Remix in the Age of Trump

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This essay argues for considering remix—defined as artifacts that employ the semiotic registers of word, sound and image—as an emergent and vital form of cultural expression and communication. After tracing the ways in which the Trump administration has appropriated the language of the liberal left, using strategies employed by those with progressive political agendas, the specific affordances of remix are highlighted. These features—its polyvocality, its embrace of history, its focus on medium specificity and its accessibility—are potentialities of the form, even as they are not always activated. Taking examples from recent documentary films that make extensive use of archival footage, I maintain that remix can aid communication across difference and contribute to media literacy.

> A lot of people knew parts of this story, but there's something about seeing the puzzle all put together and you see the final picture, that informs you in a different way.
>
> Ava DuVernay on 13th

During the vitriolic run up to the 2016 United States presidential election, I was deeply engaged with remix video: I authored one; I edited a collection of them for a special issue of a digital journal; and I oversaw the creation and revision of many since it was a central project in both my graduate and undergraduate courses.[1] The focus required when deeply engaging this form—the intense and sustained effort involved in the acts of composing, reviewing, and editing texts that span the semiotic registers of word, sound, and image—became something of an escape, an antidote to the half-baked utterances and nonstop shrieking political headlines that filled my social media newsfeeds and email inboxes. It seemed as though everyone was talking but few were listening and everything was happening with the immediacy and urgency of *real time*. By contrast, laboring for hour upon hour on edits seemed to suspend time; it helped block out the noise allowing me to think more deeply and more carefully.

For me, remix has always been a political issue: I see this work as subversive, as a way of speaking truth to power, a championing of the underdog, an occasion for thoughtful people to challenge narrow and damaging representations that comprise the visual hegemony of the Hol-

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[1] I define remix video as the use of previously recorded sound and image, which is recombined to construct a digital argument.

lywood machine. Indeed, remix is a matter of free speech. As I have long argued, if we cite words but pay (or ask permission) to use images, we effectively allow media conglomerates to dictate who may speak, silencing voices as they see fit.[2] Remixed footage of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump was rampant during this election, and neither was left unscathed as their foibles, missteps, and contradictions were highlighted, recontextualized, and disseminated. More than anything else, these videos revealed the paucity of discussion around the actual issues that plagued the campaign. Amidst the candidates' ad hominem attacks, it became increasingly clear that the country was deeply divided ideologically. Yet despite my awareness of this split, like many, I was shocked by results of the election. I felt cut off from so much of the voting public and genuinely confused about the machinations that put a man in office who, by any measure, is the least qualified candidate for the job and the most willing to make bombastic claims, contradicting himself regularly on camera and via Twitter.

When I heard Donald Trump use the word "solidarity" in his inaugural address, I was taken aback. The following day, when Kellyanne Conway used the now infamous adage "alternative facts" to describe statements made by White House press secretary Sean Spicer about inauguration attendance numbers, I recognized the strategy: They were appropriating words and concepts used by liberals and academics, recontextualizing them for their own purposes. They were remixing the left. Whether appealing to the revolutionary spirit associated with the word *solidarity*, or using the poststructuralist critique of monolithic truth claims ("alternative facts"), the tactical canniness of these rhetorical devices is clear. The same technique is operating when Trump rails against "fake news," turning the tables on the crumbling Fourth Estate, challenging its primacy. The commandeering of this phrase is reminiscent of the adoption of terms like "queer" or the slightly-modified "nigga" by the very constituencies they were created to oppress.[3] The marginalized have a long history of appropriating hurtful terms in order to drain their venom.

Of course the radical difference is one of power: digital remix emerged as a political strategy taken up by individuals to speak out against institutions, and while the Trump campaign similarly framed itself as an outsider to Big Government, it is difficult to see Trump's position—even as the then-candidate—as powerless. Trump's team upped the ante by utilizing the endless repetition of phrases like "Crooked Hillary" and "drain the swamp." Indeed, as Amy Mendez has argued in this journal, the environment among conservatives was ripe for Trump to rise, and "no other politician in recent history has so skillfully manipulated media coverage during a campaign."[4] But Trump manipulated media long before the campaign: As media literacy activist D.C. Vito noted, the highly visible role Trump maintained on *The Apprentice,* the unscripted television series meant to gauge contestants' business acumen, framed him as a savvy businessman and strong leader, in spite of evidence to the contrary.[5] Indeed, like all such shows, the footage that actually aired was carefully culled to eliminate any that showed Trump in a bad light. Referring to such shows as "reality television" adds to this illusion: No doubt those who felt disenfranchised by eight years of the Obama Administration associated the infamous phrase "You're fired!" with Trump and fully expected to see that phrase directed at the government.

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[2] This issue is most directly addressed in Virginia Kuhn, "The YouTube Gaze: Permission to Create?" *Enculturation* 7 (2010): http://enculturation.net/the-youtube-gaze.

[3] Words like "nigga" call attention to the racial slur of "nigger" and have been called an "eye dialect"; as the name suggests, modifies the spelling of word and thus its visual component, while leaving the pronunciation of the word (mostly) intact.

[4] Amy Mendez, "Digital Demagogue: The Critical Candidacy of Donald J. Trump," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 6, no. 3/4 (2016): 62-73.

[5] D.C. Vito, private conversation, 13 October 2016.

What, then, is the role of remix video in this environment? Some progressives have questioned the very nature of media literacy initiatives, provocatively suggesting they give individuals too much power of choice,[6] while others lay blame at the door of comedic "news" shows such as *The Daily Show* which seem hopelessly one-sided and smug in their "slicing and dicing" of interview footage to make conservatives look foolish**.**[7] And even as we do not know precisely how people consume information, as cognitive linguist George Lakoff argues, language has a direct connection to a worldview and once established, people tend to filter out any information that does not align with their belief system.[8] The veracity of these arguments notwithstanding, the impact of media, and its varying representations of cultural and political issues, cannot be overstated. This also means that remix—by which I mean an utterance expressed across the registers of sound, text, and image—is, more than ever, a vital form of cultural production and as such, one that demands sustained attention. Indeed, the liberal left seems to be catching on to the power of remix, as nascent progressive groups such as Indivisible construct their playbook with an explicit gesture to the conservative Tea Party's manual and its tips for organizing and gaining media attention.[9]

Below are some key features of remix that show the form's rhetorical potential and can help ameliorate some of the less desirable issues associated with a globally connected, media-inundated culture. While some aspects may seem obvious because they are familiar approaches to academic argument, the best examples come not from print-based essays but rather from documentary film. In recent years, documentary has enjoyed a renaissance as increased access to tools, software, and archives allow for the production of films made for a fraction of the budget spent on their big box office counterparts. For instance, Adam Curtis's wide ranging and incisive films employ as much or more found footage as original interviews shot by his crew, while John Akomfrah's *Stuart Hall Project* was created exclusively with preexisting footage of the late scholar culled from a variety of archival sources.[10] These projects are also far more unique stylistically and they vary in length since they do not have to conform to conventional structures dictated by studios: The 2017 Academy Award for documentary feature went to *O.J.: Made in America*, a doc released as a five-part miniseries in addition to a theatrical release. Likewise, Michael Moore's many high profile docs use rhetorically significant textual flourishes and other effects, no longer avoiding such formal embellishments that call attention to a film's constructedness. They have shed the cinéma vérité pretense of representing some pure, unmediated view of reality. As such, these films provide excellent examples of techniques used in remix. In fact, I frequently use them as course texts when I teach video remix, much the way that I used to assign journal articles and books to fuel students' essays and research papers. While the below features

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[6] danah boyd, "Did Media Literacy Backfire?" *Points: Data and Society*, https://points.datasociety.net/did-media-literacy-backfire-7418c084d88d#.y4fxtfwvc.

[7] *The Federalist*, among others, has hyperbolically suggested that John Stewart single handedly brought down the show, *Crossfire*, in part by slicing and dicing interview footage to bastardize what a person said. See Mollie Hemingway, "How John Stewart and 'The Daily Show' Elected Donald Trump," *The Federalist*, November 11, 2016, http://thefederalist.com/2016/11/11/how-jon-stewart-and-the-daily-show-elected-donald-trump/.

[8] Lakoff, George. "A Minority President: Why the Polls Failed, And What the Majority Can Do," *George Lakoff*, November 22, 2016, https://georgelakoff.com/2016/11/22/a-minority-president-why-the-polls-failed-and-what-the-majority-can-do/ (accessed February 14, 2017).

[9] Austin Cross and A. Martínez, "A Tea Party 'Playbook' Could be Helping Trump Opponents Turn the Tables," *Take Two*, February 23, 2017, http://www.scpr.org/programs/take-two/2017/02/23/55269/a-tea-party-playbook-could-be-helping-trump-oppone/.

[10] For a more detailed view of this trend, please see Eric Faden, "The Documentary's New Politics," *Mediascape,* 2008, http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Spring08_DocumentarysNewPolitics.html.

of remix are not inherently present in the form, they do represent its affordances and, as such, its potential for the construction of digital argument that is smart, engaging, and pedagogically sound.

Remix is Relentlessly Polyvocal

Remix draws assets from a variety of source materials, putting them into dialogue with each other. This not only makes it amenable to a variety of types of evidence—statistical, anecdotal, expert opinion, archival news footage—but said evidence can also be expressed in a variety of forms: voiceover, textual, images (both still and moving), layering, split screen and the like. This polyvocality can also facilitate cross-cultural conversations, a feature that is brilliantly exemplified in *13th*, the 2016 documentary that centers on the complex structural issues surrounding mass incarceration in the United States, including its historical links to slavery. *13th* director Ava DuVernay, one of the only women of color directing films in Hollywood, was very much aware of the assumptions audiences would bring to the film with regard to its liberal agenda. Research, however, precludes such bias: DuVernay notes that nearly half of the interviewees were conservatives, even as they are not labeled as such in the film.[11] Indeed, when I first viewed the film, I was happily surprised when Newt Gingrich's image filled the frame. In today's sharply divided climate, few would argue against the need for conversations across different constituencies.

Remix Embraces History

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. Digitization of analogue media is rampant and joins the born-digital media of the last few decades, all of which become source material for remix. In this way, remix can intervene in history, bringing media that was once ephemeral into the realm of the more permanent. The relative stability of video formats means that remix, as a filmic medium, displays the infinite patience that books have heretofore enjoyed—its segments, like the pages of a book, can be subjected to the repeated viewing necessary for sustained analysis. Indeed, remix, by its very nature, recontextualizes media and one of the most powerful ways to do so is to compare something new with something old.

Remix Highlights Medium Specificity

Given its ability to incorporate multiple formats, remix calls attention to the semiotic potential of each, forcing us to consider what a word can do that an image cannot and vice versa. This also allows for the analysis of fictional and nonfictional media simultaneously, recognizing that both are the stories of a particular era. We should remind ourselves that entertainment media often influences culture as much or more than fact-based forms like broadcast news and documentary. Upon the release of *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915, Woodrow Wilson famously declared it to be "history written with lightning," not a new form of entertainment, and as Journalism professor Jelani Cobb argues, the film was "almost directly responsible for the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan," adding that the image of the burning cross was an invention of D.W. Griffith in order to

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[11] *13th: A Conversation with Oprah Winfrey and Ava DuVernay* (2017), 13:13.

add a cinematic quality to the scene—only then was it taken up by the KKK.[12] Surely events like this prompted Erwin Panofsky, a noted art historian, to declare "whether we like it or not, it is the movies that mold, more than any other single force, the opinions, the taste, the language, the dress, the behavior, and even the physical appearance" of the public.[13] By pulling apart and reassembling sound and image tracks, remix calls attention to their formal qualities and the ways in which the form works with the content to deliver a message. A classic exercise in cinema studies is to view a film in silence; it helps students see things that which would otherwise go unremarked while following the narrative. Remix takes this exercise further.

Remix is Accessible

By incorporating all available semiotic registers, remix can help academics shed jargon and the often-convoluted sentence structure, of academic prose, making our work more accessible to a wider audience. It can help us get out of the Ivory Tower and allow us to weigh in on topics of public interest. Journalism has been undergoing an extreme transformation as digitally networked media have emerged, and the need for well-researched, evidence-based discourse is great. As news outlets shift or simply dissolve, academics have a responsibility to step up, particularly those of us engaged in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. We should contribute to the Fifth Estate, a concept I borrow from Gregory Ulmer to indicate the onus for critical theorists to contribute to issues of broad public interest.[14] We cannot simply ignore popular culture and engage exclusively with obscure and highly specialized texts and theories. Rather we should bring our expertise in these areas to bear upon current issues. For instance, we can be the voice of reason to the ridiculously hyperbolic claims that circulate about social media: how many times did we hear about the "Twitter Revolution" vis-à-vis Egypt and the Arab Spring? If the ludicrousness of that notion was not clear when considering the current state of affairs in the Arab world, we have only to look at Trump's use of Twitter to dispel the notion that any platform is inherently liberatory.

A flurry of discourse has arisen in the aftermath of the presidential election, much of it looking to assign blame for this upset: the tyranny of the Democratic National Convention that foisted a Clinton candidacy on its constituency; the Russians; the smugness of the liberal left who alienated the working poor; the white women who voted against their own best interests; the people of color who failed to vote; the men and women whose sexism outdid every other impulse; the uneducated people who believed the fake news; Cambridge Analytica, whose algorithms were so precise they got Brexit passed before guiding Trump's campaign… and on and on. Perhaps the most interesting of these foils however, is John Stewart, comedian and former host of *The Daily Show*. This story appeared on the conservative site, *The Federalist* just days after the election and has been repeated and excerpted throughout the blogosphere. The story goes that during John Stewart's 2004 appearance on *Crossfire*, he lambasted the hosts for treating their bipartisan

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[12] Jelani Cobb, quoted in *13th*, 06:20-06:27.

[13] Erwin Panofsky, "Style and Medium in Motion Pictures," in *The Visual Turn: Classical Film Theory and Art History*, ed. Angela Dalle Vacche, 69-94 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002). This essay was originally published in 1934.

[14] Virginia Kuhn, "Filmic Texts and the Rise of the Fifth Estate," *International Journal of Learning and Media*, 2013, http://scalar.usc.edu/anvc/kuhn/index.

panelists with kid gloves, while never holding them accountable or asking the really tough questions. This single appearance by Stewart, they say, led to *Crossfire* being canceled, and ushered in an era of comedy as news and, in the process, killed late night comedy.[15] *The Hollywood Reporter* posted the infamous *Crossfire* clip, calling it the "Watch John Stewart Call Tucker Carlson a "Dick" in Epic 2004 'Crossfire' Takedown" two months later, implicitly invoking *The Federalist* column without mentioning it.[16]

Several aspects of this story bear mention: first, Stewart's appearance on Crossfire was linked to the publication of the book he co-authored, *America (The Book): A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inaction.* As the title suggests, part of the book's premise is that Americans are guilty of political quietism and no longer feel compelled to participate in their own governance. This situation was due, in large part, to the failure of journalists to fulfill their obligation to the public. Indeed, the appearance on *Crossfire* finds Stewart saying, "We need help from the media, because you're hurting us" (06:12), "You have a responsibility to the public discourse," (07:49) "we need what you do" (7:58).[17] This was not a singular notion at that time, even on the part of journalists themselves: Legendary White House reporter Helen Thomas expressed the same sentiment, blaming her profession for the 2003 invasion of Iraq in her book, *Watchdogs of Democracy? The Waning of the Washington Press Corps.*[18] She argues that the Washington Press Corps failed to ask incisive questions about the Bush Administration's claims and never launched a thorough investigation themselves. They ignored the absence of any evidence linking Iraq to 9/11, were too easily persuaded by the evidence of weapons of mass destruction, even as they failed to consistently and accurately report on the frequency and size of the anti-war protests. Like Stewart, she did numerous television appearances. In short, the *Crossfire* team surely knew what they were getting in Stewart as a guest.

In this light, we can view the Epic Crossfire Takedown as merely indicative of a larger trend in both form and content: speculations about the role of news media in the digital world, paired with the increasing need for ratings-driven news shows provide an environment for superficial reporting. But I would also argue that the pyramid structure of print news—pithy headline followed by broad strokes leading to ever more detailed aspects of a story—do not translate well to broadcast news. Headlines become soundbites but are seldom followed by the concomitant detail (it is a time-based medium after all) leaving viewers with half a story at best. A different paradigm is needed and remix is an attractive alternative. It is a structure capable of conveying the intricacies of contemporary issues with some nuance, some contradiction, and most of all, some complexity.

This is where my final point about the Crossfire Takedown rests: John Stewart and *The Daily Show* remain notable for their pioneering work with remix: the writers and producers scanned the media coverage of events and sequenced disparate clips that showed not only conflicting state-

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[15] Mollie Hemmingway, "How John Stewart and 'The Daily Show' Elected Donald Trump," *The Federalist*, 2016, http://thefederalist.com/2016/11/11/how-jon-stewart-and-the-daily-show-elected-donald-trump/

[16] THR Staff, "Watch Jon Stewart Call Tucker Carlson a 'Dick' in Epic 2004 'Crossfire' Take Down," *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 5, 2017, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/video/watch-jon-stewart-call-tucker-carlson-a-dick-epic-2004-crossfire-take-down-961147.

[17] For a transcript of this discussion, see Oliver Willis, "Jon Stewart on Crossfire: 'Stop, Stop, Stop, Stop Hurting America,'" *Media Matters for America*, October 15, 2004, https://www.mediamatters.org/research/2004/10/15/jon-stewart-on-crossfire-stop-stop-stop-stop-hu/132095.

[18] Thomas, Helen. *Watchdogs of Democracy? The Waning Washington Press Corps and How It Has Failed the Public* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006).

ments made by politicians, but also the lazy, repetitive coverage of events on the part of reporters. Had more academics been paying attention to remix as a form of argument, our teaching and scholarship would focus on the critical analysis of its various instances, providing a means for gauging the rhetorical soundness of both the formal and conceptual elements.

Taking remix seriously as an expressive and communicative form is no longer optional. And it may encourage a more responsible news media: while moderating a bipartisan panel on the cost of protecting the first family recently, CNN's Don Lemon did just that. Parris Dennard, director of Black Outreach for President George W. Bush, invoked the term "fake news."[19] Lemon stopped the conversation long enough to force a definition of the term—news that is intentionally deceptive—putting an end to its misuse by the conservative panelist who, in pure Trump fashion, used the adage to describe something that he simply felt should not be covered.

We cannot be surprised or horrified about the appropriation of the liberal left's terms like "solidarity" or "fake news" or "alternative facts." As a strategy, it is a sound one. Rather we must apply the same rigor to remix that we apply to print-based texts, seeing them as the lingua franca of contemporary life. This means we need to concern ourselves not only with the issues of the day, but also with the tools and strategies for their responsible representation. We must also involve ourselves in open access publication venues that are peer reviewed and, as such, offer the type of jurying that ensures the quality and veracity of the form.

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[19] "CNN's Don Lemon Abruptly Ends Segment After Panelist's 'Fake News' Complaints," *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5s-qTV2Eez8&sns=em, accessed February 18, 2017 (video is no longer online).