When thinking of remix culture, it may be easy to mistake this artistic process as something simple and, perhaps, unnecessary. Worse, we could simply think of remix as the lowest common denominator of an artistic, or even intellectual, practice. The art of the remix, however, and its derivatives, is a process that not only requires a great deal of creative wit and technical skill (particularly in relation to sound and video) but also covers an incredible breadth and depth of popular culture artifacts. Without knowing the fundamental language of the medium one is attempting to remix, as well as the vast choice of objects within its respective canon, an artist would fail to create something new from its repurposed parts and instead would simply regurgitate a slightly different version of the originally intended one.

Creating a deeper understanding of remixed art in all its forms helps us become better thinkers (and makers), as we navigate a postmodern space that may otherwise be inundated with meaningless content serving as nothing more than a meme. To help us in our journey of learning and appreciating the art of remix, Scott Haden Church brilliantly illustrates the true merits (from history to practice) of this unique area of creative in/output. From modernist avant-garde practices of the 1910s (e.g., futurists) that inspired a remix of industrialized sounds, to the legal and ethical complications of a contemporary remix artist like Girl Talk (i.e., Gregg Gillis), Church guides the readers via a thorough academic argument of remix culture, all the while making the reading both accessible and enjoyable.

We must begin by understanding the basic idea behind a remix and why an artist wishes to remix available content, particularly when considering the possibility of hefty legal complications of taking another person’s work without permission. Sometimes the appeal may lie precisely within how much someone wants to push, or even break, established boundaries. Breaking boundaries has long been a central component to many avant-garde movements (from Dada to surrealism), as well as electronic musicians (from Kraftwerk to DJ Spooky).

Church begins his book by shifting away from the traditional manner of writing a prologue and, instead, demonstrates the power of writing as a mashup of nearly eighty different voices and sources to introduce his main argument. The book does not spend too much time focused on the legal implications of remixing copyrighted materials, as such an argument would be best within the expertise of an intellectual property attorney; rather, the book offers us a grounded perspective on how
remix functions as a rhetorical tool. In turn, central to the book is showing how remix functions but, more importantly, addressing “remix from a communicative perspective, examining its persuasive dimensions by locating parallels with classical rhetoric” (backcover).

While such a connection between remix culture and rhetoric may seem slightly strange at first, it actually makes a great deal of sense to think of the rhetoric of remix as a powerful tool of communication that is supported by (and connected to) centuries of debate, as well as the ever-evolving media landscape of today. In fact, one of the book’s possible shortcomings, which the author does recognize, relates to the speed in which technology shifts and changes, ultimately indicating that certain elements and/or examples discussed (but not the core argument itself) may eventually become outdated.

Church begins by contextualizing the significance of remix, as “in some ways, all thought—and thus all cultural artifacts—could be considered remixed, for symbols themselves always preexist their deployment in some way” (p. 7). And then, in further taking into consideration the ease and accessibility in which contemporary remixing tools and technologies find themselves in the hands of even the most inexperienced consumer, the ability to remix has become a widespread global practice. As Church points out, the digital era has shifted and complicated the notion of authorship, which also aids in fostering a far more ubiquitous presence of remix culture and has done so in both aural and visual spaces, as well as in artistic and political contexts. There are numerous politically centric remixes (e.g., “Trump vs Talking Heads” by Swedemason), which further substantiates the argument that “remix clearly can be employed in the service of rhetoric” (p. 6). Such remixes often serve to disrupt the notion of oppressive power structures, even if such disruption may not become more immediately obvious until subsequent viewings.

Remix artists, like avant-gardists, desire to break mainstream boundaries by transforming the originally intended message into a new one (often in its direct opposition), while simultaneously calling the message into a space of greater attention. This method functions as a sort of creative persuasion, which is, of course, tied into a long history of rhetorical tradition. As Church points out, while remix has been extensively covered in academic literature, his argument primarily diverges from the established discourse in that he seeks to make a case for remix as being a “communicative practice, a frame that illuminates the rhetorical dimensions, persuasive possibilities, and cultural implications of remixed artifacts” (p. 15). In offering the reader a robust history of remix and explanations of how it directly ties into classical notions of rhetoric, Church creates a fresh and solid argument that has never quite been offered before.

While this short review cannot do justice in covering Church’s incredibly rich argument, creative examples, and academic ground covered in Turntables and Tropes, there are a few standout moments worth noting. Aside from grounding his argument within the avant-garde as an example of “rhetoricians par excellence” (which is derived from Richard Lanham’s thoughts on avant-garde artists’ focus on grabbing people’s attention), Church also adds Marshall McLuhan’s idea of media ecology into the mix, along with the prolific influence of René Descartes, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant on Western liberalism (with remix challenging the established notion of absolutism, in whatever context); Fredric Jameson’s argument of postmodernism and late capitalism (which devalues master narratives and celebrates fragmentation and pastiche); and even Theodore Adorno’s sharp criticism of popular culture (as he found pop music to be a sterile mass manufactured capitalist product). And all of this barely covers the first chapter.
As we move along in the book, we are met with various influential voices from Isocrates to Friedrich Nietzsche to Chuck Klosterman, as well as numerous examples of remix artists and artifacts. To offer a couple of examples: Girl Talk's remixes are brilliant in that they masterfully deconstruct and mashup disparate songs, such as those from Nirvana, Salt-N-Pepa, the Beach Boys, and Snoop Dogg, into one delightfully congruous track (e.g., “In Step”), which is in stark contrast to the Gregory Brothers, who create online, auto-tune videos focused on remixing the news, sometimes with troubling lack of context that is exchanged for laughs (e.g., “Bed Intruder Song”). Thinking beyond the legal implications or creative merits of the remix, Church continuously grounds his argument within the rhetorical functionality of such remixes in that “aesthetically speaking, these deliberate heresies have their purpose” (p. 81). Therefore, examples used throughout the book, such as the two aforementioned, offer the reader a fairly broad overview of the range in which these remixes (i.e., aesthetic heresies) are used for creative and/or commercial purposes—from mere superficial fun to heavy-hitting sociopolitical satire.

And while a remix is never finished, a limitation that Church also points out, he nevertheless skillfully equips his readers with the “rhetorical tropes that can be used to both create and analyze remixed texts” (p. 159). Due in part to their ever-increasing popularity across a multitude of media platforms, remixes may be easy to dismiss as just another superficially memefied pop culture object. However, Church reminds us that this is simply not the case; remix is (and will most likely remain) a robust and complex rhetorical tool deserving of our attention, even in its most simplified forms.

The book’s structure is more thematic than chronological, as chapter by chapter Church grounds his argument by offering examples of contemporary remix culture, along with examples of classical rhetoric dating back centuries. The first chapter centers on a broader overview of remix throughout history, which then moves into its connection to ancient Greece (focused on Isocrates and kairos), followed by a more in-depth look at the influence of aesthetics, and finally, wrapping up by addressing the pervasiveness of remix in the digital age and the impact of nostalgia on the rhetoric of popular shows like Stranger Things.

Ultimately, Church “shows that an understanding of rhetoric offers innovative ways to make sense of remix culture,” which is beneficial not only for the artist and academic but for the casual consumer as well, in further deepening practical communication skills (backcover).
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory

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