

Remix and the Rouelles of Media Production



ABSTRACT: The text on video remixing contributed to *Networked Book* is the result of an ongoing collaboration that started in January 2010, when *Owen Gallagher* invited *Mette Birk*, *Mark O' Cúlár*, *Martin Leduc*, and *Eduardo Navas* to join a 'Remix Theory and Praxis' online seminar. In April, Navas invited *Tara Zepell* to join the group.

The text explores concepts of remixing not only in content and form, but also in process. The aim of the collaboration is to evaluate how the creative process functions as a type of remix itself in a period when production keeps moving toward a collective approach in all facets of culture. The emphasis on video remixing is the result of a collaborative rewriting activity among the contributors, who each wrote independent paragraphs that went through constant revisions once combined as a single text. Video was selected as the subject of analysis because members have a common interest in time-based media, and also because video remixing is at the forefront of media production. One of the group goals is that the text becomes a statement of what video could be as a reflective form of the networked culture that is developing at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The text is in constant revision and readers are encouraged to join in its writing.

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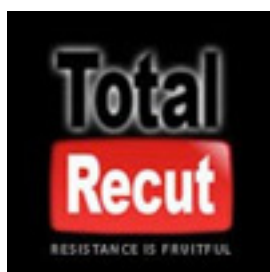
BIOGRAPHIES:



Mette Birk is an M.A. candidate for Film and Media Studies at the University of Copenhagen. She is currently carrying out field research that focuses on the sociological perspectives of creating remixes, with a particular focus on “trailer remixes” in the style of Robert Ryang’s famous “Shining” video.



Mark O' Cúlár is an Irish filmmaker and artist. His interest in remix began as a DJ and he started producing projected scenes consisting of “found material” in a VJ scenario in 2002. His work as a video editor has been the driving force to experiment with storytelling with the mass media as source material. He has produced remixed video work under a selection of pseudonyms. Mark is building doubled sided websites (<http://itison.net> and <http://itison.tv>) into community led spaces focused on media activism and remix culture.



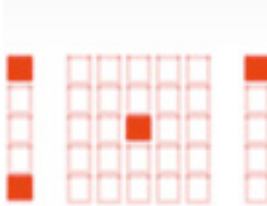
Owen Gallagher is a designer, educator, musician and entrepreneur originally from Dublin, now living in Co. Donegal, Ireland, where he is an Assistant Lecturer of Design and Creative Digital Media at Letterkenny Institute of Technology. He is a graduate of the University of Ulster, where he received a Masters Degree in Design Communication with distinction in 2007. He holds a Higher Diploma in Research Practice, a Bachelor of Design in Digital Media and a Diploma in Graphic Design from LYIT, as well as an Associate Diploma in Music Performance from the Victoria College of Music, London. Owen is also the founder and Creative Director of CHI Media, a graphic, web and digital media design agency based in the north west of Ireland.



Eli Horwatt is a Ph.D. candidate at York University, Toronto in the Cinema and Media Studies Department researching appropriation and conceptual art strategies in experimental film and video. He has published articles on remixing and machinima in Scope and CineAction Magazine. Horwatt writes a blog called [Recycled Cinema](#).



Martin Leduc is a writer, video remix artist and media activist living in Ottawa. He blogs for [cinemaminima.com](#) and [totalrecut.com](#). In Fall 2010, Leduc will be starting his Communications MA at Carleton University. He has curated remix videos and screened his own remixes at multiple venues.



Eduardo Navas researches the crossover of art, culture, and media. His production includes art & media projects, critical texts, and curatorial projects. He has presented and lectured about his work and research in various places throughout the Americas and Europe. He has taught art and media theory at various colleges and universities in the United States. Navas holds a Ph.D. in Art and Media History, Theory and Criticism from the University of California, San Diego. For more on Navas's research, visit <http://navasse.net> and <http://remixtheory.net>.



Tara Zepel is a researcher, theorist and intermittent artist and a PhD student in the Art History, Theory & Criticism program at UCSD where her work explores the intersection(s) between aesthetics, community and technology. Her current focus is on the networked aesthetics of ubiquitous computing and Augmented Reality. She is particularly interested in relations between art and technology that push conceptions of what is possible and the cultural/aesthetic implications that ensue. Prior to UCSD, Tara received a bachelor's degree in Literature from Duke University (2002). She has also acted as a project manager in the art world and doing production and post-production work for independent films but has always retained close ties to her passion for learning and sharing knowledge. Visit her [website](#).

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NOTE: This chapter was originally set up as a wiki, which would have enabled any person to edit the text, and all edits would have been viewable under a 'history' tab. Because the chapter was hacked, we have reconstructed the original text and published it here in an uneditable form.

More remixing than ever

It would be difficult to imagine art without remixing. Our earliest cultural records contain countless examples of the repurposing of extant materials in the construction of new works. Ancient Irish storytellers or 'Seanchai' would share mythical tales with eager audiences, changing and adding details depending on the circumstances and who was listening. Classical antiquity offers us centuries of repurposed myths and heroes, and the tradition continues throughout the most canonized of western cultural history. To borrow a quote from John Robert Colombo's "A Found Introduction" that was itself lifted from Louis Dudek: "*If A thinks himself a better poet than B, let him stop hinting at it in the pages of an essay; let him re-write B's poem and publish his own improved version....an absurd suggestion? Well, I am only proposing that modern artists should treat each other as Greek dramatists or Renaissance painters or Elizabethan poets did. If anyone thinks that the law of copyright has fostered better art than those barbarous times could produce, I will not try to convert him.*"(1)

We claim video as the preferred medium for poets of networked culture. Poetry from the very beginning has been about quality and selectivity: it is to this day exemplar of knowledge as a process of selection from a large data bank of references, experiences, and literary strategies which the poet deliberately reconfigures for her own vision. Video poets (or as we know them, video remixers) find quality in selecting from pre-existing material, much like poets borrow from their respective literary traditions. The difference between poetry and video is that the former has roots in a past economic system, in which intellectual property was not contested with quantitative and qualitative precision. The latter is current and active in time, when data-mining and real-time search tracking are redefining how intellectual property is distributed and acknowledged in culture. The result is a recurring question on originality which is closely linked to copyright issues.(2)

Our discussions of video remix may appear understandably familiar to many artists and cultural theorists. Video remix as we understand it today derives from influences as diverse as hip-hop aesthetics and the found footage and appropriation art of 20th century galleries. Its affinity for *détournement*(3) springs from the Situationists, and its viral patterns of distribution were initiated by culture jammers and hackers.

But the early 21st century has seen an unprecedented increase in 'remixed' productions. This has occurred largely as a result of widespread access to relatively affordable media production and distribution technology. Those who can afford this technology can now become cultural producers within a previously consumer-oriented culture industry. The traditionally one-way communication channels of film and video can now operate in both directions.

We can now treat commercially-produced video as source material for our own discussions with each other. We no longer have to abide by schedules set by TV network executives. We can search at will. We can recall and remix the media.

Social media networks are defined by remix aesthetics. And this tendency is often best manifested in video mashups of all types. It has now become so common for users of the internet to remix content that the techniques have become banal. Whether people reblog bits of text, share a link or video or a set of images, they take the act of producing content (professional or amateur) as a convention, something they expect to

carry out as part of their everyday lives. This attitude shifts the perceived role of the creator and demands a new frame of criticism from cultural producers. The boundaries between traditional notions of high culture vis-à-vis mass culture and amateurs vis-à-vis professionals are quickly dissolving into meaninglessness. Yet this shift exposes a new stage of contention best understood in the ubiquity of amateur production as a real economic force that is not easily controlled by those who enforce intellectual property laws.

How amateurs distinguish today's video remixes

Remix has the ability to go beyond the regime of professionals and the commercial incentives for producing art. When commercial interests are set aside, new motivations for creating start to emerge. Some people produce and share their work out of pure interest in participation in a cultural network, some to make political statements and some for the sheer pleasure of sharing. Breaking remix apart by looking into the diverse motivations and social structures of its participants will be a useful tool for understanding the artistic and political potential of remix culture.

As video remixing genres and communities proliferate online, we find a wide range of motives for production. Some of these are shared between different communities and artists, some are distinct or conflicting: Mad Movie editors in Japan performatively remix for their respective audiences and fellow artists, not unlike the largely North American producers of AMVs (Anime Music Videos); editors of youtube poop are often driven by a similar sense of showmanship, but also by the drive to deface and disrupt youtube and other video sharing sites; Vidders have long celebrated, criticized, and analyzed their fandoms with an enormous collection of remix work (4); VJs, who have established commercial outlets for their work, make up online communities with a broad range of commercial and non-commercial motivations for production (5); political remix videos demonstrate the explicitly political motivations typical of culture jammers.

On the other hand, movie trailer remixers remind us that not all producers have political, social or community-oriented intentions for using copyright licensed material from the entertainment industry. Many trailer remixers are not aware of the laws and politics surrounding remix. They rarely communicate with fellow trailer remixers, and they often show bias towards their own work. Thus the social structure in the group of trailer remixers is not at its optimum for collaborative remixing, and trailer remixers may not be the only contributors to have a less collaborative and more commercial motivation for producing video remix. Video remix is also used with purely commercial intentions by manufacturing and retailing businesses, letting the visitors create their own remix from a limited quantity of promoting video material (6).

Though we must be careful not to romanticize it to the point of creating a mythology, remix practice by "amateurs" (a term denoting a person engaged in an activity without concern for material benefit) should be understood as a break from other appropriative practices. It can be understood as an outsider form of media research and critique; a way of editorializing or re-imaging cultural phenomena like industrial entertainment, commercial products, news, memes and more. Remix offers us concise and vivid rhetorical techniques, capable of infecting the mass media machine, or disrupting it, or engaging it in a reciprocal relationship.

The rhetorical distinctions of remixed footage

While the importance of media literacy and the ancillary critiques of media that surround it have been discussed to the point of exhaustion, the particular features of the video remix (immediate, topical, timely and focused) offer us new rhetorical opportunities. The greatest distinction appears in the use of video remix as a means of speaking that can formulate a direct and practical engagement with circulated imagery, liberated from the traditional aesthetic concerns and institutionalized politics of the academy. It is useful to think about the way a video remix may replace a textual commentary, opinion, or protest as a visceral and immediate means of conveying a message.

Taking our earlier analogy of poetry, it is evident that video is informed by a poetic license — not just in terms of convenience of access to material (as the poet could just consider words from his growing vocabulary — the video remixer can easily access databanks of pre-existing video), but also in terms of economics (as writing has been a rather inexpensive endeavor, video editing has become unexpectedly affordable). This may be due in part to the fact that generations of people have been bombarded with moving images as consumers. Once computing made the production of video accessible, the practice of developing amateur or independent video productions was almost as natural as speaking a sentence.

Of course, video remix has by no means escaped the commercial interests that dominate cultural production. The material for online remixes often consists of the most marketed movies and television shows or the most visible music videos and commercials. The advertising industry itself has co-opted the remix aesthetic to appeal to the perceived new market demographic of rebellious prosumers. But there is a world of difference between an advertising agency legitimately securing the rights and paying to use a series of copyrighted clips in an ad and a lone remixer creating an unauthorized political remix by taking clips from a variety of sources without asking for permission. And this difference is further pronounced by the willingness of many remixers to risk copyright enforcement without any hope of financial reward for their work. This escape from commercial pressures and restraints may grant the political video remixer a potentially powerful weapon in the information wars. And it may prove resistant to corporate co-optation and remain effective as a means of empowering audiences and offering pedagogical political tools.

Can video remixes change the economics of video production?

Walter Benjamin has called for artists to not only take on the task of producing works that possess a progressive political character, but to do so through a progressive means of production that encourages other artists to do the same: “[An author’s] work would never merely be developing products, but always at the same time working with the means of production themselves... An author who teaches a writer nothing, teaches nobody anything. The determinant factor is the exemplary character of a production that enables it, first, to lead other producers to this production, and secondly to present them with an improved apparatus for their use.” (7)

The practices involved in video remixing may also qualify as media activism insofar as they undermine the laws and monopolies that dominate industrialized culture and turn it into a commodity market. Fair use, [Creative Commons](#) and [copyleft](#) lower the cost of cultural participation and give media producers an opportunity to practice their trade in a more democratic fashion. And the challenges that video remix poses to copyright’s role in culture may contribute discussions about reforming the laws that govern other forms of intellectual labor like science and software development.

Activists of all types may benefit from the low cost of video remix. Some politically motivated remixes could contribute to various progressive causes and generate solidarity between remix artists, media activists, and the broader social justice movement. Video remix can serve as an important example of progressive cultural production, and it offers opportunities for discourse that are not available in the mainstream cultural industry.

The efforts of artists like [Negativland](#) and John Oswald offer us examples of individuals who use their art as a means to challenge the economic relationships of cultural production. But we may also benefit from asking whether or not larger artistic remixing communities can work together to build on these past victories. One complication to note is that corporate owned websites make up the majority of high-traffic video sharing communities. Moreover, the handful of large conglomerates that own the rights to much of the media today are often able to squash potential artistic challenges with threat of legal action. The fair use and activist activities of individual remixers and remix groups are thus halted by financial necessity, often before the case is even presented for legal ruling.

What is the future of video remixing and how do we make it happen?

It would be worthwhile to consider the obstacles to video remix's growth and the strategies we might employ to overcome them. The labor of video remixing is prohibited by extensive hours spent finding and converting footage. Arbitrary copyright takedowns and fear of legal consequences deter many remixers from distributing their work. Solutions to these issues lie not only in legal and technological reforms, but also in the development and enrichment of remix communities themselves. Remix-oriented communities offer creators an easy means to ask contemporaries for aesthetic and technical advice. Metadata can help artists mine their source material. Non-profit distribution sites allow remixers to post their work without fear of arbitrary removal or abuse from other users ([The Archive of Our Own](#) project by the Organization for Transformative Works serves as an important example). And we can turn to the discussions that take place within these communities to find new insight into the future of video remix.

While we frequently discuss online video remixers as large demographics of users, we should also focus on the individual remixer or creator: the person behind the computer, managing editing software, making selections, piecing together fragments of disparate media, fanatically devoting her spare time – she is a foundation stone of cultural reproduction. It comes as no surprise that the creator is a central tenet of cultural production; the value of individual labor is crucial to our discussions of how we want to build our artistic communities.

References

- (1) Colombo, John Robert. "A Found Introduction" Open Poetry edited by Ronald Gross and George Quasha. Simon & Schuster: New York, 1973. 431-435
- (2) For more detail on questions of originality, copyright and culture in today's economy, see Lawrence Lessig. *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*. Penguin Press: New York, 2008
- (3) From Ken Knabb: <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/detourn.htm>. "The French word *détournement* means deflection, diversion, rerouting, distortion, misuse, misappropriation, hijacking, or otherwise turning something aside from its normal course or purpose...]"
- (4) <http://www.video24-7.org/video/vidding.html>
- (5) <http://thru-you.com/>
- (6) <http://www.craftsmanlabs.com>
- (7) Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," *New Left Review* I/62, July-August 1970, http://www.situations.org.uk/_uploaded_pdfs/AuthorasProducer_002.pdf