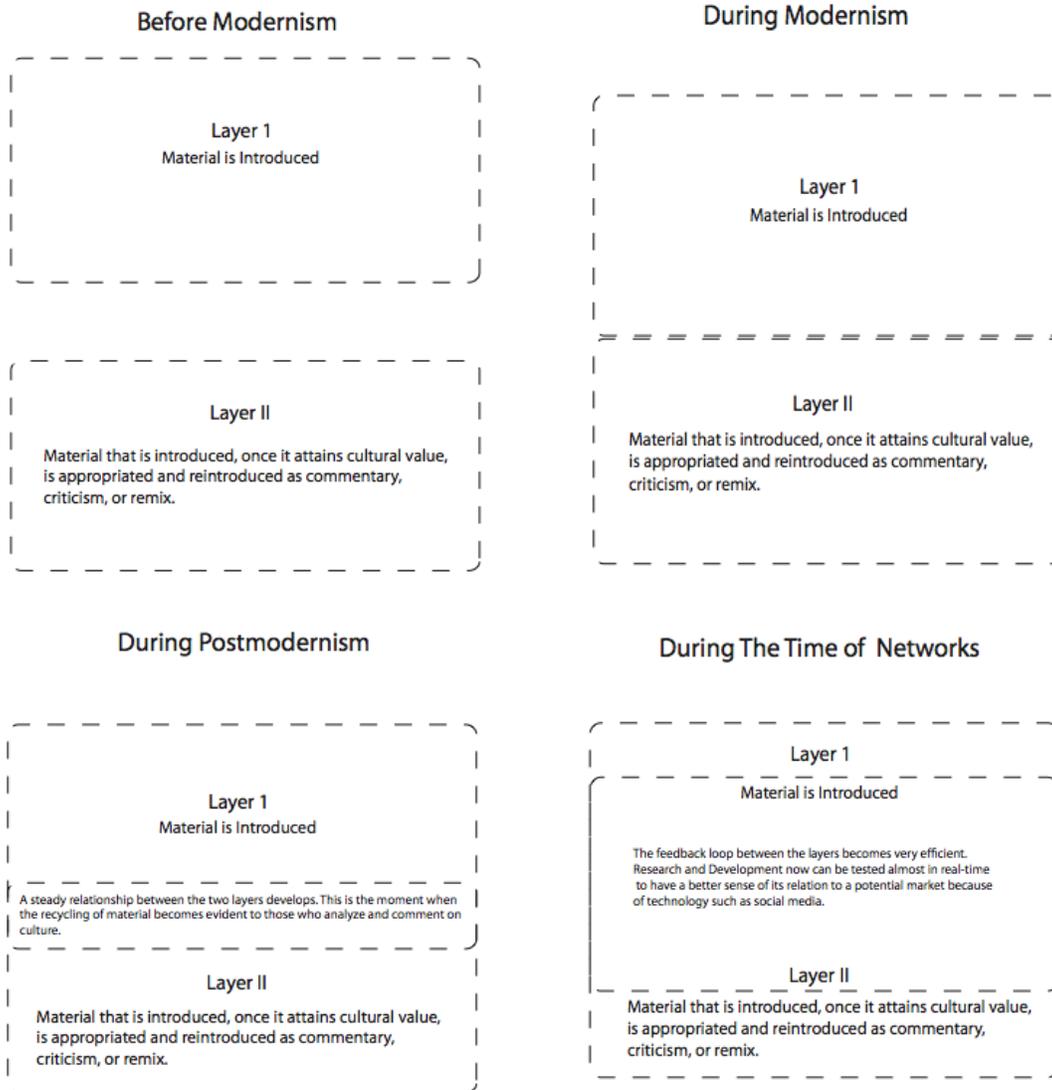**The Framework of Culture: Remix in Music, Art, and Literature**
Commissioned for the exhibition Reuse Aloud, Newcastle:
http://www.basic.fm/?page_id=2516

By Eduardo Navas

January 24, 2013

Before Modernism

Layer 1
Material is Introduced

Layer II
Material that is introduced, once it attains cultural value, is appropriated and reintroduced as commentary, criticism, or remix.

During Modernism

Layer 1
Material is Introduced

Layer II
Material that is introduced, once it attains cultural value, is appropriated and reintroduced as commentary, criticism, or remix.

During Postmodernism

Layer 1
Material is Introduced

A steady relationship between the two layers develops. This is the moment when the recycling of material becomes evident to those who analyze and comment on culture.

Layer II
Material that is introduced, once it attains cultural value, is appropriated and reintroduced as commentary, criticism, or remix.

During The Time of Networks

Layer 1
Material is Introduced

The feedback loop between the layers becomes very efficient. Research and Development now can be tested almost in real-time to have a better sense of its relation to a potential market because of technology such as social media.

Layer II
Material that is introduced, once it attains cultural value, is appropriated and reintroduced as commentary, criticism, or remix.

The four diagrams of The Framework of Culture. Each is discussed below.

Introduction

We live in a time when the self-awareness of recycling of material and immaterial things is almost taken for granted. I state *almost* because, as the following analysis demonstrates, the potential of recycling as a creative act in what we refer to as remix is in constant friction with cultural production. Consequently, the purpose of this essay is to demonstrate the importance of remix as a practice worthy of proper recognition exactly because of its ability to challenge the mainstream's ambivalent acceptance of aesthetic and critical production that relies on strategies of appropriation, recycling, and recontextualization of material.

Proper recognition is only worthy when it is an attestation of a particular achievement, which can only come about through struggle. Arguably a type of struggle that is certainly recognized and even celebrated quite often, (which admittedly makes for romantic narratives) is the basic human struggle: the will to live. We can think of struggle here as a term spanning across all types of activities, from war to natural disasters—many which are now commonly shared all over the world.

But to begin with a more basic premise, struggle in its most abstract form can simply consist of reflecting on the pain of self-awareness; of having the burden of knowing that we just exist and, for the most part, will do anything to make sure that we will exist for as long as possible. Many of us are willing to find ways to extend our lives before we take our last breath. Others, admittedly, will struggle to leave this world as soon as possible; thus, it may be suicide the subject of struggle in such cases. But this brief reflection on struggle as a humanistic preoccupation is mentioned because we diligently have extended it to everything we produce. It is an important ingredient in what we may call progress. As romantic as it may sound, human beings have the tendency to struggle in order to be better; whatever that means. And as we have grown as a complex global society, we have been able to extend our struggle on to *and* through media.

We well know, for some time now, that we have been going through a well-defined struggle in media production, in which the act of remixing has proven to be most pivotal. So, in a way, this essay aims to evaluate remix as an act of struggle. But this analysis is not only about remix, but also its relation to music, art, and literature. Adding these three cultural areas makes this analysis rather complex because we have to deal with two things that are challenging to cultures (at least cultures considered part of globalization), which is to participate in the act of repurposing, recycling, remmediating (remixing) material that superficially, in terms of history, has been validated by the very idea of being original. The very concept of originality helped establish literature, a creative field which, to this day, holds a somewhat privileged position in relation to art and music—and especially to the basic concept of remixing; this view is still pervasive in mainstream culture; and it is remix culture that is trying to debunk such position, of course.

In brief, this essay is an analysis of the recycling of concepts and ideas in relation to material forms. It is an evaluation of how an object or type of production may at times consist of citations from, or references to previous production, or be direct samplings that

make evident how pre-existing material is present in, or is the content of a new form in terms of appropriation. This text is about a cultural struggle that has at its disposal unprecedented tools, which are, more than anything else, a double-edged sword. And it is this sword that we must learn to handle, so that we don't perform any self-inflicted wounds. I call this sword, The Framework of Culture.

The Framework of Culture is a Double-Edged Sword

In order to understand remix in music, art, and literature we must first consider how cultural production takes effect. The Framework of Culture makes possible the act of remixing. This Framework consists of two layers which function on a feedback loop. The first layer takes effect when something is introduced in culture; such element will likely be different from what is commonly understood, and therefore it takes time for its assimilation. The second layer takes effect when that which is introduced attains cultural value and is appropriated or sampled to be reintroduced in culture. The first layer privileges research and development. Creative practice in all of the arts function on the second layer, which is why, more often than not, their production consists of appropriation, or at least citation of material with pre-defined cultural value. The two layers have actually been in place since culture itself came about, but their relation has changed with the growing efficiency in production and communication due to the rise of computing. Before we evaluate the implication of this change in creativity and contemporary critical production, we must first understand the relation of the layers.

Some examples from the past include the photo camera, the phonograph, and more recently, the computer. All of these examples were not "original" but rather drastically different because of the combination of various ideas to create a specific technology that when first introduced people had to negotiate into their lives.[1] These are rather modern examples, which were only possible once the loop between the two layers was fast enough to provide feedback at a rate that would make research and development an actual endeavor worth capital investment; but this was not always the case.

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[1] This idea is summarized by Kirby Ferguson in his short film series, "Everything is a Remix," http://www.everythingisaremix.info/watch-the-series/, accessed August 20, 2012.

Before Modernism

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│           Layer II          │
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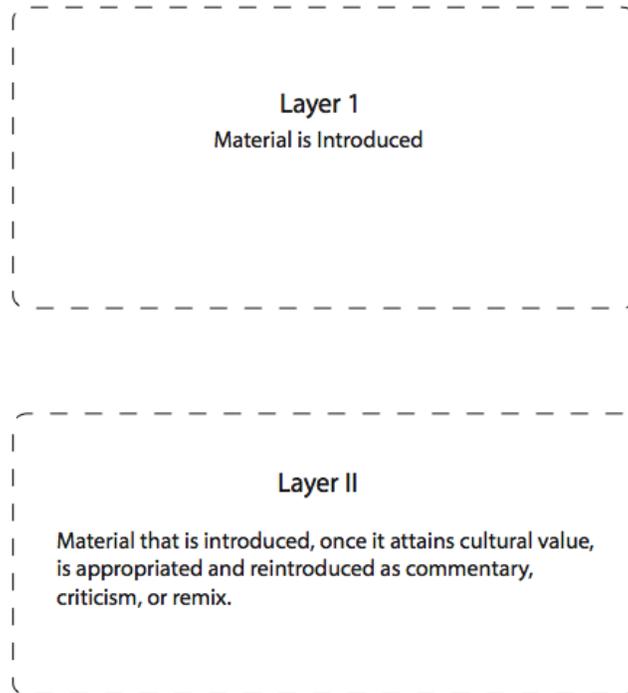
Figure 1: Framework before modernism, diagram: Eduardo Navas, http://remixtheory.net

Before this period, the two layers were separated, or at least there was a great communication lag between them. [Fig. 1] When we think back to the days prior to the enlightenment, we can see how the production of new forms and technologies took much longer to develop than in our time. This was in part due to material limitations in combination with social beliefs that perpetrated certain behaviors and attitudes towards the world.

Religion certainly played a major role in how we viewed the world. Prior to the enlightenment, people approached nature as something in which to live, in part because nature was seen as a creation of God, and thus one had to respect it and live as part of it. But as the Enlightenment took place, the belief of manipulating nature for human needs took hold of Western culture.[2] This premise enabled human beings to push for innovation, as we currently understand it. Once humans felt free to bend and shape all things, from nature to ideas for particular ideological interests, we entered a new stage when the speed of innovation becomes the driving force of what came to be known as modernism. [Fig. 2] Arguably, a recent result of this attitude to bend nature to our desires

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[2] This is something that is commonly understood in the history of science. For a very basic book see Peter Dear, *Revolutionizing the Sciences: European Knowledge and Its Ambitions, 1500-1700* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001).

is global warming, and the effects it is creating, from hurricanes in the Northern Hemisphere to the disappearance of glaciers in Antartica and the North Pole.
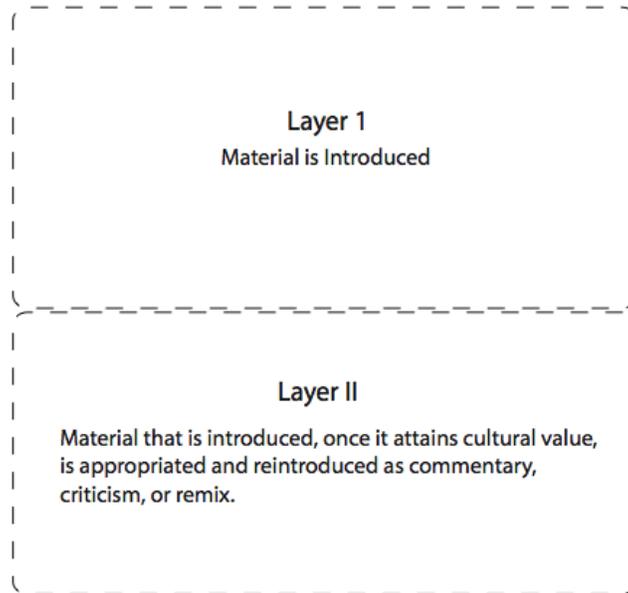
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Figure 2: Framework during modernism, diagram: Eduardo Navas, http://remixtheory.net

As modernism further developed, the efficiency of production led to an even more efficient feedback loop, one which was sensed by cultural critics who came to be associated with the postmodern period. [Fig. 3] In this case, the feedback loop is not only more efficient but begins to overlap, albeit with some delay. The relation of the two layers begins to be apparent to cultural critics and the questioning of terms such as originality, uniqueness, and the concept of progress, itself, became common subjects for intellectual debates.

What all this means is that the layers begin to share interests that push the established critical approach of the modern and postmodern onto a different position. One that we are now in the need to reflect upon. In this case, the loop's efficiency intensified as we entered our times, and currently the two layers function almost on top of each other. [Fig. 4] The result is a steady relationship between them that positions The Framework of Culture in an optimized loop; material is recycled, leading to the efficient production that is completely dependent on constant communication. This last tendency is best understood in popular terms with the concept of *constant updating*. Just how tweeter is

relevant because people keep tweeting non-stop, the two layers now have reached a frenetic pace that repositions them in a state of never-ending production.
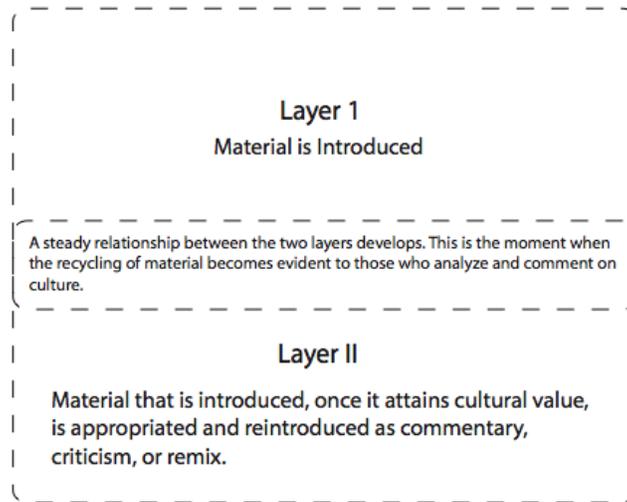
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Figure 3: Framework during postmodernism, diagram: Eduardo Navas, http://remixtheory.net

We can think of our current moment as the dream party of the house DJ, whose ultimate high is to keep the perfect beat going for hours, whose obsession is to make the entire mix of multiple songs sound like one single composition in which the dancers can push themselves physically with no other goal than to feel the beat. The perfect loop of beat-blending, then, serves as a decent metaphor for the type of productive drive behind the two layers of The Framework of Culture that appear to be one due to the Framework's current efficiency.
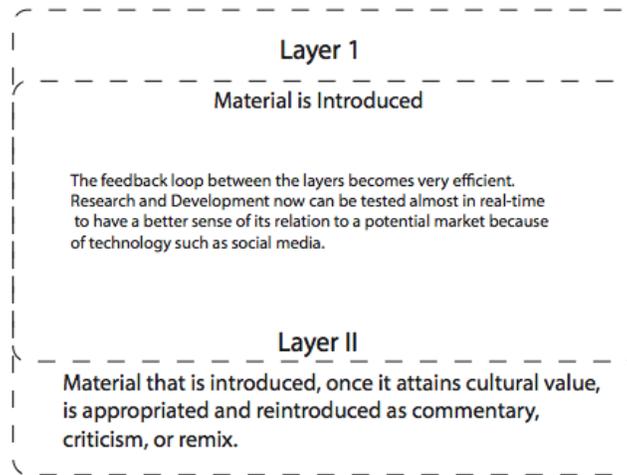
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Figure 4: Framework during the time of networks, diagram: Eduardo Navas, http://remixtheory.net

The Two Layers and Material Production

When the two layers were not working so closely together, [Figs. 1 & 2] there was some space for critical reflection as the entire process took place. This enabled the hard sciences, once we enter the Enlightenment, to become legitimated by claiming to do research not always knowing how it may be useful for practical day-to-day goals. The main purpose of science in this case was to understand how things functioned. This meant that science was strategically depoliticized, and to this day, one is likely to hear a scientist explain a theory, or an emerging technology that clearly has political and economical implications, while deliberately claiming neutrality as to how such things will take effect in our culture once it is prepared to be introduced via the media. A very common example are staticians, who during TV interviews will explain the results of polls but also will be careful not to comment on the implications of such reporting. They often repeatedly point out that the process was entirely free of bias and therefore holds up to scientific standards.[3]

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[3] During the 2012 Presidential elections in The United States, Nate Silver rose as a prominent analyst of polls. He was frequently interviewed in different news channels to explain how and why poll statistics are important.

The Framework of Culture, Music, Art, and Literature

As previously noted, creative acts in music, art, and literature function on the second layer of The Framework of Culture. These acts consist of appropriating something of cultural value in order to create meaning. This need has long been associated with intertextuality.

Intertextuality in the literary tradition is the act of embedding a text within another text, a conceptual remix of sorts where ideas are cited, but not necessarily the material object or concrete instantiation (which is what the act of remixing achieves in actual sampling of content). An intertextual work is, in essence, a literary mashup (a direct juxtaposition) of concepts.[4] Intertextuality takes effect in two ways, which can also be combined in any creative production; the first is cultural citation and the second is material sampling.

Cultural citation, which we can think of as the foundation of intertextuality, is much more difficult to trace than material sampling because at times it may be an abstract idea, or a premise that is being recycled. If the way the idea is presented is different enough, then it is considered an independent and even innovative creation. Nevertheless, an intertextual influence may be undeniable under such circumstances. Cultural citation is commonly found in literature: *Ulysses* by James Joyce is said to "borrow" or be "inspired" in part by Homer's *Odyssey*. In film, Quentin Tarantino is often criticized for recreating scenes from movie classics with his own characters. *Kill Bill* is considered his "master thesis," according to Kirby Ferguson.[5] In both Joyce's and Tarantino's work the authors' process of appropriation unfolds as one encounters it. Our engagement with their works makes evident that what we experience is not theirs, but borrowed. The intertextual process (cultural citation) in these cases makes the works important contributions to our culture.

Material sampling consists of taking parts of a source and repurposing it for one's own interests. Remixes of music function this way. Much of the production of early hip-hop relied on material sampling and quickly had problems with copyright holders; hip-hop producers were reprimanded with lawsuits. At the moment, corporations' attitudes are changing, but it is still very hard to sample for a major and official international production unless you have deep pockets.

Material sampling can be seen in the two layers functioning when looking back at the history of photography and visual art. The first layer is evident in early photography, particularly daguerrotypes. Such images, especially the very early ones, were not developed as commentary on anything specific. Their purpose was primarily experimental. They were tests in recording light on a surface over lengthy periods of time. But once this process was optimized and became efficient enough to be used by many people, a large amount of images were produced. Around the 1920s, collage, particularly, photo-collage became a valid forms of production by avant-garde artists.

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[4] See my text http://remixtheory.net/?p=444
[5] See the end of Kirby Ferguson's "Everthing Is a Remix, Part 2":
http://www.everythingisaremix.info/everything-is-a-remix-part-2/

The photo-collage, in contrast to early experimental photography, functions on the second layer of The Framework of Culture. Its primary role became to comment on pre-existing material which was evident in the recognition of its disparate elements.

It is evident that literature initially explored principles of remix in terms of cultural citation, meaning that unlike remix as popularly understood in terms of music, literature more often than not relies on referencing ideas. And the act of remixing as is often celebrated in remix festivals around the world, consists of sampling of specific material closely informed by the type of material sampling along the lines of photo-collage. Remix in music, art, and literature are meta. The creative act of appropriation in these media relies on recombining or recontextualizing material that already has cultural value to emphasize such value in the form of commentary, or aesthetic exploration. Both, even when they are aligned with different strategies of referencing, are dependent on elements that are well understood, or have some cultural validity.

All of this happens on the second layer. What takes place on the first layer—the layer of science--also is dependent on pre-existing material, which is obviously recycled in some form to develop something that appears to be new. But the difference is that this happens with a proactive attitude of action, that is, it comes about not by dwelling primarily on the cultural implications of what is being developed, but rather on how to develop something which may aid in evaluating certain cultural implications. A researcher, a scientist, primarily functioning on the first layer, then, focuses on a problem that is shared by many who have different agendas, and tries to develop a tool, device, technology—in essence a solution—with the aim to help in resolving, or at least reposition a problem.

The Feedback Loop, Research, and Culture

Today, we live in a time when research and development is closely linked to creativity as so far discussed in terms of remix. To this effect, research institutions have been developing programs that encourage the crossover between the hard sciences and the arts. The concept of the Digital Humanities, and Cultural Analytics thrive on the overlapping of the two layers.

Digital humanists, at least some of them, function like developers of new forms of analysis. Their goal is to collaborate on new tools of research defined by the possibilities that computing offers. Such humanists have the license not to take a particular critical position, but deliver new tools for use by other humanists. The digital humanities is only one example; arguably, when new media began, it also functioned in similar fashion. And before new media it was in music where much innovation took place when computer sampling found its way into music composition in the studio in terms of post-production. This activity is now a shared attitude in computing, quite evident in the basic act of cut/copy & paste; arguably, the most common form of sampling in daily life.

Currently, we are able to produce on both layers of The Framework of Culture with great efficiency. This means that remixing material as is commonly known in terms of material sampling has reached a moment in which we produce almost as fast as we speak. As a

result, we are self-aware of how we recycle ideas, information and material production. Consequently, it is in the materialization of the immaterial—that is in the careful measurement of the flow of ideas as they are embedded in different forms where there is potential for remix in music, art, and literature as forms of criticism and creative production to thrive, while functioning on the second layer; the challenge remains to push the first layer to be more transparent and admit to its relation to the politics of culture.