

Remixology: A Remix(ed) Rhetoric for the 21st Century

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Critical responses to remix have pulled in two seemingly opposite directions. On one side, there are the utopian plagiarists, copyleftists, and remix fans and prosumers who celebrate the practice as a new and original way for creating and distributing media content. On the opposing side, there are the detractors and critics. According to this group, the sampling and recombining of pre-existing material is nothing more than a cheap and easy way of recycling the work of others, perpetrated by what are arguably talentless hacks who really have nothing new to say. This essay does not choose sides in the existing remix debate but 1) deconstructs the shared assumptions and values mobilized by both sides and 2) synthesizes a new axiology that is designed to deal with and respond to the opportunities and challenges of the twenty-first century and beyond.

Keywords: axiology, authorship, deconstruction, media, repetition, remix, simulation

The term “remix”¹ generally refers to the practice of recombining pre-existing media content—popular songs, films, television programs, texts, web data, etc.—in order to fabricate a new work that is arguable greater than the sum of its parts. Although initially popularized with digital audio, made widely available over the Internet, and heard on dance floors across the globe, remix is not something limited to either digital media or popular music. Analog precursors can be found in the turntable practices of Jamaican dub and hip hop and the audio collage efforts of Pierre Schaeffer’s *musique concrète*, John Oswald’s *Plunderphonics*, Negativland, and the Evolution Control Committee. Similar practices—although not always situated under this particular moniker—have been developed and pursued in almost every area of media production and content creation. There are, for instance, literary remixes, like Seth Grahame-Smith’s recombination of Jane Austin’s classic novel *Pride and Prejudice* with b-grade Zombie pulp-fiction²; visual remixes, perhaps the most

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¹ For an examination of the origins of the word and its relationship to competing terminology (i.e. collage, sample, mashup, bootleg, etc.) see chapter 1 of my *Of Remixology: Ethics and Aesthetics After Remix* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).

² Seth Grahame-Smith and Jane Austin, *Pride Prejudice and Zombies* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2009).

famous being Shepard Fairey's iconic "Hope" poster from the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign; and data mashups, those Web 2.0 implementations and mobile apps that appropriate and combine content from two or more data sources in order to provide users with a value-added application.

Because of this seemingly unrestrained proliferation of the practice across all aspects of contemporary culture, cyberpunk science fiction writer William Gibson has identified remix as the "characteristic pivot" of the 21st century³ and documentary filmmaker Kirby Ferguson has argued that "everything is a remix."⁴

Copyright vs. Copyleft

Despite or perhaps because of its popularity, critical responses to remix have pulled in two seemingly opposite directions. On one side, there are the "utopian plagiarists"⁵, copyleftists, and remix fans and prosumers, those individuals and organizations who celebrate remix and other cut-up and collage practices as new and original ways for creating and distributing media content. This side is occupied by a diverse cast of characters who, at least initially, appear to have little or nothing in common: cultural institutions like Zizek Urban Beats Club in Buenos Aires and Club Bootie in San Francisco; DJs and VJs like Girl Talk, João Brasil, and Addictive TV; writers and poets like William Gibson, Kathy Acker, and Mark Amerika; and multinational corporations like Google, Microsoft, and IBM. Despite what turns out to be little more than minor variations on a theme, what brings these figures together in an unlikely but influential coalition is a common interest in new creative practices that not only generate innovative, useful, and entertaining media content but also open up new avenues and opportunities for its development. "The Internet," as explained by Brett Gaylor, director of the documentary *Rip! A Remix Manifesto*, "allowed me to connect from my island to the world, to communicate ideas to millions of others. And a media literate generation emerged, able to download the world's culture and transform it into something different. And we called our new language *remix*. Funny things, political things, new things were all uploaded back to the net. The creative process became more important than the product as consumers were now creators, making the folk art of the future."⁶

On the opposing side, there are the critics—again a group of strange bedfellows that include not only entertainment lawyers, copyright advocates, RIAA and MPAA lobbyists, and law makers of all political stripes and affiliations but also creative artists, visionary producers, and cultural innovators. According to this group, the sampling and recombining of pre-existing material is nothing more than a cheap and easy way of recycling the work of others, perpetrated by what are arguably talentless hacks who really have nothing new to say. Indicative of this opposing view are the comments offered by indie-rock icon and producer, Steve Albini, in one of the other remix documentaries, *Copyright Criminals*: "I've made records with a lot of people; probably the most famous would be Nirvana, the Pixies, Jimmy Page and Robert Plant of Led Zeppelin. As a creative tool, like for someone to use a sample of an existing piece of music for their music. I think it's an extraordinarily lazy artistic choice. It is much easier to take something that is already awesome

³ William Gibson, "God's Little Toys: Confessions of a Cut and Paste Artist," *Wired* 13, no. 7 (2005): 118.

⁴ Kirby Ferguson, *Everything is a Remix* (2014) <http://everythingisaremix.info>. If indeed accurate, this statement would presumably have to apply to itself, which is in fact the case insofar as the phrase "everything is a remix," the title of Ferguson's four-part documentary, is something that is initially attributed to and derived from the work of anti-copyright activist Susan King (Gail Priest, *Experimental Music: Audio Explorations in Australia* (New South Wales: University of New South Wales Press, 2009), 86).

⁵ Critical Art Ensemble, *The Electronic Disturbance* (New York: Autonomedia, 1994), 83.

⁶ Brett Gaylor, *Rip! A Remix Manifesto* (Eye Steel Film, 2008) <http://ripremix.com/>.

and to play it again with your name on it.”⁷ According to Albini, and others who share his opinion, the appropriation and reuse of the work of others in a remix is simply cheap and lazy. Unlike real creative artists or media producers, who have talent and put in the hard work to develop original content, those engaged in remix merely appropriate and recycle the work of others. This effort, it is argued, requires no particular talent or genius, and is a kind of stealing and violation of intellectual property by what are, in the final analysis, copyright criminals.

What is truly interesting about this debate, however, is not necessarily what makes the two sides different. What is remarkable and what needs to be further examined and critiqued is what both sides share in order to enter into debate and to occupy these opposing positions in the first place. Despite their many differences, both sides of the conflict value and endeavor to protect the same things, namely originality, innovation, and the figure of the hardworking and talented artist. One side sees remix as providing new modes of original expression that require considerable effort and skill on the part of producers; the other argues that there is not much originality, innovation, or effort in merely sampling and remixing prerecorded material. Formulated in this way, these two seemingly opposed positions are fueled by and seek to protect the same underlying values—originality, innovation, uniqueness, artistry, creativity, hardwork, etc. Since these values are already operative in and define the scope and configuration of the current debate, they are often deployed and even defended without ever being questioned or submitted to critical examination. They are (borrowing a phrase that is often used in audio production) “buried in the mix.”

What is needed therefore is, as Friedrich Nietzsche would have described it, a thorough and complete questioning and re-evaluation of these shared values.⁸ Not because they have somehow failed to function, but because they function all too well and often exert their influence without question or critical examination. As long as debate about remix continues to be structured according to this axiology, this rather ancient theory of moral and aesthetic value that goes at least as far back as Plato, little or nothing will change. Each side will continue to heap up new evidence and arguments in support of their positions, but they will, insofar as they seek to protect and advance the same basic principles and underlying values, accomplish little more than agreeing against each other. “They leave us,” as Andrew Whelan and Katharina Freund describe it, “in a remix-good/remix-bad binary.”⁹ The objective, therefore, is to formulate another way to think remix that can both challenge and exceed the restrictions of the current debate and, in the process, do more than simply endorse one side or the other. And there are three fundamental components to this reconfigured way of looking at things, that is, three different ways to remix the way we think about remix.

Simulation

Simulation is neither original nor derived. It consists in a deconstruction¹⁰ of the standard conceptual opposition differentiating the original from its copies by way of a double gesture that simultaneously sides with the depreciated term (copy) and makes available a new concept (*simulacra*)

⁷ Benjamin Franzen and Kembrew McLeod, *Copyright Criminals* (PBS, Independent Lens, 2010) <http://www.copyrightcriminals.com/>.

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966).

⁹ Andrew Whelan and Katharina Freund, “Remix: Practice, Context, Culture,” *M/C Journal* 16, no.4 (2012) <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal>

¹⁰ Using the word “deconstruction” in this particular context is simultaneously expedient and risky. It is expedient, because this term accurately describes the kind of double gesture or what Jacques Derrida often called a “double science” that is operationalized by remix. It is risky insofar as “deconstruction” is one of the most misunderstood and

that is neither original nor a copy. Simulacra, as Gilles Deleuze describes it, “swallows up or destroys every ground which would function as an instance responsible for the difference between the original and the derived.”¹¹ Consequently the ethic and the aesthetic of simulation consists in neither fidelity nor its polar opposite. It is just as much opposed to promiscuous infidelities and merely fooling around as it is to the faithful representation of an original concept of originality. Instead, simulation consists in *blasphemy*, which—as Donna Haraway argues and Jean Baudrillard demonstrates—is always more than mere faithlessness or apostasy. Blasphemy, therefore, comprises an exceedingly careful and excessive form of faithful attention that is otherwise than mere “reverent worship and identification.”¹²

A remix like Mark Vilder’s (a.k.a. Go Home Productions) “Ray of Gob,” a mashup of music taken from the Sex Pistol’s iconic punk anthem “God Save the Queen” (1977) and the lyrical content and vocal performance derived from Madonna’s “Ray of Light” (1998), is not just a random or haphazard concatenation of different things. It is a deliberate and calculated form of pop-culture blasphemy that not only combines the lyrical content and melody of the original recordings but also preserves the exact sound and unique inflections of both the Sex Pistols’ guitar-oriented music and Madonna’s recognizable vocal delivery. Vilder’s remixed composition, then, does not just sound like Madonna singing to something that sounds similar to the Sex Pistols; it is Madonna actually singing to the musical accompaniment of the Sex Pistols, even though this collaboration as such never took place. Consequently, the “Ray of Gob” recording, which Vilder has distributed both online in MP3 format and on vinyl disk, is not the faithful documentary record of some preceding and unique musical performance. Instead it simulates a performance that did not, strictly speaking, ever take place as such. “Simulation,” as Baudrillard writes, “is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.”¹³

What this means for remix is the following: Instead of being evaluated on the basis of its innovative originality, which is an argument that has been made time and again by advocates of remix, or on the basis of its diminished status as a mere “copy of a copy” of something, which is the argument most often mobilized by its detractors, remix succeeds to the extent that it can reverse what would have been mere copies into simulacra that blaspheme the entire axiological order. A particular remix, like “Ray of Gob,” is “good” to the extent that it is able to blaspheme and short circuit existing configurations of cultural hegemony in music, art, literature, etc. And the fact of the matter is, some instance of remix do this better than others. All remix is not created equal. Consequently, what makes a remix good is something that needs to be decided on the basis of the kind of blasphemous interventions it deploys within the material of contemporary culture and the extent to which it makes these transgressions perceptible. In some cases, a remix might just make you want to dance, and there is nothing wrong with dancing. In other cases, however, and even at the same time, it potentially violates every aspect of the way we have traditionally made sense of things, causing nothing less than monstrous but incredibly illuminating short circuits in the existing systems of axiological power.

misused words in both rhetorical criticism and remix studies. For more on this, see my contribution (“Deconstruction”) to Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, and xtine burrough’s *Keywords In Remix Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, translated by Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 67.

¹² Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149.

¹³ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, translated by S. F. Glaser. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Repetition

In deliberately undermining the concepts of originality and derivation, simulacra also destroy or deconstruct history, linear time, and all the related elements that these concepts organize and regulate. Remix, therefore, persists in a proliferation of things where there is no beginning or ending. It is an eternal recurrence or endless recirculation, where, as with the principle of mass conservation, things can be neither created nor destroyed, just transformed. “Each thing,” as Deleuze describes it, “exists only in returning, copy of an infinity of copies which allows neither original nor origin to subsist.”¹⁴ With remix, therefore, it is simply not the case that we have “run out of ideas,”¹⁵ as Kembrew McLeod has argued. Rather, what remix asserts and makes manifest is the fact that (if we insist on describing things in this way) we have always already run out of ideas; everything is a remix.¹⁶ Or as Paul D. Miller (a.k.a. DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid) describes it, sampling a deep cut from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay “Originality and Quotation”: “Our debt to tradition through reading and conversation is so massive, our protest so rare and insignificant—and this commonly on the ground of other reading or hearing—that in a large sense, one would say there is no pure originality. All minds quote. Old and new make the warp and woof of every moment. There is no thread that is not a twist of these two strands.”¹⁷ Consequently, the name of the game is not creation *ex nihilo*, which is something that is only approachable by a god. Instead it comprises a much more “down to earth” matter of developing difference in and by repetition. “Art does not imitate,” Deleuze writes, “because it repeats; it repeats all the repetitions, by virtue of an internal power (an imitation is a copy, but art is simulation, it reverses copies into simulacra). Even the most mechanical, the most banal, the most habitual and the most stereotyped repetition finds a place in works of art, it is always displaced in relation to other repetitions, and it is subject to the condition that a difference may be extracted from it for these other repetitions.”¹⁸

This statement appears to be contrary to common sense and the usual modes of response. In the face of increasing forms of mechanical reproduction—modes of representation and copying that now, with the advent of digital media, appear to have achieved a kind of fulfilment and completion—the seemingly correct response would be to seek ways to preserve what Walter Benjamin called “the aura” of originality that is on the verge of being replicated into extinction.¹⁹ Deleuze, however, suggest a seemingly counter-intuitive move. In the face of such rampant reproducibility, the task, and the task of art in particular, is to repeat repetition to such an extent and in such a way as to extract from it, and not in opposition to it, something different. “For there is,” Deleuze writes, “no other aesthetic problem than that of the insertion of art into everyday life. The more our daily life appears standardized, stereotyped and subject to an accelerated reproduction of objects of consumption, the more art must be injected into it in order to extract from it that little difference which plays simultaneously between other levels of repetition.”²⁰ Unlike former Black Flag frontman Henry Rollins, who advocates censoring the DJ who, in his mind, do little more than steal the ideas

¹⁴ Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 67.

¹⁵ Kembrew McLeod, “Confessions of an Intellectual (Property): Danger Mouse, Mickey Mouse, Sonny Bono, and My Long and Winding Path as a Copyright Activist-Academic,” *Popular Music and Society* 28, no.1 (2005): 86.

¹⁶ Ferguson, *Everything is a Remix*.

¹⁷ Paul Miller, *Rhythm Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 68. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, vol. 3: Letters and Social Aims* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

¹⁸ Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 293.

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, translated by H. Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).

²⁰ Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 293.

of others²¹ (and here Rollins follows an ancient policy that Socrates initially introduces and tries to defend in book X of the *Republic*²²), the objective should be to exploit the tools, techniques, and technologies of mechanical repetition in order to extract from it “that little difference” that makes a difference.

Unauthorized

In this endless (and beginningless) circulation of things where everything is always and already in process, what matters is not—sampling and repurposing something found in Martin Heidegger’s work—to break out of the circle²³, but to learn to enter into it in the right way and arrange an appropriate response. This means abandoning the concept of the original author—whose lifeless corpse has already been exposed and exhibited by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault²⁴—as the sole authority over creative work and the concept of artistry as the expression of an individual creative genius who has something unique to say. It signifies, therefore, a shift from this modern authority figure to the postmodern or even premodern figure of the remix DJ, or what Aram Sinnreich calls “DJ Consciousness.”²⁵ It can be considered “premodern” because this is precisely how Nietzsche had described the figure of the artist and the activity of art in the pre-Christian context of polytheism: “For an individual to posit his own ideal and to derive from it his own law, joys, and rights—that may well have been considered hitherto as the most outrageous human aberration and as idolatry itself. The few who dared as much always felt the need to apologize to themselves, usually by saying: ‘It wasn’t I! Not I! But a god through me.’”²⁶ In earlier times, the act of positing oneself as the originator or sole artistic genius of some artifact was considered to be an aberration and outrageous claim, a kind of idolatry and arrogance. Instead whoever would be called “artist” (assuming, of course, that it is still possible to employ this term despite the heavy sediment of modernity) explained what he or she did by deferring and referring things elsewhere. What Nietzsche describes, therefore, is a kind of premodern pagan DJ who channels the material and creative forces of others. Or as Mark Amerika describes it, channeling something often attributed to Marcel Duchamp, “remixology envisions the artist as a postproduction medium who *becomes instrument* while conducting radical experiments in unconsciously projected creativity.”²⁷

This reconceptualization of the “author” as a medium or instrument not only furnishes a way to deal with the recent challenges and opportunities of remix but can also provide a means by which to respond to some of the new configurations that take things one step further, like “original content” produced by algorithms, artificial intelligence, and robots. In the field of journalism, for example, computer applications now write original content that is not only indistinguishable from

²¹ Henry Rollins, “Henry Rollins on Rave and Modern Rock Music” (2007) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AyRDDOpKaLM>

²² Plato, *Republic*, translated by Paul Shorey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

²³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 25.

²⁴ Roland Barthes, “Death of the Author,” in *Image, Music, Text* (pp. 142-148), translated by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978). Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?” translated by Josué V. Harari, in Paul Rabinow (ed.) *Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984).

²⁵ Aram Sinnreich, *Mashed Up: Music, Technology, and the Rise of Configurable Culture* (Amhurst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 202.

²⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 191.

²⁷ Mark Amerika, *remixthebook* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 58. Marcel Duchamp, *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 138.

human generated stories but have been considered, by some readers, to be of better quality.²⁸ Beyond the simple news aggregators that populate the web, these natural language generation platforms, like Narrative Science's Quill and Automated Insight's Wordsmith, automatically compose human readable narratives from big data. And organizations like the Big Ten Network currently use these systems to develop content for web distribution.²⁹ These applications, although clearly in the early stages of development, led Kurt Cagle, one-time managing editor of XMLToday.org, to provocatively ask whether an AI might compete for and win a Pulitzer Prize by 2030.³⁰ Similar transformations are occurring in music composition and performance, where algorithms and robots produce what one would usually call "original works." In classical music, for instance, there is David Cope's Experiments in Musical Intelligence (EMI, pronounced "Emmy") and its successor Emily Howell, which are algorithmic composers capable of analyzing existing compositions and creating new, original scores that are comparable to the canonical works of Bach, Chopin, and Beethoven.³¹ And then there is Shimon, a marimba playing jazz-bot from Georgia Tech University that not only improvises with human musicians in real time but "is designed to create meaningful and inspiring musical interactions with humans, leading to novel musical experiences and outcomes."³² Rethinking art and artistry through the medium of the remix DJ can help us formulate an axiology -- a theory of moral and aesthetic value -- that is prepared to deal with and respond to the opportunities and challenges of computational creativity.

Conclusions

We are, to appropriate and repurpose a phrase initially issued by Sherry Turkle, in something of a "remix moment."³³ Remix is everywhere, and it is seemingly unavoidable. Despite or perhaps because of this, remix remains contentious and ardently debated. For opponents and critics, it is definitely puerile and patently criminal. For those on the side of the copyright, remix consists of an illegal appropriation and illegitimate fusion of plundered material that undermines the status and privilege typically granted original works; produces nothing innovative but simply replays, repeats, and recycles what has come before; and deliberately violates the animating intentions and authority of authors. For fans and advocates, however, remix constitutes an innovative development that reconfigures all aspects of contemporary culture. For those individuals situated on the side of what Gaylor and others call the copyleft, remix provides for new and interesting forms of artistry, challenges the established hierarchies of the culture industry, and demonstrates the way that creativity has always depended upon and borrowed from others.

Informing both sides of the controversy, as it is currently configured, are a number of common philosophical assumptions that are ultimately rooted in Platonism—originality, innovation, and

²⁸ Christer Clerwall, "Enter the Robot Journalist," *Journalism Practice* 8, no. 5 (2014): 519-531.

²⁹ Christopher Steiner, *Automate This: How Algorithms Came to Rule the World* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2012), 218.

³⁰ Peter Kirwan, "The Rise of Machine-Written Journalism," *Wired.co.uk* (2009) <http://www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2009-12/16/the-rise-of-machine-written-journalism.aspx>.

³¹ David Cope, *Computer Models of Musical Creativity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

³² Guy Hoffman and Gil Weinberg, "Interactive Improvisation with a Robotic Marimba Player," *Autonomous Robots* 31, nos. 2-3 (2011): 133-153. Georgia Tech, "Robotic Musicianship Group: Shimon" (2013) <http://www.gtcmt.gatech.edu/research-projects/shimon>.

³³ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), 9.

artistic authority. We can obviously continue to deploy and operate according to this well-established axiology and doing so seems entirely reasonable and justified. But as long as we continue to leave these basic principles untouched, unchallenged, and unexamined, very little progress will be made in our thinking about and reception of remix. Each side of the debate will continue to mobilize new data, novel examples, and persuasive arguments in support of their position, but the underlying values that influence and structure these efforts will remain largely in place, fully operational, and in control of everything. Consequently, the purpose and main objective of remixology is quite simple: to develop and advance a thorough re-evaluation of these fundamental values. In doing so, we not only challenge the usual way of dealing with and making sense of remix but also synthesize a reconfigured axiology that is designed to deal with and respond to the opportunities and challenges of the twenty-first century and beyond.