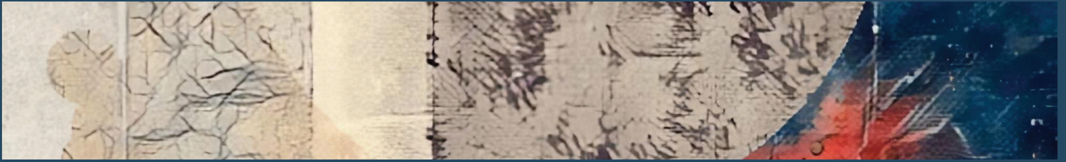
P.D. MAGNUS



A PHILOSOPHY OF COVER SONGS

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4. The Semiotic Angle

In the previous chapter, I proposed that a rendition cover can be appreciated in two modes: on its own (without consideration of the earlier recording that it covers) or in relation to the recording that it covers. There are a number of scholarly accounts of covers which put pressure on this view. Some scholars have argued that a cover *alludes to* or *pictures* the track that it covers. If such a relation were crucial to understanding the cover, then it would turn out that the cover could only be appreciated in relation to the earlier recording. The challenge can be met, but answering it reveals some interesting complexities.*

Reference, allusion, and hearing in

A number of philosophers have taken what Lee B. Brown calls a *semiotic angle* on covers, according to which 'a cover, unlike other recorded remakes of earlier recordings, stands in a referential relationship to the recording it covers' (2014: 193). Brown recognizes, as I did in Chapter 1, that this will not do as a definition of what it is to be a cover. Nevertheless, some covers are like that.

Referential covers

Some covers make explicit reference to the recordings that they are covering.

Consider the Meatmen's 1996 cover of the Smiths' 1984 track 'How Soon Is Now?' which switches the genre from alternative rock to punk and makes a subtle change to the lyrics. Morrissey, lead singer of the Smiths, sings each chorus as 'I am human, and I need to be loved.' Tesco Vee of the Meatmen echoes this in the first chorus, but changes it to 'I am inhuman and I need to be fucked' and '. . . I need to be killed' in the second and third choruses. The

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new words do not serve the central function of the original lyrics. 'How Soon Is Now?' is a plaintive cry for the oppressively shy, and being loved, fucked, or killed are radically different prescriptions for such a condition. So the Meatmen are changing the meaning of the song. Moreover, the Smiths are (described uncharitably) a mopey band, and Morrissey (by his own declaration) celibate. Whereas we are invited to understand the 'I' in the Smiths' version of the song as Morrissey or someone like him, the tone of the Meatmen's cover does not invite us to understand it as being about Tesco Vee. Rather, the 'I' in the Meatmen's cover is most readily understood mockingly to be Morrissey. It is the mopey and asexual Morrissey whom Vee is saying needs to be fucked or killed. (This interpretation is supported by other work by the Meatmen. They have an original song titled 'Morrissey Must Die.')

Consider also the Screamers' 1978 version of Sonny and Cher's 1966 'The Beat Goes On.' The cover is harsher and more confrontational than the original, with considerably refigured music and lyrics. Sonny and Cher sing that 'Charleston was once the rage,' but the Screamers sing 'Anarchy's the current rage.' Where Sonny and Cher sing that 'Grandmas sit in chairs and reminisce,' the Screamers sing, 'Pop stars sit in chairs and reminisce. Kids today are right to make a fist!' After a line about cars being faster, the Screamers add that 'Sounds are moving faster, faster!' So the Screamers' version condemns slow, schmaltzy musicians like Sonny and Cher. It is both a cover of Sonny and Cher and a commentary on them.

A much-discussed example is Sid Vicious' 1978 cover of 'My Way' (Mosser 2008, Rings 2013). The song was written for Frank Sinatra by Paul Anka in the late 1960s, and Sinatra's version is canonical. In the cover, as Leonard Cohen quips, 'the certainty, the self-congratulation, the daily heroism of Sinatra's version is completely exploded by this desperate, mad, humorous voice' (Snow 1988). In the final verse of the song, Sinatra claims to be a man true to himself who can 'say the words he truly feels'— but Vicious inquires after a 'prat' who 'wears hats' and 'cannot say the things he truly feels.' So it is plausible to think that the considerably changed lyrics in Vicious' cover are in part a comment on Sinatra in the same way that the Meatmen's 'How Soon Is Now?' is a comment on Morrissey and the Screamers' 'The Beat Goes On' is a comment on Sonny and Cher. Responding to this suggestion, Nadav Appel argues instead that 'most of the changes are *non sequiturs* and mainly give the impression that Vicious forgot some of the original lines and

replaced them with swear words on the spot' (2018: 448–449). Although Appel suggests that this question should be left to 'punk historians', the lines are not just drug-addled expletives. The words mean something, and they are plausibly about Sinatra. (That is not to say that my interpretation is necessarily right. As of this writing, the Wikipedia entry for 'My Way' indicates that the 'reference to a "prat who wears hats" was an in-joke directed towards Vicious's friend and Sex Pistols bandmate Johnny Rotten, who was fond of wearing different kinds of hats he would pick up at rummage sales.' This sentence is labeled *citation needed*, but perhaps it is true.)

In these punk covers of non-punk originals, the cover serves as an opportunity for the artist to thumb their nose at the earlier version. Doyle Greene (2014) refers to covers like these as *anti-covers*— 'anti' in the sense of *against*, because an anti-cover stands against the canonical version. Deena Weinstein sees punk as representing a 'new episteme' in which covers 'subverted the originals by transposing them to an irreverent musical attitude' (1998: 144). This is to overstate the matter, however. Even in punk, many covers are not anti-covers. First, some punk covers repurpose the original without providing commentary on the original. For example, the Dead Kennedys cover of 'I Fought the Law' changes 'the law won' to 'I won.' With other revisions to the lyrics, it becomes a pointed social commentary; as Greene writes, it is 'a protest song about the reduced manslaughter conviction Dan White received after he assassinated San Francisco mayor George Moscone and city supervisor Harvey Milk…' (2014: 42). Although it is somewhat obscured by the fact that Jello Biafra of the Dead Kennedys sings in the first-person, in the character of Dan White, the victory of the narrator over the law is meant to be understood as an absurd injustice. It is a cover of the Crickets' 1960 original or perhaps of the Bobby Fuller Four's better known 1964 cover, but it is not a rebuke of the Crickets or Bobby Fuller. Instead, the song is repurposed to provide commentary about then-recent events. Second, many punk covers are played straight. The Clash's 1979 cover of 'I Fought the Law' changes the musical style without any change to the story of the song. Shane MacGowan's 1996 cover of 'My Way', like many, reflects the Vicious cover musically but uses the lyrics from the Sinatra version. So, although some punk covers refer to the canonical version that they are covering, many others do not.

Next, consider an example from outside of punk: Ella Fitzgerald sings in her version of 'Mack the Knife' that 'Bobby Darin and Louis Armstrong.

They made a record (ooo, what a record) of this song. And now Ella, Ella and her fellas, we're making a wreck (what a wreck, such a wreck) of this same old song.' (These are the lyrics from a 1963 performance in Stockholm but are similar to ones she had improvised during a 1960 performance in Berlin.) One might object that Fitzgerald's 'Mack the Knife' does not count as a cover because it is a work of jazz and because covering is a category that structures rock and pop music. This sentiment is expressed by Michael Rings, who writes, 'A given jazz performance of a "standard" such as "Mack the Knife" certainly offers a new take on a song that has been both performed and recorded previously by countless other jazz musicians, but as a rule jazz-acculturated listeners will neither perceive nor appreciate it as a remake of any other specific performance or recording' (2013: 56). Although Rings mentions 'Mack the Knife', he does not mention Fitzgerald's version. Indeed, her version seems to undermine his claim, because she explicitly identifies it as a remake and refers to earlier versions. She even scats an impersonation of Louis Armstrong. Moreover, the versioning practices of pop music may be appropriate because Fitzgerald's version is at once jazz and pop. Bobby Darin's 1959 version was a crossover hit, reaching #6 on the *Billboard* R&B chart and #1 on the Hot 100 pop chart. Unsurprisingly, Fitzgerald's version is commonly described as a cover.

It is also possible for reference to occur in the musical elements. Albin Zak gives an example: In their recording of the Buddy Holly song 'Words of Love', the Beatles not only reproduce the timbre and tone of Holly's original but also add handclaps that echo the sound of another Buddy Holly track. Zak writes that 'the pat-a-cake effect of the eighth-note handclaps is a reference to another Holly track, "Everyday".' He continues, 'So while the Beatles track is at one level a cover version of a Buddy Holly song, it is also a more extended allusion to Buddy Holly's sound' (2001: 27).

In earlier work, my collaborators and I called covers like these *referential covers* and considered them as a separate category from rendition covers (Magnus et al. 2013). I now think of rendition covers more broadly, so that referential covers are a particularly interesting kind of rendition cover.

Saturated allusions

Other scholars have suggested that a cover can refer to the earlier version without any specific lyrics or sounds providing the reference. Theodore Gracyk (2007, 2012/3) considers cases where the musician or band connects

to an audience, most of whom will be familiar with the original, with the intention of having their cover be understood as a reference and reply to the original.

Gracyk suggests that this is the case with tribute albums, which consist of new covers of songs where all the canonical versions are by the same artist. Considering two tracks on an Elvis Presley tribute album, he writes, 'When Bruce Springsteen covers "Viva Las Vegas" and the Jesus and Mary Chain covers "Guitar Man", each renders the song in their own style. But the musicians intend that we compare what they have done with the "originals", the Elvis Presley versions, and we are invited to interpret each new performance in light of [those]' (2007: 82). In these versions, there is not a particular lyric or riff that refers to the canonical Elvis track in the way that the eighth-note handclaps in the Beatles track refer to Buddy Holly's 'Everyday.' Instead, the entirety of the cover refers to the earlier track. Gracyk calls this *saturated allusion*. 'Normally, an allusion is a brief or relatively small aspect of a text,' he writes, but in these cases, 'Every aspect of the performance is to be treated as referencing all aspects of the earlier recording at parallel points in the performance' (2012/3: 41). The idea of *saturation*, in saturated allusion, is that the reference fills up the whole version rather than occurring in some specific lyric or sound.

Rings suggests, 'Over time, covers in general have become more allusive in regard to the objects of their remaking' (2013: 57). I am not sure this is true. Gracyk achieves this result by defining 'cover' to mean a version that makes a saturated allusion to an earlier recording— see Chapter 1 for reasons not to do this. If we consider versions that are typically called covers, then some of them are saturated allusions and others are not. Both kinds continue to be made.

The fact that some covers are made with the intention that the audience think about the original recording is enough, though, to make what Gracyk and others say about them worth some attention. Andrew Kania writes that 'it is impossible to properly appreciate an allusion without considering what it is an allusion *to*' (2020: 239). This suggests that the *only* possible mode of evaluation for a saturated allusion cover is to consider it in relation to the original. This threatens to collapse the two-mode view of appreciating rendition covers.

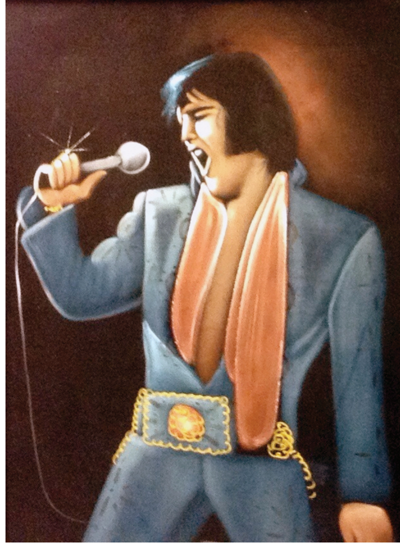

Figure 6: A vintage painting of Elvis Presley on black velvet. Although it is easy enough to see the details on the belt as just brushstrokes, it is hard not to see Elvis in the top part of the painting.
Photo by Mike Mozart, Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 license.

Hearing in

Jason Leddington (2021) points out that when someone listens to a cover, they might hear the original in it. This is more than just recognizing that it is a cover and thinking of the original. Rather, it involves experiencing the cover differently because of the original. As Deena Weinstein writes, 'In appreciating covers, one feels and recognizes similarities and differences between the original and the cover: the first plays in your mind's ear, while the other comes in through your ears from some playback device' (2010: 246). Albin Zak discusses a case which illustrates the possibility. He writes, 'However many cover versions I may hear of "Be My Baby," I can never separate what the song means to me from the image I hold in memory of Ronnie Spector's voice and Phil Spector's lavish production. Somehow, the cover performance resonates with the memory, and though the sound is all different, the meaning imparted by the original recording still comes through' (2001: 31–32).

This phenomenon of *hearing in* can be understood by analogy with the familiar phenomenon of *seeing in*, sometimes called *seeing as*. When I look

Figure 7: The cover of Molly Hatchet's eponymous debut album. The painting is 'The Death Dealer', by Frank Frazetta. Maybe you can focus your eyes past it so as to see just colors and shapes, but it is more readily seen as a dude with an axe on the back of a horse. That is *seeing in*.
Image used with permission of Frank Frazetta Jr. and the Frazetta Museum.

at a portrait, I typically experience it as seeing the subject of the portrait. For example, if I look at a painting of Elvis on black velvet, I see it as Elvis. (See Figure 6.) I do not first see the paint and then infer from its configuration that it is intended to be a picture of Elvis. Although it is possible to focus on the individual brushstrokes and the texture of the velvet, that is neither what I tend to do nor what I am meant to do when looking at such a painting. When I look at the painting in the usual way, Elvis is the object of my perception. Of course, I do not literally see the actual person Elvis Presley. Rather, I see Elvis in the velvet painting in the same way that I see the fictional Death Dealer in the cover of Molly Hatchet's debut album— as the phenomenological, intentional object of my perception, which need not correspond to any actual object out in the world. (See Figure 7.)

Likewise for sound: *Hearing in* happens when I hear some object or event as an intentional object presented through a more immediate presentation. For example, I might hear a friend speaking in the murmur of voices at a

party. Leddington argues that in such a case I do not simply hear the *sound* of my friend. Instead, I hear my friend. Similarly, I hear the clavinet in the full sound of Stevie Wonder's 'Superstition.' Again, I do not simply hear the *sound* of the clavinet. Anyone who hears the track hears that, even if they lack enough understanding to distinguish the clavinet from the other instruments. Someone who cannot resolve the clavinet as a separate object of perception is hearing the sound but is not hearing the clavinet in the sense of *hearing in*. In the same way, Zak does not just hear a cover version of 'Be My Baby' and think of the original. Rather, he hears the original in the cover.

Leddington coins the term *pictorial cover* for a cover version where the artist intends for the audience to hear the original in the new version. As he writes, 'in many cases, we can— and are *meant to*— hear the canonical track in the cover, and this constitutes a good bit of our aesthetic interest in it, even if the cover is also independently musically interesting.' He offers the example of Stevie Ray Vaughn's instrumental cover of Jimi Hendrix's 'Little Wing' and suggests that 'anyone familiar with the Hendrix will hear both its guitar and vocals in the Vaughan; and much of the pleasure we take in listening to the latter lies in appreciating how it allows us to hear the former in what is a very different piece of music' (2021: 358). A pictorial cover goes further than just referring or alluding to the original. The phenomenal experience of listening to the cover is meant to be different. The audience is not just meant to recognize connections to the original, but instead they are asked to hear the cover version differently than they would if they did not know about the original.

Leddington's example of 'Little Wing' is tempting perhaps because Vaughn's version is instrumental, and it is easy to hear in the song's lyrics. This phenomenon can occur with any instrumental cover, but it is not necessarily an instance of hearing in the original. Just hearing the words is hearing the *song*. To hear the original *recording*, one must hear the lyrics as they are sung in the original. In this case, one must hear in Jimi Hendrix's voice. Leddington's claim that *anyone* familiar with the Hendrix original will hear it in Vaughn's version is simply false. I do not. At most, *some* listeners familiar with Hendrix's original hear it in Vaughn's cover.

Taking Leddington's side, one might say that this only shows that I am missing something important about Vaughn's version— that if I were properly attentive, I would hear Hendrix's original in it. Yet that would presume

the very thing in contention, that Vaughn's version is a pictorial cover. Leddington does not cite any declarations from Vaughn which show he meant for his audience to hear Hendrix's version in his. Leddington hears Hendrix in Vaughn's version, others of us do not, and it is hard to carry the point any further than that.

Even though I am unconvinced by that example, Leddington is right that there are pictorial covers. Consider a group of musicians hired to play as a cover band in a bar. The management is paying for there to be live music, but the crowd wants to hear familiar songs. The band is not performing mimic covers, but they are performing fairly straight renditions. The songs are ones that the audience is likely to be familiar with, and the band wants to evoke the originals for the audience. As one musician who used to play in such bands comments: As a crappy bar band, you want any help you can get. So not only does the audience *hear in* the originals, the band wants them to do so.

Something similar holds for more sophisticated cover bands such as Postmodern Jukebox, Scary Pockets, and Tim Akers & The Smoking Section. These groups post videos of some of their covers to the internet, and people who share the videos on social media often do so precisely because of their fondness for the original version of the song being covered. Part of the charm of the renditions is that one can hear the originals in them.

Reference and appreciation

The semiotic angle on covers suggests two different but ultimately related ways of denying the two-mode account of evaluating rendition covers:

- **Impossibility:** Covers (or at least many covers in a sizable class) can only be *evaluated at all* by considering them in relation to the canonical recordings of which they are covers.

- **Incompleteness:** Covers (or at least many covers in a sizable class) can only be *fully appreciated* by considering them in relation to the canonical recordings of which they are covers.

Kania writes that 'it is impossible to properly appreciate an allusion without considering what it is an allusion *to*' (2020: 239). Regarding covers especially, he concludes: 'A rendition cover may be a saturated allusion to its

original or not. If not, it can be fully appreciated independently of the original track; but if it is a saturated allusion, it cannot be fully appreciated without comparison to the original' (2020: 243). Emphasizing the former yields the claim that it is impossible to properly appreciate a saturated allusion cover without considering the original it alludes to— that is, Impossibility. Emphasizing the latter yields the claim that one cannot *fully* appreciate the allusive cover without considering its relation to the original— that is, Incompleteness.

Leddington concludes that 'fully appreciating a pictorial cover requires the sort of familiarity with the canonical track that allows you to hear it in the cover. Just *knowing* that it is a cover is not enough. If you cannot hear the canonical track in the cover, then all you hear are the cover's surface features, and you are auditorily and aesthetically missing out on something essential about the work' (2021: 358). Emphasizing the first sentence ('*fully* appreciating a cover'), this sounds like a claim of Incompleteness. Emphasizing the last sentence ('missing out on something *essential*'), this sounds like a claim of Impossibility.

So both saturated allusion covers and pictorial covers can be taken to ground either thesis. In the next several sections, I defend the two-mode account of appreciating rendition covers against both challenges.

Note that both Impossibility and Incompleteness are about all covers or at least all those in a large category, so they cannot be established by offering just one or a few examples. I think they are both wrong as *general* claims. However, there are some specific rendition covers which ought not be evaluated on their own— ones which really should be considered in relation to the recording which they cover. This will depend on the details of the specific case, though, rather than following simply from being a cover or from a specific intention that the covering artist has. (I return to this point below.)

Against Impossibility

There are two general considerations which defeat Impossibility. First, even the most referential of covers can still be appreciated immediately— for example, for its beauty— without considering the original. (This applies one of the lessons of Chapter 3.) Second, Impossibility relies too much on musicians' intentions.

I pursue these responses in the next two sections. Keep in mind that this

takes us several turns into the dialogue: I offered the two-mode account of appreciating renditions. Impossibility is a challenge to that account. I will advance responses to Impossibility (thereby defending the two-mode view). In places, I will consider possible objections to my responses, and I will answer those objections.

The value of immediate experience

It really seems as if, arguments notwithstanding, Impossibility is a non-starter. There is a straightforward sense in which one can make an authentic aesthetic judgement about any rendition cover without considering the canonical recording. You can listen to it and find it to be beautiful, ugly, inspiring, saddening, harmonically rich, singable, danceable… and so on. These are reactions to the cover version itself. They are the kind of reactions one might have if one were ignorant of the fact it was a cover or if one were unfamiliar with the canonical version. It is often possible to have these kinds of reactions even after you learn it is a cover and become familiar with the canonical version.

So the claim of Impossibility requires that these categorical aesthetic judgments are somehow illegitimate or confused. Even though understanding an allusion *qua* allusion requires knowing about the earlier recording that the cover alludes to, it is unclear why finding a saturated allusion cover to be beautiful would necessarily implicate the earlier recording.

For a pictorial cover, however, one might argue that finding the cover beautiful without considering the canonical version encounters the cover in the wrong way. The argument might go like this: Imagine someone views a large pointillist painting but stands so close that they just see distinct dots and are unable to resolve it into a picture. If they judge the painting to be beautiful under these circumstances, they have not really judged it properly. They have evaluated the wrong object. Similarly, if someone listens to a pictorial cover without hearing the original in it, then the beauty they attribute to it is misplaced.

This objection requires that failing to hear the original in a pictorial cover is a tremendous mistake, on the scale of only seeing the dots of a pointillist painting. Other mistakes do not nullify aesthetic judgements in the same way. Some examples: One might mistakenly hear the clavinet in Stevie Wonder's 'Superstition' as guitar. One might mistakenly hear 'qu'est-ce que c'est?' and other French phrases in Talking Heads' 'Psycho Killer' as non-

sense syllables. Those mistakes would change the phenomenal experience somewhat, because guitars and nonsense will activate different expectations and conjure different meanings than clavinets and French. Nevertheless, I think one can make legitimate judgements of beauty when making those mistakes. Recognizing the instrument or the language would allow one a *better* appreciation of those tracks, but it is not required for there to be any legitimate appreciation at all. If the mistake of not hearing the original in a pictorial cover is like those cases, then pictorial covers support (at most) Incompleteness rather than Impossibility.

The mystery of intentions

A separate problem for Impossibility is the role that intentions play in the accounts of saturated allusions and pictorial covers. Following Stephanie Ross (1981) and William Irwin (2001), Gracyk thinks that allusion requires intention. He writes that, for a saturated allusion cover, the artist 'must intend to communicate with a particular audience… and must intend to have the remake interpreted as referencing and replying to the earlier interpretation' (2012/3: 25). Kania writes similarly that 'not all renditions are saturated allusions— that depends on the intentions of a given track's creator' (2020: 240). Pictorial covers are also defined in terms of the artist's intentions.

Gracyk gives the example of Bob Dylan performing a song by Charles Aznevour and transcribes the monologue that Dylan gives introducing the song (2012/3: 27). As he says in another context, the 'intentions of others are known by reference to their behaviors and statements' (1996: 29). Dylan says enough that we know what his intentions are. However, artists are not always so explicit. Consider Sid Vicious singing 'My Way', which I argued is an implicit reference to Frank Sinatra's version of the song. Appel suggests leaving the matter to 'punk historians', but there may be no evidence that would settle the matter (2018: 449). Vicious, unlike Dylan, is unlikely to have provided an eloquent description of his intentions.

Even where there are strong suspicions, they may be wrong. Ray Padgett discusses the work of Juliana Hatfield, who has a 'rich and varied side gig in tribute albums.' Why had she recorded so many covers? Padgett writes, 'I thought I knew the answer: She adored the artists she was paying tribute to. As I promptly learned, I thought wrong' (2020: 77). In his interview with Hatfield, she reveals that her motivations varied from the desire to record with a friend of hers, the chance to meet a legendary pro-

ducer, to mere whim. Given her intentions, she would have participated in the projects even if she did not know they were covers or if there had not been an earlier version.

A further wrinkle is that artists might not even be aware of their own intentions. Ross allows for the possibility that the intention underlying an allusion might be unconscious. This means that there might be an allusion even if the artist sincerely denies having intended it. They might be unaware of their unconscious intention (Ross 1981: 61). Irwin allows for unconscious intentions, too, especially in cases where an artist is unaware of an allusion but— when it is pointed out to them— claims to have intended it (2001: 291). So one could say that, regardless of her suggestions to the contrary, Hatfield unconsciously intended to refer to the earlier versions with her covers. If there are no limits to this maneuver— if one can attribute unconscious intentions anywhere— then appeals to intention become frivolous. Discussions of allusion suggest two plausible constraints.

As a first constraint: Attribute an intention when the interpretation of the work itself supports it. If a character in a short film smokes a pipe, wears a deerstalker cap, and draws clever inferences, then it is an allusion to Sherlock Holmes. We would think that even if the creator of the film denies that it is a reference to Holmes. Unfortunately, this is no help for Impossibility. If we attributed the intention to refer only on the basis of interpretive and appreciative considerations, then of course such attributions would obey appreciative constraints. The Impossibility thesis would be established as true, but at the cost of making it a tautology.

As a second constraint: Do not attribute an intention if the artist did not know about the object of the would-be intention. Ross maintains that 'unconscious intent is plausible only when additional evidence… shows that the artist had some knowledge or experience of the work alluded to' (1981: 61). Gracyk makes a similar move (2007: 71). This might help in the case of the filmmaker. Although it is hard to imagine, if she had simply put together the pipe, the deerstalker cap, and crime-solving behavior haphazardly— with no knowledge of Sherlock Holmes— then she must not have been alluding to him after all. Although this might be helpful with other allusions, it is no help in thinking about covers. Artists who make covers necessarily know about the earlier recording, in order to make any kind of cover. So the mere fact of their knowledge cannot settle whether the cover is a saturated allusion or not.

One might attempt to resolve this uncertainty by saying that social conventions and background assumptions can stand in the place of private intentions. As Gracyk writes, our intuitions should be informed by 'the practices of the tradition' (1996: 24). If we judge intentions in this way, recordings for Embassy records and *Top of the Pops* were mimic covers because of the organization of those publishers regardless of what was going on inside the heads of individual session musicians. Similarly, one might say that recording songs for tribute albums makes Hatfield's covers saturated allusions, regardless of what private intentions she had. However, the practice of recording tribute albums does not support such an assumption. Although some tribute albums are intended for listeners who are familiar with the original versions and so could recognize the reference, others are intended for a new audience that is unfamiliar with the classic songs. For example, the 1991 Leonard Cohen tribute album *I'm Your Fan* was recorded with the hope of making a younger audience more familiar with Cohen's work (Padgett 2020).

One might concede all of the difficulties figuring out intentions, but insist that intentions nevertheless exist. The idea would be that, even if they are unknown, intentions might still determine what kind a cover is and what kind of appreciation is appropriate. Gracyk can be read as offering such a metaphysics-first approach (1996: 26). However, there are not always well-defined or determinate intentions. An exhausted or drug-addled musician might not have any defined intention about how their work should be understood. Alternately, an artist might have an open-ended intention. They might want listeners both to listen to their version as its own thing and to consider it in relation to the original, or they may be happy for audiences to encounter it in either way. Attributing complex intentions to artists may be appropriate in some cases, but in other cases it over-intellectualizes the whole process.

There is also the extra complication of multiple people involved. The singer, other members of the band, the producer, and the A&R might all have different intentions for how audiences should react to a cover. As Gracyk himself notes in another context, 'rock recordings frustrate the expectation that each work features *an* artist's intentions' (1996: 94). Because there is not one governing intention, there will often be no definite fact of the matter about how a cover is intended to be heard. Yet being a saturated allusion or pictorial cover depends on how the cover is intended to be heard, and

the arguments for Impossibility started from those kinds of covers. The ambiguity of intention makes those categories too unstable to support such a weighty conclusion.

So the two-mode account of evaluating renditions survives the challenge of Impossibility.

Against Incompleteness

Recall that the claim of Incompleteness is the idea that, although a saturated allusion or pictorial cover can be appreciated separately from the canonical recording of which it is a cover, it can only be *fully appreciated* in relation to the canonical recording. Whether this is true or not will depend importantly on what 'fully appreciated' means.

One might understand full appreciation to be *complete*— that is, appreciation in all the ways. This would make Incompleteness both trivially true and irrelevant. It would be trivially true because, if you have not yet appreciated the cover in relation to the original, then you have not appreciated it in all the ways yet. And it would be irrelevant because it would be no objection to the two-mode view of evaluating rendition covers. My claim was not that there are two ways to *fully* appreciate a cover, after all, but just that there are two ways of coming at it. This is compatible with (even entails) that consideration in just one mode is partial. So understanding Incompleteness as something besides a trivial *non sequitur* will require understanding full appreciation in some other sense.

Another way of understanding it is that fuller appreciation would consider the *deeper, more significant* things. The idea would be this: With a saturated allusion cover or pictorial cover, one is meant to consider the cover in relation to the original. So that aspect is more central and significant than its superficial features in a way that is effectively essential to full appreciation.

One problem with this is that knowledge of the original might not actually be more central and significant. Historical factors and references may be important variables for appreciating a work, but sometimes not. There are cases where hearing the original does not add anything of artistic or aesthetic value to appreciation of the cover, beyond the knowledge that the song is not an original composition. One might still think that a trivial addition to one's appreciation would be *some* addition, but that falls back on the sense of 'fuller' as more complete.

Of course, judging the originality of the cover requires considering how it differs from the canonical recording. However, as I discussed in the previous chapter, assessing originality may also require knowing about other recordings, other songs, other musicians— anything that might be a source of inspiration for the cover version. As Gracyk notes in a different context, 'Philosophically, once you've made the move toward a historically-aware, contextualist understanding of both aesthetic judgment and artistic value, it's a short step to the idea that any and all aspects of the social context of production and reception might be relevant to the music's characteristics and value. (I stress "might be" here: any and all might be, but in any given case only some will be.)' (2021). If one insists that the cover's connection to the original is somehow the essential lynchpin to appreciating it, then one has reverted to the claim of Impossibility. If it is not strictly essential, then facts about the original become just some of the many historical facts which might— or might not— be relevant to appreciating the cover version.

This problem is compounded by the fact that considering the cover in relation to these additional facts and information may undercut appreciating it in other ways. It may simply not be possible (for some listeners at least) to hold both modes of evaluation in their head at once. So considering a cover in one mode would preclude considering it in the other. This might occur when the quantity of information would change the focus and mood. Reflecting on the beautiful simplicity of a particular instrumental might conflict with having lots of contextual facts in mind. When someone complains that thinking too much about a song ruins their experience of it, it would be elitist snobbery to simply deny that they were having the best experience of it anyway. (That sentence could be the pull quote for the book!)

Moreover, once someone experiences the original, they may be unable to hear the cover in the same way. If they *hear* an original's lyrics *into* an instrumental cover, they may lose the ability to hear it as just an instrumental. If they hear the earlier version into a cover that changes the genre, the contrast might overwhelm their ability to hear the song in its new setting. Hearing the pop original of a punk cover, for example, might change what features stand out to them. Jesse Prinz, paraphrasing Matthew Kieran (2008), suggests that 'becoming a punk enthusiast can diminish one's tolerance for other genres, making them seem overproduced, tame, or vapid' (Prinz 2014: 589). And listening to the pop original of a punk cover might highlight tame, vapid features that survive as traces in the punk version, leaving the listener

with a worse experience than they had before. It is possible that these vapid elements, once heard, cannot be unheard.

This is especially an issue when the experience of the cover involves hearing in the original. When Albin Zak hears a cover of 'Be My Baby', irresistably 'the original recording still comes through' (2001: 31–32). There might be covers which are so jarringly different that Zak cannot appreciate them, where the contrast with the original will always overwhelm whatever charms the new version might offer to a fresh ear.

So Incompleteness either collapses into triviality (by requiring all information for complete appreciation) or is tantamount to Impossibility (by making consideration of the original essential to appreciation).

Further reflections on allusions

Although I think the arguments above suffice to defeat Impossibility and Incompleteness, I want to return to a related issue about allusions. A crucial premise about saturated allusion covers was Kania's claim, quoted several times above, that 'it is impossible to properly appreciate an allusion without considering what it is an allusion *to*' (2020: 239). This claim is not true of all allusions, which shows that allusions will not carry the weight that Gracyk, Rings, and Kania are placing on them. I think this may be partly obscured by the oddity of *saturated* allusions, so let's take a step back and consider how the usual, unsaturated kind of allusion works.

Kania offers the example of the allusion to Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* in the Police's 'Don't Stand So Close to Me' (2020: 238). The song tells the story of a 'young teacher' who sleeps with one of his pupils (or who is at least tempted to do so). In the third verse, 'It's no use, he sees her / He starts to shake and cough / Just like the old man in / That book by Nabokov.' A lot is conveyed in the allusion here. *Lolita* is a complicated and controversial novel about a middle-aged professor's molestation of a teenaged girl. The character in the novel is a monster who meets a bad end. The line is the strongest suggestion that the teacher in the song is himself a monster. Not only would I miss all that if I did not know about the book in question, but the line 'That book by Nabokov' would have no significance to me at all.

It is more typical for allusions, especially in popular art, to serve a dual purpose. As Gracyk writes, 'a good allusion will serve as a functional element... independent of its alluding function' (2007: 76). In the song 'It's My

Life', Jon Bon Jovi sings, 'My heart is like an open highway / Like Frankie said, "I did it my way".' This is an allusion to the song 'My Way', written for and canonically sung by Frank Sinatra. The allusion can be seen as an acknowledgement by Bon Jovi, to listeners who might already be thinking it, that the sentiment of 'It's My Life' is much like the sentiment of 'My Way.' For listeners who do not follow the allusion, Bon Jovi is still actually saying that he did it his way— while acknowledging that it is not entirely original to do so, because some other guy already said that. I guess I appreciate Bon Jovi's song better for understanding the allusion, but the non-allusive function of the line is at least as important.

Other cases go further, so that the allusive function is clearly less important than the plain function of a line. Consider two examples from songs by They Might Be Giants (TMBG). First, the line 'I Hope That I Get Old Before I Die' (from their song of the same name), an allusion to the line 'I hope I die before I get old' from the Who's 'My Generation.' Second, the lines 'Quit my job down at the car wash / Didn't have to write no one a goodbye note' (from their song 'Put Your Hand Inside the Puppet Head'), an allusion to 'Guitar Man', a song written by Jerry Reed and made famous by Elvis Presley, which has the lines 'I quit my job down at the car wash / Left my mamma a goodbye note.' In both of these cases, the lines in TMBG's songs work even for listeners who do not recognize them as allusions. There may be some small pleasure or appreciative value in recognizing the allusions, but it clearly does not eclipse the lines' non-allusive face value.

Other allusions are musical rather than lyrical. Recall the eighth-note handclaps in the Beatles' cover of 'Words of Love.' Zak argues that the allusion there is important, because it connects the cover not just to one Buddy Holly song but to Buddy Holly's sound in general. However, musical allusion is not always so weighty. Consider the cover of Weird Al Yankovic's 'Eat It' by the Japanese punk band Shonen Knife. The bassist opens and closes the song by playing the bass line from Deep Purple's 'Smoke on the Water.' It fits and sounds good in the Shonen Knife track, and it offers a little something extra for listeners who recognize it. It works like quotation often does in jazz performance, where a soloist quotes a short passage from another jazz standard or a famous improvisation. This can be an homage or an in-joke, but it is intended to serve as a coherent part of the solo. In musical quotation, as in the lines from TMBG songs, there is no explicit statement that tells the listener that the passage is an allusion.

So Kania's example of the line from 'Don't Stand So Close to Me' is peculiar in two respects: First, the line only serves an alluding function rather than having a dual purpose. The more usual kind of allusion can be appreciated either for its function in the song or for its alluding function. Neither is blocked in principle, even if one mode of appreciation might be unrewarding in a particular case. Second, the line about Nabokov is explicit about being an allusion. Many allusions are quotations without explicit markers that quotation is happening.

For a saturated allusion cover, the entire cover version is intended to refer to the canonical original. That makes it less like the line about Nabokov and more like the other examples. First, since the entirety of the song is performed or recorded for the cover version, a listener can attend to all of its features without thinking of the original. The cover serves the face-value function of being a version of a song in addition to the alluding function of referring to the original. Second, except in the case of explicitly referential covers, the connection to the earlier version is not explicit. It is more like quotation than it is like the Police's reference to 'that book.'

By analogy with particular allusions, then, a saturated allusion cover can be appreciated either on its own or in relation to the recording of which it is a cover. That is to say, the two-mode account of appreciating rendition covers applies.

Evaluating rendition covers, revisited

So far I have defended the two-mode account of appreciating rendition covers, but I think that the discussion above allows us to extend the account a bit. There are two ways one can go about appreciating a cover in relation to the earlier recording it covers: One can have facts about the canonical recording in mind, or one can hear the canonical recording in the cover version. The latter involves greater changes the experience of the cover itself, shaping the implicit anticipations which alter the overall perceptual gestalt. Because *hearing in* amounts to hearing differently, it can make it hard to hear the cover as it sounds to an uninformed listener. So appreciating a cover by hearing in the original may preclude appreciating it in other ways.

This yields what one might call two and a half modes of appreciation. Although in principle all are possible in every case, they will not all be rewarding or worthwhile in every case. Moreover, fully engaging with some

might preclude engaging with others.

In this section and the next, I want to consider how these factors play out for some particular covers.

Consider Johnny Cash's 2002 cover of 'Hurt.' The song was written by Trent Reznor and originally released in 1994. After seeing the music video for Cash's version, Bono commented, 'Trent Reznor was born to write the song. but Johnny Cash was born to sing it.' Reznor himself said, describing his reaction to the video, 'Tears welling, silence, goose bumps... that song isn't mine anymore' (Padgett 2017: 207). For those of us familiar with the original, Cash's cover was surprising. However, the Johnny Cash version is now the canonical version of the song for some listeners. Although Cash was a songwriter, he also regularly recorded songs he had not written. One can appreciate most of those without reference to any earlier recording. For example, one can listen to Cash's version of 'Ghost Riders in the Sky' and treat it as part of the country music repertoire, without knowing anything about Stan Jones (who wrote it) or having heard Burl Ives' 1949 version (the first released recording). One can listen to Cash's 'Hurt' in the same way. However, Reznor's song is neither country music nor part of a standard repertoire. It is deeply personal and not— or at least not before Cash— an obvious thing to cover. So it is also rewarding to consider Cash's version in relation to Reznor's original.

As a contrasting example, consider Eric Clapton's 1974 cover of Bob Marley and the Wailers' 'I Shot the Sheriff.' Gracyk counts it as a mere remake rather than a saturated allusion on the grounds that 'Clapton was not comfortable with reggae and did not want to record the song or release it, but was urged to do so by his band mates and producer' (2012/3: 27). Clapton is neither trying to sound like Marley (so it is not a mimic cover) nor referring to Marley (so it is not an allusion or a picture). *Billboard* included Clapton's version among its Top Single Picks with no comment on it being a cover, calling the track 'a catchy goof of a winner.' The staff writers describe it as having 'the latino percussiveness and broad outlaw storyline of "Cisco Kid"' and add that one 'reviewer found himself humming it 11 hours straight' (1974). This appreciation of the Clapton track without consideration of the original is deeply impoverished. What the Billboard reviewers hear as 'latino percussiveness' can be heard instead as the residual reggae influence from the original. Their capsule review reveals that, although the cover can be considered in isolation from the original, it is misleading to

consider it that way. The cover is more profitably appreciated in relation to the original version, and I suspect that someone who has heard the original will no longer be able to hear the 'latino percussiveness' that appeared to naïve listeners.

Note that this example does not revive the claim of Impossibility. Because Clapton's cover makes no implicit reference to the original, it is not part of the class of covers that Impossibility was supposed to apply to. In fact, Gracyk holds both that a saturated allusion cover should be considered in relation to the original and also that a non-allusive cover (what he calls a mere remake) should be considered just as an instance of the song. Clapton's version is non-allusive but nevertheless is best considered in relation to the original. So it provides more evidence for the two-mode view— that any rendition cover may *in principle* be approached in either way. In cases where only one approach is rewarding, it is because of the particular artistic and aesthetic details rather than because of any general rule.

Covers of covers

The modes of evaluation proliferate even more when a version is a cover of a cover. In the schematic case, imagine an original recording— call it #1. Another artist records a rendition cover of #1— call it #2. A third artist records another rendition, clearly respecting some of the arrangement and musical choices of #2— call this #3. In evaluating #3, one might consider it on its own, in relation to #1, in relation to #2, or in relation to both. And the latter modes might be with or without hearing in. In the abstract case, this yields at least seven possibilities. Just as for the simpler case of a cover of one original, however, not all the theoretically possible modes will be rewarding or worthwhile— and it may not be possible to pursue them all.

Let's consider several examples.

First, consider college a cappella groups covering 'Bitches Ain't Shit.' The song was written and released by Dr. Dre in 1992, but a cappella groups more clearly follow Ben Folds' 2005 cover. If we consider it in relation to earlier versions, it is best to do so in relation to *both* the original and Folds' cover. The lyrics are due to Dre, but the surprising genre shift is due to Folds. I can easily hear Folds' version in the a cappella performances, but I am hard-pressed to hear Dre's original in them. (For more details about this example, refer to the discussion of it in Chapter 3.)

Second, consider Jeff Buckley's well known cover of Leonard Cohen's

'Hallelujah.' Initially at least, Buckley only knew the song from John Cale's cover of it. Although 'Hallelujah' appeared on Cohen's 1984 album *Various Positions*, his record label was so skeptical of the album's prospects that they did not release it in the United States. Cale, having heard the song at a live performance in New York, decided to record it for the 1991 tribute album *I'm Your Fan*. Cohen sent Cale the written lyrics, which included many more verses than Cohen's recorded version. Cale did not use all the verses he was sent. Cale settled on five verses, only two of which are shared with Cohen's earlier recording. Buckley's version replaces the piano part from Cale's version with guitar, but mostly follows Cale's lyrics— unsurprisingly, since Buckley had neither heard Cohen's version nor seen Cohen's written lyrics. The expressiveness of Buckley's version is largely due to his vocal stylings. The song was commonly performed as a tribute to Buckley after his untimely death. Although the song has been covered by numerous artists, Buckley's version has often been considered definitive. One might listen to other versions if one wants to evaluate the song— and one might find the historical path of the song to be an intriguing tale— but I think that appreciating Buckley's version is neither richer nor more rewarding for hearing earlier versions. (For more details, see Light 2012 and Padgett 2020.)

Third, consider 'Hound Dog': a song canonically associated with Elvis Presley. The original track, recorded by Big Mama Thornton, is about a no-good, cheating man. Where Elvis' version has the lines 'Well, you ain't never caught a rabbit / And you ain't no friend of mine', Thornton's has 'You can wag your tail / But I ain't gonna' feed you no more.' This revision was not original with Elvis. It was first made by Frankie Bell and the Bell Boys, who used their silly version of the song as the closing number of their Las Vegas act. That is where Elvis encountered it (Padgett 2017: 15). It is possible that Elvis never even heard Thornton's version. Nevertheless, I do not think it adds much appreciatively to learn about Bell. Hearing Bell's version into Elvis' version would not create a richer or more rewarding experience. Considering Elvis' version in relation to Thornton's does change matters, though. One might think, as cowriter of the original Jerry Leiber did, that Elvis' version 'ruined the song' by turning 'a song that had to do with obliterated romance' into 'inane' nonsense (Padgett 2017: 23).

Fourth, consider 'Killing Me Softly.' The lyrics are based on a poem by Lori Lieberman, who recorded and released the song as 'Killing Me Softly With His Song' in 1972. Her version was heard by Roberta Flack, who rear-

Some Covers of Covers	Is it rewarding to consider it in relation to the original?	Is it rewarding to consider it in relation to the earlier cover?
a cappella "Bitches Ain't Shit"	✓	✓
Jeff Buckley's "Hallelujah"	✗	✗
Elvis' "Hound Dog"	✓	✗
The Fugee's "Killing Me Softly"	✗	✓

Figure 8: This table shows different cases discussed in the chapter. Each highlights a different appreciative possibility. If you disagree with where I have placed some of these, consider other covers of covers to find your own examples.

ranged the song and released a version in 1973. Flack's version became well known and was the canonical version in 1996 when the Fugees released a cover of it. It is plausible to think of the Fugee's cover as picturing Flack's track, because Lauryn Hill of the Fugees recorded thirty separate harmony parts to reflect the background vocals in Flack's version. Few listeners to either Flack's or the Fugees' versions even know about Lieberman's version. The contrast with Lieberman's original may contribute to appreciation of Flack's cover, underscoring the originality of Flack's reinvention of the song. However, Lieberman's original is irrelevant to appreciating the Fugees' cover of Flack.

Coda

This chapter began with a focus on covers which refer in some way to earlier canonical recordings. Whether by explicit mention, saturated allusion, or picturing, this reference allows the cover to comment on the canonical version. Such a cover might raise issues with the earlier recording which would not have occurred to someone who listened to the original but had not heard the cover. It is even possible to hear a cover into an original, so that the experience of hearing the original is different once you know about

the cover.

For example, I was familiar with Jimi Hendrix's cover of 'All Along The Watchtower' before I heard Bob Dylan's original. When listening to Dylan's original, I tend to hear Hendrix's version in it. Of course, the original is not pictorial— Dylan could not have foreseen Hendrix's cover, so he could not have intended for listeners to hear it in his recording. Nevertheless, I notice features of the original that I would not be able to appreciate if it were not for that connection.

Consider also 'Iron Man', originally by Black Sabbath and covered by the Cardigans. From the Cardigan's cover, I have learned to hear a certain sadness in the song. I can hear that sadness when listening to Black Sabbath's original version, but only because I heard it in the Cardigan's first. Without having heard the cover, I would only have noticed the anger and madness.

Because a cover can serve as commentary on the original, it can reveal features of it that one would not notice otherwise. To put this in a deliberately provocative way: Sometimes, one cannot fully appreciate an original without hearing the covers of it.