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WHAT COMES AFTER REMIX?

It is a truism to day that we live in a “remix culture.” Today, many of cultural and lifestyle arenas - music, fashion, design, art, web applications, user created media, food - are governed by remixes, fusions, collages, or mash-ups. If post-modernism defined 1980s, remix definitely dominates 2000s, and it will probably continue to rule the next decade as well. (For an expanding resource on remix culture, visit remixtheory.net by Eduardo Navas.) Here are just a few examples of how remix continues to expand. In his 2004/2005-winter collection John Galliano (a fashion designer for the house of Dior) mixed vagabond look, Yemenite traditions, East-European motifs, and other sources that he collects during his extensive travels around the world. DJ Spoky created a feature-length remix of D.W. Griffith's 1912 "Birth of a Nation" which he appropriately named "Rebirth of a Nation." In April 2006 Annenberg Center at University of Southern California run a two-day conference on “Networked Politics” which had sessions and presentations a variety of remix cultures on the Web: political remix videos, anime music videos, machinima, alternative news, infrastructure hacks.¹ In addition to these cultures that remix media content, we also have a growing number of software applications that remix data – so called software “mash-ups.” Wikipedia defines a mash-up as “a website or application that combines content from more than one source into an integrated experience.”² At the moment of this writing (February 4, 2007), the web site www.programmableweb.com listed the

¹ <http://netpublics.annenberg.edu/>, accessed February 4, 2007.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mashup_%28web_application_hybrid%29, accessed February 4, 2007.

total of 1511 mash-ups, and it estimated that the average of 3 new mash-ups Web applications are being published every day.³

Remix practice extends beyond culture and Internet. *Wired* magazine devoted its July 2005 issue to the theme Remix Planet. The introduction boldly stated: “From *Kill Bill* to Gorillaz, from custom Nikes to *Pimp My Ride*, this is the age of the remix.”⁴ Another top IT trend watcher in the world – the annual O’Reilly Emerging Technology conferences (ETECH) similarly adopted Remix as the theme for its 2005 conference. Attending the conference, I watched in amazement how top executives from Microsoft, Yahoo, Amazon, and other IT companies not precisely known for their avant-garde aspirations, described their recent technologies and research projects using the concept of remixing. If I had any doubts that we are living not simply in Remix Culture but in a Remix Era, they disappeared right at that conference.

Remixing originally had a precise and a narrow meaning that gradually became diffused. Although precedents of remixing can be found earlier, it was the introduction of multi-track mixers that made remixing a standard practice. With each element of a song – vocals, drums, etc. – available for separate manipulation, it became possible to “re-mix” the song: change the volume of some tracks or substitute new tracks for the old ounces. Gradually the term became more and more broad, today referring to any reworking of already existing cultural work(s).

In his book *DJ Culture* Ulf Poscardt singles out different stages in the evolution of remixing practice. In 1972 DJ Tom Moulton made his first disco remixes; as Poscardt points out, they “show a very chaste treatment of the original song. Moulton sought above all a different weighting of the various soundtracks, and worked the rhythmic elements of the disco songs even more clearly and powerfully...Moulton used the various elements of the sixteen or

³ <http://www.programmableweb.com/mashups>, accessed February 4, 2007.

⁴ <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/13.07/intro.html>, accessed February 4, 2007.

twenty-four track master tapes and remixed them.”⁵ By 1987, “DJs started to ask other DJs for remixes” and the treatment of the original material became much more aggressive. For example, “Coldcut used the vocals from Ofra Hanza’s ‘Im Nin Alu’ and contrasted Rakim’s ultra-deep bass voice with her provocatively feminine voice. To this were added techno sounds and a house-inspired remix of a rhythm section that loosened the heavy, sliding beat of the rap piece, making it sound lighter and brighter.”⁶

Around the turn of the century (20th to 21st) people started to apply the term “remix” to other media besides music: visual projects, software, literary texts. Since, in my view, electronic music and software serve as the two key reservoirs of new metaphors for the rest of culture today, this expansion of the term is inevitable; one can only wonder why it did not happen earlier. Yet we are left with an interesting paradox: while in the realm of commercial music remixing is officially accepted⁷, in other cultural areas it is seen as violating the copyright and therefore as stealing. So while filmmakers, visual artists, photographers, architects and Web designers routinely remix already existing works, this is not openly admitted, and no proper terms equivalent to remixing in music exist to describe these practices.

One term that is sometimes used to talk about these practices in non-music areas is “appropriation.” The term was first used to refer to certain New York-based post-modern artists of the early 1980s who re-worked older photographic images – Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, Barbara Kruger, and some others. But the term “appropriation” never achieved the same wide use as “remixing.” In fact, in contrast to “remix,” “appropriation” never completely left its original art world context where it was coined. I think that “remixing” is a better term anyway because it suggests a systematic re-working of a source, the meaning which “appropriation” does not have. And indeed, the original

⁵ Ulf Poschardt, *DJ Culture*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (London: Quartet Books Ltd, 1998), 123.

⁶ *Ibid*, 271.

⁷ For instance, Web users are invited to remix Madonna songs at <http://madonna.acidplanet.com/default.asp?subsection=madonna>.

“appropriation artists” such as Richard Prince simply copied the existing image as a whole rather than re-mixing it. As in the case of Duchamp’s famous urinal, the aesthetic effect here is the result of a transfer of a cultural sign from one sphere to another, rather than any modification of a sign.

The other older term commonly used across media is “quoting” but I see it as describing a very different logic than remixing. If remixing implies systematically rearranging the whole text, quoting refers inserting some fragments from old text(s) into the new one. Thus I think we should not see quoting as a historical precedent for remixing. Rather, we can think of it as a precedent for another new practice of authorship practice that, like remixing, was made possible by electronic and digital technology – sampling.

Music critic Andrew Goodwin defined sampling as “the uninhibited use of digital sound recording as a central element of composition. Sampling thus becomes an aesthetic programme.”⁸ We can say that with sampling technology, the practices of montage and collage that were always central to twentieth century culture, became industrialized. Yet we should be careful in applying the old terms to new technologically driven cultural practices. The terms “montage” and “collage” regularly pop up in the writings of music theorists from Poscardt to Kodwo Eshun and DJ Spooky who in 2004 published a brilliant book *Rhythm Science* which ended up on a number of “best 10 books of 2004” lists and which put forward “unlimited remix” as The artistic and political technique of our time.⁹ In my view, these terms that come to us from literary and visual modernism of the early twentieth century – think for instance of works by Moholy-Nagy, Hannah Höch or Raoul Hausmann – do not always adequately describe new electronic music. Let us note just three differences. Firstly, musical samples are often arranged in loops. Secondly, the nature of sound allows musicians to mix pre-existent sounds in a variety of ways, from clearly differentiating and contrasting individual samples (thus following the traditional modernist aesthetics of

⁸ Ibid., 280.

⁹ Paul D. Miller aka Dj Spooky that Subliminal Kid. *Rhythm Science*. MIT Press, 2004.

montage/collage), to mixing them into an organic and coherent whole¹⁰; To use the terms of Roland Barthes, we can say that if modernist collage always involved a “clash” of element, electronic and software collage also allows for “blend.”¹¹ Thirdly, the electronic musicians now often conceive their works beforehand as something that will be remixed, sampled, taken apart and modified.

It is relevant to note here that the revolution in electronic pop music that took place in the second part of the 1980s was paralleled by similar developments in pop visual culture. The introduction of electronic editing equipment such as switcher, keyer, paintbox, and image store made remixing and sampling a common practice in video production towards the end of the decade; first pioneered in music videos, it later took over the whole visual culture of TV. Other software tools such as Photoshop (1989) and After Effects (1993) had the same effect on the fields of graphic design, motion graphics, commercial illustration and photography. And, a few years later, World Wide Web redefined an electronic document as a mix of other documents. Remix culture has arrived.

The question that at this point is really hard to answer is what comes after remix? Will we get eventually tired of cultural objects - be they dresses by Alexander McQueen, motion graphics by MK12 or songs by Aphex Twin – made from samples which come from already existing database of culture? And if we do, will it be still psychologically possible to create a new aesthetics that does not rely on excessive sampling? When I was emigrating from Russia to U.S. in 1981, moving from grey and red communist Moscow to a vibrant and post-modern New York, me and others living in Russia felt that Communist regime would last for at least another 300 years. But already ten years later, Soviet Union ceased to exist. Similarly, in the middle of the 1990s the euphoria unleashed by the Web, collapse of Communist governments in Eastern Europe and early effects of

¹⁰ To use the term of Barthes’s quote above, we can say that if modernist collage always involved a “clash” of element, electronic and software collage also allows for “blend.”

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 146.

globalization created an impression that we have finally Cold War culture behind – its heavily armed borders, massive spying, and the military-industrial complex. And once again, only ten years later we seem to be back in the darkest years of Cold War, except that now we are being tracked with RFID chips, computer vision surveillance systems, data mining and other new technologies of the twenty first century. So it is very possible that the remix culture, which right now appears to be so firmly in place that it can't be challenged by any other cultural logic, will morph into something else sooner than we think.

I don't know what comes after remix. But if we now try now to develop a better historical and theoretical understanding of remix era, we will be in a better position to recognize and understand whatever new era which will replace it.