Deconstruction

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The term "deconstruction," which has often been utilized to characterize both the practice and theoretical importance of remix, is itself the product of remix, specifically Jacques Derrida's messing around with material drawn from other sources. The word, as Derrida has explained and acknowledged, was originally appropriated from and devised as means of translating Martin Heidegger's *Destruktion* and the task of critically analyzing the history of Western ontology, which was supposed to have been the subject of the second volume of his career-defining 1927 *magnum opus*, *Being and Time* ("projected" because this part of the project was never actually completed or undertaken as such). In fact, the way Derrida explained all of this in the "Letter to a Japanese Friend" sounds a lot like the practice of remix: "When I choose this word [deconstruction], or when it imposed itself on me—I think it was in *Of Grammatology* —I little thought it would be credited with such a central role in the discourse that interested me at the time. Among other things I wished to translate and adapt to my own ends the Heideggerian word *Destruktion*."[1] So what exactly is deconstruction? And how does it relate to the theory and practice of remix?

Default Setting

Descriptions, definitions, and depictions of both the process and product of remix—whether provided in popular media or academic efforts at what is now called "remix studies"—have subsequently appropriated the term in order to define or characterize what remix is, how it comes to be produced, or how it re-works and re-purposes existing content. Consider the following examples derived from the current literature (emphasis added):

> For the mash-up to proliferate, two key technological developments were
> necessary: an abundance of available source material, which, by the late 1990s,

had amassed on the Internet, and cheaper music software that facilitated the *deconstruction* and reconstruction of songs.[2]

Tom Moulton was another remix innovator who helped change the complexion of pop music…He *deconstructed* songs by boosting the hooks, lengthening instrumental passages, building layers of rhythm that beefed up the percussion breaks, and other tricks.[3]

So there is this DJ who goes by the name Danger Mouse. He decided one day to try a little art project. So the Jay-Z album is called *The Black Album*. Well, there's this little group out of Liverpool that came up with an album called *The White Album* years and years ago. Danger Mouse decided to *deconstruct* the *White Album* into snippets, which could be played as an accompaniment for Jay-Z's vocals. The result was called *The Grey Album*.[4]

"Remixing Information Without Programming," introduces mashups without demanding programming skills from you and teaches skills for *deconstructing* applications for their remix potential.[5]

Add to this list *Wired* magazine's "Mashup DJ Girl Talk Deconstructs Samples from *Feed the Animals*," which features a cleverly designed infographic—a multicolor timeline (bent into the shape of a circle) complete with graphical icons of source material and precise time index numbers—to dissect, identify, and exhibit the 35 individual samples that comprise the remixed composition "What's it all About."[6]

As is evident from these representative samples, the word deconstruction, or its verbal variant "to deconstruct," has been typically understood and operationalized as a synonym for decomposition, reverse engineering, or a kind of destructive analysis or dismantling. In this way, de-construction (written with the hyphen to emphasize the negative prefix "de") is positioned as the opposite, undoing, or reversal of construction. Whereas "construction" denotes the process of assembly or the putting together of different elements in order to create a unified whole, i.e. a drum beat is combined with a guitar melody and vocal line, "deconstruction" is assumed to be the decomposition of something into its constitutive parts. Hence remixing has been

characterized as "deconstruction" insofar as the dj, remix artist, or web mashup programmer takes some already existing application or content, a popular song for instance, and disassembles it by extracting each individual constitutive element, like isolating the drum beat from its accompanying vocal and guitar lines. For this reason, deconstruction is commonly situated as the reversal or undoing of construction and the necessary antecedent to efforts at reconstruction.

This particular employment of the word is not unique to remix; it is consistent with similar usage in other areas of contemporary culture. Physicist Brian Greene, for instance, takes apart and examines the original components of the physical universe under the title "Deconstructing the Bang," while Steve Ettlinger exposes and examines the constitutive elements of processed food in *Twinkie, Deconstructed*. In the field of building construction, the word "deconstruction" is routinely used to identify an alternative strategy to demolition: "Bulldozing a house and burying the shattered structure in a hole in the ground sounds perverse…an alternative is *deconstruction*, which simply means systematically dismantling a building and salvaging its parts for reuse."[7] And in the culinary arts, celebrity chefs, like Graham Elliot, (dis)assemble "deconstructed salads"[8] by arranging separate piles of greens, vegetables, and dressing on a plate. Although this employment of the word has its utility, it is not entirely accurate and as such misses the full potential and opportunity that "deconstruction" releases and makes available.

Deconstructing Deconstruction

According to Derrida, the word "deconstruction," to begin with a negative characterization, does not mean to take apart, to un-construct, or to disassemble. Despite this now rather wide-spread and popular misconception, deconstruction is NOT a form of destructive analysis, a kind of demolition, or the process of reverse engineering. As Derrida himself has said quite explicitly (and on more than one occasion), "the de- of deconstruction signifies not the demolition of what is constructing itself, but rather what remains to be thought beyond the constructionist or destructionist schema."[9] Deconstruction, therefore, names something entirely other than what is understood and delimited by the conceptual opposition situated between the terms "construction" and "destruction." So what exactly is deconstruction? Here is how Derrida described the practice in an interview from 1971:

What interested me then, which I am attempting to pursue along other lines now, was...a kind of *general strategy of deconstruction*. The latter is to avoid both simply *neutralizing* the binary oppositions of metaphysics and simply residing within the closed field of these oppositions, thereby confirming it. Therefore we must proceed using a double gesture, according to a unity that is both systematic and in and of itself divided, according to a double writing, that is, a writing that is in and of itself multiple, what I called, in "The Double Session" a *double science*. On the one hand, we must traverse a phase of *overturning*. To do justice to this necessity is to recognize that in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-à-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other, or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment....That being said—and on the other hand—to remain in this phase is still to operate on the terrain of and from the deconstructed system. By means of this double, and precisely stratified, dislodged and dislodging, writing, we must 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.[10]

If we take this apart—if we "deconstruct" it, to redeploy what would, by comparison, need to be characterized as the "wrong" (or at least "insufficient") sense of the word—we can extract and identify a number of important features.

First, deconstruction names a way—what Derrida calls a "general strategy"—to intervene in "the binary oppositions of metaphysics." According to the insights provided by the 20th century innovations of structuralism and poststructuralism, what we know and are able to say about the world can be characterized and arranged in terms of conceptual opposites. As Mark Dery explains it: "Western systems of meaning [what Derrida, following Heidegger, calls "metaphysics"] are underwritten by binary oppositions: body/soul, other/self, matter/spirit, emotion/reason, natural/artificial, and so forth. Meaning is generated through exclusion: The first term of each hierarchical dualism is subordinated to the second, privileged one."[11] In other

words, human beings organize and make sense of the world through terminological differences or conceptual dualities, like mind/body, male/female, good/bad, being/nothing, etc.

Furthermore for any of these conceptual oppositions, the two terms are never situated on a level playing field; one of the pair is already determined to have the upper hand. Or as Derrida characterizes, "we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-à-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy." In the conceptual opposition (or "metaphysical duality") that identifies sexual difference, for example, the terms "male" and "female" have not been situated as equal partners. The former has already been granted a kind of privilege over the later (seen, perhaps, most directly in the Judeo-Christian tradition, where God first creates Adam—the prototype of man— from whom Eve is then derived) and this bias has historically produced and been used to justify all kinds of misogynistic prejudice, exclusion, and oppression. Deconstruction constitutes a mode of critical intervention that takes aim at these problematic conceptual oppositions in such a way that does not simply neutralize them or remain within the hegemony of the existing order. It therefore comprises a general strategy for challenging existing ways of organizing reality and formulating alternative possibilities for "thinking outside the box."

Second, in order to do this, deconstruction consists in a complicated double gesture or what Derrida also calls "a double science." This two-step procedure necessarily begins with a phase of inversion, where a particular duality or conceptual opposition is deliberately overturned by siding with the traditionally deprecated term. This is, quite literally, a *revolutionary* gesture insofar as the existing order is inverted or turned around. This is precisely what occurs in the "default" understanding of deconstruction described above. In the standard conceptual opposition situated between the terms construction and destruction, the first term is generally considered to be the positive element. The other term is defined as *its* flipside—the negative and opposite of this positive component. Deconstruction begins by flipping the script and privileging destruction over construction. In terms of remix, the cutting apart of existing media content deliberately threatens the integrity of the original composition. It is, therefore, a violent operation that puts emphasis on destruction or at least disassembly. But this is only half the story. This conceptual inversion, like many revolutionary gestures—whether social, political, or artistic— actually 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. Simply flipping the

script, as Derrida concludes, still "resides within the closed field of these oppositions, thereby confirming it."[12]

For this reason, deconstruction also entails a second phase or operation. "We must," as Derrida describes it, "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."[13] This new "concept" is, strictly speaking, no concept whatsoever, which does not mean that it is simply the opposite of the conceptual order, for it always and already exceeds the system of dualities that define the conceptual order as well as the nonconceptual order with which the conceptual order has been articulated.[14] For this reason, this "undecidable"[15] new concept occupies a position that is in between or in/at the margins of a traditional, binary pair. It is simultaneously neither/nor and either/or. It does not resolve into one or the other of the two terms that comprise the conceptual order nor constitute a third term that would mediate their difference in some kind of a synthetic unity. It is positioned in such a way that it both inhabits and operates in excess of the conceptual oppositions by which and through which systems of meaning have been organized and articulated. And it is for this reason, that the new concept cannot be described or marked in language except (as is exemplified here) by engaging in what Derrida calls a "bifurcated writing," which compels the traditional philosophemes to articulate, however incompletely and insufficiently, what necessarily resists and displaces all possible modes of articulation.[16]

Perhaps the best illustration of deconstruction's two step operation is available in the term "deconstruction" itself. In a first move, deconstruction flips the script by putting emphasis on the negative term "destruction" as opposed to construction. In fact, the apparent similitude between the two words "deconstruction" and "destruction" is a deliberate and calculated aspect of this effort. But this is only step one. In the second move of this "double science," deconstruction introduces a brand new concept, the concept of "deconstruction." The novelty of this concept is marked, quite literally, in the material of the word itself. "Deconstruction," which is fabricated by combining the "de" of "destruction" and attaching it to the opposite term "construction," is a neologism that does not quite fit in the existing order of things. It is an exorbitant and intentionally undecidable term that names a new conceptual possibility. This new term, despite first appearances, is not the mere polar opposite of construction but exceeds the

conceptual order instituted and regulated by the terminological opposition situated between construction and destruction.

Deconstruction and Remix

Deconstruction, therefore, names a mode of critical intervention that is simultaneously both more and less than a mere revolutionary operation. It comprises both the inversion of a classic metaphysical opposition and the irruptive emergence of a new concept that exceeds the grasp of the existing system and puts all elements of the established order in question. This formulation supplies a more radical set of critical possibilities for understanding the role and function of remix. As deconstruction, remix is more than the process of simply taking things apart in order to reassemble new and interesting recombinations. This phase is undoubtedly necessary, but it is just one step in what is a two-step process. In addition to this first stage of revolutionary destructive analysis, deconstruction also releases new opportunities that challenge or mess with the existing conceptual order and its authority.

Although this might sound rather abstract, we can, following the suggestion of Paul D. Miller (aka DJ Spooky), already find an example in a rather unlikely place: Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Originality and Quotation." Although Emerson's text predates both the emergence of remix and the theory and practice of deconstruction, his essay elucidates remix as deconstruction *avant la letter*: "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."[17]

In this short passage, Emerson deconstructs the existing opposition situated between the concepts "original" and "copy." From very early on, copies have been positioned as derived and deficient representations or images of some pure and pristine original. This conceptual order has been in place since at least Plato, where it finds expression in both the *Phaedrus* and *Republic*, continues through the modern period with works like Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, and informs contemporary efforts with digital technology and intellectual property law and copyright. Emerson does not just reverse this long-standing value system; he deconstructs it. He inverts the existing hierarchy by privileging the deprecated term

(the copy or the act of copying) and fabricates a new concept, what he calls "quotation," that is not quite just another form of copying but something that challenges this entire tradition, demonstrating that the idea and ideal of a "pure original" is originally a derived fiction.

Remix as deconstruction taps into this Emersonian effort, releasing, in both theory and practice, a disturbing but revitalizing reconfiguration of Western axiology—the theory of value in both moral and aesthetic terms. Conceptualized in this way, remix is more than a temporary fad that shakes things up just for the fun of it. (It can do that, of course, but there is always more to it.) Instead remix comprises a crucial and critical intervention in the way we perceive, conceptualize, and make sense of all kinds of things: art, creativity, technology, aesthetics, ethics, law, etc. Remix, therefore, is more than just putting unlikely things together. It is a carefully calculated and deliberate intervention in the material of contemporary culture that fabricates what Miller calls "new zones of representation" [18] that put all the elements of the establish order in question.

A particularly good illustration of this can be heard in DJ Danger Mouse's seminal mashup of the Beatles and Jay-Z on *The Grey Album*. According to Danger Mouse (aka Byron Burton), *The Grey Album* is not just a clever recombination of different things. "A lot of people just assume I took some Beatles and, you know, threw some Jay-Z on top of it or mixed it up or looped it around, but it's really a deconstruction. It's not an easy thing to do."[19] In recombining the music of the Beatles with the vocal delivery of Jay-Z, Burton did more than just rearrange prefabricated audio components. It is, as he points out, a critical and calculated intervention in the material of popular culture, creating both disturbing and revealing short circuits that challenge existing standards and practices in the culture industry.

Responses to this kind of effort typically begin with direct (and even violent) opposition but often end with attempts at recuperation and domestication. Although EMI initially issued an infamous cease and desist letter to try to shut down and control the "damage" wrought by *The Grey Album*, the corporation then tried to repurpose Burton's efforts by creating its own mashup of Jay-Z and Linkin Park. This is not hypocrisy or even a ruthless business strategy, it is, as Derrida has pointed out, the necessary and predictable response to all efforts of deconstruction. Because the conceptual oppositions or existing systems of power, on which and in which deconstruction works, comprise the very logic and possibility of being able to say anything at all, "the hierarchy of dual oppositions always seeks to reestablish itself."[20] Consequently, the result

of deconstruction always runs the risk of becoming re-appropriated into the conceptual order by which it comes to be articulated, explained, and understood.

This facet is clearly evident in the history of deconstruction itself. Despite Derrida's explicit statements to the contrary—namely, that "the de- of deconstruction does not name the opposite of construction"—deconstruction has been continually (mis)understood and explained through association with forms of destructive analysis that come to be defined through opposition to the (positive) work of construction. And these efforts at re-appropriation are (for better or worse) firmly established in the literature of remix studies, where "deconstruction" has been typically utilized as a synonym for decomposition, dissection, and reverse engineering. In other words, the way that deconstruction has been routinely (mis)understood and utilized in the literature of remix and remix studies is itself a necessary and unavoidable aspect of deconstruction itself. For this reason, deconstruction must remain, as Derrida finally insists, something of "an interminable analysis."[21] It is "interminable" mainly because the critical work of deconstruction is never able to be completed or finished. It must continually struggle against both the efforts of its opponents, who seek to marginalize, demonize, or even criminalize it, and its advocates, who unfortunately work to re-inscribe its transgressions within the existing conceptual field that it targets in the first place.

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[1] Jacques Derrida, "Letter to a Japanese Friend," trans. by David Wood and Andrew Benjamin in Peggy Kamuf (ed.), *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 271.

[2] Michael Serazio, "The Apolitical Irony of Generation Mash-up: A Cultural Case Study in Popular Music," *Popular Music and Society* 31.1 (2008): 81.

[3] Kembrew McLeod and Peter DiCola, *Creative License: The Law and Culture of Digital Sampling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 59.

[4] David Earl, *LMMS: A Complete Guide to Dance Music Production* (Birmingham, UK: Packt Publishing, 2012), 167.

[5] Raymond Yee, *Pro Web 2.0 Mashups: Remixing Data and Web Services* (New York: Apress, 2008), xxx.

[6] Angela Watercutter, "Mashup DJ Girl Talk Deconstructs Samples from *Feed the Animals*," *Wired* 16.9 (2008): 92. http://www.wired.com/special_multimedia/2008/pl_music_1609

[7] Jennifer Roberts, *Redux: Designs that Reuse, Recycle, and Reveal* (Salt Lake City, UT: Gibbs Smith, 2005), 126.

[8] Lucy Lean, *Made in America: Our Best Chefs Reinvent Comfort Food* (New York: Welcome Books, 2011), 118.

[9] Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*., trans by Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 147.

[10] Jacques Derrida, *Positions,* trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 41-42.

[11] Mark Dery, *Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at the End of the Century* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 244.

[12] Derrida, *Positions*, 41.

[13] Ibid., 42.

[14] Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 329.

[15] Derrida, *Positions*, 43.

[16] Ibid., 42.

[17] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Quotation and Originality," in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, vol. III: Letters and Social Aims* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 94.

[18] Paul D. Miller, *Rhythm Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 33.

[19] Matthew Rimmer, *Digital Copyright and the Consumer Revolution: Hands off My iPod* (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2007), 132.

[20] Derrida, *Positions*, 42.

[21] Ibid.

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