

# Appropriation's Making of

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## Abstract

The remix has played an important cultural dialogue role when it comes to originality, authorship, signature, appropriation, inappropriation and expropriation, because between samplings and contextual displacement of voices and sounds, the aesthetic result and/or communicational message of a remix usually triggers an identitarian crisis. Who owns the original creation of a remix? What are the circulation spaces of a remix? Who is the addressee of a remix? This article is an analytical reflection in the form of an interview with one of the most important thinkers of Remix, Eduardo Navas, professor at Penn State College of Arts and Architecture, where he teaches on topics related to cultural analytics and digital humanities. In this interview, Navas analyzes the new forms of interaction between digital media production and appropriation technologies, developing an accurate contextual analysis of contemporary media objects. In addition to an observation and a critical look at the remix, issues that touch on the problems of appropriation and expropriation, as noted by Lisa Oppenheim, are deconstructed in the light of the concepts outlined by Navas throughout his career as a remix scholar. Navas was advised in his Ph.D. by Lev Manovich at University of California, and is author of several books and hundreds of articles about remix.

## Keywords

Appropriation; Inappropriation; Expropriation; Remix, Digital Communication.

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## Resumo

O remix tem ocupado um papel de interlocução cultural importante quando o assunto é originalidade, autoria, assinatura, apropriação, inapropriação e desapropriação, pois entre samplings e deslocamentos contextuais de vozes e sonoridades, o resultado estético e/ou a mensagem comunicacional de um remix normalmente entra em processo de crise identitária. A quem pertence a criação original de um remix? Quais os espaços de circulação do remix? Quem é o receptor do remix? O presente artigo é uma reflexão analítica em formato de entrevista com um dos mais importantes pensadores do remix, Eduardo Navas, professor da Penn State College of Arts and Architecture, responsável pelas disciplinas de cultural analytics e humanidades digitais. Na entrevista, Navas analisa as novas formas de interação entre a produção de mídias digitais e as tecnologias de apropriação, desenvolvendo uma acurada análise contextual dos objetos de mídia contemporâneos. Além de uma observação e olhar crítico sobre o remix, questões que tocam nos problemas da apropriação e desapropriação, conforme observadas por Lisa Oppenheim, são desconstruídas à luz dos conceitos delineados por Navas ao longo de sua carreira como pensador do remix. Navas foi orientando de doutorado de Lev Manovich na Universidade da Califórnia e é autor de inúmeros livros e centenas de artigos sobre remix.

## Palavras-chave

Apropriação; Inapropriação; Desapropriação; Remix; Comunicação Digital.

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## Inappropriating the Remix

**Cicero Silva:** Do you see any relation between remix/sampling and the appropriation, inappropriation and expropriation concepts proposed by Lisa Oppenheim in terms of cultural production (music, design, architecture, literature etc)?

**Eduardo Navas:** I think Lisa Oppenheim's take on appropriation functions similarly to how I have written about the concept. In my first book *Remix Theory* (2012), I discuss allegory in relation to appropriation according to the theory of Craig Owens, who defined allegory necessary for the validation of the postmodern work of art [1]. Honestly, I have not used the terms inappropriation or expropriation, but based on how Oppenheim applies them, both appear to function at a second level of signification that relies on appropriation as the foundational process of validation itself.

I actually met Oppenheim back in November of 2009, when I was a resident writer for Swedish Traveling Exhibitions in Sweden. I visited Mejan Labs, a New Media exhibition space located in Stockholm, and she happened to be at the gallery at the time. We talked for a bit and then she took me to another installation she was working on at another nearby gallery. Based on our conversation that afternoon, it became evident to me that her approach was basically structural, very much following principles of conceptual art. I eventually wrote a brief review on her film-loop projection installation shown at Mejan Labs titled *No Closer to the Source* [2]. Her installation was quite simple, a series of images of the sun and the moon photocopied repeatedly to the point that both became abstracted as the objects appear to be getting closer. She claimed the first two images were taken on July 20, 1969, the day of the U.S. moon landing. The project is an act of appropriation which relies heavily on allegory in two specific ways. First, she took two single historically important images of the sun and the moon, photocopied them, placed them in sequence to show the deterioration of each copy, moving towards abstraction. Such process relies on allegory as a visual experience. Furthermore, her work is validated allegorically by the historical reference to July 20, 1969, as the date for the moon landing. This installation, and much of Oppenheim's other work follows the established conceptual model in art practice, in which appropriation is validated through allegorical strategies. By this I mean that the work that is presented deliberately points to the source. Without knowing this, the work has no meaning because its validation is in exposing a contradiction that may be

at play in the appropriated source.

Considering Oppenheim's statement, my argument on appropriation is that it functions in conceptual art in part similar but nevertheless different from how it functions in remixing as practice in music, to be specific. However, it's important to note that appropriation is not equivalent to remix, but rather appropriation is a foundational element that makes remix possible (and all communication when you look at my chart): one has to appropriate something considered to hold cultural value in order to recontextualize it. This can be in many forms, as art, which is more often than not critical, or as sampling in remix, which can be used for critical reflection or for banal entertainment value. This aspect of allegory as a means to validate the work of art is indeed at play across media at large, certainly in high-brow productions in music, design, architecture, literature that you specifically asked about.

**Cicero Silva:** You recently released a book called *Art, Media Design and Postproduction: Open Guidelines on Appropriation and Remix* (2018), which offers paths to develop digital media objects with a strong analytical background. In the book you decided to divide what you called "guidelines" in three main fields: Media Production, Metaproduction, and Postproduction. Could you describe why you chose those concepts to define the steps of media production related to remix?

**Eduardo Navas:** As I explain in the respective sections in the text, the terms were chosen because, based on my research, they represent the type of production at play since the early Twentieth Century. Media production corresponds with modernism, meta production with postmodernism, and post production with our contemporary times of networked culture. Media production is closer to analog media, as understood according to "mechanical reproduction" after the theory of Walter Benjamin. Meta production, as the prefix implies, points to a period that comes after media production that paves the way in terms of the postmodern towards our current forms of creativity and communication, which in turn is related to the term postproduction. As I explain throughout the book, the loop of recyclability of material is increased exponentially as more efficient technology is developed, which is much more evident in terms of postproduction. We do postproduction activities with our phones. We can take a video, edit it, and upload it to a social media platform, or send it to friends and family. This aspect of editing a video in the past could only be done in the media studio. Now, we perform postproduction on media objects as casually as sending a text. This in turn affects how remix emerged, first as a concept specific to

music, and eventually, evolved to be applied broadly across media and culture, and be relevant for any form of creation or communication.

**Cicero Silva:** Currently we are seeing more and more judicial disputes related to the remix, sampling, appropriation, inappropriation and expropriation than previous years. Along with this, we are also realizing that several “creators” of some music performances that went viral were not recognized by the society as the inventors of that cultural artifact (I am thinking in Jalaiah Harmon and her *Renegade* performance) [3]. Do you see this happening or do you think that we, as society, are again pushing back concepts that surround “originality” and its derivatives? How to balance that with capital gains and cultural recognition?

**Eduardo Navas:** Fair recognition or credit of someone’s work has always been a basic contention of cultural production. Who gets credit is part of the selective process that makes possible the assimilation of emerging creative material. Since you provide an example from street dance, *The Renegade*, credited to Jalaiah Harmon, the issue is challenging because remix as a concrete form of production is not at play in dance as is usually understood across media forms that leave cultural objects, such as music recordings, films, or art (digital or analog) as the final products.

In dance, it’s the move that is “created.” This means that a person develops the sequence of actions that are meant to be performed live. The person cannot expect anyone who performs the work to pay royalties whenever performing the dance moves. But what is at stake is recognition of who “created” the dance, meaning, who came up with the specific combination of moves that make *The Renegade*, in your case. Dance moves are closer to syntagmatic enunciation; that is, the act of speaking. We pronounce words that nobody owns. But what a person can come to own is a specific organization of words (sentences) that provide a unique experience which can paradoxically be considered “original.” This is concretized in writing. If it is only spoken, it is free-for-all, and there can be no copyright because there is no official recording as an actual product. Rappers feel the tension of their lines being stolen until they are able to record them for proper recognition. This is the reason why rap battles challenge the process of recognition. Freestylers who perform may use phrases they carefully developed while carefully listening to other performers to see if they bit (stole) any phrases from them or other rappers part of the community. You can see the friction on originality at play in these types of public performances. This has now been highlighted in the mainstream with Netflix series such as *The Get Down* (2016),

as well as *Hip Hop Evolution* (2016).

In the early days of MCing, for example, there were certain phrases that were used to get people going on the dancefloor, such as “Party people in the house! Make some noise!” Other common phrases were “Let me hear you say Yeah! Throw your hands in the air, and wave them like you just don’t care!” Variations of these commonly shared phrases across dance parties eventually made it to early hip hop recordings, such as *The Roof is on Fire*, by Rock Master Scott and the Dynamic Three [4]. And are accepted as common enough that anyone could use them. However, if an actual sample of a recording from Rock Master Scott is used in a music composition or other media form without permission, a lawsuit is possible. Not because of the sequence of the phrase, which is accepted at common knowledge, but the interpretation of the phrase.

Getting back to your question on Harmon and her dance *The Renegade*, she cannot claim copyright over the moves like a musical artist can claim over lyrics. So, what is at stake is recognition, which as the article explains, can turn into revenue if the person who created the dance can become popular across social media and perhaps even become an influencer. But this has more to do with how we allocate credit of certain things to certain people, which is more about cultural politics that are bound with class, race, ethnicity, economics. Harmon may or may not eventually have a career as a professional dancer because of the way she comes across social media. This is a social development not so different from the way kids negotiate social positioning on the playground, and adults figure out how “to make a name for themselves” as they live their lives, as the common phrase goes. How this is balanced against capital gains has changed drastically, and complicates the way dances going viral are accredited to a specific person because now what artists sell is not an actual copy of objects, but circulation of their material. One no longer needs to buy a copy of a music recording, but pay for a streaming service such as Spotify or Amazon Music that gives limitless access to millions of songs at the tip of our fingers. This is why the article also highlights the importance of influencers as brands in their own right. Revenue is no longer in originals or copies, but in streaming of content to the largest audience possible. Your example of Harmon as a dancer provides a peculiar challenge to cultural commodities that by nature are ephemeral. How can you sell a dance move in the end?

**Cicero Silva:** You basically proposed the concept of “selectivity” related to remix, creating a methodological structure to the concept that can provide us with

tools and reliable features to think and analyse remix. How do you see your “selectivity” diagram related to Oppenheim’s ideas about “...to distill and to process” (OPPENHEIM, 2014) a cultural object? Do you think that those concepts could also be related to the curatorship process? Are they similar/familiar in some ways?

**Eduardo Navas:** The elements of selectivity are used in all aspects of communication and creative production. In this sense, yes, those concepts are completely related to the curatorship process. We could call selectivity “curatorship” as well. The term curator is defined as “a person who selects content” [5]. But selectivity on closer examination makes curatorship possible, because everyone needs to select in order to communicate, create meaning, develop work, and offer something of value to others (this ranges from basic sentences in oral communication to buildings designed by renowned architects). A curator’s main role is to select for a specific purpose, in their case, for an established institution. The term implies a position of power in which selectivity will play a definitive role in shaping cultural outcomes.

Artists often use the term curator to discuss their practice, but if we keep in mind the role of the curator as a person that is more or less a gatekeeper for an institution, often a museum, then the process of selectivity is quite different from that of an artist. According to my diagram of selectivity, “to distill and to process” as discussed by Oppenheim (2014) support the flow of elements of selectivity, in terms of implementation (repurpose that which has been appropriated), contextualization (that which is implemented is understood according to specific cultural variables), and legitimation (acceptance of a work as legitimate or illegitimate). What artists are doing when producing actual works is not curating as a person with the proper title does for an institution, but choosing to develop work based on the key foundational element in my theory of selectivity itself: appropriation.[6] To complicate matters, artists could appropriate curation as their “medium” but even then, they are not proper curators, because what validates them (legitimation as a process of selectivity theory) is that they are artists, not curators. They can do this, again, because they appropriate at a meta-level to produce work that is, as I stated previously, allegorical. The authority of the work is based on the fact that it relies on curatorship as the method to produce the particular work. Again Oppenheim’s work touches on what I point out in this case.

**Cicero Silva:** Changing a little bit of subject and at the same time still thinking with the same methodological tools, as soon as you are a member of Manovich’s software studies/cultural analytics lab, do you see any relation between remix/

sampling/appropriation and software culture? If yes, in which way software could also be remixed/appropriated without being considered piracy or something more problematic?

**Eduardo Navas:** Software is remix at its core. This is true in both concept and form. In terms of syntax, to be specific, we can notice how the programming language C is the foundation of higher languages that follow it. Essentially what higher languages offer are adjustments to make programming more accessible or intuitive, as well as optimized for a specific purpose the particular developer found needed to be fulfilled. In terms of concept, all languages share the same building elements: variables, loops, routines, subroutines, functions, etc. Software is interesting because it is built with code, which is increasingly being learned with coding libraries that encourage users to copy and paste prewritten algorithms, which they can adjust for their specific needs. Perhaps the most friendly scripting library for people in the arts and humanities is Processing, which is built on top of Java.

Software historically has thrived because of open source, so I see it as a contradiction when a corporation produces proprietary code. “Piracy” in software happens all the time. Hacking is linked to this activity in a way that is unequivocally important, and ultimately beneficial for the development of software and sharing of ideas. So, to answer your question directly, Software is dependent and thrives on the fact that it will be remixed. It’s the only way it can be improved. That’s what a new software version is all about.

**Cicero Silva:** And to finish: currently we are living in a global society where the far-right conservative sectors are dominating the debate. In US, Trump, in UK, India, Brazil, Hungary, Italy, Ecuador, Austria, Australia etc. they are all following through the same pattern of far-right cultural understanding of race, originality, creativity etc. Do you see any influence of this social cultural and political shift in the remix/sampling creations? Are creators (musicians, designers, architects and media artists) also shifting their understanding of remix/appropriation related to their work? Do you see any sign of this change in remix since we believed that after the horrible experiences of the Shoa, Fascism etc. we were kinda of vaccinated against the “original ideas about race”, “purism” etc. in culture? Do you see any light at the end of the tunnel?

**Eduardo Navas:** Today, remix is more accepted across the world. When I started presenting my research on remix in 2006, people were resistant to what I



proposed. There was this sense that something had to be original. Now, because there are so many documentaries on remix and remix culture, people have an implicit understanding that we build on what others have produced.

Remix as an action is not owned by anyone. It can be used by people with opposing ideologies. Fake news is founded on remixing facts so that it fits a certain world view. What we see in this process is the detachment of the signifier from the signified. This is something that Baudrillard (BAUDRILLARD, 1981) noticed in his theory of simulacra some time back. Some people found his premises polemical and dismissed him, but now, I think his basic premise has become the foundation of our reality. We function in a time when people feel comfortable in taking a sign and detach the concept from the form to reconfigure both to match what they desire to acknowledge. This is easier today because we have stopped working with the concept of an original form. Digital production privileges the copy. With computers there are no originals. It's all data. Digital born media is based on the principle that what is created can be replicated with no loss of quality. Of course we can compress a file which will change its data configuration, but this is optional. When we save a file, we are basically rewriting on top of a pre-existing form. Now, this is different from a version that we decide to share. For instance, as you work on a digital file (such as this interview), the edits can be saved as versions, and we can trace the beginnings of a digital file. But we know we can share any version as a copy, and that copy will be exactly the same in one hard drive as in another. Both are copies. One could be considered an original because it was created first, but not because it is different formally and technically speaking. This aspect of digital culture is unprecedented and informs our ability to create versions of reality that ideologically appear just as real as other versions, and can be accepted to be “real.”

We are truly living in the hyperreal today. The challenge of remix as a critical tool for humanistic reflection in this regard is that we need to understand that critical practice's previous approach to parody, and appropriation by activists, such as The Yes Men [7] is more difficult to accept as critical parody. I often discuss their project on The New York Times, which presented articles on news that never happened such as the end of the Iraq War.[8] Because of the detachment of the signifier from the signifier, anyone who wants to attack their creative work can recontextualize The Yes Men's own documentary on their New York Times Spoof to make it appear as though they actually were serious about creating a fake newspaper. If persons viewing such content does not do research on the Yes Men, they are likely to believe that what the Yes Men did was early “fake news.” They will suspend the critical signifier that

validates the Yes Men's work in order to make their work fit a particular reality that viewers feel comfortable with. This is all functioning at a second order of signification as Baudrillard argues in his writing. The real is no longer important, but the reality you create for your own reality.

**Cicero Silva:** Oh, one more question: I was reading your interview to Norient Beta and I clashed with this statement from you: "It's like a virus, it will figure its way out" [9]. What are your thoughts about the remix culture and the Coronavirus pandemic in terms of cultural production? Do you see something changing in the way that people interact with digital media art and the cultural objects they are currently creating? (this is a loose question..but I was thinking in terms of Zoom users, TikTok etc. in confinement).

**Eduardo Navas:** It's interesting you ask this question because I have been thinking a lot about the COVID-19 Pandemic and my statements on remix and viruses. I actually equated remix to viruses in my first book, *Remix Theory*, in which I state "...Remix is more like a virus that has mutated into different forms according to the needs of different cultures" (NAVAS, 2012, p. 10) [10]. Another time that I discussed remix and viruses is in my essay *Regenerative Culture*. In that occasion I considered the flow of sound and humans' urgency to try to control things around them: "The process of recording sound in a sense is driven by the human interest to domesticate noise. Indeed, humans strive to domesticate everything around them, including the environment, plants, animals and viruses. And it is with viruses with which humans appear to keep a contentious relationship" (NAVAS, 2016) [11] And more recently I mentioned viruses in the Norient interview to which you refer; as you quoted, I explain that remix will figure its way out.

I began referring to remix and viruses in terms of simile. I have been thinking about their relation for some time, going back to about 2006 when I was doing research for my dissertation on remix and art practice that evolved into a broader evaluation on culture and media; which, in turn, resulted in my first book in 2012. I'm not alone in considering the relation of viruses to cultural production by any means. This concept goes way back in time to the late Nineteenth Century. In 2013 I reviewed a book by Tony Sampson titled *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* [12]. Sampson revisits the work of Gabriel Tarde who considered how ideas spread like viruses. Tarde's theories do have some limitations because he saw imitation as a cultural variable that should be resisted. He proposed ways to achieve some type of purity, by

keeping imitation at bay, that today clashes with our acceptance that constant change is part of nature and culture, as I explain in the book review. But nevertheless, I think Tarde's long-term contribution is that he makes a clear connection between natural and cultural evolution. The book eloquently traces the way that ideas in culture spread similarly to viruses in nature. Gilles Deleuze actually took a bit from Tarde to develop his theories of the rhizome with Felix Guatarri. If you do some research on Tarde, you will notice that his work is now being revisited. Sampson performs primarily exegesis with an update on how the concept of virality can function with what is now called new materialism theories.

But to go back to your question, I argue repeatedly whenever I mention viruses in relation to remix, sound, or culture in general is that there is a symbiotic connection between the two. People tend to think of culture being separate from nature, one being human-made and the other, well, naturally made (or made by god for believers). When I state that remix will figure its way out, I mean that it pretty much functions like a virus. It will not go away, but will adjust itself to the situation. Remix will always be with us in some form. While in terms of action it remains the same, it is constantly shifting as a cultural element that can be used by anyone for creativity and communication. No one owns remix, no one can claim it. As soon as anyone tries to do this, remix will evolve. It remains fluid, and always on the fringes. It's never truly part of the mainstream and at the same time, at this point it completely supports the mainstream, particularly in terms of things going viral online. Principles of remix are what make networked communication relevant and worth actual monetary return for major corporation. Remix is the paradox that supports our current reality. It is both fake and real, and adaptable to great and horrible realities. It's up to us to implement it to move forward as a global society that cares about everyone who participates. This is perhaps the biggest challenge we face as humans.

## Notes

[1] See Allegory in Remix chapter in *Remix Theory: The aesthetics of Sampling*. New York/Wein: Springer, 2012.

[2] Eduardo Navas, *A Visit to Mejan Labs: Notes on Sweden's Approach to Art and Exhibitions*, November 21, 2009. Available at: <https://remixtheory.net/?p=405>. Last accessed: 29 jul. 2020.

[3] Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/13/style/the-original-renegade.html>. Last accessed: 29 jul. 2020.

[4] Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Vv\\_LwwwpmU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Vv_LwwwpmU). Last accessed: 29 jul. 2020.

- [5] Available at: <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/curator?s=t> . Last accessed: 29 jul. 2020.
- [6] A version of my theory is available online, “The Elements of Selectivity: After-thoughts on Originality and Remix.” Available at: [https://remixtheory.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Elements\\_Selectivity.pdf](https://remixtheory.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Elements_Selectivity.pdf) . Last accessed: 29 jul. 2020.
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- [9] Available at: <https://norient.com/academic/sampling-stories-vol-15-eduardo-navas>. Last accessed: 29 jul. 2020.
- [10] See Eduardo Navas, *Remix Theory: The Aesthetics of Sampling* (New York/Wein: Springer 2012), p. 10.
- [11] Eduardo Navas *Regenerative Culture*, Norient. Available at: <https://norient-beta.com/academic/regenerative-culture-part-15>. Last accessed: 29 jul. 2020
- [12] Eduardo Navas, *Book Review of Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks*. Available at: [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/virality-book\\_b\\_2946287](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/virality-book_b_2946287). Last accessed: 29 jul. 2020

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