

Intertextuality And Remix Culture

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Introduction

Intertextuality and remix culture describe related ways in which new works emerge from earlier language, images, sounds, genres, and cultural conventions. Intertextuality is the broader critical concept: texts gain meaning through their relationships with other texts, whether those relationships are deliberate, unconscious, respectful, parodic, or contested. Remix culture is a visible creative practice in which existing material is sampled, edited, rearranged, quoted, or combined to produce a new work. The original essay correctly recognizes that remixing long predates digital technology and includes a valuable first-person account of rebuilding music when original stems are unavailable. It can be improved by distinguishing intertextuality from copying, explaining different remix methods, examining authorship and audience, and treating copyright as a contextual legal analysis rather than a simple requirement to pay every original artist. Remix culture demonstrates that creativity is often relational, but the ability to borrow does not remove duties involving attribution, consent, licensing, fair use, and the unequal power through which some creators are copied without receiving recognition.

Intertextuality: Meaning Between Texts

Julia Kristeva introduced the term intertextuality while drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's account of language as dialogic. (Kristeva) From this perspective, a text is not an isolated container created from nothing. It is a meeting place for prior expressions, social languages, genres, and assumptions. A novel may echo the Bible, a film may reproduce the visual logic of a western, and a song may invoke an earlier rhythm without quoting a recording directly. Readers also bring other texts to interpretation. A reference that one audience immediately recognizes may be invisible to another. Intertextuality therefore concerns meaning as well as material reuse. It explains why a work can be connected with predecessors even when no sample, quotation, or legal infringement exists.

From Quotation to Remix

Creative borrowing exists on a continuum. Quotation reproduces a recognizable portion and often marks its source. Allusion points indirectly toward another work. Adaptation retells a story in a new medium, setting, or historical context. Parody imitates recognizable features to comment on the original or its conventions. Pastiche combines styles without necessarily criticizing them. Sampling incorporates part of an existing sound recording into a new composition, while a cover re-performs a song. A mashup places distinct works together so that their interaction becomes the central effect.

Calling every practice a remix can hide important differences in technique, meaning, and law. The creator should identify what was borrowed, how it was transformed, and what relationship the new work establishes with the source.

Remix Before Digital Media

Digital tools made copying, editing, and distribution faster, but cultural production has always involved recombination. Oral storytellers retold inherited narratives, musicians altered folk melodies, painters reused religious scenes, and playwrights adapted chronicles and myths. Shakespeare's plots drew from earlier histories and tales, while jazz musicians developed standards through repeated interpretation. Fashion revisits silhouettes, materials, and symbols from earlier periods. These practices show that originality does not require absence of influence. What changes historically is the technology of reproduction, the visibility of borrowing, the legal framework, and who possesses the economic power to control circulation.

Digital Technology and the Expansion of Participation

Affordable software allows users to cut video, isolate audio, alter images, build beats, and publish work from ordinary devices. Online platforms make source material easier to encounter and provide audiences without traditional distributors. This expansion has educational and democratic value because people can respond to mass culture rather than consume it silently. A fan edit can reveal a different character perspective, a meme can summarize political criticism, and a remix can connect musical traditions. Participation remains unequal, however. Devices, software, bandwidth, training, platform visibility, and copyright enforcement are not distributed evenly. Platforms also profit from user creativity while retaining broad control over recommendation, monetization, and removal.

Music Remixing as Production

A musical remix is not merely a lower form of composition. The remixer makes decisions about tempo, key, harmony, rhythm, texture, space, structure, and audience. Selecting a vocal phrase and placing it over a new harmonic environment can change its emotional meaning. Removing dense instrumentation may expose vulnerability, while changing rhythm can convert a ballad into dance music. Good remixing requires critical listening and technical control. The producer must distinguish frequencies, manage timing, shape transitions, and understand how the source functions before altering it. The original essay's observation that creation and mixing are different skills is persuasive: some musicians write memorable material but do not specialize in reconstructing it, while some remixers hear possibilities within material that the original arrangement did not explore.

Working With Stems

Stems are grouped audio components such as vocals, drums, bass, or instruments. Access to clean stems gives a remixer greater control than working with a finished stereo file. Vocals can be repositioned, drums replaced, and harmony rebuilt without severe audio artifacts. Official remix competitions and commissioned projects may provide stems under stated conditions. Unofficially obtained stems raise legal and ethical concerns, especially when leaked from private sessions. Technical access should not be confused with permission. A responsible producer should understand how the files were obtained and what uses the artist or rights holder has authorized.

Reconstruction When Stems Are Unavailable

The original essay describes rebuilding an entire track around an available vocal hook. This method is closer to reconstruction or re-production than simple editing. The producer listens for chord movement, rhythm, melody, and arrangement, then recreates or deliberately changes those elements with new instruments. The process can develop ear training, synthesis, and arrangement skills. It also requires careful labeling. A producer should not present the reconstructed work as wholly original if listeners would reasonably recognize the borrowed composition or vocal. Creative labor in rebuilding the track is real, but it coexists with the contribution of the songwriters and performers whose material made the project possible.

Acapellas and the Vocal as Intertext

An acapella recording makes the voice available as a movable text. When placed over a new beat, the same words can acquire a different mood, pace, or cultural association. A confident vocal may sound mournful over minor harmony, and a familiar pop lyric may become ironic within an experimental arrangement. This transformation demonstrates intertextuality at the level of performance. The listener hears both the remembered original and the new context. The remix derives part of its meaning from the gap between them. Protecting acapellas in professional studios reflects both their commercial value and the risk that an isolated performance can circulate in ways the singer never approved.

Hip-Hop, Sampling, and Cultural Memory

Sampling is central to hip-hop's history. Producers transformed breaks, bass lines, voices, and fragments from funk, soul, jazz, spoken word, and other recordings into new rhythmic structures. Sampling can preserve cultural memory by bringing older performers into new listening contexts. It can also generate disputes about ownership, compensation, and unequal recognition. Some source artists gained renewed audiences, while others were sampled without permission or meaningful

payment. The ethical analysis should consider not only legal ownership but cultural relationship: who borrows from whom, whether the new use acknowledges its lineage, and whether a powerful company profits from traditions whose creators were historically underpaid.

Film, Memes, and Fan Editing

Remix culture extends beyond music. (Lessig) Video essays combine clips with narration to analyze cinematic form. Fan edits change pacing or narrative emphasis, while trailers can be recut to make a comedy resemble a horror film. Memes place familiar images into repeatable formats whose meaning changes with each caption. These works depend on recognition; the audience supplies knowledge of the source. Their apparent simplicity can conceal sophisticated rhetorical choices involving timing, compression, irony, and community conventions. At the same time, viral circulation can detach an image from its original context and expose ordinary people to unwanted attention. Consent and harm matter especially when the source is not a professional public work.

Fashion and Recurrent Design

Fashion illustrates how industries continually reinterpret earlier forms. Designers revisit decades, subcultures, workwear, military garments, and traditional textiles. Borrowing can be creative dialogue, but it can also become appropriation when a dominant brand removes a design from its cultural meaning, claims novelty, and profits without credit or benefit to the community that developed it. The absence of strong copyright protection for many clothing designs does not settle the ethical question. Intertextual analysis asks what history the garment carries and how the new context changes that history.

Authorship After the “Original Genius”

Remix culture challenges the romantic image of the creator as an independent genius producing work without influence. Roland Barthes argued that writing is made from cultural quotations and that meaning cannot be controlled entirely by the author. (Barthes) This does not make authorship irrelevant. Creators still make distinctive selections, combinations, and formal decisions. The more useful position is that originality lies in relationship and arrangement rather than absolute isolation. A remix can be original in its argument, structure, and effect while openly depending on preexisting material. Honest authorship acknowledges both dimensions.

Copyright and the Rights Involved

Copyright grants owners specified rights, including reproduction, distribution, public performance, and preparation of derivative works. Music may involve separate rights in the composition and the sound

recording. Clearing a sample can therefore require permission from more than one owner. A cover and a remix are not legally identical, and licensing rules vary by country and use. Copyright attaches automatically to original works fixed in a medium; an online file is not free to reuse merely because it is easy to download. Producers who plan commercial distribution should identify relevant rights early rather than treating clearance as an afterthought.

Fair Use and Transformative Purpose

In the United States, fair use permits some unlicensed use after consideration of four statutory factors: purpose and character, nature of the copyrighted work, amount used, and effect on the potential market. Transformative purpose—adding a new meaning, message, or function—can be important, but no single factor guarantees the result. Noncommercial status does not automatically make a remix fair, and commercial status does not automatically defeat fair use. Courts assess context. Criticism, commentary, parody, teaching, and scholarship may receive stronger consideration than a track that substitutes for the entertainment market of the original. The U.S. Copyright Office advises that fair use is case-specific rather than a fixed number of seconds or notes. (U.S. Copyright Office)

Attribution, Permission, and Ethical Practice

Attribution and permission answer different questions. Crediting a source is ethically important and may be required by a license, but credit alone does not authorize a use. Permission can make a use lawful without ensuring that the new work treats the source community respectfully. Ethical remixing involves transparent labeling, accurate credit, compliance with licenses, proportionate borrowing, and consideration of harm. Creative Commons licenses can provide advance permission under stated conditions. Public-domain works offer broader freedom, but creators should still verify status because national terms and editions differ.

Platform Enforcement and Unequal Power

Automated copyright systems can identify music or video and block, monetize, or mute uploads. These systems help rights holders manage enormous volumes, but they can misidentify lawful quotation, public-domain material, or a creator's own work. Large companies often possess teams capable of challenging errors, while independent users may accept removal even when they have a strong defense. Conversely, small creators may struggle when larger accounts copy their work. A fair remix environment needs accessible dispute systems, transparent rules, and remedies for abusive claims as well as genuine infringement.

My Practice as a Remixer

The personal account in the original essay reveals why remixing is educational. Rebuilding a track from a vocal hook requires listening for implied harmony, constructing new drums, choosing synthesizer textures, and deciding which features should remain recognizable. The process is most valuable when it becomes analysis rather than imitation. I can improve this practice by documenting sources, saving licenses, labeling the work accurately, and asking what the new arrangement contributes. A successful remix should not depend only on louder drums or added layers. It should establish a reason for the source to exist in a new context.

Conclusion

Intertextuality explains that works gain meaning through relationships with prior language, form, and culture. Remix culture makes those relationships materially visible through sampling, editing, reconstruction, adaptation, memes, fashion, and fan production. Digital technology expands participation but also intensifies conflicts over ownership, consent, attribution, platform power, and compensation. Musical remixing is a genuine creative practice requiring technical and interpretive skill, whether it uses official stems, an acapella, or a reconstructed arrangement. That creativity does not erase the rights and histories embedded in source material. The strongest remix culture is neither a world in which all borrowing is prohibited nor one in which every accessible file is treated as free. It is a culture of transformative contribution, accurate credit, lawful and ethical judgment, and open recognition that creation is both individual work and continuing dialogue.

Works Cited

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