Remix and the Dialogic Engine of Culture: A Model for Generative Combinatoriality (Abstract)


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Is the cliché “everything is a remix” more than trivially true? And what sense of “remix” can we work with? The terms remix, appropriation, sampling, and mash-up are used so generally, in so many contexts, and at different levels of description that they don’t provide a useful vocabulary for explanation. “Remix” has become a convenient metaphor for a mode of production assumed to be specific to our (post)postmodern era and media technologies (though with some earlier “precursors”). “Remix” and related terms are used for *genre of composition* (artefacts like assemblage works and music remixes), artistic *practices* (with a variety of self-reflexive, performative, and critical strategies), and *cultural processes* (ongoing reinterpretation, repurposing, and cross-cultural hybridization). Creative works and compositions that we call “remix” are usually considered only at the surface layer of recognizable, recombined references, quotations, and fragments from other works (“source material”), rather than at the level of the underlying generative principles for recombination, reinterpretation, and collective meaning that make them possible. In other words, we need to account for how and why remixes are possible and understandable, what grounds the meaning and the making, rather than merely describing surface features (“this was the source for that”) or software outputs of cut-and-paste techniques.

“Remix” needs to be turned inside out, reverse engineered, de-blackboxed, so that it can reveal the dynamic, generative processes that make individual (re)combinatorial expressions possible. This requires a difficult metaconceptual move. Just as we are ordinarily unaware of the grammatical and semantic rules that allow us to generate unlimited new expressions in unforeseen new contexts of meaning, “remix” sits on top of ongoing, generative, dialogic, and combinatorial processes for meaning and expression that underlie all our symbolic systems, a second-order generative grammar of which we are ordinarily unaware. Making these generative, dialogic processes understandable and describable allows us to reposition remix and combinatorial forms in the living continuum of culture, thus enabling these creative forms to do much more cultural work for us in an era of intense debates about the status of authors, artists, the individual work, the cultural archive, intellectual property, and the role of common culture.
This chapter will present a new, transdisciplinary, synoptic view of concepts that provides heuristic steps toward a more complete description of the generative principles behind remix and hybrid works. My approach merges the conceptual models of dialogism (from Bakhtin and sociolinguistics), generative models of meaning-making or semiosis (from Peircean foundations to recent interdisciplinary work) and generative-combinatorial-recursive models of language and symbolic cognition (from linguistics and cognitive sciences). My approach also presupposes the background of canonical arguments in postmodernism, poststructuralism, and cultural theory (which I will neither rehearse nor cite), but works toward a new model of cultural complexity and creativity.

An Overview of Main Hypotheses and Conceptual Repertoire

From Bakhtin and the Peircean semiotic tradition we have a useful model of the intersubjective and inter-individual preconditions of cultural meaning, linking new expressions to others’ and prior expression and to material history and cultural memory. Bakhtin’s primary insight comes from living conversations: we are always referencing, assuming, quoting, embedding, and responding to the expressions of others, whether in direct references or as unexpressed presuppositions. Expression always has addressability and answerability built-in, simultaneously instantiating a response to, and an anticipation of, ongoing meaning. Scaled up to the level of cultural genres and compositional types, dialogism becomes intertextuality and intermediality, the networks of artefacts, expressions, contexts, and genres that presuppose and entail each other and provide the links for new combinatorial nodes. Dialogism is the generative engine of culture, and all cultures are always already dialogic. Dialogic hybridization is the default (always on) state of culture.

C. S. Peirce’s model of semiosis as the central cognitive meaning-making process unfolding dialogically in time provides an important description usefully combined with Bakhtin’s. From Umberto Eco’s extrapolations of Peirce and from semantic theory in linguistics we have useful terms for describing the components of combinatorial processes in the systemic layers of lexicon, encyclopedia, and archive, which describe semantic and semiotic functions in language that are extensible to all symbolic systems.

Although Bakhtin’s dialogic principle is frequently cited in cultural studies, its importance as a theory of generative productivity and its conceptual confirmation (in other vocabularies of description) in other fields has not been developed. The concept has suffered from over-generalization and under-specification. Dialogism as an explanatory model becomes more specific and powerful when combined with the models for generativity, recursion, and combinatoriality in linguistics and the cognitive sciences.

Generative linguistics provides important models that account for unlimited creativity (“discrete infinity” or unlimited new expressions from finite means), open combinatoriality, and recursion in language, models which scale to the underlying capabilities in all symbolic systems for generating new, unpredictable expressions. The combinatorial function relies on recursion, the looping, embedding, and feedback and
feedforward processes for managing time and memory in all human cognition and its extension in artefacts. The principle of recursion underlies the formal operations of what Bakhtin describes as dialogism within discourse. Generativity in any symbolic system requires both feedback and feedforward functions, the capacity for looping and embedding expressions in other expressions. This includes back-referencing and forward-anticipated of meanings and full expressions (parallel to Bakhtin’s principles of answerability and addressivity as functions of dialogism). The compositional and combinatorial procedures for remix and appropriation select out and mark already expressed symbolic states and make them visible in the continuum of generative functions for connecting past and present expressions and projecting them into the future.

At another level of cultural description we find research on symbolic cognition, intersubjective meaning, recursion, and memory in the cognitive sciences spilling over into anthropology, linguistics, music and many other fields. This approach provides further, independent scientific confirmation of the dialogic description of meaning and cultural productivity and of the semiotic function of artefacts and media as externalized or distributed cognition, a capability which is fundamental to the transmission of meaning over time, the possibility of cultural memory and tradition.

I will call this synoptic interdisciplinary model generative dialogism, or simply dialogism understood in this extended sense for combining the heuristic value of the fields that converge on the central question of the bases for productivity and generativity in any form of symbolic expression. By recontextualizing the concept of dialogism in this larger field of research and theory, we get a more complex and extensible model of meaning making and creative expression that can account for combinatoriality, compositionality, intersubjectivity, recursive embedding and looping, memory and future-projection, encyclopedia-based semiotics, and the function of artefacts of all kinds in encoding and externalizing cultural memory for reuse in ongoing processes of live, real-time understanding and new expression. Remix is a normative implementation of the dialogic and combinatorial principles at the foundations of language and culture, a product of generative processes that underlie all expression from everyday speech to the complex artefacts of popular culture (music, novels, movies, artworks, TV, digital media).

**Putting the Model to Work**

What happens when we plug some works into this combinatorial conceptual software? Let’s take the example of remix music. Remix, sampling, and found sounds in music composition and performance (when done interpretively, not merely technically) activate our dialogic, combinatorial principles by selecting out a subset of the musical-cultural lexicon (accumulated discrete units analogous to words and phrases) and a shared cultural encyclopedia of musical expressions and signature, prototypical sounds (including the sub-encyclopedias of subcultures), and then activates the explicit quotational function in dialogic composition by embedding recognizable phrases (prior and contemporaneous expressions with addressivity and answerability built-in) in a new context. It is important
to see that these phrases are activated not as discrete, independent units but as tokens of known, recognized, and already accumulated meanings, synecdoches not only for other works and artists but for whole genres and cultural ideas. The meaning of a remix emerges from the symbolic (re)uses of the quotational units in a new context of meanings, not from their prior disquotational function in other expression. The remix is primarily a remix of ideas, concepts, and cultural values (termed types, categories, and frames in semantics and semiotics) for which the quotational units are tokens (instances with symbolic value). The remix thus defunctionalizes or depurposes the embedded quotation or reference as a unit or phrase in a prior composition (considered as a discrete, authored expression in the form of an artefact) and refunctionalizes or repurposes the phrase in a new expression and a new moment of possible cultural meanings. Legal and economic definitions of cultural property need to be re-synced with these fundamental facts of human cultural expression.

This interdisciplinary approach also helps us make some important distinctions and differentiations among kinds of works and processes often lumped together as “remix”. We can develop more detailed categories of description for explicit quotational forms (sampling, cut-and-paste, assemblage, appropriation, repurposing of found or already-made materials), hybrid combinatorial genres, and improvisational musical performances generated from a shared repertoire of chord changes, melodies, rhythms, and phrases. Burroughs’ Dadaist cut-up method and novels are very different in concept and process from a Rauschenberg combine assemblage work or a complexly layered, multi-sourced, software-mixed composition by a musician on the Ninja Tune label. I will use the generative dialogic principle for thinking through some examples of appropriation and assemblage artworks, blues and jazz composition, hip-hop and electronic music composition, and film production.

Conclusions

Remix has become an iconic cultural mode for our hyper-networked, software-driven era, but all genres of remix, appropriation, and hybrid form will take on new significance from being rebooted in a descriptive discourse of implemented dialogism. Remix now seems inextricably tangled in legal theory and policy in the economy of cultural goods, partly because of falsely constructed starting points. Instead of starting from the implicit assumption that the genre of remix is a special case (troubling the ideologies of the autonomy of the work and the artist/author) that requires justification, explanation, or special pleading, remix can do much more important cultural work when redescribed as a visible form of the generative, intersubjective, and collective meaning-making processes underlying all forms of symbolic expression in any medium.

By rebooting “remix” in a discourse of generative dialogism, we find that recognizable “remix” artefacts emerge from ongoing, generative, dialogic, and combinatorial processes for meaning and expression that underlie all cultural symbolic systems. The generative process in meaning-making systems activates recursive functions like intertextual presupposition and embedding of prior expressions at both the lexical and
encyclopedic levels (individual components and networks of genres, types, and symbolic relations). Reverse engineering and de-blackboxing the remix with the combined authority of multidisciplinary research thus has significant consequences for reframing interpretation and debate about cultural expression in any medium, authorship, the cultural commons, intellectual property, and copyright. If the generative dialogic hypothesis is extensible across all forms of symbolic expression in a culture (and I’m convinced it is), then in the case of remix and related genres we have an important new tool for redescribing creative combinational expression and the normativity of quotational embedding in the dialogic foundations of language, meaning, and culture. I propose this (incomplete) model as an open-ended research program for recentering our understanding of productivity and combinatoriality in the collective, intersubjective, interindividual, and historical grounds of cultural production and reception. A tool can be a weapon if you hold it right.

Bibliography (Representative works)

**Semiotics, Media Theory, Dialogic Principle, Discourse Theory**


**Art and Music Theory, Appropriation & Remix**

**Cognitive Science, Philosophy, and Linguistics**


**Remix Culture, Copyright, Cultural Memory**


