

The Elements of Selectivity: After-thoughts on Originality and Remix.

Notes from a series of lectures presented during October and November, 2017.
Released online on December 16, 2017

Eduardo Navas

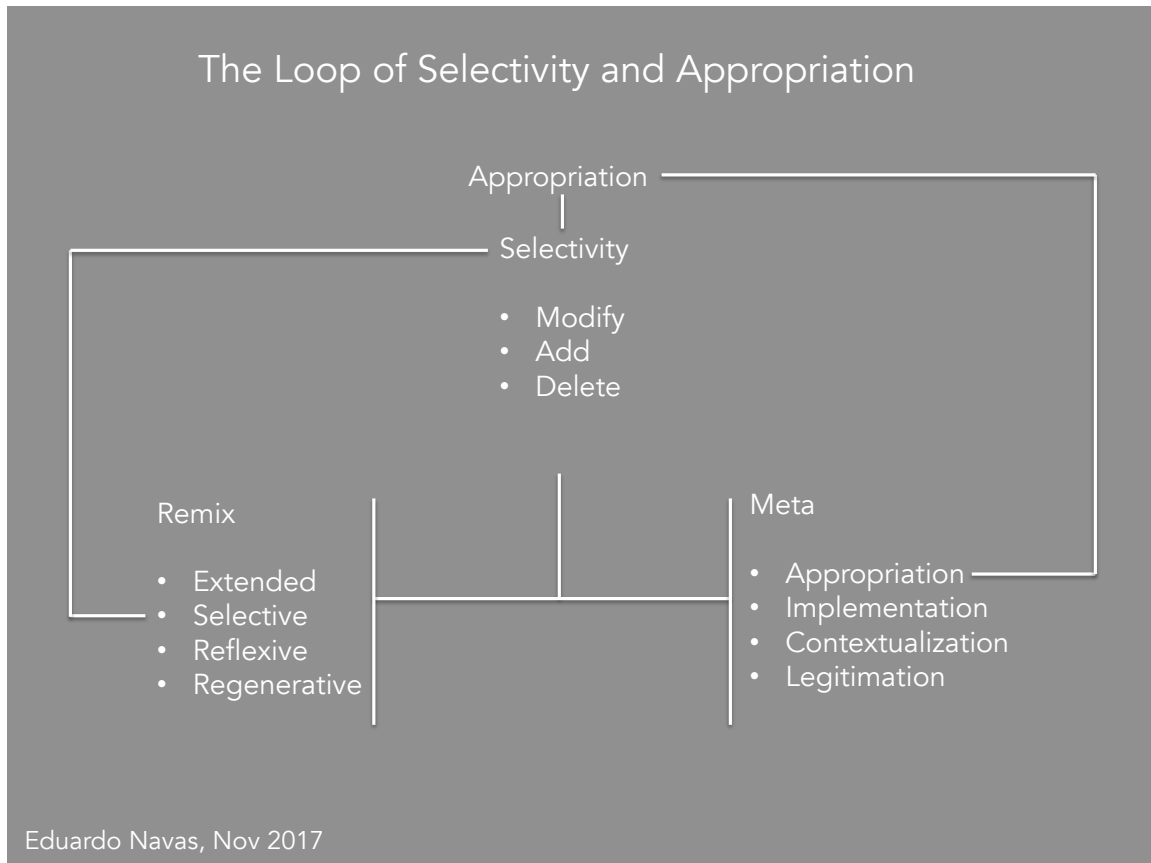


Figure 1: Diagram showing the tautological process of meaning creation.

The following are edited notes, which can be considered a theoretical mashup from a number of presentations which took place during the Fall of 2017, specifically on October 10 at the Arts & Design Research Incubator (ADRI), Penn State, on October 11 at The University of Caldas in Manizales Colombia, on November 1 at The University of Bern, Bern Switzerland, and as a lecture at Karen Keifer-Boyd's graduate seminar class at Penn State on November 8. I was fortunate to have received ample feedback on what I presented, which led to the current set of notes I now share. I want to thank everyone who made my presentations possible, during what turned out to be a very busy, but intellectually fruitful period in 2017. In the lectures, I was able to explore the relation of the elements of selectivity (modify, add, delete) in relation to the cultural state of meta, which is the stage in which we create cultural value, and the different forms of remix. These notes, as is the case with much of my writing, are in the process of making their way in remixed fashion to different publications. In effect, the section titled, "The Elements of Meta" is already part of the closing chapter in my book *Art, Media Design, and Postproduction: Open Guidelines on Appropriation and Remix* (Routledge, 2018).

Challenges of Remix

When we think of remixing, most likely it is remixing by way of material sampling that comes to mind (taking a piece of an actual music recording). But remix principles are also at play in terms of cultural citation (making reference to an idea, or a style, story, etc). The difference between these two forms of recycling content and concepts can be noticed when examining the forms of the medley and the megamix. The medley is usually performed by a band, while a megamix is composed in the studio usually by a DJ producer, who understands how to manipulate breaks on the turntables.

When considering this difference and evaluating how sampling functions in the megamix (which is basically an extended mashup of many songs), it becomes evident that a remix in the strict sense of its foundational definition has to be materially grounded on a citation that can be quantified, in other words, measured because a remix is based on samples. While a sample is quantifiable, a cultural reference (citation) is not, and may not even be noticed by an audience, thus making the material performed appear original. Due to the ability to trace samples back to their sources, given that they are recordings, DJ producers quickly ran into trouble with copyright law: a lawyer could play a sample from a Hip Hop song, in direct juxtaposition with the source of the sample and prove on material grounds that the sample was an act of plagiarism.

Proving this is more complicated with cultural citation. Let's consider Led Zeppelin in this case (who are a prime example used by Kirby Ferguson in "Everything is a Remix, Part 1").¹ Zeppelin, as Ferguson demonstrates performed arguably straight-forward plagiarism within the tradition of covers and knock-offs, because as has by now been documented, they did not give proper credit to the musicians from whom they took large parts of compositions. Ferguson refers to covers and knock-offs as forms of "legal remixes." What these forms of recycling content actually share with remixes is intertextual citation—the embedding of ideas by way of direct or even indirect reference, which often is not materially grounded, but rather made possible through well calculated emulation.

Examples of cultural citation in literature include *Ulysses* by James Joyce,² which *borrow*s or is inspired in part by Homer's *Odyssey*.³ *Don Quixote* by Manuel de Cervantes inspired Jorge Luis Borges to write "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," a short story about an aspiring author whose goal was to rewrite *Don Quixote* word for word in order to make it afresh.⁴ In both cases, there is no direct taking of actual words configured in the same exact order, but rather a general or implicit reference to a previous cultural object that in turn validates the object a reader experiences. Kirby Ferguson's most recent video focusing on *The Force Awakens* makes a case for cultural citation by showing how JJ Abrahams is citing and appropriating ideas and plots from pre-existing sources, but not necessarily sampling as is often practiced in the selective remix. In brief, material sampling consists of taking something that has been previously arranged or composed in a specific way, and repurposes all or part of it to develop new meaning. Cultural citation consists of referencing indirectly or by emulation a previous existing work in order to develop new meaning.

The Elements of Selectivity

The question that arises out of this analysis is if there is an actual origin of anything if it appears that principles of remix are at play in terms of material sampling, cultural citation, or a

combination of both. The answer to this question can be evaluated when we consider how remix takes place. As I have previously noted in various publications, there are four basic forms of remix: the extended, the selective, the reflexive and the regenerative.⁵ It is the regenerative that has made the other three types of remixes prevalent across culture. But this process actually takes place through selectivity, which may be why we tend to recognize the selective remix as the most common form of “remix” over the others. It is selectivity that enables recyclability to take place. Selectivity is possible because of three elements that lead to its conception. When we choose to select anything, we have the options to 1) modify it, 2) add something to it, 3) delete something from it. These elements can be combined of course, which makes remixing quite complex (figure 1).

Selectivity, in turn, cannot be possible until we enter an advanced stage of signification; that is a stage of meta. This is a moment that relies on the surplus of meaning, which in turn can be recycled. In order to understand how this is at play, then, we must consider four elements that make meta possible. We will then connect these elements to selectivity and remix.

The Elements of Meta: Meta and Appropriation⁶

Perhaps the main challenge that emerges when thinking about the beginning of anything is the inability to conceive how anything begins. This is a tautological conundrum that folds on itself in order to offer us the answer in its inherent inability to move beyond itself; but by doing so, in fact, it repurposes itself as the mean to expand tautology as the basis for the inquiry of all things one finds the need to define. This is the foundation of meaning creation, or signification, as semiotics prescribes. This process is at the root of creative production, which in turn is the backbone of remix as a pivotal variable in communication across culture. Remix is made possible by a state of meta, which in turn, is the process by which the question on the beginning of anything is displaced in order to develop ongoing signification.⁷ This process is possible because of appropriation and its three supporting elements: implementation, contextualization, and legitimation upon which meta relies for its effectiveness. In what follows I describe how these four terms inform the development of ongoing signification, based on the ability to produce difference in line with repetition of material and immaterial things. These elements are then contextualized within the framework of culture, the elements of selectivity and remix.

Appropriation

Appropriation makes signification possible. Proposing this term as the initial stage of signification seems paradoxical, because, as the term implies, in order to appropriate something one must have the capacity to know that there is something of value to actually appropriate. In other words, appropriation can only happen once something is defined with some type of value, already of interest. So what happens in the beginning? As there is nothing to appropriate, one begins with questions that are answered through constant exposure to things and how they are contextualized.

Here we find the tautology of origins already at play. In terms of basic communication, semiotics is straight-forward about this process, which begins as soon as we are born.⁸ We learn by relating, initially our bodies to other material objects; we rely on sound to expand on this basic form of knowledge acquisition. Oral speech enables us to assign specific sounds to things that in time evolve into concepts in our minds related to things we see repeatedly. Put another way, we are beings who copy and mimic in order to learn by example to eventually develop a sense of “originality” based on things and the environment around us. This takes place in literal form: we

assign value based on constant exposure to the world. Hearing the word “apple” every time an object that has been socially accepted to be identified by that word, in effect, comes to signify apple, in both concept and form. We select basic concepts from our memories that we learn throughout life, and combine them in sentences or media objects for constant communication. This type of selection is a form of appropriating resources (concepts/ideas) that are gathered in our memories, which in turn become implemented for basic communication.

To be clear, as much as we would like to think otherwise, we create and communicate byway of signification; even when we work with what is often called intuition. In terms of art and design, this is happening through ongoing slippage of concepts in our minds that eventually yield to forms that at times may be unexpected, and compelling, and perhaps difficult to understand, while at other times, quite accessible. It is our ability to appropriate from what we already know for an interest in recombination that enables us to develop new things. This process in effect is extended to actual material production; meaning that we imagine new things based on concepts that have already been implemented: basic math operations and equations became automated leading to the calculator, eventually making possible the development of the computer as a multitasking tool, which is currently used for ever-growing activities in all aspects of daily life. This chain of signification took place over many decades, and was developed through a recursive process: a back and forth (tautology) of concepts and forms in cultural environments that experienced two world wars, and the rise of industrialization, moving from modernity into postmodernity.

In brief, appropriation becomes possible due to a recycling process which relies on the assignment of concepts initially learned based on repeated exposure to speech one associates with specific objects, which eventually become meaningful as one learns to interpret them based on their role in specific contexts. This is known as connotation in linguistic terms.⁹ Appropriation, in short, is the constant process of taking from that which we know to recontextualize it byway of implementation. As mentioned above, when we do not know, we ask, “what is that?” And, in terms of language, we get an answer that in turn uses other words or contextual elements to explain what that thing is based on other concepts that we may already know. If this is not possible, we investigate by any means possible to develop some meaning of the object, concept or idea. Once appropriation takes place, it becomes possible to implement what is appropriated according to one’s intent. Appropriation can happen byway of material sampling or cultural citation, at which point the appropriated material is ready to be repurposed byway of implementation.

Implementation

Once we are able to appropriate, we can then implement; meaning that we can repurpose that which has been appropriated. Implementation can take place in various forms. In terms of art it could stand alone (as in Duchamp’s urinal remaining unchanged physically as an object, but recontextualized as work of art), or be isolated (as when one defines a word, or examines an object at its most basic level), or it can be combined with other elements. In terms of words, this is equivalent to taking terms from our memory to organize them in sequences to develop sentences. In music this is equivalent to taking samples to recombine them as a new composition. In computing it can happen by taking pre-existing code and modifying it slightly or dramatically to fit a different purpose.

Appropriation is implemented by way of cultural citation, which, in terms of writing, one can take parts of an idea and rewrite it with completely different words, knowing that the reader might

notice references to previous works. In music this means that one may play a melody on a particular instrument that is in effect informed by intertextual knowledge of previous songs. This is how music evolves from one style to another: the blues leading to rock & roll, R& B, reggae, dub, punk, prog rock, grunge and so on. The first method is material sampling, while the latter is cultural citation. It is important to note that both of these approaches are quite often combined to develop new concepts, ideas, forms, and objects. In short, the material appropriated in terms of material sampling and/or cultural citation is embedded into all types of media forms that often combine image, sound, and text.

Contextualization

Depending on the approach to create new content, one then contextualizes the work based on one's interests and principles. One can present the object as something original or something derived. If the material has not been transformed enough, or no credit is given to whom it is clearly due, the object can be considered the result of plagiarism. Part of the process of contextualization depends on how the producer decides whether to downplay or over emphasize material sampling and/or cultural citation. Deciding how to present one's work in turn can make it appear "original," but using such term based on what has been explained thus far is a fallacy; while the object may appear to be original, it is actually unique to the moment in which it participates. It is in effect, a cultural node, or in terms of complexity, a module that will lead to other forms that will build on top of it, or incorporate it materially or conceptually for the eventual development of new unique forms in the future. Decisions on how to contextualize objects, concepts and ideas, will in turn play a major role on whether or not it is accepted or rejected in diverse cultural contexts. This leads to the process of legitimation, which will also define if and how the object would be repurposed in the future.

Legitimation

Legitimation is the last element in the development of new forms that may appear original, but as explained are unique. Depending on how the other three elements have been executed by a person, legitimation will take place. The acceptance of a work as legitimate or illegitimate, however, is not controlled by the person who produced the object, but is actually a negotiation between the producer and the culture in which the object is introduced. This is where one encounters contentions of intellectual property, and debates over fair use may come about if the object being evaluated is perceived as derivative, or unique. Plagiarism may emerge as an issue if the work is presented as "original." This part remains contentious, and many of the works, even when not clear if they are accepted as the maker would desire, once they enter this stage, in turn, inform the very process of creativity, critical thinking and writing, as well as the economy behind authorship as a practice based on the myth of originality. In effect, it is also a fallacy we developed to justify individual action in relation to collective tensions of society and the economic differences supported by hierarchical organizations that in turn are the backbone of the capitalist market.

Legitimation is the focus of remix culture. Creative Commons, in effect, is invested in finding a fair and balanced approach to creative production that allows the legitimation of what they call derivative works based on fair use. This means that a compromise is trying to be reached among nations to have a sense of what fair use is. Given that copyright laws vary from country to country this remains a challenge. What is crucial in our case is to understand that how something is appropriated, implemented, and contextualized is important to decide whether or not an object

will be legitimated. And if so, how it will be legitimated: as a unique or a derivative object. These four elements are what make the state of meta an important variable in the act to remix.

The elements of meta are, more than likely, familiar to most people, since they are integral in basic communication. These elements informed modernism as we developed machines and tools to record and enhance our material reality. The elements of meta function within the framework of culture, which consists of two layers on a feedback loop. On the first layer something is introduced, which may be different from what is commonly known; this means that its assimilation may take some time, if accepted. At this stage we can note how appropriation depends on implementation, contextualization and legitimation. The latter two elements of meta take effect on the second layer of the framework of culture, in which material that has been introduced in the first layer attains cultural value. It is at this point, in terms of remix, that the material can be repeatedly appropriated, or sampled, and in turn, it can be reintroduced in culture as something derivative or new. These stages became evident in postmodernism, and are now being exploited by ongoing development of technology for potential new markets.

Now we can evaluate the elements of selectivity in relation to the basic forms of remix as well as the elements of meta, (see figure 1). We can note that the elements of selectivity are what make possible remix. We can also note that selectivity through rhetorical play makes possible a stage of meta, which consists of four elements. Appropriation is the element in meta that in turn makes possible the loop that enables signification to take place. In this same way, selectivity, which is vital to remix is also a key element for the loop that enables signification to continue evolving. And this loop is also what makes possible the ongoing repetition of difference at play within the framework of culture.

¹ See Everything is a Remix, part 1, <http://www.everythingisaremix.info/blog/everything-is-a-remix-part-1>

² James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Modern Library, 1934; Reprint, New York: Vintage International, 1990).

³ Homer, *The Odyssey* (London: A.C. Field, 1900; Reprint, Clayton, Delaware: Preswick House, 2006).

⁴ Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," *Collected Fictions*, trans Andre Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1999), 88-95.

⁵ See "Remix Defined," *Remix Theory: The Aesthetics of Sampling* (New York: Springer 2012), 65 – 76.

⁶ This section, "The Elements of Meta," is part of the closing chapter in my book *Art, Media Design, and Postproduction: Open Guidelines on Appropriation and Remix* (Routledge, 2018).

⁷ For an excellent summary of this complex process see Martin Irvine, "Remix and the Dialogic Engine of Culture: A Model for Generative Combinatorality," *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies*.

⁸ Peirce actually discusses this in his writings on the referrant. See, Charles Sanders Peirce, *Peirce on Signs*, ed. James Hoopes (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 8 and 67.

⁹ Peirce prefers the term sign in relation to this process: Peirce, "On the Nature of Signs," 141 – 143.