool) and GNU Parallel, led by Ole Tange.¹⁰ A 30-topic BERTopic model was trained on a random sample of the full text of 200,000 TCCs. The fitted model was used to make single-topic predictions for every one of the 1.2 million TCCs in the dataset.¹¹ TCCs that express similar or identical topics should be similar to each other, if not in tone and intention, at least in content. The BERTopic technique was chosen as it makes use of contemporary natural language processing techniques in widespread use, so-called neural or semantic-space models of language, the importance of which is described briefly in the conclusion.

BERTopic also supports agglomerating discovered topics based on their similarity. This is crucial here, since preliminary experiments surfaced several hundred distinctive topics within the dataset: these have been further clustered manually into thirty distinctive topics. I have given a loose, personal-interpretative label for each topic to help orient the reader towards the ‘findings’ of the topic model. Notably, a large proportion of the TCCs does not fall easily into one of these thirty categories and is not assigned to a topic by the trained model; these residual comments are covered in part in this chapter and many features of the TCCs are described, though they demand further analysis. The results of this process are summarized in Table 12.1. Next, I further aggregated closely related topics into a more manageable number of ‘TCC types.’ For some of these types, I describe their distinctive features and give a number of TCCs that exemplify them. I also examine some examples of non-normative uses of TCCs, which are less common in the dataset and therefore are not prominent within the thirty clusters surfaced by the topic model. Such TCCs do not always obviously refer to the specific content of the music video. Rather, they often represent either humorous or ironic engagement with the platform’s affordances or, sometimes, a failure to correctly handle time code-like text (e.g. clock times and references to scripture) on the part of the platform.

¹⁰ ‘GitHub – Yt-Dlp/Yt-Dlp: A Youtube-Dl Fork with Additional Features and Fixes’, <https://github.com/yt-dlp/yt-dlp>; Ole Tange, *GNU Parallel* 2018, March 2018.

¹¹ Maarten Grootendorst, ‘BERTopic: Neural Topic Modeling with a Class-Based TF-IDF Procedure’, *arXiv*, March 2022, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2203.05794>.

Table 12.1 Aggregate Results of a 30-Topic BERTopic Topic Model Trained on a Random Sample 200,000 Comments Extracted from a Larger Set of TCCs and Used to Predict Topic Assignments for the Full Set of 1.2 million TCCs, Posted in Reply to Parent Videos Representing Music Popular in the Anglosphere between 2000 and 2020

BERTopic Number	Topic Words	Interpretative Label	Comment Count	(% total)	Mean Like Count
-1	yeah tcttimecode de like girl need	unclassified (see Methodology)	739,162	61	5.92
0	tcttimecode np doe tcttimecodework pregnet	time code only – ‘bare’ time code	113,903	9	0.66
1	drake lol tcttimecode did notice	celebrity spotting	29,170	2	2.61
17	david guetta looks pitt brad	celebrity spotting	9,862	1	2.50
23	homework whats girl song know	who is that?	9,035	1	3.58
21	looks like miranda carly look	celebrity spotting	8,833	1	1.86
29	hair shawn camila flip camilla	[incoherent] celebrity spotting	6,837	1	8.74
			63,737	5	
3	best tccrange moment tcttimecode song	best part/best section	25,093	2	3.59
5	favorite tccrange fav favourite song	best part/best section	17,199	1	4.20
19	tcttimecode later thank best parte	best part/best section ‘thank me later’	9,243	1	8.97
25	love bee minecraft postal song	best part/best section	7,665	1	3.85
			59,200	5	
4	dance dancing cool moves dancer	noticing dancer	16,724	1	4.34
8	dab teacher marshmello shes tcttimecode	noticing dance moves	12,819	1	7.23
			29,543	2	
16	wtf boobs clown boob tcttimecode	noticing something shocking/titillating	11,546	1	1.95
13	dead walking omg scared killed	noticing something shocking	10,685	1	2.75
26	tccrange wut lol wth cringe	noticing something shocking	6,984	1	1.43
			29,215	2	

7	pause left girl creepy head	pause to see something shocking	13,637	1	1.83
10	minuto el ghost en fantasma	pause to see something shocking	12,072	1	1.25
			<u>25,709</u>	<u>2</u>	
2	pm watching views 2018 tcttimecodepm	listening-log comment	23,470	2	4.47
9	face epic tho lmao look	noticing a facial expression	15,254	1	2.01
22	hand tattoo arabic fly protection	noticing hands, arms and tattoos	7,927	1	12.91
			<u>23,181</u>	<u>2</u>	
27	tcttimecode frosch grandpa	0:00 comments, multiple per comment	8,307	1	5.38
	tcttimecode tcttimecode der				
28	replay button tcttimecode free buttons	replay buttons/0:00	7,513	1	22.41
			<u>15,820</u>	<u>1</u>	
11	xd badak bra tcttimecode ikan	[incoherent] mix, including bahasa Indonesia content	13,749	1	1.55
6	video tcttimecode chat tik tok	inbound viewers from TikTok	13,678	1	4.68
12	jesus god christ lord shall	biblical references 'spam'	11,140	1	2.66
14	fuck said say karate says	WTF (and assorted profanity)	10,583	1	6.13
15	voice singing sing song pitbull	noticing the song	9,795	1	4.22
20	starts start song music magic	'song starts here'	9,660	1	3.06
18	phone samsung apps messaging missed	ASCII-art comments	9,426	1	5.60
24	illuminati eyes eye confirmed close	noticing symbolism in video (illuminati)	8,391	1	2.09
			1,209,362	100	4.94

These results were used to inform the discussion of TCC types in the associated chapter but do not entirely cover the spectrum of commenting behaviours in the dataset.

Some Types of TCCs on Pop Music Videos on YouTube

Affect

Buried within individual TCCs, then, are deep emotional and affectual responses to music videos – both their visual and sonic content – expressed without the technical vocabulary of cinema and music.¹² For example, this allows a commenter in reply to Amy Winehouse, ‘Back To Black’ (2006), to explain their reaction to the one-off bridge section before the song’s final chorus:

2:45 . . . this part breaks me a little. Idk why but I remember about all the times I’ve cried and nobody was there to help me. . . . I lost many friends time ago, then I’ve always been shy and I don’t trust people, so I don’t talk that much . . . then I’ve also been in love with a boy, he didn’t love me back and I was really hurt.

As with all online text, there is a risk that the kinds of topics treated by authors skew towards those likely to attract approbation: relatively long, ‘deep meaningful comments’ are popular on the platform, though the above-cited comment attracted a modest thirty-five likes. But shorter and less popular comments also capture something of the emotional experience of listeners. On Taylor Swift’s ‘Wildest Dreams’ (2014), for example, a commenter simply writes ‘Best moment at 0:40 Makes me feel torn and at the same time like i’m in love’ in exchange for no likes: marginal attention from other users. By contrast, this TCC, posted in response to Billie Eilish’s ‘everything i wanted’ (2019), captures the close and intricate relations between affect (‘vibes’), autobiographical memory, musical memory (the connection with the video game soundtrack) and interpretation:

At 2:08 it gives me the vibes of when we used to play that weird sonic game as a kid and if he was underwater for too long it would play these sounds and I remember it being close to the ‘do do do dO’ in the background so. And it completely makes sense because if she is under water too long she will ya know . . . drown.

On occasion, users will enter into dialogue with each other and try to offer explanations for how the music works, as in this exchange in response to twenty-one pilots, ‘Heathens’ (2016): User A (233 likes), ‘This song gives me goosebumps and I don’t know why’; User B (six likes), one of twenty replies, ‘It

¹² See the previous chapter in this book, Alexandra Lamont, Scott Bannister and Eduardo Coutinho, “‘Talking’ About Music: The Emotional Content of Comments on YouTube Videos’.

actually is because of the music. The chord at 00:23 is a D major with an E. That makes it have an eerie feel to it.' Despite its inaccuracies, comments like this show at least an attempt to marshal music's affective qualities in familiar music-analytical terms.

Musical Structure

TCCs can also help us understand the social construction of musical structure: how structurally significant moments in particular genres reflect not only salient musical features that inhere in sound but also conventional and affectual functions shared by a group of listeners. Researchers have already shown how information in TCCs on SoundCloud recordings of 100 mainstream electronic dance music tracks can speed up the automatic detection of the structurally significant and generically typical 'drop', through the use of more conventional music-analytical techniques.¹³ TCCs reveal not only where listeners hear a drop (as in 'The drop is where CadiB [*sic*] comes in 2:53 <— click it (you know you want to)', on Maroon 5, 'Girls Like You' (2017)) but also where their expectations about where the drop *should* be are violated (as in '1:40 bit disappointing, where's the hard drop?' on Clean Bandit, 'Symphony' (2017)). Another structural use of TCCs worth calling attention to, not represented in the data analysed, is to compile track listings for transfers from analogue media or for recordings of live musical performances. These TCCs can include valuable information about as-yet-unreleased or unknown tracks, sometimes known as 'Track IDs' (especially in electronic dance music circles).¹⁴ TCCs also afford intertextual links between songs on the basis of their lyrics. For example, one commenter annotates the Billie Eilish track 'goodbye' (2019), showing how the lyrics of the final track of album of the same year, *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?*, recapitulate the preceding tracks. This fan work garners the commenter over 2,000 likes. The likes and replies that comments like this accumulate

¹³ Karthik Yadati, Martha Larson, Cynthia C. S. Liem and Alan Hanjalic, 'Detecting Drops in Electronic Dance Music: Content Based Approaches to a Socially Significant Music Event', in *Proceedings of the 15th International Society for Music Information Retrieval Conference (ISMIR 2014)* (15th International Society for Music Information Retrieval (ISMIR) Conference, Taipei, Taiwan, 2014), 143–8; Karthik Yadati, Martha Larson, Cynthia C. S. Liem and Alan Hanjalic, 'Detecting Socially Significant Music Events Using Temporally Noisy Labels', *IEEE Transactions on Multimedia* 20, no. 9 (September 2018): 2526–40. See also, Paul Lamere, 'The Drop Machine', *Music Machinery – a Blog about Music Technology by Paul Lamere* (blog), 16 June 2015, <https://musicmachinery.com/2015/06/16/the-drop-machine/>.

¹⁴ Steven Colburn, 'Filming Concerts for YouTube: Seeking Recognition in the Pursuit of Cultural Capital', *Popular Music and Society* 38, no. 1 (2015): 59–72.

evidence time spent imposing temporal structure on music using TCCs; this time is exchanged for the fan capital that these ‘engagements’ represent.

Imagery

Users often use time codes to give a temporal structure to their observations about the imagery in music videos, supporting hearings of the music with concrete reference to the accompanying video. Commenting on the video for Little Mix’s certified UK platinum release ‘Black Magic’ (2015), one user uses TCCs to put a somewhat finer (if, admittedly, relatively blunt) point on the video’s retrogressive sexual politics:

morale of the story 1. 0:18 nerdy girls are clumsy and unattractive 2: 0:36 you get to be a royal bitch if you are **hot** 3. 1:38 you need to dress **hot** and slutty to attract the boys 4. 1:59 only when you are **hot**, you get to bully others. dont you dare stand up for yourself when you look like a loser 5: 2:17 same for guys, if you are not **hot** you need magic 6 3:05 instead of helping e class pay attention, use your magic to make the class go fun and crazy yup, a very faithful murica production.

A more popular comment, containing an extended time-coded interpretation of the music video for Sia’s ‘Chandelier’ (2014), is reposted several times and reads the video’s extended use of dance as a parable for alcoholism and depression. It is not always straightforward to disentangle filmic interpretation from musical observations, as this excerpt from a longer response to Adele’s ‘Hello’ (2015) makes clear:

So lets analyze this [...] @ 1:21 ‘Hello it’s me’ ... (as stated below ... she wins the Granny here) @ 1:45 ‘Hello, Can you year me?’ This is so good that I had to make it my ring tone [...] @ 2:26 ... that slow blush of the eyes ... and that sweet pain in her voice. Man, I can go on an on ... but here is what it is ... it gives you goose bumps, orgasms, and takes you into a state of Nirvana, all at the same time .. What a song and what a beauty !!

The combination of music and moving image in music video is its hallmark as a cultural form: this affords ready connections with other music videos along multiple axes of comparison. Predictably, commenters are quick to pick up on these allusions and identify them with time codes, as in the case of Anne-Marie’s ‘2002’ (released 2018) which fittingly invokes early ‘oughties releases by Britney Spears, N*SYNC and more. It also poses challenges for the computational analyses of TCCs, as their references to sound and vision are rarely determinate.

Listening-Log Comments

YouTube's straightforward algorithm for detecting time codes in comment text often incorrectly converts text that resembles a time code, such as clock times (e.g. 12.01 am) or some non-conventional formats (e.g. 01:05:20 – i.e. 5 May 2020), into clickable TCCs. Thus, another common TCC type is the 'listening log'-type comment. Here, a user either simply states a date and time we assume corresponds to their local time while listening or appeals to other users to determine who else is 'out there' listening at the same time. For example, this comment responding to Coldplay, 'Hymn for the Weekend' (2015), is typical: 'Hey it's 11:16 pm March 7th, who's watching right now? Write your date and time ^_^'. Sometimes these journal entries appear with more or less effusive praise for the track, though they are more likely to be unqualified. However, they are sometimes maintained by dedicated fans who return to and update their comments with the time and date of their latest relisten, occasionally with a record of their location or emotional state at the time.¹⁵ These are ripe for parody, of course, with one commenter writing in 2016, in response to Adele's 'Hello' (2015), 'Hoo wach it in nuketown 2025 18:35pm', and another, in response to Akon's 'Smack That' (2006), 'who's watching on 7 December 1941 at 7:48 in Hawii?????'

0:00 Comments

Users worked around the platform's lack of the replay feature by making tactical use of the comment sections' deep-linking function to curate comments that can be used as surrogate, since they contain a link to the start of the music video. 0:00 comments can demonstrate that a user enjoyed the video enough that they immediately sought to 'rewind' to the start of the track; occasionally, the time code is embedded inside a message of approval (e.g. 'M0:00AR', 'm0:00re!!!!').¹⁶ Less popular than many of these more light-hearted topics is the use of 0:00 comments to circumvent pre-roll video ads on YouTube. We might think about these efforts as attempts to deprogram the specific televisual 'flow'

¹⁵ See, among others, Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹⁶ 'M0:00RE', Know Your Meme, accessed 19 March 2022, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/m000re>.

imposed upon YouTube's archive by its corporate stewards.¹⁷ This one simple trick was supplanted by more sophisticated ad blockers and, in exchange, more sophisticated mitigations: anti ad-blocker techniques. Still, an interesting economy surrounds these 0:00 comments, dividing authors who describe themselves as 'offering' the time codes for use into two broad groups: those who freely offer the link without expecting anything in exchange and those who claim exact "payment", usually in the form of likes, which place the comment (and the author's account) more prominently in YouTube's screen real estate.¹⁸

ASCII-Art Comments

The standard YouTube player user interface (UI) encourages 'all-the-way'-through engagement with a video and forces users to view ads before progressing to the rest of the video content. Lately, the platform automatically plays algorithmic recommendations for the next video. Some researchers in the field of human-computer interaction have already proposed alternative interfaces for online video players that leverage the information about the video content that is contained in its TCCs.¹⁹ Interestingly, commenters themselves have come up with their own, bottom-up solutions, simulating the user interface of a media player in their TCCs. Complete with fictitious playback buttons (play, pause, etc.), time-elapsed indicators and progress bars, these comments represent the vestigial features of digital music players that predate the YouTube moment. These relatively brief comments are almost always copy-pasted from a small source of base 'player' styles (see Figure 12.1, examples A–E) and often minimally adjusted to reflect title and duration of the parent video. These snippets of ASCII-art, sometimes called 'playlist decor', are collected in sites like

¹⁷ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, 3rd edn, Routledge Classics (London: New York: Routledge, 2003), ch. 4.

¹⁸ For an example of similar ironies in other online spaces, see Blake Durham and Georgina Born, 'Online Music Consumption and the Formalisation of Informality: Exchange, Labour and Sociality in Two Music Platforms', in *Music and Digital Media: A Planetary Anthropology*, forthcoming.

¹⁹ Raynor Vliegndhart, Martha Larson and Alan Hanjalic, 'LikeLines: Collecting Timecode-Level Feedback for Web Videos Through User Interactions', in *Proceedings of the 20th ACM International Conference on Multimedia, MM '12* (Nara, Japan: Association for Computing Machinery, 2012), 1271–2; Raynor Vliegndhart, Babak Loni, Martha Larson and Alan Hanjalic, 'How Do We Deep-Link? Leveraging User-Contributed Time-Links for Non-Linear Video Access', in *Proceedings of the 21st ACM International Conference on Multimedia, MM '13* (Barcelona, Spain: Association for Computing Machinery, 2013), 517–20; Vliegndhart et al., 'Exploiting the Deep-Link Commentsphere to Support Non-Linear Video Access'; Matin Yarmand, Dongwook Yoon, Samuel Dodson, Ido Roll and Sidney S. Fels, '"Can You Believe [1:21]?": Content and Time-Based Reference Patterns in Video Comments', in *Proceedings of the 2019 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, CHI '19* (New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 2019), 1–12.

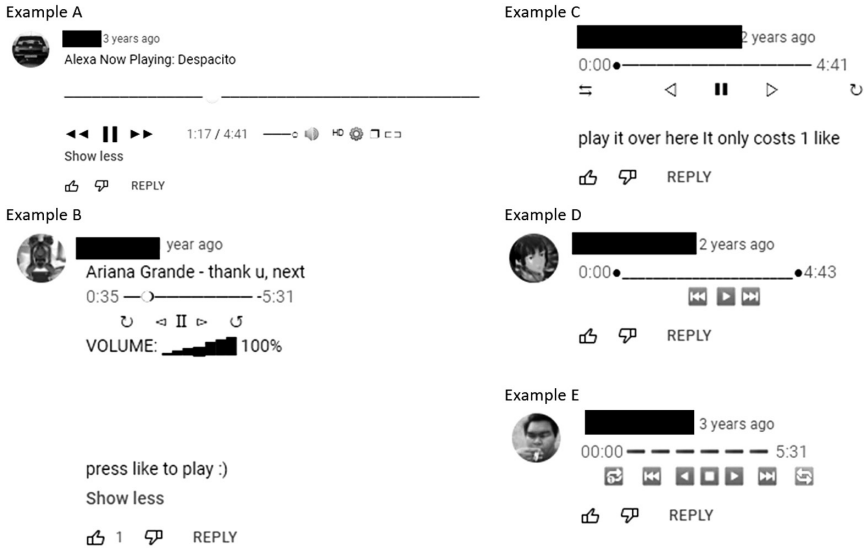


Figure 12.1 Five examples of ASCII-/Unicode-art players as they appear in a dataset of TCCs on YouTube videos of pop music. Screenshots of the comment in situ show a variety of base player styles, likely copy-pasted by the user and adjusted to reflect the playing time and title of the parent video.

aestheticemoji.com and cutesymbols.net for easy copy-pasting by users. Along with their liberal use of emoji, non-Latin alphabets and extended character sets from the Unicode standard, these comments are allied not only with 2010-era Tumblr and Myspace content but also its contemporary revival in the ‘Aesthetic aesthetic’ elsewhere online. These skeuomorphic sketches, echoes of other devices growing obsolete, aspire towards a greater freedom of user expression within the constraints of the YouTube commentsphere, which these other more freewheeling platforms stand for.

Overlong Time Codes

Interestingly, a small number of TCCs contain time codes in which the detected timestamp exceeds the total duration of the video. These TCCs usually encompass deliberate trolling, where users use timestamps in excess of the playing time of the video to promise aggravating or titillating content, for example: ‘OMG 3:58 made me cryyyy’ (on a music video with duration 3:57), ‘Justin’s face at 3:46 :D SOOO FUNNY’ (duration, 3:39) or ‘the best part was at 5:32’ (duration 3:36). This TCC type also includes the use of ranges to cover the whole running time,

as in ‘My favorite part is 0:00 -> 4:27’ (several commenters on several videos); here, the intent is harder to discern since the comment could be construed as a sarcastic imitation of users who post such comments sincerely, or as a genuine expression of approval for the whole track. We have already discussed the use of timestamps and date stamps in listening-log TCCs, which are incorrectly presented as clickable deeplinks to users. Analogously, the dataset contains a considerable amount of irrelevant or ‘spam’ comments, some containing multiple references to religious texts: biblical citations to chapter and verse also resemble time codes and are also incorrectly converted to clickable TCCs by YouTube’s platform.

Towards the Future: Challenges for Research with TCCs

Participants in mainstream social media platforms are lately not just users but what Axel Bruns calls ‘producers’, whose digital labour is captured, repackaged and resold as behavioural, social, political or commercial insight.²⁰ Researchers, in industry and academia, aim to extract valuable information from such loosely structured user-generated content, including, but not limited to, YouTube comments. This data can then be used to improve multimedia retrieval systems – for example, search engines, recommendation engines, playlisting services – by attempting to integrate the preferences expressed by users in these comments into the criteria used to rank and promote content on the platform.²¹ This is the background to cultural studies’ interest in the same data; as Richard Rogers argues, it is useful to appropriate some of the techniques of commerce and industry to analyse cultural data at scale.²²

However, these techniques have their limitations, which manifest even in a cursory analysis of TCCs. Difficult or unruly user data – such as the 0:00 comments, overlong or otherwise invalid TCCs – should not be excluded from

²⁰ Axel Bruns, ‘From Prosumer to Producer: Understanding User-Led Content Creation’, *Transforming Audiences 2009*, 2009, <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/27370/>.

²¹ See, for example, Stefan Siersdorfer, Sergiu Chelaru, Wolfgang Nejdl and Jose San Pedro, ‘How Useful Are Your Comments?: Analyzing and Predicting YouTube Comments and Comment Ratings’, *Proceedings of the 19th International Conference on World Wide Web, WWW ’10* (New York: ACM, 2010), 891–900; Julio Savigny and Ayu Purwarianti, ‘Emotion Classification on YouTube Comments Using Word Embedding’, in *2017 International Conference on Advanced Informatics, Concepts, Theory, and Applications (ICAICTA)* (2017), 1–5; Aliaksei Severyn, Alessandro Moschitti, Olga Uryupina, Barbara Plank and Katja Filippova, ‘Multi-Lingual Opinion Mining on YouTube’, *Information Processing & Management* 52, no. 1 (January 2016): 46–60.

²² Richard Rogers, *Digital Methods* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013).

analysis simply because they cannot easily be synchronized to the time-based media to which they are related: they are only malformed with regard to a particular end. Deliberate and subversive attempts to troll other users by using intentionally opaque or invalid time codes, as well as the incorrect detection of time code-like citations throughout the platform, confound such ready algorithmic extraction of these data, by both industrial researchers and, perhaps ironically, academic researchers.

YouTube, like other Alphabet online properties, continued to host scores of user tests, in which new user interfaces are tested on website users.²³ One such test, which went live in October 2021, trialled the introduction of a graph-like visualization of the most rewatched video segments, called ‘Heatseeker’.²⁴ Another experiment, which graduated to a full feature, extracted time-coded data from video descriptions to derive clickable video ‘chapters’, another feature proven to be popular with users and the platform owners, since they enable subsections of longer videos to appear in search results in the Alphabet-owned Google internet search property, further fragmenting the audiovisual object.²⁵ However, it seems at the time of writing that user comments containing TCCs that delineate these segments, or offer alternative parsings of the parent video, are ignored – if they exist at all. The only approved non-linear paths through video media are those provided by the video author or the uploading user, while user-generated alternatives are condemned to the comments section. As with the abolition of YouTube annotations (completed in 2019), the site’s owners are evidently ambivalent about the promise of user-generated hypertext, leaving TCCs in the comment section as the only means to project users’ dreams for the time-critical futures of the platform.

Some of the antinomies of working with TCCs are inherited from the attitudes to and problems with the platform more generally. YouTube comments were viewed by respondents to a 2013 survey as not particularly reputable, relevant

²³ ‘YouTube Test Features and Experiments – YouTube Community’, <https://support.google.com/youtube/thread/18138167/youtube-test-features-and-experiments>; Noortje Marres and David Stark, ‘Put to the Test: For a New Sociology of Testing’, *The British Journal of Sociology* 71, no. 3 (2020): 423–43.

²⁴ Damien Wilde, ‘YouTube UI Test Highlights ‘Most Viewed’ Video Portions in Playback Progress Bar Graph’, *9to5Google* (blog), 11 October 2021, <https://9to5google.com/2021/10/11/youtube-ui-test-highlights-most-viewed-video-portions-in-playback-progress-bar-graph/>.

²⁵ ‘YouTube Tests “Video Chapters” to Skip Through to Relevant Sections in a Video’, *Social Media Today*, <https://www.socialmediatoday.com/news/youtube-tests-video-chapters-to-skip-through-to-relevant-sections-in-a-vi/576048/>; ‘YouTube Makes Video Chapters Official, Helping You Skip to the Parts That Matter’, *Android Police* (blog), 29 May 2020, <https://www.androidpolice.com/2020/05/29/youtube-is-rolling-out-video-chapters-to-help-you-skip-to-the-parts-that-matter/>.

or essential to the viewing experience.²⁶ Despite this, they remain relatively popular: about 12 per cent of viewers will leave comments under a given video, while over half of their survey respondents agreed that they often read the first one or two comments after watching a YouTube video.²⁷ Studies drawing on YouTube data that claim some representativeness significantly risk overstating the musical preferences of a self-selecting cohort of online commenters. Patricia Lange sounded the alarm early in the history of the site, observing that ‘it is a synchronically-laden categorisation to seek a person who posts videos on YouTube, and assume that they were, are, and always will be “ordinary”’.²⁸ Lange was thinking primarily of users who post videos, though much the same goes for commenters.

Worse, recent research shows that the specific implementation of the comment section has led to the contagion of racial antagonisms inside and across videos at the ‘meso’ level of the social network.²⁹ Racism – and, by extension, other harms – in the YouTube comments section ought not to be characterized as exceptional and sporadic incivility, trolling or flaming; rather, as Dhiraj Murthy and Sanjay Sharma argue, ‘online hostility’ is ‘a networked phenomenon’ that predates the Web.³⁰ Indeed, comment sections were the focus of policy changes by YouTube designed to protect children from exploitative, predatory and sexualizing behaviour, concerns about which first surfaced around the same time as the Elagate controversy in 2017 but were only heeded two years later, as large advertisers began to terminate their relationships with YouTube.³¹ TCCs can facilitate the spread of objectionable and harmful material under musical guises, a problem with (but hardly specific to) recorded dance performances by Black YouTube users, flagged up for quite some time now by Kyra Gaunt.³²

²⁶ Peter Schultes, Verena Dorner and Franz Lehner, ‘Leave a Comment! An In-Depth Analysis of User Comments on YouTube’, in *Wirtschaftsinformatik Proceedings 2013* 42 (11th International Conference on Wirtschaftsinformatik, Leipzig, 2013), 659.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 660.

²⁸ Patricia G. Lange, ‘(Mis)Conceptions about YouTube’, in *Video Vortex Reader: Responses to YouTube*, ed. Geert Lovink and Sabine Niederer (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2008), 90.

²⁹ Dhiraj Murthy and Sanjay Sharma, ‘Visualizing YouTube’s Comment Space: Online Hostility as a Networked Phenomena’, *New Media & Society* 21, no. 1 (January 2019): 209.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 193.

³¹ ‘YouTube Bans Comments on All Videos of Children’, *BBC News*, 28 February 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-47408969>; ‘The Disturbing YouTube Videos That Are Tricking Children’, *BBC News*, 26 March 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-39381889>; ‘Nestle, Disney Pull YouTube Ads, Joining Furor Over Child Videos’, *Bloomberg.com*, 20 February 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-02-20/disney-pulls-youtube-ads-amid-concerns-over-child-video-voyeurs>.

³² Kyra D. Gaunt, ‘YouTube, Twerking & You: Context Collapse and the Handheld Co-Presence of Black Girls and Miley Cyrus’, *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 27, no. 3 (September 2015): 244–73;

These serious issues with content aside, access issues also proliferate: YouTube data is proprietary data, which is regulated not only by terms of service agreements but also by a nest of national and international legislation that has tended to favour the rights of the owners of the Web property on which the data is made available. In late 2020, related to the policy changes described above, the comment section on likely millions of audio-only videos (so-called Art Tracks) was disabled; undisclosed millions of comments were lost and, with them, valued fan feedback – much to the vocal frustration of small artists.³³ Additionally, although the latest version of the YouTube Data API allows the mass retrieval of comments by technical and semi-technical researchers and quota is relatively generous, the number of requests required to paginate through millions of comments and their replies means that costly quota increases are necessary at the scale required to retrieve and filter TCCs. For this reason, researchers may prefer to use non-official means to retrieve comments (including the popular youtube-dl package and its derivatives), which have the added advantage of insuring against a potential post-API future, in which authorized access to YouTube comment data may be withdrawn.³⁴

Conclusion

Keeping these challenges of working with TCCs in mind, the future for research into the narrower domain of music and music videos with TCCs is relatively bright, once data is generated from careful and equitable comment curation, collection and preservation efforts. Future research might examine the role of YouTube TCCs and their associated memes in canon formation in online-first music cultures and, relatedly, language change in references to music more generally. TCCs have the capacity to pinpoint the appearance of new music production practices as well as the circulation of samples and Track IDs, which are often identified by fans shortly after the release of new tracks online and in

Kyra D. Gaunt, 'The Disclosure, Disconnect, and Digital Sexploitation of Tween Girls' Aspirational YouTube Videos', *Journal of Black Sexuality and Relationships* 5, no. 1 (2018): 91–132.

³³ 'YouTube Mass Disables All Comments on "Art Track" Music Videos', *Reclaim The Net* (blog), 18 December 2020, <https://reclaimthenet.org/youtube-mass-disables-comments-art-track-music-videos/>.

³⁴ Deen Freelon, 'Computational Research in the Post-API Age', *Political Communication* 35, no. 4 (October 2018): 665–8; Axel Bruns, 'After the "APocalypse": Social Media Platforms and Their Fight Against Critical Scholarly Research', *Information, Communication & Society* 22, no. 11 (September 2019): 1544–66.

advance of their analysis by critics or other writers. Academic music theorists have lately taken an interest in the transmission of music theory online; because TCCs enable references to music without the mediation of notation, viewers and content creators can use them to structure their listening *en route* to written musical literacy.³⁵ There is also the possibility that phenomena described by music psychologists, such as chills, earworms and music-evoked autobiographical memories (MEAMs) can benefit from the extension of laboratory studies using more naturalistic data as it occurs on social listening platforms.³⁶ And, most speculatively, there is the capacity for a large-scale study of TCCs to reveal historic shifts in listening practices over the last two decades, as notions of the ownership of digital media are put at stake through the rise of streaming and in reactions against the same that are palpable in counterhegemonic musical niches that carve out their presence online nonetheless.

Perhaps the most promising technological development is the recent peak in interest in so-called neural or semantic search technology. Clustering and retrieval of similar documents can be completed with minimal human labelling ('supervision') and few assumptions about the linguistic structure of the claims represented in the data. This innovation allows for non-verbal text – including time codes, Unicode art and emoji – to influence which comments are considered similar to each other as well as sophisticated multilingual models. Images, audio and even video can be used alongside or instead of text to specify a query over the index of stored social media. This will supplement or even entirely replace text-based modes of analysis that require researchers to articulate their interests as textual search queries. This inaugurates a move towards a more multidimensional and multimodal exploration of social media, that is thus more free-associative.

This comports with the rejection of the extractive attitude towards online texts that some of their less normative uses of TCCs engender, yet further calling attention to the fact that the claims that online comments make about the media to which they refer are mediated by the technologies with which they

³⁵ See the many contributions engaging with YouTube at the recent Society for Music Analysis study day 'Teaching Music Theory In The Digital Age', convened by Kenneth Smith and John Moore (University of Liverpool), which was held online on Friday, 26 March 2021, <https://www.sma.ac.uk/2021/03/teaching-music-theory-in-the-digital-age-2/>.

³⁶ Lassi A. Liikkanen, Kelly Jakubowski and Jukka M. Toivanen, 'Catching Earworms on Twitter', *Music Perception* 33, no. 2 (December 2015): 199–216. See also, for example, Kelly Jakubowski and Anita Ghosh, 'Music-Evoked Autobiographical Memories in Everyday Life', *Psychology of Music* 49, no. 3 (May 2021): 649–66; Scott Bannister, 'Distinct Varieties of Aesthetic Chills in Response to Multimedia', *PLoS ONE* 14, no. 11 (November 2019): e0224974.

are articulated. The framing analytic of Adorno's study of fan mail thus remains oddly durable for twenty-first-century streaming media platforms. What's needed, then, is less new theory and more new technique to acquire and process the relevant data. A final challenge to researchers interested in exploring this phenomenon further: the openness of TCCs, and that of online social media texts about music in general, is significant – relative to Adorno's data – but may be fleeting and is certainly ever-changing. It is therefore important to move quickly, in an environment when online texts that are rich in cultural–technical detail risk enclosure or, worse, complete withdrawal from circulation.

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