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Editorial

Issue Edited by Darren Tofts and Christian McCrea

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At first I had considered him to be as singular as the phoenix of rhetorical praise; after frequenting his pages a bit, I came to think I could recognize his voice, or his practices, in texts from diverse literatures and periods. I shall record a few of these here.

Borges, 'Kafka and His Precursors'

Many happy returns

It became a minor phenomenon during 2007. By September 2009 it was a virus out of control. Described in [Wired](#) as a 'popular internet meme' (Wortham, 2008), the obsessive serial mash-up of a key sequence from Oliver Hirschbiegel's 2004 film of the last days of Adolf Hitler, *Der Untergang (The Downfall)*, is suggestive of the cultural logic of the contemporary formation known as remix. Remix culture is comprised of what could loosely be termed amateurs and professionals engaged in the practice of creatively re-using found material. The distinction is useful in identifying the aesthetic and material differences between dedicated intermedia remix artists ([Negativland](#), [Martin Arnold](#), [Craig Baldwin](#), [Soda Jerk](#)), artists who incorporate elements of remix into a broader audiovisual practice ([Philip Brophy](#), [Candice Breitz](#), Christian Marclay, [John Zorn](#)) and the vernacular audio-visual mash-up/remake/dub/scratch aesthetics associated with a broad range of online practices. The domestication of audio-visual literacies in the digital age has meant that the processes of sampling, editing and compositing – once the province of dedicated adepts – have become second nature for a generation weaned on computers and digital technology. Audio-visual remix attests to a utilitarian competence in 'writing' for the communications paradigm of the internet and networked conditions that Gregory L. Ulmer famously termed 'electracy'; a concept that prioritises the notion of the 'remake' and the use of found material (Ulmer, 1989, 1994, 2005, Tofts, 1996). As well, this pervasive cultural competence (in Chomsky's linguistic sense of the term) attests to the dramatic distribution of the material means of production into the hands of consumers. [\[1\]](#)

The Downfall meme is a portrait in miniature of the doxa of contemporary remix; namely, the collaborative, socially-networked taste for creatively manipulating work made by someone else. These received ideas presume the assurance of an invisible yet simpatico audience of like-minded, DIY-capable remixers alive to the vertiginous pleasure of knowing that anything labeled a remix is one file in a conjugate (yours, mine, ours) Shareware .zip archive of infinite re-use. In other words, an assurance of many happy returns. [2] *The Downfall* meme is a weird internet event in that it has garnered the kind of concentrated anticipation on a singular event usually associated with cult television series, or, more distantly, the narrow band era of broadcast television (see Palmer, 2008). As remix artist and theorist Dan Angeloro has suggested, we are witnessing a ‘popular movement of incredible momentum – the copy/cut/paste logic of contemporary internet culture’ (Angeloro, 2006: 20).

The morphology of remix

The Downfall is also a weird remix event in the way that every online mash of Joe Pesci’s ‘Do I amuse you?’ shtick from *Goodfellas* is not. Pesci’s menacing rhetorical question is sampled across a diverse range of deliberately incongruous contexts from *Sesame Street* to *The Flintstones*. The humour of the remix, as satire or parody, is predicated on the principle of inappropriate juxtaposition; a trope that is arguably best witnessed in the ultra lounge covers by [Richard Cheese](#) of grunge and especially hard core songs, such as Slipknot’s *People=shit* or The Prodigy’s *Smack my bitch up*. But let’s face it, the sound of Pesci’s sublimely foul-mouthed imbroglia of violence spoken by Elmo or one of the [Angry Alien Bunnies](#) makes for good ‘water cooler’ conversation, but it hardly contributes to or advances the long cultural tradition of re-use. This tradition has been extensively discussed elsewhere (Evans, 2009, Navas, 2006, Chang, 2006, Miller, 2004, Baldwin, 1995, Jameson, 1991 inter alia), however some of its more familiar phenomena include contemporary DJ/VJ culture, 90s data hacking and culture jamming, 80s appropriation art, hip hop and sampling, 70s funk, 60s pop art, Dada and Surrealism, literary modernism, the Renaissance, Shakespeare, the Homeric rhapsodists... so it goes.

The Downfall and other collective remix subphyla such as ‘literal version videos’, film trailer re-dubs, scratch video, re-edits and machinima all evidence a perversely myopic form of relational aesthetics that is unrehearsed, ongoing and self-organising. The collective and accretive nature of such collaboration is motivated by the desire of its decentred community of consumers to contribute productively to a generative, networked folk art; an unspoken ethic of sharing in which borrowing, copying and otherwise plundering someone else’s work constitutes a gesture of sharing within a kind of digital potlatch or gift economy. The idea of the potlatch is also useful in signifying the sense of excess associated with both the sheer volume of remixes and remixers, as well as the sense of surpassing the achievements and giving of the previous contributor. In this online remix reveals a conspicuous and persistent creative one-upmanship, the desire to evidence greater ingenuity and invention than what has come before.

The repetitive re-working of the same sequences from particular films or other media is also akin to the restrictive, Oulipean context of working within a defined, narrow field of possibility. This virtuoso, rule-governed challenge associated with the [Workshop for Potential Literature](#) is very much in evidence in *The Downfall* archive, which is focused around re-interpretations, or rather alternative scripting of a persistent sameness. If Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais are unlikely patrons of contemporary remix, then Benoît Mandelbrot is clearly its CEO. We can ascribe to the systematic repetition of the same scene or sequence in so much remix the fractal process of self-similarity, whereby an organism or system is made up of replications of itself. [3] Consistent with the principles of deconstruction, iteration features prominently in fractal geometry to account for minute transformations of difference within processes of self-similarity (Mandelbrot, 1983). The fractal mechanics of ‘iterated function systems’ may well be the key to re-defining the diachronic cultural history of remix prior to its synchronic, contemporary idiom.

In *The Downfall* genre this iterated function system predominantly takes the form of a short but intense sequence (there are the odd exceptions to the rule). It features Hitler (Bruno Ganz) receiving news from his senior generals that the war is lost, momentarily reflecting on its consequences before launching into a fit of enraged apoplexy in which it is declared that suicide is preferable to surrender: Aristotelian pity and terror in three minutes and fifty seconds. [4] While the potential for remix under such fractal conditions is infinite (as conditioned by the principle of iteration as alteration), it is of necessity limited or multiplied by the degree of imagination and invention evidenced in the remix. That is, the most memorable examples self-consciously foreground the precise synching of scenarios that uncannily fit and at the same time queer the *mise en scène* of the original text. They are humorous because of the realisation that the alternative scenario could be text rather than copy-text, humorous also because it is not. [5]

Two examples of this deceptive aesthetic rhythm of continuity and disruptive contrast are worth noting. Soda_Jerk's *Dawn of Remix* scratch video (2004) seamlessly transforms Stanley Kubrick's apes from the opening sequence of *2001* into a rap posse bustin' rhymes to the tune of L L Cool J's 'Can't live without my radio'. Philip Brophy's *Evaporated Music 2: At the Mouth of metal* (2006-2008) eviscerates the sound from teen bands performing in wholesome American TV series, such as *California Dreams*, then, with a malevolent surgical exactitude, replaces it with a death metal score. Both works reveal how appropriation—as opposed to expropriation—is and has always been a legitimate poetic or inventio for the creation of new work (see Barth, 1967, Eco, 1982, Collins, 1995, Armand, 2009). Most online remix, however, simply goes through the motion of doing a remix: hence our sub-titular qualification of 'imprecise' and disagreeable'. They fail to memorably stand out from the crowd and thwart the expectation of encountering something out of the ordinary—the imperative, surely, of any remix aficionado or media scholar armed with a search engine. This leveling out of banal variations on a theme is an instance of the dissolution of distinctions that Takashi Murakami invokes in his category of the 'super flat' in relation to the visual arts (Murakami, 2003). Accordingly, treatments of the same scene from *The Downfall* are preposterously (and infuriatingly) varied, ranging from Hitler ranting about the selection of the 2009 All Australian AFL team, the death of Michael Jackson or the election of Obama, to finding himself banned from Xbox Live, having his car stolen, problems with his internet access and, ultimately, reacting to the Hitler remix genre itself.

Make it New!

Recent formations such as *The Downfall* meme can best be regarded as formalist ostranenie, the defamiliarisation of the notion of re-use as the condition of all textual forms. From poststructuralist notions of alterity and intertextuality to structuralist concepts of narratology and the law of genre, cultural artifacts are iterations of other iterations. It is in the very logic of textuality to remake something from permutations of lexical items within specific generic paradigms. The cornucopia of mash-ups, trailer-hacks and re-edits on sites such as YouTube and Google Video are governed by the same linguistic laws of metaphor and metonymy, substitution and combination, paradigm and syntagm as novels, films, operas and computer games (we might also include sculpture, architecture, music, ballet, manga, visual art, etc.). But from the more pressing contemporary perspective of issues to do with copyright, fair use and creative commons, a historical conception of creativity as re-use suggests that we have always already had access to a 'common wealth' of intellectual property—history, in Emily Apter's words (with McKenzie Wark's *Hacker Manifesto* in mind) as an 'open-source utopia' (Apter, 2009: 94). This view is consistent with Ezra Pound's modernist call to arms to 'Make it New!' at the start of the twentieth century. For many years literary historians presumed that Pound was advocating radical, avant-garde experimentation. For Pound, however, it was the duty of the modern artist to re-work the cultural traditions of the past, to re-make them ('it') anew in a contemporary idiom. Arguably the most allusive writer in the Western canon (no mean feat during the time of Joyce and Eliot), Pound

constructed his own idiosyncratic tradition, an imagined cultural lineage that included Dante, Guido Cavalcanti, Sapho, Homer, Confucius and the French troubadours of the fourteenth century; an eclectic set that most contemporary DJs would struggle to mix down.

But even more profoundly than the choice to draw from the deep well of the already said, the well itself — as utterance, discourse, communication, mediation, the history of representation — implies as its very condition a rhythm of call and response, as in jazz. Dizzy Gillespie was conscious of the consequences of this when he observed that ‘when we borrowed from a standard we added and substituted so many chords that most people didn’t know what song we were really playing’ (Gillespie and Fraser, 1979: 209). Paul D. Miller’s (aka DJ Spooky) concept of ‘rhythm science’ presumes this recontextualising of utterance that precedes your own, articulating in his book of the same name a ‘compositional strategy’ of improvised permutation (Miller, 2004: 20). And so, too, Jacques Derrida was slave to the rhythm in his discussion of the myth of [Echo and Narcissus](#) in Kirby Dick’s and Amy Ziering Kofman’s 2002 film *Derrida*. Le philosophe sits in a hotel room in front of a mirror in a Paris studio being filmed by a film crew being filmed by another film crew. He is immediately self-conscious of this multiplication of the scene:

Speech is what’s taking place here right now. There’s a mirror. I’m speaking. There’s a camera. You pose a question, I repeat it. So I’m acting as both Narcissus and Echo at one and the same time. (Dick and Kofman, 2005: 94)

If we re-cast Charlie Parker as Echo to Dizzy Gillespie’s Narcissus, Derrida’s account has the one repeating the end of the other’s phrases in a syncopated groove, blowing changes such that

in repeating the last syllables of the words of Narcissus, she speaks in such a way that the words become her own. In a certain way, she appropriates his language... In repeating she responds to him... She speaks in her own name by just repeating his words. (94)

This repetition with a difference (Gregory Bateson’s ‘difference that makes a difference’) is the ontology of remix, what free jazz hep cat Ornette Coleman famously called ‘something else’.

Consistent with this be-bop grammatology of all forms of expression, we should refrain from continuing to partition online remix as a distinctive “Web 2.0” instance of textuality as enunciation squared. With Mandelbrot’s iterated function system in mind, not to mention Bolter’s and Grusin’s remediation (Bolter and Grusin, 2000), we should think of it as a reflexive, stylized foregrounding of the reusable poetics of all forms of cultural production. Contemporary remix, then, is less a decisive, à la mode practice of copy-text, than a Baroque moment in the history of culture as remix more broadly.

Should Auld Acquaintances Be Forgotten?

In Angela Ndalanian’s *Introduction to Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*, the term ‘Baroque’ is historicised as a pejorative historical impulse, an attempt to dismiss ‘art or music of extravagance, impetuosity, and virtuosity’, and ‘possessing traits that were unusual, vulgar, exuberant, and beyond the norm ... a degeneration or decline of the classical and harmonious ideal epitomized by the Renaissance era’ (Ndalanian 2004: 4-5). If the neo-Baroque discussed by Ndalanian and Omar Calabrese (Calabrese, 1992) persists in large-scale technological marvels, spaces and media, it stands to reason that the extravagance, impetuosity and virtuosity of smaller scale works such as dorky online video remixes, sound collages or pointless Photoshops could and should be interpreted through such a historical filter.

This, on the surface of things, is more plausible than sidelining these endless abyssal zones in favour of

an art historical discourse that privileges the monied artist cultures and the easily expressible. Much like Web 2.0 ‘open’ democracy projects, which are now only ‘open’ to abuse by public relation ghouls, the rhetoric of contemporary aesthetics has been more geographic than aesthetic or polemical. Hitler’s thousand and one Downfalls are surely dislocatable from their historical significance – but more in the sense of a painfully dislocated shoulder or muscle than an ephemeral drift from station to station. There, and not there, haunted but already always exorcised. The indolence, negativity and yes, stupidity of much online remix culture requires the same register of historicity as the formal questions about a networked, post-networked or ever-shifting identity.

‘Cui bono’? To whose benefit indeed. For whom is the rhetoric of remix weighed so heavily on its formal implications? The recent interest in the categories of the hauntological and speculative realism by critics such as Graham Harman (Harman, 2009), Quentin Meillassoux (Meillassoux, 2008) and others has provoked higher stakes for media discourses, by which they impress upon scholars and readers enquiries that return us to the ‘not this again’ un-returnable; class, power, people. The Auld Acquaintance, as Borges wrote in ‘Kafka and His Precursors’, can’t ever quite be forgot, but certainly will come under pressure from the present as much as the past (‘each writer creates his precursors’ [Borges, 1999: 365]). These images and sounds taken up for reuse are still past even as they are presented. In *Oblivion* Marc Augé notes that ‘the definition of oblivion as loss of remembrance takes on another meaning as soon as one perceives it as a component of memory itself’ (Augé 2004: 15), as the auld and the neu take on radical repurposing. Augé explained further:

Remembering or forgetting is doing gardener’s work, selecting, pruning. Memories are like plants: there are those that need to be quickly eliminated in order to help the others burgeon, transform, flower. Those plants that have in some way achieved their destiny, those flourishing plants have in some way forgotten themselves in order to transform: between the seeds or the cutting from which they were born and what they have become there is hardly any apparent relationship anymore. In that sense, the flower is the seed’s oblivion (Augé, 2004: 15).

Cui Bono, then, as the fetishisation of the archive? Dylan Trigg would argue similarly that ‘instead of an ethical demand towards continuity, let us place memories in ruin’ (Trigg 2006: 12). Ruination and decay, if we think of them through that never-present Baroque, raise these stakes in a way the sober mechanisms of the data collector and the ‘synergy’-hunting new media autist were never interested in. ‘In the docility of ruins, preservation is enforced as the justified response ... this ethics is only tenable so long as reason is said to be sovereign’ (3). But reason is not sovereign. The rhetorical strategies of the past decade that promote a hypertrophic archive impulse— a principle of keep everything, connect everything— has served us very well. The public aspects of this argument, exemplified perhaps by Henry Jenkins’ *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006) have made broad inroads into the necessary torsions between commerce and the commons. Lawrence Lessig’s *Free Culture: How Big Media Uses Technology and the Law to Lock Down Culture and Control Creativity* (2005) was more pointed, alerting us to how ‘we are less and less a free culture, and more and more a permission culture’ (Lessig, 2005: 3). Remix culture engages with questions of ownership quite naturally, but in terms of a positive rhetorical statement for cultural researchers, it benefits to also draw down some thick description about what precisely is being remixed, by whom and for what purposes. More pointedly, then, to also look outside the arts communities and look how high or low the stakes of our atomised cultural forms are becoming.

If copyright had become the big threat for remix culture by the beginning of the decade, it would become clear that by its end that the defense and adoration of the archive had mutated. Fascination with the network metaphor has turned into an obsession; consider our (in)ability to wrestle down the concept of the ‘network culture’, a cottage industry of publication and intellectual labour that has acted on the

formal problems facing humanities research just as much as the broad changes brought about by interconnectedness. Blending the histories and discourses of both the form and content of remix remains vital to our capacity for critique.

The intellectual work on ‘network culture’ is also an act of violence on framing devices that came prior to it; it deletes as much as it creates, prunes as much as it flowers. Accordingly, we need to broaden and historicise the debate beyond the current tenor of ‘social media’, ‘participatory culture’ and ‘copyright wars’ (Lessig, 2008). Thankfully, the doxa is supple enough in most places to allow for the common to grow muddy, strange flowers to grow and animals to grow fat. Remix culture appeals to us because it is precisely just a moment too late for its discussion, the wave has moved on and the Rhetoric Safari conceives of culture in ways that overarch the remix. Rather than argue for the urgency of this issue of *Fibreculture Journal*, the editors wish to pause, rewind and record over the apparently urgent question of what is remix and ask instead ‘What Now?’

H. P. Lovecraft’s ‘mocking and incredible shadow out of time’ might have destroyed all hope (Lovecraft 2005: 323), but perhaps this is a way to consider what a culture of remix performs out of the past— a mocking shadow that curses, then recurses all those impossible-to-escape shadows. Remix culture is best understood by remix performers and artists, but due to their visibility rather than a position of privilege. By the same impulse, discourses about what occurs in the occluded miasma of cultural activity (the cheap and nasty Windows Movie Maker uploads to Youtube) provide the grist for our mill. Form and content still require careful attention and their own careful historical action from those engaging with intellectual enquiries, however we choose to position ourselves in regard to high and low, cool and warm, work and network. After James Brown, then, hit the rewind button on the One and hit it hard.

In his scriptible persona of Professor VJ, [Mark Amerika](#) riffs on the verbal funk of George Clinton to ‘remixologically’ displace the concept of the ‘new’ to the ‘renewable’ in relation to the historical body of literature. ‘The Renewable Tradition (Extended Play Remix)’ is a prose-poem manifesto for the becoming of the artist as ‘postproduction medium’ in the age of the digital apparatus. If ‘Information wants to be free’ was the catchphrase of the hacker 80s, ‘Source Material Everywhere’ is the moniker of the ‘remixological’ present.

[Ross Harley](#) picks up on a ‘conceptual bass-line’ in historical attitudes to appropriation and traces its reverberation through a range of practices of Australian audio-visual remix. In ‘Cultural Modulation and the Zero Originality Clause of Remix Culture in Australian Contemporary Art’, this vibe resonates through the experimental movements of the Sydney Super 8 group and the emergent video art scene of the 1980s, finding its ultimate expression in the ‘zero originality clause’ of post-digital remix collective Soda_Jerk.

[Lisa Gye](#)’s ‘How can you be found when no one knows you’re missing?’ explores the nationalist hysteria surrounding the position of the Australian film industry and the doublespeak by industry and academic narratives that circulate within it. Twin narratives of ideological fantasy and reflective fiction manipulate nationalist sentimentality while refusing to confront history. Gye’s exposure of this double helix is explicit in twinned essays that remake, rather than attempt to make sense of, these competing positions.

[Ian Haig](#)’s ‘Sputnik Baby’ reflects on the band both very much before and well after their time, Sigue Sigue Sputnik. A debateable musical legacy notwithstanding, Sputnik made visible the elementalism and archive fever of the 1980s. Pop culture’s re-arrival into itself, that daunting sense of coming back to (the) futurism, was how Sigue Sigue Sputnik were elevated from cynical marketing conflagration to one of remix’s most complex micro-histories.

[Steve Jones](#)' essay 'James Brown, Sample Culture and the Permanent Distance of Glory' takes us through the recombinatory history (and histrionics) of the Minister of The New New Super Heavy Funk, the Real Superbad, The Hardest Working Man In Show Business. The stakes of imitation and reformation of soul and funk were explicitly woven into and through Brown's performativity and self-production, which take on historical value for contemporary sampling and referentiality.

[Esther Milne](#)'s 'Materialities of Law: Celebrity Production and the Public Domain' positions that elusive nexus of culture, the public person, as a means by which ephemerality and materiality put demands on law. Examples are drawn from cases of celebrity endorsement, defamation and rights to publicity cases that have drawn the lines between a person and their image. Milne's close analysis of the legal materialities grounds a discourse and history of celebrity and raises the stakes for discourses of celebrity remix.

[Craig Saper](#), in 'Materiality of a Simulation' rewinds the clock to postulate a poetic anachronism in which Bob Brown's 1931 'Reading Machine' introduces the scratch technique of hip-hop as a mechanism for de-naturalising the act of reading. Usurping DJ Kool Herc by forty years as the inventor of shig-shigi, Brown anticipated a mode of reading as scanning that would come to make sense in the age of electracry; the corollary of which, of course, is that we need to re-write turntablism as a branch of grammatology.

Editors' Biographies

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Notes

[1] We have deliberately avoided usage of the dreaded neologism 'prosumer'. A more palatable analogy, again following the lead of Ulmer, is the diffusion of a general literacy akin to the shifting of power over the craft of hieroglyphics away from the priestly class to a wider community in Predynastic Egypt. For the record, the writer Mark Dery asks, 'is there a more appalling word than Blog' (email correspondence with Darren Tofts, June 2006). The answer is yes and that word is 'prosumer'. [\[back\]](#)

[2] Imre Salusinszky observed of this superfluity that 'if everybody who has devised a parody of this particular scene from *Downfall* had to quit, world employment statistics would register a dip' (Salusinszky, 2009). [\[back\]](#)

[3] The literary critic Hugh Kenner took a similar approach to the modern novel. Drawing on general

number theory, Kenner argued for a concept of art as a closed field of possibility, a language game of infinite permutation within a finite lexical set (Kenner, 1962). [\[back\]](#)

[4] Suffice to say that in the sanctioned masquerade of speaking of others speaking that is contemporary remix culture, this summary of *The Downfall* was gleaned from the Internet Movie Database. No first hand encounter with the actual film occurred during the writing of this Introduction. [\[back\]](#)

[5] This realisation of could be and is not presumes the familiarity with and recognition of an original referent being remixed (see Navas, 2006). The opposite is of course true, whereby encounter with the remix precedes any familiarity with the original. [\[back\]](#)

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