

From Medievalism to Memes: Editor's Introduction to a Special Issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*

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In introducing this special issue of the Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric, this essay engages in four moves. First, I look at the Steampunk subculture as a case study in remix and a process of appropriation of historical culture. Then, in examining four invited essays, we produce the most current theoretical and critical frames for the study of remix. Then, introducing a series of essays submitted by scholars in communication, media studies, literary studies, and creative writing, we explore the sheer range of possibilities for the application of remix theory. Finally, I centralize remix as a viable language and, perhaps, a unifying rhetorical framework for discussing the surfeit of cultural variety presented by contemporary traditional and digital media.

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One of the principal characteristics of a viable and vibrant critical theory is the tendency of its proponents perpetually to re-define its parameters. The dynamically varied definitions of Remix within this special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* partake of this critical practice.

Remix as musical artifact,

Remix as an artistic phenomenon,

Remix as an aspect of cultural self-awareness,

Remix as a lens through which to read events,

all these and more applications appear here. Remix is a language with which to discuss cyclical historical and cultural trends—a method of examining parallels among the wide-ranging periods, themes, works, and authors I relish and explore in my own research.

A Prototypical Example of Remix Rhetoric: Steampunk

The appeal of Remix as a rhetorical theory, particularly for discussing the reflective and refractive nature of cultural studies, has heavily informed my research on Steampunk subculture. When Steampunks gather for an event like Teslacon, an annual immersive-experience convention in Madison, Wisconsin, they may don vests, frock coats, and top hats; there may be crinolines, frilly bonnets, and parasols, but beyond these visual links (and occasional attempts at posh British accents), the similarity to the 19th century English really ends. This is not simply Neo-Victorianism or historical reenactment, although neophytes might misread the distinction. Where Steampunks engage in *remix*, Neo-Victorians arguably content themselves with *pastiche*. Wearing the fashions and emulating the mannerisms of Victorian society can, indeed, be considered pastiche. However,

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while this quaint practice might seem harmless, simple pastiche is inherently problematic. Many elements of Victorian/nineteenth century social norms are, at least ostensibly, abhorrent to contemporary sensibilities—open racism, blatant classism, aggressive anti-feminism, rampant xenophobia, and belligerent imperialism. Candidly, such social problems persist in contemporary culture, which is why the remixes (of the Steampunk subculture and of Steampunk genre fiction) are both effective and necessary. Within the context of a Victorian setting, it becomes possible for contemporary observers, readers, and participants to examine, analyze, and critique such cultural dilemmas.

At Teslacon and other Steampunk conventions, it is possible to find female con-goers wearing the gaiters and frock coats, although none but the most daring women would have attempted such transvestite subversion in the Victorian era. (Recall the scandalous reception of actress Sarah Bernhardt and her fictional doppelgänger Irene Adler). Steampunks are also far more likely to openly carry weapons than the English of the time—fantastical, implausibly hybridized weapons at that. These weapons present the intersection of Victoriana, science fiction, and the Steampunk affinity for tinkering. When Steampunks sit sipping tea and chatting over the design of their newest chapeaux, they may give the impression of Jane Austen characters gathering to admire newly affixed bonnet ribbons, but closer attention to the Steampunks' conversation will reveal a fascination for concealed devices for self-defense or even scientific experimentation to a degree that would probably give the beloved novel heroines palpitations.

One of the greatest lures of the neo-Victorian or Steampunk movement is the compelling notion of re-creating history and the figures of historical literary periods in our own image. To stay with the Austen connection, consider the publication and popularity of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* or *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters*—we contemporary folk enjoy Victorian fiction and culture, but we seem to enjoy it even more when it looks a bit like a John Carpenter movie.

Consider the transformation of that most Victorian of literary figures, Sherlock Holmes. For over a century now, writers have been producing attempts to expand the original stories of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and also attempt, while doing so, to remain as faithful to the original style, tone, and themes as possible. These attempts have been described, very appropriately in most cases, by the art history term “pastiche.” Of late, however, contemporary culture has produced no less than three high profile reiterations of Holmes. Only one of these, the 2009 and 2011 Guy Ritchie films starring Robert Downey Jr., kept to the original Victorian setting, but it is interesting to note that the much-acclaimed ongoing BBC series starring Benedict Cumberbatch elected to set its 2015 “Christmas Episode” within a psychologically reconstructed 1895. The Ritchie films relied heavily on the visual rhetoric of Steampunk to create its mood and although top hats and horse-drawn carriages were very much in evidence, there was nothing Victorian about the principal characters, their habits, their attitudes, or their interactions. These are not, then, pastiches at all,¹ but the most apposite theory I can find to explain and expound the transformative historical cultural appropriation in Steampunk is Remix.

¹ My exhaustive discussion of the Steampunk details in these two films appears in the 2014 volume *Clockwork Rhetoric*, so I will not reiterate it here. Lisa Horton, “Guy Ritchie’s *Sherlock Holmes*: Steampunk Superhero?” in *Clockwork Rhetoric: The Language and Style of Steampunk*, ed. Barry Brummett, 177-202 (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi Press, 2014).

Framing Current Understandings of Remix Rhetoric: Four Essays

Our special issue of *The Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* begins with four invited essays bringing us up to date on remix theory.

In “Remixing and Reconsidering Rhetorical Velocity,” Jim Ridolfo and Dànienne Nicole DeVoss reflect on the evolution of remix theory and its relationship to the developing understanding of authorship. Particularly how the idea of rhetorical velocity that they explored in a 2009 article on third-party recomposition of texts has informed the study of rhetoric and composition in an age of increasing digital redistribution.

Despite the advances traced by Ridolfo and DeVoss, Remix theory is still very much in its infancy. In 2006, Eduardo Navas, whose own paper “Rhetoric and Remix: Reflections on Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*” appears in this issue, broadened the term’s usage explaining the musical origins of the remix terminology and of the phenomenon as a whole. He pointed out that in hip-hop the original “aura” dominates the remix version, but that a particularly “challenging remix” might not follow this pattern. These challenging remixes embody a unique subcategory that Navas calls Regenerative Remix, which does not merely imitate a dead style or original but is creative rather than reiterative—transformative, not derivative. Not *pastiche*, but *remix*.

Navas discusses the vexed relationship between original and copy, describing them as a “rhythmic loop” that reflects the reiterative and cyclical nature of all life and he advocates for a practice of “living historically.” This resonates strongly with observed cycles of cultural reiteration—the Renaissance fascination with the Classical period, the Victorian preoccupation with the Medieval, and of course the Steampunk movement. By so creating indeterminacy across the boundary conditions between types and degrees of remix, Navas’ phrasing prepares the way for an evocative term for remix artifacts—“simulacra.”

David Gunkel discusses simulacra in his essay “Remixology: A Remix(ed) Rhetoric for the 21st Century,” and speaks of remix deconstructing concepts of linear time and erasing the ideas of origin or original. His contribution to this collection illuminates, for me, the remix function at work in the contemporary Steampunk culture and in the Sherlock Holmes fan subculture. Gunkel reveals the work of “copyleftists” who challenge arcane copyright laws as they do or, as he would urge, do not apply to new creations from old originals. The successful work of Sherlockian author-activists Leslie Klinger and Laurie R. King to release Doyle’s original characters from unnaturally protracted American copyright partakes of the very process Gunkel explores.² Their legal contention rests directly on this issue of remix as simulacrum, and their success against the Doyle Estate suggests that the cultural shift Gunkel predicts has swung in their favor.

As a simulacrum of Victorian aesthetics and culture, steampunk is neither pastiche nor copy of either of those things—it references them and rewrites them with mere flashes of recognition to madden and tantalize non-participant observers. For example, steampunk culture seems to subvert and undercut BOTH feminism and sexism at the same time. This should not be possible, but the way in which the culture operates tends to enforce a wholly different kind of hierarchy independent of gender. The privileging of creatives and “makers” as well as, within some expressions of the culture, scientists, also ignores historically prioritized class structures.

In Virginia Kuhn’s essay about remix rhetoric in our contemporary American political context, she expresses shock at her own sudden realization of partisan conservative tactics: “They were appropriating words and concepts used by liberals and academics, recontextualizing them for their

² Leslie Klinger, “Suing the Conan Doyle Estate,” February 25, 2013 <http://lesliesklinger.com/2013/02/suing-the-conandoyle-estate/>.

own purposes. They were remixing the left.” “Given the pace at which information circulates, and the rapid shifts in communication technologies, contemporary culture tends to be ahistorical. Remix can provide a much-needed historical perspective given its ability to incorporate archival footage from television, radio, and film, in addition to textual sources such as books, magazines, and newspapers.” Thus, “Taking remix seriously as an expressive and communicative form is no longer optional.” She concludes that “we must apply the same rigor to remix that we apply to print-based texts, seeing them as the lingua franca of contemporary life.”

These four invited essays, representing leading work in communication, composition, and media studies, frame the discussion that the rest of the issue teases out.

Critical, Creative and Pedagogical Explorations of Remix Rhetoric

The remaining articles within this special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*, submitted and peer reviewed by scholars in Communication as well as English studies, explore ways in which remix manifests in music, video games, social media, literature and more.

Music: In John Logie’s essay on the music and career of Yoko Ono, he directly examines the proliferation of definitions and functions of remix. For him, this is a strong indication that the way in which academics think of and describe remix might contradict or at least undercut its original musical meaning and sense. Such a contradiction may, and in Logie’s view does, cloud the broader, non-academic understanding of the term and of the entire phenomenon.

Videogames and Steampunk Culture: Betsy Brey uses a discussion of the complex storytelling in *Bioshock Infinite* as a case study in the unique rhetoric of videogames. She examines its powerful remix of genres: the game draws sound, imagery, and design elements from the material and popular culture of late 19th century Americana—a steampunk backdrop that resonates fantastically with the strong science fiction aspects of the story and the three-game series. This remix allows the game designer to build a “multifaceted tension” for the player, highlighting the game’s rhetorical subtext of choice and agency.

Additionally, Bri Kerschner gives us an invited reflective essay that pulls our special issue from the work of criticism to the work of the classroom. She hails the beauty and utility of the steampunk genre as an approach vector for discussions of the ethical problems of contemporary culture.

Social Media: Kyle Larson examines “Saved by the bell hooks” as a case study in the intricate remix rhetoric of internet memes and the potential power and significance of the genre. Scott Church examines a mashup video to demonstrate the notion that “rhetoric is remix and remix is rhetoric.” He insists that the principles and strategies of remix provide an essential foundation for understanding how the rhetoric of persuasion functions in digital media and in contemporary culture as a whole.

Literature and Film: As re-examining the culture, history, and fiction of the past through the lens of the present is hardly a new practice, neither is rewriting the stories of the past to speak significantly to the themes of the present. Jackielee Derks’ masterful commentary on *Boy, Snow, Bird* explores how this retelling of fairytale appropriates plot structure and subthemes from old versions of both German and French iterations of the story. Unlike a simple retelling or updating of the story however, Derks points out that the primary themes in *Boy, Snow, Bird* are racial and class tensions in mid-twentieth-century America and the efforts of the protagonist to grapple with them within her more personal family and identity struggles.

Scott Koski draws a parallel between the rhetoric of heroics and remembrance in Homer's *Illiad* and the scripts of Joss Whedon in the television series *Firefly* and its film sequel *Serenity*. Koski discusses how Whedon remixes themes and the rhetorical moves of Homeric storytelling into dystopian postcolonial science fiction.

Creative Writing: Finally, we take an experimental leap outside the genres typical for the *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* to run some creative writing with a critical reflection essay—allowing a scholar to practice remix and then reflect not just on the product, but on the process.

E.L. Ridsen's short fiction piece "Marie de France Dreams of Steampunk" and its accompanying commentary essay provide a bridge of comprehension across two potential chasms of understanding. As a medievalist and a scholar of contemporary medievalisms, Ridsen explores how remix looks back to earlier ways of thinking about the process of composition and the meaning of authorship. As a creative writer, he demonstrates the ways in which remix in general and steampunk in particular subverts and explodes the accrued rhetorical habits of centuries, providing a unique variety of artistic freedom.

The Victorian medievalism movement in its time, and our own contemporary iterations of medievalism, engage in precisely the same creation of simulacrum—deconstructing the medieval and creating a culture of conscious, acknowledged homage but both conscious and subconscious subversion and convergence of medieval historicity with contemporary aesthetics and mores. As David Gunkel remarks, former ages of literary endeavor eschewed the idea of original authorship, considering the impulse to claim ultimate originality "idolatry and arrogance" This instinct, lively and healthy within what he calls "premodern" DJ culture flourished among medieval writers like Chaucer, Gower, Marie de France, and others who relentlessly deferred creative responsibility and denied the possibility of identifying either origin or original. Ridsen examines this authorial/anti-authorial literary culture in the essay that accompanies his story when he describes a particularly metafictional moment: his writing of a medieval poet-nun having a dream vision of her next story, which becomes the work his story references. His version of Marie, and the medieval author herself as her prologue to her "Lais" makes clear, strongly resists making claims of original authorship. She strives instead to deflect both potential praise and potential blame for the stories she writes by citing obscure troubadours of an earlier age.

Eduardo Navas' approach to the philosophical side of remix favors this medievalist deferment of authorial privilege, looking forward to a future in which we participate in a knowledge collective, partaking of the cultural exchange enabled by the internet and our societal reliance on it and harkening back to the medieval sense of knowledge understood by all of literate society and the medieval resistance to direct, sole authorship.

Such demure behavior utterly fails to transfer to Victorian medievalism where sampling and remixing of medieval story and history abounds but where authorial prestige is enforced on behalf of Tennyson, Scott, Doyle, Morris, and everyone else who drew their inspiration so liberally from such precursors. Their products are as surely simulacra as those produced by the proponents of steampunk and remix today

The special issue closes with a meditation on imagination and remix by my co-editor of this special issue, David Beard.

Significance of this Special Issue

Steampunk is a regular beat to this issue, appearing in this introduction and in several essays, including our concluding creative work. The authors of contemporary steampunk fiction, as the

authors of Victorian medievalist fiction before them, recast contemporary problems in the settings of the past to give us some perspective. In this way, they read the conundrums of their own contemporary society and, by means of a generous remix with the readily identifiable icons of past cultures, allow fellow readers to experience both problem and commentary in a less confrontational experience.

This is just as true in all the forms of remix studied in this special issue -- whether the music of Yoko One or the memes of Saved by the bell hooks. In all cases, remix provides an illusion of distance or a disorienting juxtaposition that allows us more clearly to read the issues of our own time. Remix rhetoric is a central rhetorical practice of the twenty-first century.