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Audible Transgressions:

Art and Aesthetics after the Mashup

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During a recent conference panel on mashups, remixes, and bootlegs (NCA 2009), one of the attendees asked what was initially termed an "innocent question." Although I cannot remember the exact wording, the gist of the inquiry concerned aesthetics: How can we decide whether a particular audio mashup is any good or not? What is it that separates a good mashup from a bad one? Or more pointedly, how can you tell whether something is a well-designed mashup as opposed to an accidental concatenation of materials simply thrown together? This line of questioning is, despite how it was initially presented, anything but "innocent." It is a crucial and insightful inquiry that asks us to reconsider long-standing assumptions about art, artistry, and aesthetic judgment.

Attempts to respond to these kinds of questions often, and unfortunately, make the situation worse. In a 2009 YouTube promotional video for Club Bootie, proprietors and mashup/remix gatekeepers Adrian and Deidre Roberts (aka DJ A+D) offer the following assurances: "Mashup culture is that—it's kind of like the new punk rock. Anyone with a laptop and computer software can make a mashup. However, just cuz everyone can do it doesn't mean everyone should. And we will dig through so many mashups to find the good ones. And that's what Bootie really does; we showcase the best mashups in the world. Bootie is the quality control of the mashup world." (Figure 2.1)

Figure 2.1 – Promotional Flier for Club Bootie

On the one hand, it can be reassuring to know that someone is sorting through the digital deluge of mashups and remixes in order to pick out the "good ones." The Internet provides virtually unmitigated access to a flood of material and sorting through it all can be a full-time job. Club Bootie, therefore, provides mashup fans and consumers with a much needed service. They will sort through (in theory) every bit of what is currently available and hand-select only those remix compositions that are "worth" attention. On the other hand, this ability to sort and select is a powerful and influential occupation. One might justifiably ask: Why trust Bootie and its decision making process? What are they filtering out, and why? What, in Bootie's estimations, make a mashup, remix, or bootleg good? What controls, if any, are on their quality control? Who, in other words, gets to decide what is "good," and on what grounds?

This chapter will engage these questions by using what is arguably a mashup method. That is, it will bring two seemingly incompatible things together in an effort to investigate what results from their collision, interaction, and even abrasion. This approach is commonly marked in remix culture by the use of the term "vs" as a nominal convention for identifying mashup compositions, i.e., Blondie vs. The Doors (Go Home Productions), Jay-Z vs. the Beatles (DJ Danger Mouse), The Strokes vs. Christina Aguilera (Freelance Hellraiser), etc. What is remarkable, and maybe even ironic, in this practice is that the term "vs" borrows from and repurposes a long-standing legal practice, where court cases are officially identified by specifying the names of the two opposing sides involved in a suit, i.e. *Bush v. Gore*, *Feist Publications v. Rural Telephone*, *Campbell v. Acuff-Rose Music, Inc*., etc. In nominally conjoining yet distinguishing two opposing and seemingly incompatible positions, the term "vs" (or simply "v.") provides a convenient way to identify the site of conflict and the terms of a dynamic interaction. Unlike a court case, however,

the objective of a mashup is not to decide ultimately in favor of one side or the other or to mediate the dispute in favor of some kind of compromise. My goal, therefore, is not to pick winners or losers in this particular debate or to strike some kind of workable "balance," as Lawrence Lessig (2008, p. xvi) advocates, in order to retain the best both sides have to offer. The objective will and must be otherwise. To put it schematically, we can say that the goal of the examination is to challenge the conceptual boundaries of the current debate and to offer a new aesthetic of the mashup that does not necessarily endorse or simply adhere to the status quo. It is, to sample and remix something from Friedrich Nietzsche (1989), not an effort to decide once and for all what is "good" and what is "bad" but rather to *submit the way such decisions have typically been made* to a thorough reevaluation and critique.

Gaylor vs. Albini

Let's begin by sampling the two sides of the debate as it currently stands. On one side, there are the "utopian plagiarists" (Critical Art Ensemble 1994, 83), copyleftists, and mashup fans and pro-sumers—those individuals and organizations that celebrate the mashup, remix, and other cut-up and collage practices as new and original ways for creating innovative art and media content. This side is occupied by a diverse cast of characters who, at least initially, appear to have little or nothing in common: William S. Burroughs, DJ A+D, Negativeland, William Gibson, Google, and even Fox Television's *Glee*. Despite what turns out to be little more than minor variations on a theme, what brings these figures together in an unlikely but influential coalition is a common interest in new creative practices that not only generate innovative and entertaining media content but also open up the gated community of the culture industry to other interests and players. "The Internet," as Brett Gaylor, director of *Rip! A Remix Manifesto*, explains, "allowed me to connect from my island to the world, to communicate ideas to millions of others. And a media literate generation emerged, able to download the world's culture and transform it into something different. And we called our new language remix. Funny things, political things, new things were all uploaded back to the net. The creative process became more important than the product as consumers were now creators, making the folk art of the future" (Gaylor 2008; Figure 2.2).

Figure 2 – Stills from Brett Gaylor's *Rip! A Remix Manifesto*

On the opposing side, there are the critics—again a group of strange bedfellows that include not only entertainment lawyers, copyright advocates, RIAA lobbyists, and law makers of all political stripes and affiliations but also creative artists, visionary producers, and cultural innovators. According to this group, the sampling and mashing up of prerecorded material is nothing more than a cheap and easy recombination of other artist's work by what are arguably talentless hacks who really have nothing new to say. Indicative of this opposing view are the comments offered by indie rock icon and producer, Steve Albini, in the other remix documentary, *Copyright Criminals* (2010):

> I've made records with a lot of people; probably the most famous would be
> Nirvana, the Pixies, Jimmy Page and Robert Plant of Led Zeppelin. As a creative
> tool, like for someone to use a sample of an existing piece of music for their music.
> I think it's an extraordinarily lazy artistic choice. It is much easier to take
> something that is already awesome and to play it again with your name on it. It's
> sort of like a bad dance move or something. You think the people doing it should
> be embarrassed for behaving this way. You know. Or you think the people doing it
> should be self aware enough to understand that what they're doing is cheap and
> easy and everyone else can tell that it's cheap and easy (Franzen and McLeod,
> 2010)

The important and operative question here is not, at least for our purposes, what makes these two positions different. Clearly one could, as is demonstrated in both the documentaries that have been cited, examine the terms of the conflict in an effort to better understand the debate and even work out some kind of tentative solution or response to the dispute. These efforts typically result in a

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kind of inconclusive and unsatisfying outcome that ultimately perpetuates and even exacerbates the conflict. That is, by taking sides in the current debate or attempting to resolve the conflict through some kind of compromise or synthetic solution, one perpetuates the dialectical opposition, continuing to operate according to the terms and conditions that it makes available, controls, and regulates. Because of this rather unsatisfactory result, we can instead target and investigate the common ideological assumptions that both sides of the debate already endorse and must endorse in order to oppose each other and enter into debate in the first place. This alternative strategy recognizes, as Slavoj Žižek (2002) points out with reference to the general structure of this kind of transaction, that "the two sides are not really opposed, that they belong to the same field" (244).

Despite their many differences, both sides of this conflict value and endeavor to protect the same thing, namely artistic innovation, the creative process, and the figure of the creative artist. One side sees the mashup as providing new modes of artistic expression by opening up the boundaries of a closed art and media world in which producer and consumer have been too tightly controlled and regulated. "See mashups as piracy if you insist," Sasha Frere-Jones (2005) argues in an article for *The New Yorker*, "but it is more useful, viewing them through the lens of the market, to see them as an expression of consumer dissatisfaction. Armed with free time and the right software, people are rifling through the lesser songs of pop music and, in frustration, choosing to make some of them as good as the great ones" (p. 3). On the other side, you have those who argue that there is not much originality or artistry in merely sampling and remixing prerecorded material. Taking someone else's creative work, cutting and pasting it together, and then slapping your name on it is the province of the cheat and talentless, not the product of a true and original artist. "Real" creative work, like that exemplified by the cultural icons named by Albini (i.e. Nirvana, the Pixies, Led Zeppelin, etc.), takes time, training, and considerable effort. Formulated in this way, these two seemingly opposed positions concerning the mashup/remix are obviously fueled by and seek to protect the same underlying aesthetic values—originality, artistry, creativity, uniqueness, and innovation. Despite their openly acknowledged differences, the two sides of the argument share and agree upon a common and fundamental set of underlying values. And this common substructure can be found in what is arguably the basis or even basement of Western thought.

Standard Operating Presumptions

The phrase "basement of Western thought" refers, quite literally in fact, to a subterranean space situated at the center of one of the foundational texts, "The Allegory of the Cave" in book VII of Plato's *Republic*. This remarkable story, which Socrates provides in an effort to elucidate the concept of education, concerns an underground cavern inhabited by men who are confined to sit before a large wall upon which are projected shadow images. The cave dwellers are, according to the Socratic account, chained in place from childhood and are unable to see anything other than these artificial projections. Consequently, they operate as if everything that appears before them on the wall (arguably a kind of motion picture screen or computer monitor *avant la lettre*) is, in fact, real. They bestow names on the different shadows, devise clever methods to predict their sequence and behavior, and hand out awards to each other for demonstrated proficiency in knowing such things (Plato 1987, 515a-b). At a crucial turning point in the story, one of the captives is released. He is unbound by some ambiguous but external action, dragged kicking and screaming out of the cave, and forced to confront the real world that exists outside the subterranean cavern. In this way, the story not only establishes a long-standing and widely accepted metaphysical edifice that differentiates between the real thing and its mere apparitions or shady copies but also an aesthetics that associates the real with the good and makes the copy something that is deficient, derived, and deprecated. "In this philosophy of mediation," Jonathan Stern (2003) writes in direct reference to sound recording, "copies are debasements of the originals" (218).

The full consequences of this "philosophy of mediation," which is, we should note something of a default setting and the standard operating presumption for Western art and media, is taken up and given explicit consideration in the final book of the same dialogue. Here Socrates proposes an image by which to examine and explain the nature of imitation. The image consists of a three stage hierarchy of artisans and their artworks. At the apex, Socrates locates the real and true form of a thing that is created by the deity. Christian interpreters routinely associated this highest level with the unique creation *ex nihilio* of God, the originator of all things. Subordinate to this singular and unique creation, the Socratic account positions a first order replication, which is produced through the art of a human craftsman. The skillful craftsman, Socrates reasons, produces his creation by looking to and trying as best as possible to approximate the exact features exhibited by the original form of the thing (Plato 1987, 596b). Or to give it a Christian spin, the human artist takes his/her inspiration from and copies the perfect forms already available and found in God's

creation. This derived product is subsequently copied by the painter who creates what Socrates calls a "third order" replication or reproduction (Plato 1987, 602c). Although the craftsman technically makes a copy of some original thing, the name "imitator," or more colloquially "copycat," is reserved for the painter, for as Glaucon, Socrates' interlocutor, argues, "he is the imitator of the thing which the others produce" (Plato 1987, 597e). In the parlance of digital media and remixing, the painter is equivalent to the mashup DJ who simply samples and replicates the creative work of others. Such activity as everyone from Socrates to Albini would agree, requires little skill or knowledge; it is cheap and easy. "On this, then," Socrates concludes, "we are fairly agreed, that the imitator knows nothing worth mentioning of the things he imitates, but that imitation is a form of play, not to be taken seriously" (Plato 1987, 602b). Because of this, Socrates famously proposes the expulsion of all imitative artists from his *Republic*, especially those remixers of the oral tradition, the singers and tragic poets (Plato 1987, 607a). And this is precisely the kind of solution and remedy that is sought and advocated by the intellectual property hardliners and copyright supporters, those individuals and organizations who argue that sampling even one note of another person's creative output is plagiarism pure and simple. Although not necessarily proposing exile, these individuals and groups endeavor to restrict and marginalize the practice by making it patently illegal.

As originally articulated and arranged in the *Republic*, the operative terms for deciding what is and what is not valuable in the case of creative artwork is something that is ultimately located in the skill and efforts of the individual artist. At the top of the Socratic hierarchy is the prototypical figure of all creative work, God, the one creative genius that provides the conceptual anchor and flawless template for all others. Below this divine figure are situated the human craftsmen and craftswomen. Although nowhere near the level of the divinity in terms of skill or ability, these individuals apply their knowledge and talent to the fashioning of unique and original creative products—"artworks" in a very literal sense of the word insofar as the production of art is work and takes work. At the bottom of the scale, there is the imitator or copycat—a mere representational artist. This figure occupies the lower rungs of the ladder, because s/he does nothing original. The imitator merely downloads and copies the work of others. Consequently, these "works," if they can even rightfully be called that, are derivative, deficient, and not to be taken seriously, and this occupation is, by comparison with the other two, considerably less skillful, less knowledgeable, and cheap. For this reason, the imitators need to be if not expelled

then at least tightly controlled and regulated. Although it will have been be close to 2000 years before the first copyright statue would be drafted, Socrates would have certainly supported the measure even if he would have most likely found it rather lenient and perhaps too permissive.

Making Sense of the Mashup

Although the *Republic* is an ancient text written well in advance of digital technology and modern intellectual property law, it prescribes the way all creative works in general have been understood and the approach that is taken in conceptualizing and dealing with the mashup in particular. On the one hand, skeptics and critics of the practice, like Albini, argue that sampling and remixing recorded music is not very interesting, mainly because it is, as a so-called "creative practice," nothing more than cheap and easy imitation. According to Pete Rojas (2002):

> Home remixing is technically incredibly easy to do, in effect turning the vast world of pop culture into source material for an endless amount of slicing and dicing by desktop producers. So easy, in fact, that bootlegs constitute the first genre of music that truly fulfills the 'anyone can do it' promises originally made by punk and, to lesser extent, electronic music. Even punk rockers had to be able write the most rudimentary of songs. With bootlegs, even that low bar for traditional musicianship and composition is obliterated (1).

Although intended as a kind of endorsement of the democratizing potential of the mashup, Rojas's explanation illustrates what many critics identify as the underlying problem. Mashup and remixing are just too easy. Anyone can do it, and it takes little or no real skill or talent. This argument, whether it is in practice actually true or not, holds water precisely because it is assumed that real art, following the dictates of the Socratic plan, is the product of a skilled and studied craftsman. Mere copycats who simply cut and paste the work of others by using easily obtainable software tools do little or nothing that could be considered creative, artistic, or worth serious consideration. There is therefore already in the text of the *Republic*, a tension between a kind of democratic ideal —the idea that "anyone and everyone can do it"—and an elitism or a star system that makes art the province of a privileged few. It is, therefore, no surprise that Plato's *Republic* promotes a polity ruled by an elite class of "philosopher kings" and eschews anything that looks like democratic

populism. For Plato, as for many contemporary artists, agents/brokers, and even consumers, art is something made by an elite class of artists, entertainers, and celebrities. Only the specially skilled artisans and celebrity superstars, the ruling elites of the (pop)culture industry (i.e., The Beatles, Led Zepplin, Nirvana, etc.), are permitted to make what is properly considered art.[1] Everyone else is situated as either a law-abiding and dutiful consumer of their products or a copycat criminal of their unique innovations.

On the other hand, advocates argue in direct opposition to these criticisms that the mashup should be considered artistic precisely because it *does* require considerable effort and skill on the part of the remix producer. It is, therefore, not a kind of cheap and easy activity that just anyone can do but a truly artistic endeavor that is reserved for a small group of truly skilled remix artists. As Adrian Roberts points out, just because everyone with a laptop computer and some software can, theoretically at least, do a remix, this does not mean that everyone should do it or can do it well. The difference is that there are true artists of the mashup who demonstrate a kind of virtuosity with the turntable or the laptop computer that is unique and impressive in its own right and that cannot be easily accomplished by just anybody. Although staking out a claim that would be the exact dialectical opposite of that advanced by the critics, the advocates of the mashup make the same argument and on the same grounds. They too eschew the idea that "everyone can or should do it" and assert a privileged few as the properly revered pantheon of star remixers. This is precisely the *raison d'être* of Bootie, at least as it understands and promotes itself. Adrian and Deidre Roberts, the self-appointed gatekeepers of the mashup/remix community, sort through the large amount of material that is out there in order to separate the wheat from the chafe—the work of a true mashup artist from that of the talentless hack. Consequently, the remix community is just as enamored with superstars and celebrity artists as the critics seem to be. As John Shiga (2007) insightfully points out, already "by 2002, mash-up culture furnished its own set of 'star remixers'" (94), including well-known DJs like Freelance Hellraiser and DJ Danger Mouse and remix brand names like Mark Vidler's Go Home Productions.

Of all the star remixers, however, the one that seems to get the most press is Gregg Gillis (aka Girl Talk). "Gillis may be," Larry Hardesty (2009) reports, "the most popular mashup artist in the United States. He's opened for Beck. He's performed at the rock festival Lollapalooza. His MySpace page gets more hits than that of indie-rock sensation Wilco. When he tours, he packs good-sized clubs—like the Starlight Ballroom, where more than a thousand people pressed toward

the stage, dancing" (1). So what is it that makes Gillis stand out from the rest? For many fans, journalists, and music critics, it is his virtuosity and skill in assembling what are arguably impressive remix compositions. He is, for example, often credited for the sheer number of samples he is able to assemble and bring together in a single work. Hardesty, citing a *Wikipedia* article, points out that Gillis draws on no less than 24 individual sources for "Play Your Part (Pt. 1)," the first track on his album *Feed the Animals* (Hardesty 2009, 1). Angela Watercutter of *Wired* Magazine goes further in analyzing the data: "His latest album, *Feed the Animals* (released digitally in June with hard copies out September 23), brims with 300 song snippets in just over 50 minutes (compared to around 250 in his previous effort) (Watercutter 2008, 1)." And in order to help readers visualize just how impressive Gillis's work is, Watercutter (2008) provides a detailed visual map of the album's fourth track, "What's it all About." The cleverly designed graphic, a multicolor circular timeline complete with graphical icons of source material and precise time index numbers, illustrates an impressive array of 35 individual samples drawn from all corners of popular music into a single remixed composition that lasts 255 seconds. At the same time, this aesthetics has also been used by critics, who point out that Gillis often takes what is considered to be the easy route to producing mashup compositions. "He also," Hardesty writes, "tends to pair instrumental tracks with hip-hop vocals, as the analysis of 'Play Your Part (Pt. 1)' might suggest. 'In the mashup community,' says Luke Enlow, a mashup artist from New Hampshire who releases music under the name Lenlow, 'that's kind of seen as a cop-out because it's very easy to do, because you don't have to worry about keys matching'" (p. 2). Although critical of Gillis's work, Enlow's comment mobilizes the same values and argumentative structure as those fans who celebrate the Girl Talk's artistry.

Deconstructing the Remix

By formulating their arguments in terms of artistic skill and effort, both sides of the debate play by the same set of rules and essentially value and seek to protect the same metaphysical and aesthetic investments. As long as the discussion continues in this fashion, little or nothing will change. Each side will continue to deploy and entertain what is by now easily recognizable arguments, somewhat predictable evidence, and, in the final analysis, unresolved controversies. And each will, at least within the context of the Socratic logic they share, turn out to be entirely justified and correct. In effect, continuing in this manner leads thinking about the mashup into a kind of

intellectual *cul-du-sac* where we circle around the same problems and disputes *ad infinitum*. If there is any possibility to make progress in this endeavor, we will need to proceed otherwise. Toward this end, I submit that the mashup should, as Slavoj Žižek (2001) suggests of all transgressive practices, fully endorse what it is accused of (182). That is, instead of arguing against the charge that mashups and remixing are cheap and easy by struggling to demonstrate their artistry, mashup advocates and supporters should embrace—but with a positive spin—the indictment that has been routinely leveled against them. In other words, instead of publishing one more article, writing one more book, or making another documentary film arguing for the artistry of the mashup by demonstrating the skill, knowledge, or virtuosity of the artist, the advocates of the practice should simply agree with their critics against them.

Take for example *Tecno-brega*, a digital remix practice and scene that developed in the northern part of Brazil, especially the city Belém. The term means "cheap techno" or, more literally, "techno cheesy," and everything about it is cheap. *Tecno-brega* sounds cheap. It takes pop music from the 1980's and replaces all acoustic instrumentation with deliberately cheesy or tacky techno sounds from inexpensive digital instruments and devices. It is made on the cheap in make-shift bedroom studios by individuals who are neither trained musicians nor music producers and distributed on CD for cheap (approximately $1.50 US per unit) by unlicensed street vendors. And the result is considered cheap, that is, "being of lesser quality," by anyone with even a modicum of musical taste (Johnsen, Christensen and Moltke, 2007). Consequently, *Tecno-brega* in both name and function deliberately celebrates the cheap and inauthentic as something valuable in its own right. Instead of pitching an argument against the critics by making a case for the artistry of the remix—in essence, playing by the Socratic rules of the game and deploying its logic and rhetoric—*Tecno-bega* says, in effect, "Yes, this is cheap, and that's the point." This maneuver does not, it should be noted, simply invert the Socratic logic, transforming what had been considered bad into good and vice versa. Inversion, as both Heidegger (1979) and Derrida (1981) point out, actually changes nothing insofar as the inverted schema keeps the original system intact and functioning. Instead these efforts institute what can be called a *deconstruction*.

Deconstruction, despite wide-spread misinterpretations and misunderstandings that have become something of an institutional (mal)practice, does not mean "to take apart" or "to unconstruct." The English language already possesses words that adequately describe that process —analysis, dissection, disassembly, or reverse engineering. Instead "deconstruction," as Derrida

points out on numerous occasions (1981 and 1993), indicates a critical practice that takes aim at and seeks to intervenes in a particular field that is defined and structured by way of conceptual oppositions. In all these cases, however, the two sides are never on equal footing. One side always and already has the upper hand so that the other is defined as its negative and deficient counterpart. The moral and aesthetic conceptual pairing of "good" and "bad," for instance, does not situate these two terms on the same level. Good is already the privileged term. It is considered to be the "good" one, while "bad" is, by comparison, understood and formulated as its opposite. That is, it is commonly defined as the absence or lack of what is considered good. Deconstruction is a means by which to intervene in this and every other conceptual pairing, and it does so by way of a deploying what Derrida (1981) calls "a double gesture" (41).

To begin with, the conceptual opposition is inverted by strategically siding with the deprecated term. In the case of the Socratic legacy, for example, this would mean affirming the imitator or copycat against the term that has traditionally occupied the position of privilege—the celebrated artist or craftsman. This inversion, however, like all revolutionary operations—whether social, political, or artistic—does little or nothing to challenge the dominant system. In merely exchanging the relative positions occupied by the two opposed terms, inversion still maintains, albeit in an inverted form, the conceptual opposition in which and on which it operates. For this reason, deconstruction also entails a second step or gesture. "We must," as Derrida (1981) explains, "also mark the interval between inversion, which brings low what was high, and the irruptive emergence of a new 'concept,' a concept that can no longer be, and never could be, included in the previous regime" (42). Deconstruction, therefore, comprises both the inversion of a conceptual opposition and the irruptive emergence of a new concept that transgresses the conceptual boundaries and exceeds its comprehension.[2] Or as Paul D. Miller (aka DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid) (2004) writes, drawing an explicit connection between Derrida's heady poststructuralist theory and the material practices of remixing:

> Interpenetration of one form into another mirrors the classic sense of binary movement that writers of semiotic philosophy and literature have been concerned with for several centuries now. Double movement, binary stratification, transience of meaning—all point to a strange game in which absence and presence, form and function, sign and signified, play in an ever-shifting field of meaning, a place where

text and textuality switch place with blinding speed. That's what mixing is about: creating seamless interpolations between objects of thought to fabricate a zone of representation in which the interplay of the one and the many, the original and its double all come under question" (p. 33)

Extending this "double gesture," or what Derrida (1981) has also called a "double science" (41), to the mashup, we can say that the practice does not just contest the Socratic system. It deconstructs artistry. Specifically, it inverts the customary and widely accepted conceptual opposition that not only distinguishes the skilled artist from the cheap imitator but arranges an aesthetics and attendant value system that privileges the former while making the latter a derived, deficient, and negative counterpart. Mere inversion of this conceptual pairing, however, is insufficient insofar as this kind of revolutionary gesture, like all revolutionary undertakings, does little or nothing to challenge the established rules of the game or its underlying substructure. Whatever it comes to be called—inversion, conceptual reversal, revolution, etc.—such an operation is always and already insufficient for transgression. The mashup, therefore, cannot and should not be satisfied with the mere overturning of the two terms that already structure and define the field. For this reason, the mashup also involves and facilitates the "irruptive emergence" of a new concept, one that exceeds the grasp and traverses the limits of the existing conceptual order. Although this might sound rather abstract, one can already find attempts to articulate such an alternative in the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson (2010): "Our debt to tradition through reading and conversation is so massive, our protest so rare and insignificant—and this commonly on the ground of other reading or hearing—that in large sense, one would say there is no pure originality. All minds quote. Old and new make the warp and woof of every moment. There is no thread that is not a twist of these two strands" (94). What Emerson identifies in this passage from the essay "Originality and Quotation," is an understanding of imitation—what he decides to call "quotation"—that is no longer the captive of or a concept regulated by the Socratic legacy. "Quotation" as Emerson formulates it (and which I write in quotation marks in order both to recognize that it is derived from elsewhere and to distinguish it from the customary understanding of the term), is not just copying or reproducing the work of others. It is the creative borrowing and repurposing of what came before in an effort to do something else entirely. This new concept of "quotation" is not the mere polar opposite of what we typically understand as originality but the

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outcome of a deconstruction of the conceptual opposition that had distinguished quotation from original in the first place. Emerson was, in effect, describing the mashup and remix *avant la lettre*. Or as Miller (2004) explains, Emerson's essay "prefigured much of the discourse around originality in twenty-first-century culture" (p. 68).

Conclusions

In the end, we can return to the question with which we began: "What makes a mashup good?" Clearly one can and would have no trouble imposing the Socratic schema in an effort to respond to this query. Doing so would be both understandable and easy to accomplish and justify (and thus argue for or against the concept of the mashup itself). But it would also be (using the very scale in question to judge itself) intellectually cheap. It would, in effect, advance nothing innovative or new; it would merely replicate an ancient and well-established method of deciding these things. Alternatively we can, following the example provided by Emerson, proceed otherwise. Pursuing this other possibility, we can say that what makes a mashup "good" is not something that can be measured on the Socratic scale. In fact, it is, quite literally and deliberately, off the scale. What makes it "good" is the extent to which a particular mashup intervenes in this legacy system and facilitates its deconstruction. And some remix compositions do this better than others. All mashups, therefore, are not created equal. Some affect this intervention better than the competition. This is because, as Derrida (1993) points out, "there is no one single deconstruction" (141), only specific and irreducible instances in which a deconstruction takes place. Furthermore, what makes one mashup's deconstruction more interesting or successful than another's is not something that can be situated in or referred to the old Socratic terms (i.e., artistic knowledge, skill, or virtuosity). These items are still far too metaphysical. Instead this alternative aesthetic will need to be understood as a kind of "materials science," something that is attentive to the material effects of the practice in the subject matter at hand and not interested in speculating about immaterial causes operating somewhere behind the scenes. What makes a mashup good, therefore, is decided on the basis of the kind of interventions it deploys within the material of popular culture and the extent to which it makes these transgressions audible. In some cases, the mashup might just make you want to dance, and there is nothing wrong with dancing. In other cases, however, and even at the same time, it potentially violates every aspect of the way we have traditionally

made sense of art and aesthetics, causing nothing less than monstrous but incredibly illuminating short circuits in the very material of Western thought.

Finally, and this is crucial, in all of this there neither is nor can be finality. This is because deconstruction comprises, as Derrida (1981) insists, something of an "interminable analysis" (42). And what makes it "interminable" can be understood in at least two ways. First, deconstruction always takes place as a parasitic operation that works within and by repurposing the materials and tools derived from a specific system at a specific moment. The audio mashup in particular feeds off and derives all its resources from popular music. Everything that comprises it—every note, every sound, every musical phrase, and every lyric—comes from something and somewhere else. It cannot, therefore, simply remove itself from the milieu of its host and stand outside what defines and delimits its very possibility. For this reason, the mashup, like any deconstructive endeavor, is never simply and completely finished with that in which and on which it operates, but also takes place as a kind of never-ending engagement with the systems in which it works and is necessarily situated. The mashup, like Michel Serres's (2007) concept of the "parasite," "doesn't stop. It doesn't stop eating or drinking or yelling or burping or making thousands of noises or filling space with its swarming din" (p. 253). But this is, we need to remember and continually assert, a good thing.

Second, deconstruction always and necessarily runs the risk of becoming recuperated by the conceptual field in which and on which it operates. "The hierarchy of dual oppositions," as Derrida (1981) explains, "always seeks to reestablish itself" (42). The seemingly inescapable pull of recuperation can be seen, for example, by the way advocates and fans of the mashup already accommodate themselves to the vocabulary and logic of the very Socratic system that the mashup puts in question and seeks to undermine. In other words, efforts to articulate what makes the mashup culturally interesting and important have the effect, whether intended or not, of domesticating its transgressions in the very process of naming its accomplishments. This is primarily because the very language that is at our disposal to identify these things is already part and parcel of the metaphysical system that is contested. We are, to sample and remix a statement made by Audre Lorde (1984, 110-114), in the difficult position of needing to use the master's tools to tear down the master's house. And when we start repurposing verbal instruments like "imitation," "quotation," and "cheap," we inevitably risk falling back into the established definitions and metaphysical field that we sought to criticize and get beyond. What this means,

then, is that the interventions and transgressions deployed and released by the mashup can never be considered finished or complete. The establishment, and this includes not only the oppositional voices on the copyright but also fans and advocates of the copyleft, will continually try to accommodate the mashup and remix to the Socratic rules so that we can both make sense of it and make it make sense. Because of this gravitational pull, the mashup, like any critical practice, must continually rework its own transgressions, repurposing its own interventions or remixing its remix, so as to avoid the efforts of the opposition as well as the well-intended but unfortunately just as repressive labor of its advocates.

Notes

[1] The exercise and the extent of this hegemony is not something that is limited to artistic practices or aesthetic theory. As Plato's *Republic* already demonstrates, such an imposition of power is always contextualized politically and has far-reaching social consequences. For a critical investigation of the political dimensions and consequences of the mashup, see Richard Edward's contribution to this volume.

[2] This "two step" procedure can, for example, be illustrated in the story, included in Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Twilight of the Idols*, "How the 'True World' Finally Became a Fable." This parable, which proceeds in several discrete steps, ends with the following, remarkable statement: "The true world—we have abolished. What world has remained? The apparent one perhaps? But no! *With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one*" (Nietzsche 1983, 486). Here, Nietzsche, who had initially formulated his philosophical ambitions as constituting a "reversed Platonism" (Nietzsche 1980, 199), moves beyond a mere revolutionary gesture, undermining and collapsing the very distinction between the true world and its apparitional others. According to Mark Taylor and Esa Saarinen (1994), "the point is not simply that truth and reality have been absorbed by illusion and appearance. Something far more subtle and unsettling is taking place… What emerges in the wake of the death of oppositions like truth/illusion and reality/appearance is something that is neither truth nor illusion, reality nor appearance but something else, something other" (Virtuality 15).

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