Remixology: An Axiology for the 21st Century and Beyond

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Despite what is typically said and generally accepted as a kind of unquestioned folk wisdom, you can (and should) judge a book by its cover. This is especially true of my 2016 book with the MIT Press, *Of Remixology: Ethics and Aesthetics After Remix* (Gunkel 2016). With this book, the cover actually "says it all." The image that graces the dust jacket (figure 1) is of a street corner in Cheltenham, England, where the street artist believed to be Banksy (although there is no way to confirm this for sure) appropriated a telephone booth by painting figures on a wall at the end of a line of row houses. This "artwork," which bears the title "Spy Booth," was then captured in a photographed made by Neil Munns, distributed by way of the Corbis image library, and utilized by Margarita Encomienda (a designer at MIT Press) for the book's cover. The question that immediately confronts us in this series of re-appropriations and copies of copies is simple: What is original and what is derived? How can we sort out and make sense of questions concerning origination and derivation in situations where one thing is appropriated, reused, and repurposed for something else? What theory of moral and aesthetic value can accommodate and explain these situations where authorship, authority, and origination are already distributed across a network of derivations, borrowings, and re-appropriated found objects?
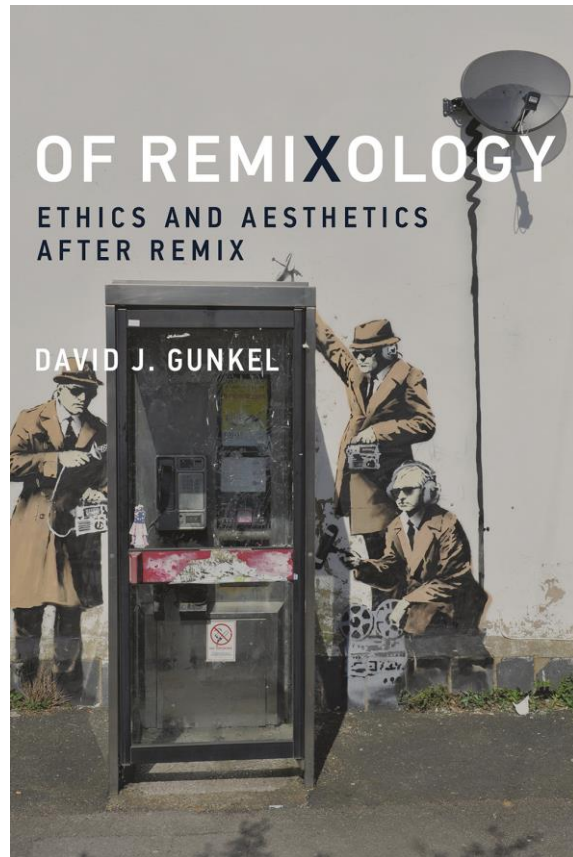
Figure 1 – Cover Image for *Of Remixology* (MIT Press 2016)

The following develops a response to these questions, and it does so in three steps or movements. The first briefly introduces the concept of remix and the opportunities and challenges that this now wide-spread, content creation practice presents to existing models and theories of moral and aesthetic value. The second outlines the three elements of what I call "remixology"—a new axiology (or theory of moral and aesthetic value) that is designed to scale to these new opportunities and challenges. The third and final movement investigates the consequences of this proposal, demonstrating how remixology can be read backwards through time, providing us with some new perspectives on artistry and creativity in all human endeavors, and read forwards into the emerging challenges that have been made available by innovations in algorithmic content generation and computational creativity.

1 Introduction

So let's begin in the usual way, with a definition. A good place to find a definition of remix is in a source that is itself a product of remix—Wikipedia (2017): "Remix is a piece of media which has been altered from its original state by adding, removing, and/or changing pieces of the item. A song, piece of artwork, book, video, or photograph can all be remixes. The only characteristic of a remix is that it appropriates and changes other materials to create something new." This is an entirely functional characterization, but we can perhaps do better by way of an example, specifically Mark Vidler's (a.k.a. Go Home Productions) "Girl Wants (to Say Goodbye to) Rock and Roll" (figure 2). This mashup consists of music derived from the Velvet Underground's "Rock and Roll," the third song on the Atlantic Records 1970 album *Loaded* (the last of the Velvet's studio recordings to feature Lou Reed) and vocals extracted from Christina Aguilera's glossy and highly processed "What a Girl Wants" (RCA 1999).

Figure 2 – Mark Vidler's remixed cover art for the mashup
"Girl Wants (to say goodbye to) Rock And Roll" (2006)

The result of Vidler's digital data-diddling not only combines the lyrical content and melody of the original recordings but also preserves the exact sound and unique inflections of both the Velvet's guitar-oriented rock music and Aguilera's recognizable pop-vocal delivery. Vidler's remix, then, does not just sound like Aguilera singing to something that sounds similar to the Velvet Underground, it is Christina Aguilera actually singing to the musical accompaniment of the Velvet Underground even though this collaboration as such never took place. Consequently, the "Girl Wants (to Say Goodbye to) Rock and Roll" recording, which Vidler has distributed in mp3 format over the Internet, is not the documentary record of some preceding and unique musical performance. Instead, it simulates a virtual performance that did not, strictly speaking, ever take place as such.

This practice, however, is not something that is limited to popular music. Remix has proliferated across all forms of content creation and media. There are literary remixes, like William S. Burrough's (2013) cut-up novel *Naked Lunch* and Seth Grahame-Smith's (2009) recombination of Jane Austin's classic novel *Pride and Prejudice* with B-grade zombie pulp fiction; visual remixes, perhaps the most famous being Shepard Fairey's iconic "Hope" poster for Barack Obama's 2008 US presidential campaign; cinematic remixes, one of the best examples being Quintin Tarantino's *Kill Bill*, a film that borrows liberally and quite deliberately from the history of cinema; and data mashups, those Web 2.0 implementations that appropriate and combine content from two or more Internet source in order to provide users with a value-added, integrated application. Because of this seemingly unrestrained proliferation of the practice across all aspects of contemporary culture, cyberpunk science fiction writer William Gibson (2005, p. 118) has identified remix as the defining feature of the twenty-first century: "The remix is the very nature of the digital. Today, an endless, recombinant, and fundamentally social process generates countless hours of creative product (another antique term?)…The recombinant (the bootleg, the remix, the mash-up) has become the characteristic pivot at the turn of our two centuries."

Despite or perhaps because of its popularity, critical responses to remix have pulled in two seemingly opposite directions. On one side, there are the "utopian plagiarists" (CAE, 1994), copyleftists, and remix fans and prosumers; those individuals

and organizations who celebrate remix and other cut-up and collage practices as new and original ways for creating and distributing media content. On the opposing side, there are the critics—not only entertainment lawyers, copyright advocates, 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 recombining of pre-existing material is nothing more than a cheap and easy way of recycling the work of others, perpetrated by what are arguably talentless hacks who really have nothing new to say. What is truly interesting about this debate, however, is not necessarily what makes the two sides different. What is remarkable and what needs to be further examined and critiqued is what both sides share in order to enter into debate and to occupy these opposing positions in the first place. Despite their many differences, both sides of the conflict value and endeavor to protect the same things, namely originality, innovation, and the figure of the hardworking and talented artist. One side sees remix as providing new modes of original expression that require considerable effort and skill on the part of producers. The other argues that there is not much originality, innovation, or effort in merely sampling and remixing prerecorded material.

These values are old. They are, in fact, originally recorded for us in Plato's *Phaedrus* (1982), a dialogue that provides the first recorded account of recording technology. For the ancient Greeks, recording technology is not what one typically thinks about with the words "recording" or "technology." During this period of time, the new technology that had everyone both really excited and worried was writing—an art or *techne* that supposedly came to Greece from Egypt. At the end of the *Phaedrus* (Plato, 1982, 274c-277e), Socrates and Phaedrus debate the social consequences of the new technology of writing. Socrates, who is a bit of a conservative, is worried that this new technology will make people, especially the young people of Athens, antisocial, lazy, and hard to get along with (which should sound familiar to anyone familiar with the debates about young people and the potentially corrupting influence of technology like smart phones, cf. Turkle 2011). And in the process of making this argument, Socrates formulates an axiology—a theory of value that privileges originals over copies, live

performances over recorded transcriptions, and the rights of paternity held by authors over their written products, which Socrates refers to as a kind of bastard child.

2 Basic Elements of Remixology

What is needed therefore is, as Friedrich Nietzsche (1997, p. 3) would have described it, a thorough and complete questioning and re-evaluation of these shared values. Not because they have somehow failed to function, but because they function all too well and often exert their influence without question or critical examination. As long as debate about remix continues to be structured according to this axiology, this rather ancient theory of moral and aesthetic value that goes at least as far back as Plato, little or nothing will change. Each side will continue to heap up new evidence and arguments in support of their positions, but they will, insofar as they seek to protect and advance the same basic principles and underlying values, accomplish little more than agreeing against each other. The objective, therefore, is to formulate another way to think remix that can both challenge and exceed the restrictions of the current debate and, in the process, do more than simply endorse one side or the other. And there are three fundamental elements of this new axiology: Simulation, Repetition and Unauthorization.

2.1 Simulation

According the usual way of thinking, we commonly distinguish originals from copies. We differentiate, for example, between the original performance of a musician and the recording of that performance. And we typically invest greater value in the live event then we do in the recorded transcription (cf. Auslander 1999). Remix introduces a third term "simulacrum," which is neither an original nor a copy. It is the copy of a copy that (re)produces a new original. The simulacrum, as Gilles Deleuze (1994, p. 67) describes it, "swallows up or destroys every ground which would function as an instance responsible for the difference between the original and the derived." Consequently the ethic and the aesthetic of simulation consists in neither fidelity nor its polar opposite. It is just as much opposed to promiscuous infidelities and merely fooling around as it is to the faithful representation of an original concept of originality.

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A remix like DJ Danger Mouse's *The Grey Album*, a mashup of music taken from the Beatle's iconic *White Album* (Apple 1968) and the lyrical content and vocal performance derived from Jay-Z's *The Black Album* (Def Jam, 2003), is not just a random or haphazard concatenation of different things. It is a deliberate and calculated form of pop-culture blasphemy. Instead of being evaluated on the basis of its innovative originality, which is an argument that has been made time and again by its advocates on the copyleft, or on the basis of its diminished status as a mere "copy of a copy," which is the argument most often mobilized by its detractors on the copyright; remix succeeds to the extent that it can reverse what would have been mere copies into simulacra that blaspheme the entire axiological order that had been inherited from Plato.

2.2 Repetition

In deliberately undermining the concepts of originality and derivation, simulacra also deconstruct history, linear time, and all the related elements that these concepts organize and regulate. Remix, therefore, persists in a proliferation of things where there is no beginning or ending. It is an eternal recurrence or endless recirculation, where, as with the principle of mass conservation, things can be neither created nor destroyed, just transformed. Remix, therefore, re-purposes what had been designed to be a criticism and turns it into a kind of instruction manual. In his writings on music, Theodor Adorno (1941, p. 18) provided the following critique of popular (and specifically American) music: "The beginning of the chorus is replaceable by the beginning of innumerable other choruses. The interrelationship among the elements or the relationship of the elements to the whole would be unaffected. In Beethoven, position is important only in a living relation between a concrete totality and its concrete parts. In popular music, position is absolute. Every detail is substitutable; it serves its function only as a cog in a machine." Remix is nothing less than an extreme form of this mechanical substitutability and replication. In fact, remix producers and DJs appropriate and repurpose Adorno's indictment as if it were a set of instructions, deliberately repeating and substituting one thing for another with little or no regard to the integrity of the so-called "original."

In the face of increasing forms of mechanical reproduction—modes of representation and copying that now, with the advent of digital media, appear to have achieved a kind of fulfilment and completion—the seemingly correct response would be to seek ways to preserve what Walter Benjamin (1969) called "the aura" of originality that is on the verge of being replicated into extinction. But this is precisely the wrong mode of response. In the face of rampant reproducibility, the task—and the task of art in particular—is to repeat repetition to such an extent and in such a way as to extract from it, and not in opposition to it, something different. The name of the game is not to protect originals against the proliferation of unauthorized copying but to exploit the tools, techniques, and technologies of mechanical repetition in order to extract from it "that little difference" that makes a difference (Deleuze, 1994, p. 293).

2.3 Unauthorization

In this endless (and beginningless) circulation of things where everything is always and already in process, what matters is not to break out of the circle, but to learn to enter into it in the right way and arrange an appropriate response. This means, following Roland Barthes (1978), that we need to abandon the concept of the original author as the sole authority over creative work and the concept of artistry as the expression of an individual creative genius who has something unique to say. It signifies a shift from this modern authority figure to the postmodern or even premodern figure of the remix DJ. It can be considered "premodern" because this is precisely how Nietzsche (1974, p. 191) had described the figure of the artist and the activity of art in the pre-Christian context of polytheism: "For an individual to posit his own ideal and to derive from it his own law, joys, and rights—that may well have been considered hitherto as the most outrageous human aberration and as idolatry itself. The few who dared as much always felt the need to apologize to themselves, usually by saying: 'It wasn't I! Not I! But a god through me.'" In earlier times, the act of positing oneself as the originator or sole artistic genius of some artifact was considered to be an aberration and outrageous claim, a kind of idolatry and arrogance. Instead, whoever would be called "artist" explained what he or she did by deferring and referring things elsewhere. What Nietzsche describes, therefore, is a kind of premodern pagan DJ who channels the

material and creative forces of others. Or as Mark Amerika (2011, p. 58) describes it, channeling something often attributed to Marcel Duchamp (1973, p. 138), "Remixology envisions the artist as a postproduction medium who becomes instrument while conducting radical experiments in unconsciously projected creativity."

3 Consequences and Outcomes

Remix not only imposes on us the need to question existing theories of moral and aesthetic value but provides the occasion for formulating a new axiology of simulation, repetition and unauthorization—something I have designated (by appropriating and repurposing material sampled from Mark Amerika) "remixology" (Amerika and Gunkel, 2012, 58). The impact and effect of this new axiology, however, is not limited to the current situation with remixed content in digital media. Its consequences reverberate both backwards and forwards in time. Let me end, therefore, by indicating the opportunities and challenges made available in and by remix as it proliferates both backwards and forwards from this point.

3.1 Rewind

If we look at the history of art and aritisty, remixology enables a different way of conceptualizing creativity, innovation, and the production of original work. In other words, it helps us make sense of things in a new way and from a different perspective. This what Kirby Ferguson (2014) argues in *Everything is a Remix* (figure 3). In this four-part, web-distributed documentary, Ferguson demonstrates how remix is not new; it describes the very process of all forms of human creativity. Only a god creates *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). Finite human beings innovate by building on what came before, transforming what they copy, and, in the process, producing something new or at least different. And Fergusons's documentary, which is generated by appropriating and mixing samples drawn from existing content, does an impressive job of showing how this happens in visual art, especially Hollywood cinema.
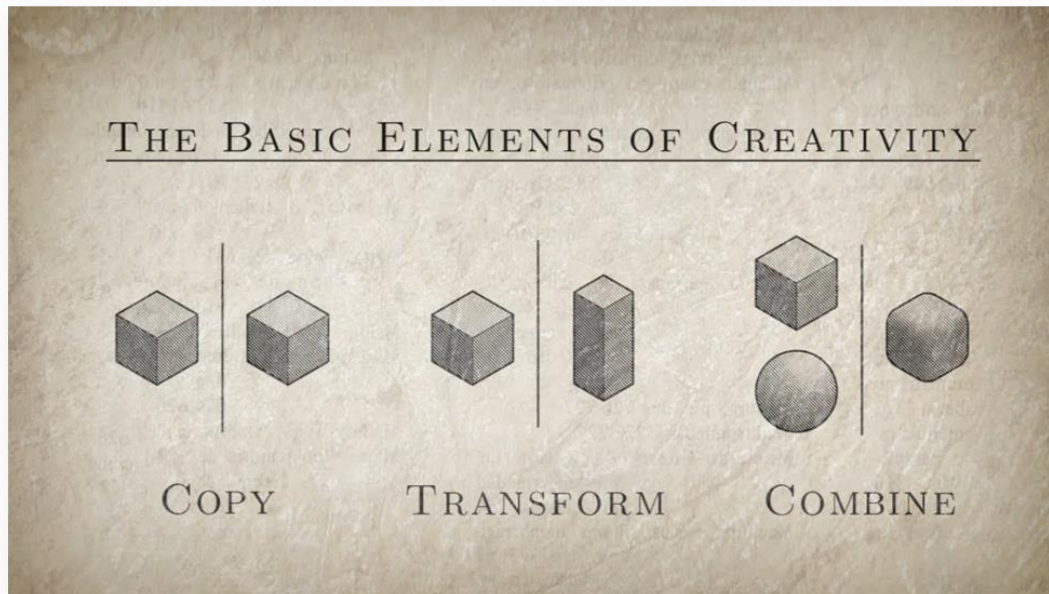
Figure 3 – The Basic Elements of Creativity.
From Kirby Ferguson's *Everything is a Remix* (2014)

But even this insight is not new. It too is a remix of something that had already been expressed by others. Take for example the following statement from Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Originality and Quotation" (2010), which has been subsequently sampled and worked into the mix by Paul D. Miller (2004, p. 68), a.k.a. DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid: "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 a 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." In this passage, sampled from Emerson's text and woven into the texture of Miller's book, *Rhythm Science*, one finds the description of an alternative understanding of artistic production, one that does not vest authority in the original genius of the author and his or her creation *ex nihilo* but locates the creative endeavor within a network of pre-established textual relations—what Brian Eno has called, by way of contrast, "senius" (Straw, 1999, 206–207)—such that creativity is a matter of drawing on, reconfiguring, and repurposing remade materials that are already at hand and in circulation.

3.2 Fast Forward

In addition to helping make sense of the past, remixology is also positioned to assist us in confronting the opportunities and the challenge of the future, like "original content" produced by algorithms, artificial intelligence (AI), and robots. On the side of consumption, algorithms now determine what books we read, what movies we watch and what music we enjoy. Netflix now estimates that over 75% of the content that is seen by users of their service is determined by an algorithm (Amatriain and Basilico 2012). Similar recommendation applications are in operation at Pandora (for music) and Amazon.com (initially for books, but now for all kinds of products). This means that the consumption of cultural products like film, literature, and music is not determined by critics, human reviewers, or peers. It is something that is calculated, processed, and controlled by a machine.

Similar things are happening on the side of production. Natural language generation algorithms, like Automated Insight's Wordsmith and Narrative Science's Quill, are beginning to "write" much of the content we read in both print media and on the Internet. In fact, when *Wired* magazine asked Kristian Hammond, co-founder of Narrative Science, to predict the percentage of news articles that would be written algorithmically within the next decade, his answer was a sobering 90 percent (Levy 2012). In the field of visual art, there is Simon Colton's The Painting Fool, an automated painter that has been designed "to exhibit behaviors that might be deemed as skillful, appreciative and imaginative" as that of a human artist; has produced work that "has been exhibited in real and online galleries" (Painting Fool 2017); and aspires to be "taken seriously as a creative artist in its own right" (Colton, 2012, p. 16). And in music, machines are also writing and performing "original" compositions. In classical music, for instance, there is David Cope's Experiments in Musical Intelligence (EMI which is commonly pronounced "Emmy") and its successor Emily Howell, which are algorithmic composers capable of analyzing existing orchestral compositions and creating new, original scores that are comparable to the canonical works of Bach, Chopin, and Beethoven (Cope, 2001). In jazz performance, there is Shimon, a marimba playing robot from Georgia Tech University that is capable of improvising with human musicians in real time (Hoffman and Weinberg, 2011).

And then there is Amper—an AI music creation program that has just produced (or "was just utilized to produce," and the choice of words definitely matter in this situation) a full-length album in collaboration with lyricist/vocalist Taryn Southern. Amper is not just a computer-based tool to be used by composers and musicians, it automates the work that is typically performed by composers, producers, and musicians. Using a form of machine learning, Amper identifies patterns in existing user data and then employs this information to generate, perform, and produce "original music." "Amper," as Drew Silverstein (2017) explains, "allows anyone to create unique and professional music for their content instantly with no experience required." This means that anyone can create music without needing things like musical training, years practice, or expensive equipment and instruments (Silverstein 2017). This is presented, by the team at Amper, as a positive development, but these same items—making music without training, talent, or instruments—is precisely the criticism leveled against remix music like hip hop. Consequently, rethinking art and artistry through the medium of the remix DJ can also help us formulate an axiology that is prepared to deal with and respond to many of the opportunities and challenges made available by innovations in computational creativity.

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