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The Remix Aesthetic: Why originality is not what it used to be

...the reading of the modern text...consists not in receiving, in knowing or in feeling that text, but in writing it anew
- Roland Barthes¹

Abstract

The turntable, if you've cared to notice, is coming in pairs these days. Phonographs, with their encoded grooves, were originally thought of (by Edison) as a database technology; a record of words and sounds past, timeless, yet susceptible to scratches. Scratching then became something very different with the live remix. The constant rotational speed of the player became variable, and the final form of the record's sound—unpredictable. Records in the hands of a talented DJ are a *medium* and the turntables, spun together, form a musical instrument.

This McLuhan-esque progression of hot to cool record players serves only as an initial image to my inquiry, which is; *how* does the idea of remix manifest itself in a distinct aesthetic paradigm? Considering that this term, which has been slapped on everything from textbooks to soda cans², is at risk of being diluted, it nonetheless conjures up strong sentiments of 1990's dance music. My concern in this study is not with music specifically, but rather, the broader realm of digital media arts (of which digital audio is a category). In the last decade, the hardware and software of digital home studios enabled remix production to proliferate alongside technological advances³, but with this came an important shift in thinking. Remix aesthetics are evident everywhere in digital media, from its foundations, in the functions of *sampling* and *looping*, to the readymade, ease-of-use of design templates, to the cultural fads of sprite comics and video mash-ups.

Remixing is indicative of the way we create with digital media. Lev Manovich, perhaps the most notable theorist of digital media to date, has written about looping, Flash turntables and "remix" as a possible metaphor for the amalgamation of culture and digitization in general⁴. It is these cultural reverberations of the remix aesthetic that is my main focus in this paper, for an analysis on this level of values, tastes and judgments will expose the remix aesthetic in all of its facades; music, photomontage, the moving image, physical objects, virtual communities etc.

¹ P.153. *Image, Music, Text* by Roland Barthes. Translation by Stephen Heath. Hill and Wang. 1978.

² O'Reilly Media's SafariU brochure states "Use as much or as little of our content as you want and remix it as you see fit. In 2004, Coca-Cola Company began offering the "Sprite Remix" soft drink.

³ "...by and large, it's the phenomenon of 'DJ meets home-studio enthusiast' that has cultivated so many of the techniques used by today's remix producers." P.5. *The Complete Guide to Remixing* by Erik Hawkins. Berklee Press. 2004.

⁴ "In conclusion let me offer you a different metaphor to think with about this cultural slice which we also call 'new media.' This metaphor is that of 'remix.'" *New Media and Remix Culture* (introduction to Korean edition of *The Language of New Media* by Lev Manovich), MIT Press. 2001. Translation: 2003.

Personally, I have found the term “remix” to be handy when connecting theoretical models to class work. The term “remix” becomes a bridge between the colloquial slang of my students: *retro*, *techno* and *emo*, and postmodern terms like deconstruction and appropriation. In fact my interest in this topic is spurred on by continual discussions with my students. Rethinking the remix leads to a unique perspective on academic topics regarding art, authority, authorship, epistemology and the enigma of content and form.

Philosophically speaking, remix is ultimately a correlate to becoming, in other words, the denial of unity in favor of processuality. Remixing is a processual view of things that denies a fixed origin, voice or essential identity and as such, it resonates with certain important intellectual statements—Barthes’ *Death of the Author*, Baudriaud’s *Simulations* and McLuhan’s metaphor between electronic media and the oral tradition; just to name a few. With the emergence of new academic disciplines that depend on digitization in general; such as those that call themselves Digital Media, New Media or an array of other new design-oriented disciplines; we have a distinctive new way of learning, creating and thinking. Diagramming how this unique aesthetic builds upon its foundations in semiotics, critical theory, media studies and other established domains will help define these emerging digital disciplines, not to mention, make them more understandable to traditional academes. Remix is thus significant as a qualitative rubric within the digital disciplines, and serves as a bridge that links digital-studies to the broader cultural scene.

To return to my turntable image above, a unified “identity” taken through the remix becomes a multivalent compound of potentialities. Remixing is *not* an act of imitation, akin to counterfeiting, yet aesthetically; remixes do run the gamut from the Sunday painting to the avant-garde. Regardless of the height of their artistry, every remix bears the imprint of digitization. For digitization enables more complex combinations of these pluralities—of image, sound and information. Technology, it seems, is the perfect catalyst for this act of mixing digital streams; the remix resembles a chemical concoction: nothing new in its elemental purity, but sometimes, powerful when mixed.