

# Book Review

## ***Of Remixology: Ethics and Aesthetics After Remix* | David J. Gunkel**

(London: The MIT Press, 2016)

Reviewed by Mike Grimshaw

I am old enough to remember the release of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message" in 1982 and the way it changed the way we listened to and thought about music. Even in my very small, provincial high school in the South Island of New Zealand there were divides between those who realized something new and good was happening and those who clung ferociously to either mainstream AOR or top - Twenty radio pop. It was those of us who were post-punk in our tastes who found ourselves in an uneasy alliance with the few non-white kids who took up hip-hop. Things then began to rapidly shift: New Order, our post-punk heroes put out the cross-over 12 inch dance track "Blue Monday", Malcolm McLaren released "Buffalo Girls". Of course a couple of years earlier Blondie had released "Rapture", but for those of us who considered ourselves 'alternative', Blondie were far too commercial - and American- to be taken seriously. The music press we read also had also began to herald the cross-overs; the copies of *The Face* that made it way slowly by ship half way across the world has already signalled something was happening that we could only dream about: a remixing of styles, cultures and ideas in urban centres that affected how global youth listened, talked, dressed, thought and made music.

When I think about it I have been living in remix culture for the past 35

years but in the manner of an early adopter I took it as just the normal state of things. We bought 12-inch remix singles, made our own mix tapes, mixed and matched styles, fashions and identities as we were immersed in global consumerist pop culture, took it for granted that sounds, images, ideas were sampled and remade. What we didn't have however was a coherent philosophy to explain what we did, why we did it and what it meant at more than just a surface consumerist and identity politics level. Thankfully, belatedly, we now have David Gunkel's excellent *Of Remixology* to, in turn, remix our scattered thoughts, experiences, memories and expectations into a provocative series of new possibilities.

The title itself is acknowledged as a remix occurring into and out of what we can term a remixed and sample culture; this includes the way remix is and has been disclosed (hence the addition of the "Of") and the way remix itself has been studied and discussed. Astute readers will also hear the trace of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* in the title and this is a deliberate sample by Gunkel, for also part of the discussion is the way we can include language and writing itself under remix. In reading this book I was reminded of the celebrated maxim by Alfred North Whitehead that 'the European philosophical tradition consists of a series of footnotes to Plato'; is this it self not an example of the sample and remix culture and philosophy? As Gunkel notes authorship "is nothing more than a kind of conduit or DJ, whose sole authority remains limited to selecting, responding to, and reconfiguring already existing materials"(p.xiii). Scholarship is itself therefore a series of samplings and remixes, sometimes a mix-tape where the debts are clear and tracks identified, other times a mash-up, most often sampling, both acknowledged and pirated (the bootleg), sometimes the equivalent of the 12-inch single, often a more audacious full album that we call 'the book'.

Remix of course is not confined to music; all media content "popular songs, films, television programs, texts, web date "(p.xviii) are recombined in remix to "fabricate a new work"(p.xviii). If we think about this in the framework of time, we could argue that the remix looks to the past (that which is sampled and drawn upon) to remake the present and to anticipate (a) possible future/s. Is this also not what fashion does as well at both designer and street level? And of course that which was and has been remixed itself becomes the potential basis for further remixes - much as in this review I will be remixing Gunkel's text through my own series of cultural and philosophical samples. Also, could we now not therefore be in what can be (re)-labelled *remix modernity*; a label that signals we are no longer in the singularities of post-, accelerated-, late- or neo-modern labels?

Of course we need to also acknowledge that remix occurs within global

capital; how else could I as a teenager have heard the sounds of New York from over 14,000 km away, or configured my aesthetics and identity around Manchester 18,000km away? Only because remix culture is part of global capital can its media content, its aesthetics its technologies circulate. Here I was also reminded of Joseph's Schumpeter's classic description of capitalism as 'creative destruction'<sup>1</sup> and was drawn to sample this as a way to consider whether remix culture in its commodified form is itself anything more than the *creative* destruction of capitalism (emphasis added)? The noted debates on copyright and intellectual property that circulate and issues of remixing and sampling are themselves issues not only about creative value but also commercial value, for what is sampled and remixed is, especially in media culture, commodities that have exchange value. So all the debates on whether remix is theft or new creative practice actually occur within capitalism which in turn results in my sampling thought of is not remix also the expression of Marx's modernity (in that most sampled phrase) "all that is sold melts"? But here I would also want to mashup this with Malabou's notion of plasticity in both its explosive and malleable forms. How this would play out is beyond the remit of this review but I do wish to signal here the type of possibilities this text gives rise to. So you can see this fascinating, provocative book encourages remixes and mashups in the mind of the reader, especially as the discussion undertaken by Gunkel "is not, at least directly, the object called 'remix'; it is the way that this object has been identified, formulated, and objectified in and by these efforts" (p. xxiii). In doing so Gunkel makes a very clear case that the criticism involved is a philosophical undertaking and so, via *Of Remixology*, undertakes nothing less than a philosophical critique of contemporary culture, its aesthetics and ethics and further, to some degree, the politics of remix.

But more than this, sitting within the discussion of remix, we are drawn to acknowledge that written and spoken texts are themselves remixes and at the very least composed of overt and implicit sampling that, as noted, involve "a set of values and an understanding of the technology of recording that is at least as old as Plato's *Phaedrus*" (p. xxvii). Questions also arise as to the reception of the remix that in turn for me raise issues of the gnosis of remix and sampling. For who recognizes the sample, who can hear (or read) the remix? Who is the audience? Sometimes, to our embarrassment we only recognize the sample belatedly. For example, it was only in writing this review, in re-checking out Grandmaster Flash tracks that I realized that in the seminal mashup of "Walk This Way" (1986/original 1975) by Run DMC & Aerosmith, the rapping by Run DMC takes the rhythm and cadence from The Sugarhill Gang's 1979 track "Rapper's Delight". To follow the samples, "Rapper's Delight" sampled heavily from Chic's "Good Times" (1979) (which resulted in litigation) and Queen also sampled the

bass line for “Another One Bites The Dust” (1980) as did Blondie in “Rapture” (1980) (two tracks I hated then and now) – and the list of samplers continues to grow. Here of course I could easily segue off into an extended remix discussion of Eric B & Rakim’s sampling on “Paid in Full” that constantly accompanied my 4<sup>th</sup> year at Otago University in 1988 along Ciccone Youth’s “Into the Groovy” (1988) and Public Enemy’s “Yo! Bum Rush the Show” (1987). In other words, thinking back over more than 30 years there is, once one enters the world of remix, a semi-gnostic circulation of samples and remixes that, in the main, occurs implicitly for most who receive them and provides a soundtrack to our lives.

Of course the language used in description of the practice is central to the reception and Gunkel engages in a thoughtful critique of the differences between collage, sample, bootleg, mashup and remix. In thinking through these options we can say that collage legitimizes the practice and gives it a high-art meaning; the sample can be undertaken in a manner similar to either the quote (the singular sample) in which an exact copy is taken and relocated or alternatively the paraphrase; the bootleg operates as low-culture twin to the high-art/high-culture practice of the collage which then also rises question of high-low divides between ‘art’ and ‘commerce’; and the mashup with its confrontational “vs” whereupon the vocal track from one artist is laid on top an instrumental track by another can be considered the event itself, the act of conflict central to remix wherein there is no decision or mediation outside the event. In the mashup the “goal is to produce a new, third term that is arguably greater than the sum of its parts”(p.14), which in turn raises a question of whether remix- and especially mashup - is nothing more - nor less - than media culture dialectic?

As for remix, it occurs as what can be described as re-authoring and editing combined, arising from audio recording wherein the producer, in the act of seeking to improve the ‘original’ becomes, in many ways, ‘the artist’ who is heard on the recording; this in turn gives rise the question if many artists are in fact hyper-real (and this is not at the deliberately deceptive level of Milli Vanilli). The remix is undertaken for two main reasons. The first is a two-fold aesthetic; that is, what is the sound quality (content) and quality of sound (mix) sought? The second is commercial: what new markets can be opened up by remixing the sound, resulting in multiple commodification of the product? Therefore remix is commodification within global capital, which raises interesting questions if remix can be described as “the zeitgeist of the early twenty first century”(p.18).

What we get then is remix as cultural undertaking within the circulation of global capital, yet the cultural undertaking, informed as it is I would argue by the creative destruction of capitalism, also occurs within larger philosophical

discussion as to truth. So we get sampling from Plato, from Socrates, from Heidegger as perhaps the equivalents of Chic's "Good Times"; that is, that which is sampled, re-sampled and circulated, that which sits under mashups, bootlegs and collages. Here we can offer two possibilities: one is that of truth as remix or perhaps, more so, truth as that uncovered and revealed via remix, that is in the disclosure of remix. This in turn opens up the second possibility of a Hegelian sample where remix enables a speculative mode of knowing. (p.32)

To return to the issue of the sound sampled, central to the question of what occurs in remix is whether it is theft or creativity, which in turn discloses the underlying issue of what can be termed the commodification of sound. This is what the central claim of Intellectual Property is based upon, or rather, that of a combination of sounds: in short the commercialization of noise. This raises further questions of what is taken to be 'real', 'authentic', 'legitimate' and 'reproduced'? Here again, as discussed in the text we can also go back to Plato and to Socrates' dismissal of that original bootleg of the live performance of the orator Lysias which has been copied (via the technology of writing) by Phaedrus. This raises a series of possibilities; firstly, if writing is a technology of recording then remixing is the various forms of writing out of what has been written; and secondly, if remixing occurs out of what has been recorded then without recording there is no sample. Therefore, is it not technology all the way down, all the way back to Phaedrus?

Who then does *the work* of remix? Is remix a form of secondary extractive labour, reworking that which has been worked? Is remix therefore a type of bourgeois extraction that in effect extracts surplus value from that which has been produced, undertaking to "manufacture new originals from copies"(p.61) in that what is sampled and mashed is never a singular original but rather that which circulates as multiple copies? In the mashup a new original occurs, such as in Mark Vidler's "Ray of Gob"(2004) that mashes Madonna's "Ray of Light" (1998) with the Sex Pistols' "Pretty Vacant" and "God save the Queen"(1977)<sup>2</sup>. In this mashup time, place and gender are also mashed, as are politics and new age spirituality in a new commodity that in its production also slightly pitch-shifts and increases tempo. The resultant 'new original' product makes the imagined a possibility as simulation (and so samples Baudrillard). What occurs, in Gunkel's analysis, "designates a radical intervention that not only suspends the very difference that would distinguish copies from the original in the first place but results in something that is neither one nor the other."(p.76). Remix is therefore "a bastard art form"(p.80) whereby the innovation is in the remix and so again makes us think back to the remix of Hegelian dialectic. But it is more than this, because remix is also a blasphemous act; that is, the profaning of faithfulness (in this case the fidelity of the original), wherein the valued is devalued in the

act of revaluing. Remix could therefore be termed the act, the culture - and indeed the zeitgeist - of the blasphemous bastard. Or as Gunkel heads a section, that of "critical blasphemy"(p.82), wherein occurs an intentional transgression out of knowledge. So a further question arises: if we don't blaspheme (in the Zizekian sense of a faithful betrayal) then do we just become the equivalent of cover bands and copyists - or even just a karaoke culture in which there is no blasphemy but rather a Zizekian betrayal by repetition, of remaining faithful to the core?

It is here that Deleuze is sampled- and hopefully- in light of the above, blasphemed. The sample is of course Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* and via this Gunkel leads us into a history of the remix which I would push back much further than the early twentieth century of Duchamp and the surrealists; for were not the renaissance, the neo-gothic and Romanticism all remixes in their way? And perhaps even further, could not the Synoptic gospels be labelled proto-remixes, that themselves sampled from a variety sources (the gospels as *the blasphemous bastard* album)? In turn this raises a central question to be addressed as to the r claim that "recontextualization is critical and can be interpreted as a deliberate act of criticism"(p.102): *what is* the political and social intention of the remix, what is its meaning, beyond - in the end- commercial possibility? For even if the remix in the present age can be seen as work, is it not, in almost every case, ultimately work undertaken for financial recompense and possibility? And is this why issues of copyright and intellectual property are raised? For we need to ask whether the difference and repetition of the media data remix are not actually philosophical, but rather, financial in primary ethos? They are to create a new commodity out of existing ones, a new commodity with explicit (sales, airplay, You Tube views) or potential (self-commodification of the remixer) financialization? For as noted, "Copyright does not, it is important to remember, protect "original ideas"; it protects the expression of those ideas in tangible form"(p.107).

We return here to sample Deleuze, wherein the simulacra (and a sample is simulacra as extraction) is *difference* as excess of difference in its repetition. This means the claim of transgression is central to the question of the remix - and its reception. What digital media transgresses, via its "perfect replication of data...a clone, an exact duplicate of the original"(p.111) is the central issue of difference compared to *difference* - which itself is a type of Deleuzean repetition- and itself only able to be represented via the technology of *italics*. This *difference* of remix is also, via technology, the presentation of the possibility of exceeding what is taken to be the case resulting in the possibility of remix as a Deleuzean monstrosity resulting from a version of his "philosophical buggery" whereupon an author is taken from behind and given a monstrous offspring, that which is

“both somewhat recognizable and different”(p.114); which as Gunkel suggests, is what he has done in buggering Deleuze in the name of remixology (p.114).

But what, but whom, is ‘the author’ so buggered? Barthes, as Gunkel discusses, has raised issues as to the author and authorship and so via Gunkel we can offer that remix aims to end closure and rather holds versus closure in the hope and expectation of on-going openness, readings and creations. To return to issues of copyright and authorship, via Foucault (another sample by Gunkel) we can see that in law the author exists as the identity of responsibility for what has been produced, wherein we can rethink remix because is not the remixer a new author as responsible party for the monstrosity of remix? But what are they responsible for? Sound recording is, as noted by Gunkel “often a collaborative and industrialized undertaking” (p.122). What then of the remix? Could the remix actually be *difference* as post-industrial undertaking and commodity wherein the remix is the re-commodification of commodities and so in many ways similar to the processes undertaken by financialization? This in turn raises the possibility that the remix is yet but another form of the transcendence of capital.

An astute reader of the original text will by now have noted that my monstrous remix of Gunkel repeatedly raises questions of commodification that Gunkel does not. This is deliberate for, having lived for the past 32 years under neoliberalism (introduced in my country in 1984), I cannot help but, in a politicized reading, view anything and everything without ultimate recourse to the politics of capital and commodity. In this, in my derivative remixed reading of Gunkel’s provocative, fiercely intelligent text, I cannot but see remix within neoliberalism and global commodity culture as the dialectic of Marx buggered by Friedman and Friedman buggered by Marx, resulting in the doubly monstrous remix of Hegel and Deleuze as the dialectic of *difference* in the constant remix of global commodification. Out of which issues that constant plea of the last decades: who is responsible for this what we find ourselves within? Which, as this text tells us, is a despairing plea in the wake of the death of the author, for no one wants to assume ultimate responsibility except, I despair, that to be found in *caveat emptor*. For, in the main, in this ever-commodified world of Wikipedia, of Google, of the all-enveloping recourse to digital society, of download, mashup and remix, do we even know or care, in the main, *who* is responsible? Rather, are we not, in the remix, in the world of depoliticized *effect*?

---

1 Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism & Democracy*, (London: Routledge, 1996), p.83.

- 2 Just a word of warning: once you enter the YouTube world of mashup, time can be seriously wasted... and your wife and kids begin to look at you in a 'you are so tragic' way...