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Recombinant Thought: Slavoj Žižek and the Art and Science of the Mashup

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"I am a DJ, I am what I play"—David Bowie, 1979

Anyone who has search the term "Žižek" will have discovered a curious but intriguing result. "Žižek" is not only the surname of that Slovenian philosopher who *The Chronicle of Higher Education* once called "the Elvis of cultural theory," it is also the moniker of one of South America's most popular venues for rap, hip-hop, and mashup dance music—Zizek Urban Beats Club located in Buenos Aires, Argentina (Figure 1). This nominal coincidence is curious mainly because Slavoj Žižek, despite his undisputed street cred with many facets of popular culture, has had little, if nothing, to say or do with this particular type of popular music. He is involved with music no doubt, but more often than not it is the music of Wagner and other forms of what one might be tempted to call Adorno-certified European art music. Or if he does take an interest these "vulgar" forms, it is in response to the Teutonic sounding Laibach and *Neue Slowenische Kunst* (Žižek 2006a, 63-66). Not that there's anything wrong with these items and interests; it is just that Žižek's homies are Hegel, Lacan, and Hitchcock, not Girl Talk, A+D, Beto Metralha, and Mark Vidler.

But this nominal coincidence is anything but coincidental. Word on the street is that the club did in fact title itself after the "Yugoslavian-born philosopher and cultural critic," concocting

its own mashup of Žižek, and everything that the name entails and encompasses, with the sounds, practices, and culture of contemporary dance music (Hernandez 2010, 136). And what can be perceived in this unlikely combination of two apparently disparate and incompatible sources is something that exceeds the comprehension of both, opening each to previously unheard of opportunities. Consequently, the thesis of this essay can be stated quite directly: Slavoj Žižek, despite having little to say about mashups in any direct way, engages this new media phenomena in both theory and practice, providing contemporary culture with both a conceptual understanding of the mashup and a carefully executed illustration of its methodology. The examination of this will proceed by way of two movements. The first investigates how Žižek's work, especially his general interest in "short circuiting," provides theoretical insight for understanding the mashup and its cultural significance. The second turns things around, demonstrating how the mashup explains and describes Žižek's own compositional practices. In other words, the first part explains the mashup by way of Žižek, while the second explains Žižek by way of the mashup.



Figure 1: Flier for a Zizek Urban Beats Club show

Mash(ing)up Theory

"Mashup" refers to a wide-spread digital media practice that takes existing works—popular songs, films, television programs, texts, web data, etc.—and recombines what often appears to be incompatible source material in different (re)configurations to fabricate new products that are arguably greater than the sum of their parts. Take, for example, one of the most celebrated but also reviled audio mashups, DJ Danger Mouse's *The Grey Album*. This 12 song recording, which debuted on the Internet in February 2004, combined the lyrics and vocal performance of rapper Jay-Z's *The Black Album* (Def Jam 2003) with music sampled from one of the undisputed classics of classic rock, the Beatles *White Album* (Apple 1968). Danger Mouse (aka Brian Burton) used off-the-shelf audio processing software to isolate and sample musical passages from various Beatles' songs, often looping an opening instrumental segment or a particularly recognizable hook, and then layered a cappella versions of Jay-Z's vocals on top of this musical foundation. Critical responses to this effort have pulled in the direction of one extreme or the other. On the one hand, this "art project," as Burton called it (Rimmer 2007, 133), was celebrated for its inventiveness and insight. And if copying is a form of flattery, then *The Grey Album* was a remarkable success, leading to both other unauthorized versions like DJ Doc Rock's *American Zeppelin* (2008), a mashup of vocals taken from Jay-Z's *American Gangster* (Def Jam 2007) and music from that other classic of classic rock Led Zeppelin, and the authorized spin-off *MTV Ultimate Mashups Presents: Collision Course* (Warner Bros. 2004), which utilized Burton's concept to recombine the lyrics and rap performance of Jay-Z with the alternative rock sounds of Linkin Park. On the other hand, Burton's unauthorized use of other people's intellectual property was perceived as nothing less than criminal—a deliberate theft or plundering of some of the most valuable property that exists in popular music. And the authorities and copyright holders responded, not surprisingly, by mobilizing every available legal remedy. As stated in one of the cease and desist letter issued by the law firm Cowan, Liebowitz & Latman on behalf of their client Capitol Records, who currently owns the rights to the music of the Beatles: "Distribution of *The Grey Album* constitutes a serious violation of Capitol's rights in the Capitol Recordings—as well as the valuable intellectual property rights of other artists, music publishers, and/or record companies—and will subject you to serious legal remedies for willful violation of the laws. We accordingly demand that you cease any plans or efforts to distribute or publicly perform this unlawful recording" (Chilling Effects 2004).

Although initially popularized in digital form, made widely available over the Internet, and heard on dance floors across the globe, the mashup is not something limited to either digital

media or popular music. Analog precursors can be found in the turntable practices of Jamaican dub and early hip hop, John Oswald's *Plunderphonics*, and the audio collage of Negativland and the Evolution Control Committee (see Gunkel 2008). Similar practices have also been developed and pursued in almost every area of creative endeavor. In April of 2009, for example, Seth Grahame-Smith published a recombination of Jane Austen's literary classic *Pride and Prejudice* with zombie horror films, producing a textual mashup called *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and subtitled "The Classic Regency Romance—Now with Ultraviolent Zombie Mayhem" "It is a truth universally acknowledged," the hybrid novel begins, "that a zombie in possession of brains must be in want of more brains. Never was this truth more plain than during the recent attacks at Netherfield Park, in which a household of eighteen was slaughtered and consumed by a horde of the living dead" (Austen and Grahame-Smith 2009, 7). But even this was a rip-off insofar as writers like Kathy Acker and William S. Burroughs had been plundering and reworking other writer's material for a number of decades. Similar efforts and effects have been instituted in the visual arts, with the most notable versions perhaps coming from the 2008 US presidential campaign. One of the iconic images of candidate Barak Obama was Shepherd Fairey's "Hope" poster, which was fabricated by combining an Associated Press photograph by Mannie Garcia with the framing and graphic style of Jim Fitzpatrick's 1967 reworking of Alberto Korda's famous picture of Che Guevara (Wortham 2008, 1). And one of the most successful Internet campaign advertisements, again produced in support of the Obama campaign, was "Vote Different," which took the classic 1984 Apple Macintosh Super Bowl commercial directed by Ridley Scott and mashed it up with recordings of campaign speeches by Hillary Rodham Clinton. This combination had the uncanny effect of turning Clinton into a totalitarian "big sister" figure in control of the Orwellian masses who are fortunately liberated by the violent intrusion of an athletic Obama supporter wielding the sledge hammer of hope. Because of this seemingly unrestrained proliferation of the practice, cyberpunk science fiction author William Gibson (2005) has identified the mashup as the "characteristic pivot" of the turn of the 21st century.



Figure 2: Shepherd Fairey's "Hope" poster

Although fabricating a mashup sounds relatively easy, getting it right is more difficult than it initially appears. "A lot of people," Burton explains, "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" (Rimmer 2007, 132). In recombining The Beatles with Jay-Z, Burton did more than just rearrange prefabricated audio components. It is, as he points out, a calculated and critical intervention into the material of popular music, creating what Žižek has termed a "short circuit."

A short circuit occurs when there is a faulty connection in the network—faulty, of course, from the stand point of the network's smooth functioning. Is not the shock of short-circuiting, therefore, one of the best metaphors for a critical reading? Is not one of the most effective critical procedures to cross wires that do not usually touch: to take a major classic (text, author, notion), and read it in a short circuiting way, through the lens of a "minor" author, text or conceptual apparatus ("minor" should be understood here in Deleuze's sense: not "of lesser quality," but marginalized, disavowed by the hegemonic ideology, of dealing with a "lower", less dignified topic)? If the minor reference is well chosen, such a procedure can lead to insights which completely shatter and undermine our common perceptions (Žižek 2006b, ix).

Although Žižek does not, in his own published writings, address the cultural practice of the mashup per se, this passage supplies what is arguably one of the best descriptions of what

mashup is all about. First, mashups produce or deploy *short circuits* in the networks of popular culture by deliberately crossing two or more seemingly incompatible media sources. In combining *Pride and Prejudice*, one of the major works in the Western literary canon, with pulp-fiction horror movies, a "minor text" not necessarily in terms of quality (although there is that aspect of it) but in the marginalized position this material and its subject matter occupies with regard to what is called "literature," Grahame-Smith's mashup does not just cross literary genres. It also facilitates an encounter that intentionally violates differences in media formats, ontological levels, aesthetic categories, and historic periods, producing what Žižek (2006b) calls "an *impossible short circuit* of levels which, for structural reasons, can never meet" (3) or what digital media artist Mark Amerika (2011) has called, in a clever reworking of tech-speak and literary theory, "a [G]Lit/ch aesthetics." In this way, "texts with no apparent connection," as Colin Davis (2010) writes concerning Žižek's own efforts, "should be read in the light of one another" (125).

A particularly good illustration of this procedure and its effects can be heard in Mark Vidler's, "Girl Wants (to Say Goodbye to) Rock and Roll" (figure 3). This mashup consists of music derived from the Velvet Underground's "Rock and Roll," the third song on the 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). In this particular situation, what Žižek calls, following the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1975), "major" and "minor" are relative, depending on one's initial perspective and cultural investments. For guitar-oriented, rock-and-roll traditionalists, especially those alternative music enthusiasts who celebrate the DIY ethos and garage-band sound that will eventually take the name "punk," the Velvet Underground is the major player and Aguilera's efforts are considered a marginal and essentially unimportant blip on the radar of bland mainstream media. For contemporary pop music fans, however, the situation is reversed. Aguilera, a former contestant on the proto-*American Idol* talent show *Star Search* and one-time cast-member of Disney's next-gen *The Mickey Mouse Club*, is the recognizable figure, and the Velvet Underground, who never had a top-10 anything, is considered to be an Andy Warhol side project situated on the margins of top-40 popular music. What Vidler's mashup does, therefore, is provoke and exploit the improbable confluence of these two very different musical texts, producing shocking—understood as both unanticipated but also disturbing—effects within the networks of popular culture.



Figure 3: Mark Vidler's mashup graphic

Second, in fabricating these unexpected and improbable encounters—these short circuits—the mashup does not aim to mediate the conflict it releases and mobilizes but deploys them in order to open up what Žižek (2006b) calls, in one of his many contributions to the MIT Press Short Circuits series which he edits, "an insurmountable parallax gap" (4). "Parallax" is the term Žižek deploys (in something of a repurposing of the word's standard connotation) to name an irreducible difference in perspective that is not programmed for nor determined to result in some kind of final mediation or dialectical resolution. "The two perspectives," Žižek (2006b) writes with regard to an entirely different but structurally similar situation, "are irretrievably out of sync, so that there is no neutral language to translate one into the other, even less to posit one as the 'truth' of the other. All we can ultimately do in today's condition is to remain faithful to this split as such, to record it" (129). Take for instance the physical properties of light, which Žižek (2006b) offers, by way of example, as one mode of parallax in modern theory (7). In physics, light sometimes appears and behaves as a wave; in other circumstances it seems to be and functions like a particle. The truth of the matter does not reside on one or the other side of this antinomy. It is not the case that light really is a wave but just appears, at various times and in certain situations, to be a particle or vice versa. It is also not the case that the true reality of light, that is, the *thing-in-itself* (to use a distinctly Kantian turn of phrase) is the way light actually is apart from these two different theories by which we (finite, limited, and embodied human beings) conceive of and understand the phenomena of light. Nor is the truth to be found in some third, and perhaps as yet unnamed, term that would, following that rather ham-fisted caricature

of Hegelian dialectic, mediate the binary opposition of thesis and antithesis through a culminating synthesis. Instead, and this is Žižek's point, the truth of the matter only emerges in the shift of perspective from the one to the other. "This means," Žižek (2006b) writes, "that, ultimately, the status of the Real [Real light, for example] is purely parallaxic and, as such non-substantial: it has no substantial density in itself, it is just a gap between two points of perspective, perceptible only in the shift from the one to the other" (26).

This is precisely what is at stake in the material and practices of the mashup. Vidler's work, for example, provokes what he and other mashup artists characterize as "genre crossing" (Vidler 2006), which is the intermingling of two or more audio sources that represent different and seemingly incompatible perspectives—entirely different musical styles, competing production values, and often opposed traditions in popular culture, typically identified by terms like "mainstream" or "top-40" and "alternative" or "underground." And this tension is marked, quiet literally in fact, by the use of the term "vs." in mashup titles, i.e. The Beatles vs. Jay-Z or Christina Aguilera vs. The Velvet Underground. The purpose and result of fabricating such oppositions is not to comprehend one source in terms of the other, that is, for example, to understand the proto-punk, alternative sounds of the Velvet Underground in terms of the highly commercialized pop of Christina Aguilera or vice versa. Nor is it to negotiate some shared understanding or neutral agreement between the two sides that would ultimately mediate their apparent differences and/or resolve whatever conceptual or aesthetic conflict their juxtaposition may have initially generated. Instead what "vs." marks is the confrontation of these two irreconcilable elements "between which no synthesis or mediation is possible" (Žižek 2006b, 4). The mashup, therefore, not only emerges in and from the gap that opens up between these two incompatible sources, but it seeks to remain faithful to the split as such by recording it (Žižek 2006b, 129).

Third, and because of this, such operations cannot be simply explained away or excused as mere "fun and games," even if the results are often both intellectually and aesthetically pleasurable. It can also, as Žižek points out, play a critical role. Or as Paul D. Miller (2004), aka DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid, explains, "any shift in the traffic of information can create not only new thoughts but new ways of thinking" (86). In facilitating what Žižek (2006b) calls "the short circuit between two spheres which are usually perceived as incompatible" (13), whether it be the music of the Velvet Underground and the vocal performance of Christina Aguilera or a celebrated masterpiece of English literature and kitschy mid-twentieth century Saturday-matinee horror films, the effort produces a shock or interruption that is capable of disturbing the usually smooth functioning and standard operating procedures of the culture industry. As Colin Davis

(2010) writes with regards to Žižek's figure of "short circuiting," the objective of such an undertaking "is to coerce an unseen truth into visibility, and in the process to produce something strange, startling, yet also persuasive" (125). By strategically inserting brain-eating zombies, and all the conceptual trappings and narrative requirements that customarily go along with this monstrous figure, into Austen's comedy of manners, for example, Grahame-Smith's mashup not only demonstrates how the refined mores of 19th century England were capable of producing truly horrific social situations but also exhibits the profound literary potential of apparently low-bow material that is typically written-off as mindless entertainment—"mindless" not only in terms of the somnambulistic figures that populate the *mise-en-scene* of zombie movies but also insofar as such cinematic distractions, as specifically opposed to the reading of books and literature, are often said to produce mindless and passive consumers, a kind of media-induced zombie. Formulated in this way, the mashup constitutes a precisely calculated and deliberately aberrant short circuit in the network of contemporary culture, crossing wires that should not be crossed in order to produce noisy cross-talk or static that has the effect of disturbing the smooth flow and functioning of things. If, as Žižek (2006b) points out, the source materials are well chosen and strategically employed, the mashup does not just provide entertaining novelties but can "lead to insights which completely shatter and undermine our common perceptions" (ix), expectations, and assumptions.

The important word here, however, is "can," because there are no prior assurances or guarantees in this business. In fact the mashup, as a cultural phenomena and product, occupies a seemingly ambivalent position that is itself parallaxic. On the one hand, mashups have been celebrated and promoted as a revolutionary art form and critical intervention into the material of bland commodity culture. Adrian Roberts, co-founder of club Bootie and one-half of DJ A+D, for example, has called the mashup "the new punk rock" (Roberts and Roberts 2009), and scholars like Kembrew McLeod (2005) have likened the effort and effect to recent innovations in critical theory, stating that mashups "unknowingly follow the deconstructionist method, whereby a text is pried open, disassembled, and drained of meanings intended by the author" (83). Understood in this way, the mashup is positioned as a critical intervention and endeavor. As Žižek (2006b) points out, the shock that is produced by such short circuiting is perhaps one of the best ways to characterize, mobilize, and understand what meant by "critical reading" (xi). On the other hand, however, mashups can be and have just as successfully been incorporated into the systems and operations of the dominant culture industry. Shortly after the release of Danger Mouse's unauthorized *The Grey Album*, for instance, MTV plundered or appropriated (and the choice of verb here is not incidental) the concept and repackaged it as a legitimate commercial product.

Although this authorized concatenation of Jay-Z and Linkin Park, which had the blessing of the record companies and the licensing agreements to prove it, did not enjoy the same critical success as *The Grey Album*, it did quite well as a commercial product with the *Collision Course* CD topping the Billboard 200 one week after its release. More recently, Fox Television's *Glee* used mashup techniques in its popular high-school musical series to arrange catchy reworkings of tired pop-tunes, giving new life and commercial viability to titles from the recording industry's back catalogs.

What is crucial and important about the mashup, and what Žižek's work helps us to perceive and understand about it, is the fact that the truth of the matter does not reside on one or the other side of this opposition. It is not the case that the mashup really is, in and of itself, a critical practice that has been subsequently co-opted by the "enemy" to serve existing commercial interests or that its critical employment subversively appropriates and redeploys the technologies, techniques, and tools of the recording industry in order, sampling words from Audre Lorde (1984), to use the master's tools to tear down the master's house. Nor is it the case that the truth of the matter lies somewhere in between these two positions in some common ground that would hold the two perspectives in balance or even sublimate their difference. What makes the mashup interesting, useful, and potent is that it occupies and is maintained in the parallax gap that emerges from the conflict between such critical interventions, on the one hand, and commodity culture, on the other. In fact, we can say, following Žižek, that the mashup actually has no substantial density in itself; it is nothing more or less than what emerges in the shift of perspective from the one side to the other. Consequently, if it is asked whether the mashup constitutes a critical intervention in contemporary popular culture or is just another tool serving the interests of the music industry and its commodification of culture, the answer is "yes." But that makes all the difference.

DJ Žižek

We can and should, however, take things further (And is this not something Žižek himself would endorse and prescribe?), and argue that Žižek does not just provide a theorizing of the mashup but that his own efforts embody and exemplify the practice. To rework and reconfigure Rex Butler's (2005) interpretation, it is possible to say that "it is in this sense—not so much in what it says as in its saying, not so much in its content as in its form—that Žižek's work" engages the mashup (136). In other words, although the letter of Žižek's texts indicate little or nothing directly about the practice of mashup, what he does in his own work is a mashup, irrespective of

whether the term is actually utilized or not. As Paul Taylor (2010) describes it, " Žižek recognizes the mutually constituting nature of the high and low, and his conceptual legerdemain shifts between high philosophical/psychoanalysis and low culture to create sparking contrasts illuminating our normally unexamined, everyday assumptions" (7).

First, Žižek's philosophical project, as he himself understands and describes it, can be characterized as a mashup. As explained in a 2003 interview with Eric Dean Rasmussen, the general effort is to "bugger Hegel with Lacan" in order to produce monstrous hybrids or mashups of these two thinkers that gives new life and street cred to both. In this way, Hegelian dialectics is "reactualized" by way of a confrontation with Lacanian psychoanalysis and the Lacanian texts are redeployed to analyze the seemingly impenetrable thought of German Idealism. This is, as Žižek (2003) admits within the course of the same interview, the fundamental characteristic of all his work and something that he considers non-negotiable: "It's a very technical, modest project, but I believe in it. All other things are negotiable. I don't care about them. You can take movies from me, you can take everything. You cannot take this from me" (4). But even this essential and non-negotiable characteristic is, strictly speaking, not original. It too is a reworked version of something initially derived from another, unlikely source, Gilles Deleuze—"unlikely" not only because of Deleuze's professed anti-Hegelianism but also because of Žižek's (2004) own unorthodox interpretation and hacking of the Deleuzian texts. What Žižek (2004) borrows from Deleuze is the "*philosophical practice of buggery*" (46), which Deleuze describes in his "Letter to a Harsh Critic" and which Žižek quotes at length:

To see the history of philosophy as a sort of buggery or (it comes to the same thing) immaculate conception. I saw myself as taking an author from behind and giving him a child that would be his own offspring, yet monstrous. It was really important for it to be his own child, because the author had to actually say all I had him saying. But the child was bound to be monstrous too, because it resulted from all sorts of shifting, slippage, dislocations, and hidden emissions that I really enjoyed (Deleuze 1995, 6 and Žižek 2004, 46).

It is here, with Žižek's sampling of one of the Deleuzian deep cuts, that one finds articulated, in very clear terms, what distinguishes the practice of remixing from mashup—two terms that have often been used interchangeably. What Deleuze calls "buggery" is, in the parlance of DJ culture, a remix. "A remix," according to Wikipedia (2011), the recognized authority for all things popular, "is an alternative version of a recorded song, made from an original version." Consequently, a remix, like what is heard in the pioneering work of Jamaican dub producer Lee "Scratch" Perry, is typically created by taking a single audio recording and rearranging its various elements to

produce a new "version," which was the term initially utilized in dub to identify these reworkings of popular reggae tunes. As Deleuze accurately describes the process, the remix must be the original source material, just reworked and reconfigured in order to make it sound new and different. Žižek appropriates this Deleuzian practice and reconfigures it. Whereas Deleuze remixes top-10 philosophers like Kant, Nietzsche, and Foucault, Žižek goes one step further and recombines two or more of these sources together. Instead of simply fabricating a Hegelian remix, for example, Žižek mashes Hegel and Lacan together, producing not simply a bastard child but a truly monstrous chimera. But, and here is where things get exceedingly complicated and mixed up, even this reconfiguration of the Deleuzian remix is not necessarily unique or innovative. As Žižek points out, Jacques Lacan had already experimented with this procedure by mashing up Kant and Sade, two Enlightenment figures who appear to have little or nothing in common, and Derrida had done something similar in *Glas*, mashing up Hegel with Genet.

Second, and because of this, Žižek cannot and should not be situated as a Kantian "genius" who produces brand new ideas that are unique and not derived through imitating or borrowing from the work of others (Kant 1987). Instead he occupies the position of philosophical DJ, an attentive reader/listener/viewer who samples and reworks the vast library of available texts to create innovative insights and possibilities through surprising juxtapositions and the unexpected short circuiting these unlikely crossings produce. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, (2008) for instance, Žižek lays down a basic track derived from the driving dialectical rhythms of Hegel and various Hegelians, adds the heavy bass of Lacanian psychoanalysis, drops the needle on a few recognizable passages taken from the films of Alfred Hitchcock, Wagnerian opera, and other media sources, and then periodically punctuates the mix by introducing interesting effects in the form of "bad" jokes and comical anecdotes often derived from experiences on the former Soviet-side of the iron curtain. Responses to this effort typically pull in two different and seemingly opposite directions. On the one hand, there has been and continues to be a kind of ridicule and dismissal, where Žižek is regarded as nothing more than a "philosophical wanker" (Taylor 2010, 33) or, what Todd McGowan (2000) calls, "a theoretical clown." "Serious theory," McGowan (2000) writes with reference to one of Žižek's (in)famous examples, "involves thinking about the ideological ramifications of the structure of toilets, but such speculations do not earn one the reputation of being a serious philosopher" (65). Like an audio mashup, which is typically not considered a serious musical composition, this kind of playful toying with theory can be momentarily entertaining and even provocative, but it certainly will not be regarded as earnest philosophical inquiry. Or as McGowan (2000) cleverly describes it, "cleverness is not proper philosophy" (65). On the other hand, and often along side or in

opposition to this verdict, there are well-intended and even useful attempts to make this material work and to do some serious work. Toward this end, McGowan (2000) argues that Žižek, for all the bad jokes and puns and his own manic public persona, should in fact be taken seriously. "Though Žižek openly considers himself to be (in Badiou's terms) an antiphilosopher," McGowan (2000) argues, "he resembles Badiou's model of the philosopher through his serious foregrounding of the question of truth and asserting of truth-claims" (59). Following suit, Adrian Johnston (2008) has endeavored to perform for Žižek what Rodolphe Gasché (1986) had done for Jacques Derrida, translating Žižek's often dismissed and misunderstood musings, his apparently "disorganized, hyperkinetic meditations on various and sundry popular cultural phenomena" (Johnston 2008, xvii), into serious philosophical work by making it do the heavy lifting of thought.

What is interesting about these two responses is not what makes them different, but what they share and hold in common. Both, in fact, seek to preserve and protect the same thing—a certain understanding of and assumption concerning what comprises original and serious philosophical work. The one seeks to protect these assets through exclusion and marginalization, while the other endeavors to do the same by including and accommodating Žižek's efforts to the serious work of philosophy. If, however, we approach things from the perspective made available by the practice of the mashup, one can begin to see the way Žižek actualizes a kind of mashup philosophy that challenges this entire tradition. This alternative way of pursuing philosophy (which is something that would be considered "anti-philosophical," if viewed through and understood according to the traditional paradigm) confronts and questions the "normal" way of writing theory and doing philosophy in much the same way that the mashup provokes critical confrontation with the accepted standards and practices in all aspects of creative endeavor. Consequently, instead of simply excusing Žižek's efforts as a kind of entertaining novelty or working to accommodate his "works" and put them into service for the serious labor of philosophy, we can perceive in them that burst of Nietzschean (1974) laughter and *fröhliche Wissenschaft* that disturbs and undermines this very expectation of and pretension to seriousness. Žižek's philosophical mashups, which, like the efforts of Girl Talk, juggle an impressive and wide range of seemingly incompatible source material, can be highly entertaining and may even make us chuckle despite ourselves. But what really matters, what can and should be heard over all the noise that is made about these efforts, is how that laughter causes us to laugh at ourselves, our traditions, and our supposedly serious endeavors and investments. Consequently, Žižek's efforts can be written off as a kind of amusing distraction that is at odds with the true work of serious philosophy. But, and at the same time, it is also

possible to hear in his mashups the noise of a short circuit that puts all of this in question. Another instance of parallax.

Finally and to make matters more interesting or complicated, Žižek's published texts not only appropriate and repurpose the work of others but often reuse and recycle the same material. Like a philosophical DJ, Žižek appears to maintain a file of carefully selected pre-recorded samples—recognizable Hegelian rhythms, interesting Lacanian phrases and neologisms, and clever pop culture hooks—that he cycles through and reuses over and over again. "Most of Žižek's books," Nicholas Brown (2004) writes, expressing a criticism that has become increasingly popular and prevalent, "are both too short and too long: too short, because they are missing the systematic exposition that would give his arguments their full force, and too long because his constant repetition and self-plagiarism are intensely annoying" (310). What's the matter with Žižek, according to Brown's analysis, is that his books simply toy with different textual samples, and often times the same textual samples just rearranged in different configurations. Žižek might, one could argue, arrange these recycled materials in an interesting and entertaining fashion, but there is, in the final analysis, really little or nothing that is truly new or unique in his published output. "Same shit, different package." "You read one book, and you've read them all." Although this criticism, or something close to it, has appeared in various forms and venues, one of the more interesting articulations appears in a blog post called, with a suitable sense of irony, "fun with zizek, part 324" (figure 4).

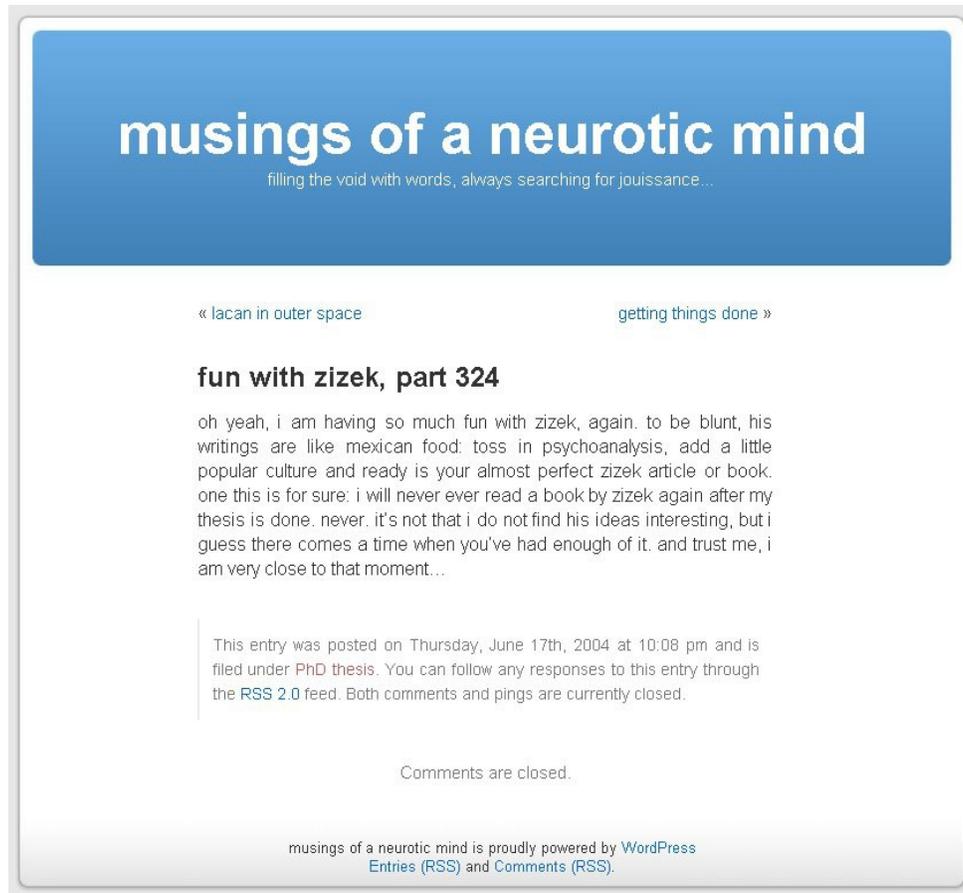


Figure 3: "fun with zizek, part 324" (17 June 2004)

So much can and should be said in response to this posting. There is the obvious and unapologetic ethnocentric prejudice concerning the food of others, in this case the cuisine of Mexico. The assumption that informs and is mobilized by this comment is that Mexican food is just the same basic ingredients wrapped up in different packages (which might be an accurate description, if experience with the cuisine is limited to what is available on the menu at Taco Bell). The same charge, of course, can and has been made of many other cultures' cuisines. And this is, by analogy, the criticism leveled against Žižek: Žižek's writings, like Mexican food, are really just a few basic ingredients—some Lacan, a little Hegel, and a garnish of popular culture—wrapped up in different packages, but essentially tasting the same. In other words, every Žižek text is ultimately the same basic material, just rearranged and contained within different looking packages. And for this reason, it is argued, one can burn out on it rather quickly because, as Socrates says of all writing, they "always say only one and the same thing" (Plato 1982: 275e). Consequently, Žižek's efforts have often been characterized as derivative, parasitic, and plagiaristic—a kind of cut-and-paste pastiche that, as Geoff Boucher (2009)

describes it, "makes most of his work into a sort of self-plagiarized avant-garde ready-made" (425-426). The same criticism, not surprisingly, has been leveled against the mashup. As Kembrew McLeod (2005) has argued, mashups are just a symptom of our postmodern times—"yet another sign of the end of the world, proof that our culture has withered and run out of ideas" (86). Or as Jaron Lanier (2008), the one time VR *wunderkind* cum curmudgeon, puts it, "I must be clear about the nature of my grumpiness: I'm not complaining about how crummy the new pop music is. If only! I'm complaining that there is no new pop music to complain about" (385). For both McLeod and Lanier, the main problem with the mashup in popular music is that it is and does nothing new. "Despite my appreciation for them," McLeod (2005) concludes, "I do not mean to idealize mash-ups because, as a form of creativity, they are quite limited and limiting... Mash-ups pretty much demonstrate that Theodore Adorno, the notoriously cranky Frankfurt School critic of pop culture, was right about one key point. In arguing for the superiority of European art music, Adorno claimed that pop songs were simplistic and merely made from easily interchangeable, modular components. Yes, Adorno was a snob; but after hearing a half dozen mash-ups, it is hard to deny that he is right about that particular point" (86).

These criticisms are not necessarily wrong, they just miss the larger and more important point. What is demonstrated in and by this kind of response is not the extent to which Žižek's writings fail to be original or new but the way this very expectation—an expectation, we should remember, that is rooted in Platonic metaphysics and given its particular modern expression by Kant (1987), is itself something that is questionable and not without its own history, legacy, and theoretical complications. What the charge of self-plagiarism shows, therefore, is that this expectation—the idea and ideal of a unique creation *ex nihilo*—is already something of an artifice and fiction that never adequately accounted for what actually happens. It has always been, as Ralph Waldo Emerson (2010) already knew and pointed out, a matter of reappropriating, recycling, and mashing up what came before: "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). Consequently, the mashup is not some recent postmodern aberration caused by a lack or a running out of new ideas. It has always already been mashup "all the way down" (Žižek 2006b, 79). As a result, the mashup, whether occurring in Žižek's seemingly "self-plagiarized" books or in various forms of popular media, compel one to reconsider many of the traditional values that often pass without question or critical reconsideration. As the Critical Art Ensemble (1994) aptly described it, "plagiarism has

long been considered an evil in the cultural world. Typically it has been viewed as the theft of language, ideas, and images by the less than talented, often for the enhancement of personal fortune or prestige. Yet, like most mythologies, the myth of plagiarism is easily inverted" (83). The critical question asked of and by the mashup, therefore, is not "Is it plagiarism?" but what unexamined assumptions, expectations, and values already underlie, inform, and shape this very question?

Conclusion

Although Žižek has not addressed, written about, or investigated the mashup in any direct way, he is, as Hegel (1991) would describe it, "a product of his age" (313). And this particular epoch, as William Gibson (2005) asserts, appears to be all about and characterized by one thing—the mashup. Consequently, Žižek's (re)formulation of the "short circuit" and the "parallax view" can and perhaps should be read as mashup theory, and his approach to writing (about) these theories, by mashing up, for instance, Hegel and Lacan and reworking recognizable textual samples into different recombinations and reconfigurations, exemplifies and appears to play with the art and technique of the DJ. If the 21st century is in fact the age and time of the mashup, Žižek is one of its principle thinkers. One question, however, remains. Would Žižek ever recognize and/or endorse this conclusion? Would he agree with the results of this mashup of his own work and this seemingly widespread digital media practice? Would he either recognize his own efforts as a product of this particular age, or see the opportunities and challenges that have been released by this confrontation between Žižek (the philosopher and theorist) and what one encounters on the dance floor of Zizek Urban Beats Club? This line of questioning, despite its rather common sense appeal is a loaded question insofar as it requires and mobilizes assumptions that both the mashup and Žižek's own efforts already circumscribe and complicate.

Despite authorized versions like MTV's *Collision Course* or Mark Vidler's *Mashed*, the majority of mashups, and especially those that have been recognized and celebrated as a critical success, proceed with what appears to be little or no regard for the intentions of the original artists or the integrity of their recordings. When Danger Mouse cut-up and recombined the Beatles and Jay-Z, he did so without seeking the prior approval or permission of either party. In fact, part of what made Danger Mouse's *The Grey Album* so interesting and seemingly "dangerous" was the fact that it deliberately violated the integrity of the source material, taking it over, reconfiguring it in new and interesting ways, and making it do and say things which it was not initially designed for. The same, of course, can and should be said of Žižek's own efforts

and publications. His mashups of Hegel and Lacan, for instance, proceed and are pursued without necessarily having secured the approval of or official licensing from the one or the other. In fact, Žižek, like Danger Mouse, has taken a considerable amount of flack for his apparent violations and rather unorthodox uses and reuses of the Hegelian texts—although in Žižek's case the backlash is manifest in the relatively benign form of negative book reviews and critical essays as opposed to cease and desist letters written by attorneys and supported by intellectual property law.

This unauthorized use and willful violation of the source material constitutes, it is important to note, more than a mere affectation. It is a crucial and necessary effect of the effort. As Žižek writes concerning his own series, "'Short Circuits' intends to revive a practice of reading which confronts a classic text, author, or notion with its own hidden presuppositions, and reveals its disavowed truth" (ix-x). The exposure of "hidden presuppositions" and "disavowed truths" typically requires that the integrity of the original source, which is, it should be noted, precisely what does the hiding and disavowing in the first place, be confronted, undermined, or transgressed in some way. Not, it is important to point out, in some accidental and haphazard fashion by simply throwing things together to see what happens, but through careful attention to the material and to the materiality of the material, as opposed to the supposed animating intentions and control of an always already absent authority figure. This involves, at least, careful selection of source material, a close and attentive reading or listening that does not miss a beat, and a calculated response that can and is able to take responsibility for this particular mode of responding. In other words, the source material needs to be taken up, interpreted, and utilized, as Derrida (1978) once wrote of Georges Bataille's engagement with the texts of Hegel, by following it carefully and attentively to the point of agreeing with it against itself and of wresting from it insights that it is itself unable to see or actualize (260).

So if we return to the question and ask "would Žižek agree with, recognize, and/or endorse this mashup of his own writings and the mashup?" The answer is clear. For now, at least, we have no way of knowing for sure and frankly we do not and should not care. I offer this conclusion not out of disrespect for Žižek, the numerous texts that bear his name, or the authority that has been vested in them but because and specifically out of respect for the fact that it is Žižek who authors and authorizes this very transaction and conclusion. It is, in fact, only in mashing up Žižek that one remains faithful—exceedingly faithful—to the letter and example of his thinking.

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