

2009

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The Mashup as Resistance? A Critique of Marxist Framing in the Digital Age

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Humanities and Cultural Studies
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Date of Approval:
July 10, 2009

Keywords: Hegemony, Girl Talk, Consumer Empowerment, Remix, Copyright

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this to my mom, my dad, and Randy, all who supported me and made it possible for me to pursue my academic goals.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis critiques contemporary scholarly approaches to the modern musical mashup that rely on outdated and over-generalized Marxist frameworks. These frameworks stem from an Adornian view of the culture industries that places consumers and producers in distinct and opposing roles. The mashup is therefore seen as little more than a subversive weapon for a resistant consumer class in its fight against the hegemonic structure of the mass media. A case study of the prominent mashup artist Girl Talk is presented to illustrate how the mashup can actually function as a celebratory form and how modern technological advances have destabilized traditional distinctions between consumer and producer. These technological advances, primarily the rise of the personal computer and the Internet, have empowered many consumers to engage with and create their own media. In the process, they have forced a cultural negotiation among existing ideological forces that reflects a dynamic and ever-changing hegemonic process.

Introduction

"You know: 'I'm the product, you're the consumer' — it's no longer like that."

(Yo Yo Ma, quoted in *Wired* magazine)¹

On December 15, 2002 The *New York Times* published an article titled “The Year in Ideas: Mashups.” In the article Chris Norris writes about the ‘mashup’ as a newly emerged “fad” of mixing two popular songs together. Norris juxtaposes the empowerment creating a mashup can give a person with the unlikely prospect that the mashup might make a significant impact on the cultural dominance of the music industry. Ultimately, he resigns himself to viewing the mashup as an avenue for personal and private retaliation against undesirable yet unavoidable mass media such as “Eminem’s audio terrorism.”²

In this article Norris echoes common perceptions of the mashup as an attack on mainstream music and the record industry that manufactures it. On one hand, Norris acknowledges the mashup as a notable development in the ability of the traditionally defined consumer to interact with media content and the media production process. On

¹ David Downs, “Yo-Yo Ma Brings Remix Culture to Music's Ivory Tower,” *Wired Magazine*, 22 December 2008, http://www.wired.com/entertainment/music/magazine/17-01/pl_music_mix_maestro.

² Chris Norris, “The Year in Ideas: Mashups,” *New York Times*, 15 December 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/12/15/magazine/the-year-in-ideas-mash-ups.html>.

the other hand, he criticizes the mashup as having failed to overcome or produce any kind of substantial opposition to the hegemonic control of music by the record industry. It is at this juncture of consumer empowerment and consumer opposition that the discourse surrounding the mashup finds itself. Frequently, the mashup is defined as an ideological weapon of oppressed consumers that either succeeds or fails in undermining the music industry they hope to cripple.

In this thesis I will address what shaped this discourse and critique its shortcomings. I will then provide an alternate framework for understanding the mashup that places it into a broader and less ideologically tinted movement toward increased consumer interaction with media. This movement is simultaneously being adapted to and shaped by traditional media producers in a process that reflects a more nuanced and dynamic representation of hegemony than the one traditionally provided in the discourse surrounding mashups.

The modern musical mashup is in its simplest form the combination of vocals from one song and the instrumentation from another, quite literally two songs mashed together. It is a fairly recent arrival into American culture, originating in British nightclubs as dance anthems and then quickly migrating to America via the Internet and bootleg CDs. The mashup first emerged into mainstream awareness in 2002 with Freelance Hellraiser's "A Stroke of Genie-Us," a layering of Christina Aguilera's vocal track from her song "Genie in a Bottle" with the rhythm track from The Strokes' "Hard to Explain." Further hits such as Soulwax's "Smells Like Teen Booty," a mixing of fabled grunge band Nirvana and R&B pop stars Destiny's Child, rose to prominence around the same time and cemented 2002 as the arrival of a new way of making music.

The arrival of so many mashups in the early 2000s indicated that something new was happening culturally. Yet, the mashup is still musically connected to a long lineage of experimental tape music and sampling that stretches back to the mid-twentieth century. Its most distant technological roots are found in the audio collage aesthetic of *musique concrete* of the 1950's and 60s. Both forms utilize pre-existing sounds: *Musique concrete* in its use of natural and non-musical sounds and the mashup in its use of pre-recorded and copyrighted music. Furthermore, *musique concrete* and mash-ups also share a common approach to the construction of music. In *Electronic and Experimental Music*, Thom Holmes details this approach, stating that creating a *musique concrete* piece “began with the sound material itself” rather than a score or composition, creating a process where “the *material* preceded the *structure*.”³

Mashups' unauthorized use of copyrighted music also has many precedents. As early as 1961, James Tenney was cutting up Elvis Presley songs for his piece “Collage #1 (Blue Suede).” While much of the material is slowed down or manipulated beyond recognition, there is still more than enough recognizable material present that would incur the wrath of modern-day copyright lawyers if it was produced today. By utilizing an extremely popular song as its source material, James Tenney created what many see as the first “unequivocal exposition” of audio plundering techniques. His manipulation of an iconic Elvis Presley song as a creative musical act was the first time audio collage techniques were performed on mainstream popular music. While Tenney's work comes from a much more experimental audio-collage school, his use of copyrighted materials

³ Thom Holmes, *Electronic and Experimental Music: Pioneers in Technology and Composition* (New York: Routledge 2002), 93.

nonetheless paved the way for future commercial uses of copyrighted materials. As Chris Cutler rightly notes, “the gauntlet was down.”⁴

More recent precedents can be seen in the widespread practice of sampling. Sampling, or the use of a portion of another song in one’s own song, is a fundamental component of hip-hop music. Frequently, hip-hop artists use samples to build choruses, beats, or backgrounds that are mixed with originally created vocals, drums, or other assorted sounds. While hip-hop albums released by record labels today are much more likely to be in accordance with copyright law and have their samples cleared, unauthorized sampling was rampant in early hip-hop and still occurs in the music of unsigned or ‘underground’ acts, as well as in under-the-radar “mixtapes” of prominent artists.⁵

If the modern mashup is embedded in a musical practice that has been around for more than half a century, what accounts for its sudden emergence into mass media and its quick adoption among consumers? The answer lies in the emergence of the Internet and advances in computing technology that have reshaped societal relationships to music and music production. More specifically, the modern audio mash-up is a result of the incredible amount of source material available in digital formats, the relatively

⁴ Chris Cutler, “Plunderphonics,” in *Musisc, Electronic Media, and Culture*, ed. Simon Emmerson (Burlington: Ashgate 2000), 96.

⁵ Lil’ Wayne, who is currently one of the most successful hip-hop artists in the world, rode to popularity on the back of an almost constant release of mixtapes. See Evan Serpick, “How Lil’ Wayne Became a Superstar,” *Rolling Stone*, 26 June 2008, http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/21128373/how_lil_wayne_became_a_superstar. Mixtapes, despite being big business, were generally left alone by the music industry. In the beginning of 2007, however, DJ Drama, a major mixtape DJ, was busted for his unlicensed compilations. See Kelefa Sanneh, “With Arrest of DJ Drama, the Law Takes Aim at Mixtapes,” *New York Times*, 18 January 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/18/arts/music/18dram.html>.

inexpensive cost of audio editing software, and the function of the internet as a free, global distribution platform that allows people to bypass record labels and major retailers.

The Internet's vast archive of digital music provides quick access to an almost limitless supply of source material. iTunes, the largest online retailer of music, currently has a catalogue of over 10 million songs. File sharing networks also provide access to a wealth of music including hard-to-find releases, bootlegs, and other recordings not likely to be found in traditional brick-and-mortar stores.⁶ The presence of this music in digital format means as soon as someone downloads a song, they can instantly and easily edit and manipulate it in an audio program. Greg Gillis, a prominent mash-up DJ under the moniker Girl Talk, reveals in an interview how access to the vast amount of material available on the internet provided much of the samples for his mashups, stating that he owned "under half" of the source material used.⁷

At the same time that the Internet allows access to a plethora of source material, computers allow access to the necessary processing power to manipulate them. Audio editing has progressed tremendously in the past two decades. The cost of computers has fallen dramatically as processing power has risen exponentially. Many consumer model computers can now be had for less than \$1,000 and are fully capable of running advanced audio editing software. Professional-level audio editing software itself can also be purchased for increasingly cheaper amounts. For \$350, one can purchase Digidesign's

⁶ It is important to note that originally, much of the music sold legally online was embedded with copy-prevention technology known as DRM. Thus, one had to either remove the DRM through third-party software or download the music from file-sharing networks if they wanted to manipulate it. However, in the past year, there has been a trend away from selling music with DRM as iTunes and the Amazon music store have reached agreements with record labels to sell DRM-free music.

⁷ "Interview: Girl Talk," *Pitchfork Media*, 30 August 2006, <http://pitchfork.com/features/interviews/6415-girl-talk>.

ProTools, an audio editing program used by many music professionals. Cheaper programs (and even a few free ones) are also available.

The ability to remove audio editing from an expensive studio setting with specialized hardware and transfer it to common personal computers has done much to eliminate economic and technical obstacles for amateurs to gain entry into the audio editing process. Access to digital music creation is by no means universal. Computers and audio software can still be quite expensive and a lower priority purchase for people with limited incomes. Yet compared to two decades ago, the practice has been able to expand beyond the professional studio and into the homes of people with even modest incomes.

Once someone makes a mashup, the Internet provides an easy and free way for him or her to distribute that song across the world. This is important to the success of the mashup because their legality hinges on the subjective and vague “fair use” provision of the current copyright law⁸. Danger Mouse’s *The Grey Album* provides an excellent example of the power of the Internet to distribute content despite legal efforts to prevent that distribution. To make the *Grey Album*, Danger Mouse combined the vocals from Jay-Z’s *The Black Album* with the instrumentation from the Beatles’ *The White Album*. He then made a small pressing of 3,000 copies of the album for some independent record shops in his area. Once the album found its way onto the Internet, it spread quickly across file-sharing networks and began to gain the attention of the mainstream press. EMI soon sent a cease and desist letter to Danger Mouse, who promptly complied.

⁸ Fair use allows someone to use copyrighted materials without permission for such activities as teaching, criticism, and parody, as well as in other copyrighted works provided the work is considered “transformative.”

Before the Internet, the episode would have most likely ended there. Without a way for it to be effectively physically distributed, *The Grey Album* would have been relegated to bootleg copies circulated in underground circles. In 2004, however, the album made its way to the Internet where it was shared across websites, blogs, and file-sharing services. In response, EMI began to send cease and desist letters to the websites hosting the album. In defiance, Downhillbattle.org, a music activist group, organized a day of civil disobedience dubbed “Grey Tuesday.” Over 300 websites, including one run by University of Iowa professor Kembrew McLeod, participated in the protest by hosting and making available *The Grey Album*. Organizers claimed the album was downloaded over 100,000 times on “Grey Tuesday” alone. Today, *The Grey Album* can still easily be found on file-sharing networks.⁹

Danger Mouse’s album generated tons of publicity and garnered praise from major outlets such as *The Boston Globe* and *Rolling Stone* despite not being sold in any retail stores.¹⁰ What the incident reveals is the power of the Internet to share information, even if sharing that information constitutes a crime or would incur a potential lawsuit. Indeed, before the Internet it would be very difficult to imagine *The Grey Album* or any other popular mash-up being successfully distributed without the consent and infrastructure of the major record labels or retail channels.

In much of the current discourse on mashups, a heavy focus is placed on the specter of copyright that constantly surrounds them. The heavily publicized confrontation

⁹ Bill Werde, “Defiant Downloads Rise From Underground,” *New York Times*, 25 February 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/25/arts/music/25REMI.html>.

¹⁰ See “DJ Makes Jay-Z Meet the Beatles,” *Rolling Stone*, 5 February 2004, http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/5937152/dj_makes_jayz_meet_beatles and Renee Graham, “Jay-Z, The Beatles, Meet in ‘Grey Area,’” *Boston Globe*, 10 February 2004, http://www.boston.com/news/globe/living/articles/2004/02/10/jay_z_the_beatles_meet_in_grey_area.

between EMI and supporters of *The Grey Album* is constantly used as the basis for which to understand the cultural impact and meaning of mashups, resulting in much being written on the “theft” aspect of mashups. These arguments commonly see mashups less as an act of creativity than an attempt to reclaim consumer agency in the face of a manufactured and tightly controlled mass culture. One of the ways in which they purportedly do this is by actively and purposely defying current copyright laws that play a crucial role in the music industry’s ability to maintain strict control on how its music is presented in our culture. This perception of copyright law as the legal enforcer of the mass media’s agenda makes it difficult to critique or discuss copyright law without also discussing the mass media. As such, the mashup, which inherently confronts conventional views of copyright, is increasingly perceived to also possess a critique against the mass media.

Driving this perception is a theoretical framing, exemplified in the Frankfurt School, of the media landscape that hinges on generalized Marxist terminology that sets up producers and consumers of media as two separate, distinct classes rigidly opposed to each other. In Chapter 1 I will critique the reification of Marxist theory that makes this framing possible as well as trace its influence in the scholarly discourse centered on the mashup. Through this prism of reified Marxist concepts, the mashup is predominately understood as resistant consumers’ newest weapon in their war against mass media. What this viewpoint lacks, however, is an understanding of the mashup as part of a broader consumer movement toward increased media interaction that cuts across many ideological spectrums and challenges a distinct consumer/producer dichotomy.

The mashup is not necessarily or exclusively beholden solely to resistant consumers that wish to confront mass media saturation. Not only have the large record labels used it to great success in promoting their own acts but it also forms a common way for many people to interact with and pay tribute to the music they enjoy.¹¹ In Chapter 2, I will discuss the prominent mashup artist Girl Talk and detail how his music is a reflection of his personal fascination of pop and a celebration of the music industry.

As evidenced by Girl Talk and other artists, the mashup form is not strictly rooted in a specific political or ideological position. Rather, it is the product of a larger cultural movement toward increased consumer media production and distribution brought about by the emergence of the personal computer and the Internet. Through these platforms, the ability to produce and distribute professional quality media has been made available to a much larger amount of people than ever before. In Chapter 3, I will detail how the easing of traditional economic and technical barriers between media producers and consumers has formed a new media landscape in which established media producers and consumer media producers co-exist. The established media producers have reacted to this reality in a number of different ways. Their evolving strategy to harness and control user-generated content reveals an adaptation to the fact that increased consumer engagement with media is an inevitable byproduct of current technological advances. It is also reflective of the cultural negotiation required by dominant cultural forces in a dynamic hegemonic process.

¹¹ The most prominent example of a label utilizing the mashup is the *Collision Course LP* put out by Warner Bros. that contained mashups of Jay-Z and Linkin Park. The LP, performed by the two artists on MTV's *Ultimate Mash-Ups* show, went on to become #1 on the Billboard chart. See Joe D'Angelo, "Jay-Z's Retirement Gets Even Richer As *Collision Course* Debuts At #1," *MTV.com*, 8 December 2004, http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1494614/20041208/jay_z.jhtml.

Chapter 1: A Critique of Marxist Framing of the Mashup

As the mashup straddles the line between being a part of the evolution of musical borrowing and a symptom of a newly minted process of cultural text creation, much of the current scholarly literature that concerns it works within an established discourse that centers on traditional, distinct, and oppositional separations between the producers and consumers of media that stems from a reliance on overly generalized Marxist concepts. This approach neglects broader structural changes in our relationships to media production and consumption effected by recent technological developments in favor of viewing the mashup through the familiar lens of mass media opposition. In critiquing this framework, I intend to lay the groundwork for an expanded understanding of the genre as a reflection of the larger process of increased consumer engagement with media production.

In *Marxism in Literature*, Raymond Williams critiques the tendency of Marxist theorists to take concepts originally detailed by Marx as fluid and complex and cement them into static generalities. In discussing the analysis of “base” and “superstructure,” Williams laments the effects of this process:

[T]he analytic categories, as so often in idealist thought, have, almost unnoticed, become substantive descriptions, which then take habitual priority over the whole social process to which, as analytical categories, they are attempting to speak.¹²

¹² Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1977), 80.

The result, Williams argues, is that many commentators have transformed “base” and “superstructure” from dynamic and reflective categories that aid in analyzing economic and social structures to rigidly defined terms that, in their “physical fixity,” become the descriptive and generalized conclusions of analysis of social and economical process rather than the relational building blocks on which to understand them.¹³

Williams continues his critique in his discussion of Antonio Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony. Williams is generally appreciative of the flexibility and nuance of Gramsci’s interpretation of hegemony, which understands domination and subordination not through the direct exercises of legal and military power (which Gramsci would describe as ‘rule’) but as a “saturation of the whole process of living” that penetrates all of our relationships and identities to the degree that a “specific economic, political, and cultural system” is seen by citizens as nothing more than the ‘natural’ pressures, limits, and experiences of everyday life. This definition, William’s notes, connects the powerful, but isolated, ideas of ‘culture’ and ‘ideology’ under a larger umbrella that unites them by relating the “whole social process” to existing power structures.¹⁴

While the idea of hegemony can be seen as approaching a unified theory of culture, Williams explains that hegemony is in fact a highly nuanced and flexible concept. Rather than existing as a system or structure, hegemony is first and foremost a relational process that shifts and evolves as the complex relations among various social actors and processes interact and evolve. Indeed, as Williams notes, hegemony is something that must be “continually renewed, recreated, defended, and modified.” It is in

¹³ Ibid, 82.

¹⁴ Ibid, 109.

effect a constantly updating reflection of the volatile intersection between culture, ideology, and power dynamics.

Unfortunately, Williams concedes the generalizing temptations that the concept of hegemony present have succeeded in luring many into portraying hegemony as a static ideological structure and simplifying the relationship between the dominant and subordinated classes. This simplification generally entails having the dominant class possess a fairly clear-cut ideology which it easily and directly distributes to the subordinating class which either subsumes the entire ideology or has it imposed on its own competing ideology, leading to a struggle for the subordinated to overcome the “ruling-class ideology” of the dominant group. This transition of hegemony from the nuanced, complex and ever-changing process originally laid out by Gramsci into what Williams deems an “abstract totalization” creates an environment in which all “political and cultural initiatives and contributions” are reduced to “fixed positions” and understood solely in terms of their relation to the statically defined hegemony, a practice Williams finds “misleading.”¹⁵

Much of the groundwork for this eventual reification of Marxist concepts of hegemony and economic and social structure can be found in Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s influential *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in which Adorno and Horkheimer rail against the “totality of the culture industry.” This culture industry “crushes” insubordination and penetrates people’s entire life by:

subordinating in the same way and to the same end all areas of intellectual creation, by occupying men’s senses from the time they leave the factory in the

¹⁵ Ibid, 109-113.

evening to the time they clock in again the next morning with matter that bears the impress of the day.¹⁶

Adorno and Horkheimer further equate the selling of products with propaganda, noting that the desire of each is the same: “to overpower the customer, who is conceived as absent-minded or resistant.”¹⁷ This framing coincides nicely with William’s critical discussion about hegemonic framing in which the dominant (in this case, the culture industry) imposes its ideology on either unsuspecting or resistant subordinates (the consumer). Continuing on, Adorno and Horkheimer see this imposition as so thorough, penetrating so deep into the cells of everyday life, that they, again using the framing criticized by Williams, dismiss forms and works that conflicts with this dominant ideology as “inherent in the technical and personnel apparatus which.....forms part of the economic mechanism of selection.” These conflicts thus exist as “calculated mutations” which are cultivated in order to validate the system. Once their resistance is “noted by the industry” the defier is subsumed by it, similar to the way the land-reformer eventually subsumes to capitalism.¹⁸ The result is a false sense of agency among the resisters that Adorno and Horkheimer deem “pseudo individuality.”¹⁹ Indeed, Adorno and Horkheimer cynically declare that the culture industry so thoroughly controls cultural production and perception that “none may escape.”²⁰

Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique defines the relationship between the culture industry and consumers as one of complete and thorough domination. Underlining all of their evaluations and opinions is nothing short of a fatalistic sense of brainwashed and

¹⁶ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2002), 131.

¹⁷ Ibid, 163.

¹⁸ Ibid, 122-132.

¹⁹ Ibid, 154.

²⁰ Ibid, 123.

ignorant consumers operating under the control of blank-faced executives working in concert to maximize profit and minimize any sense of individuality among their consumers. At times, they even acknowledge the seemingly overt nature of their claims, noting for instance that the stream of identical and indoctrinating content is so steady and polished that “one might think that an omnipresent authority had sifted the material and drawn up an official catalog of cultural commodities to provide a smooth supply of available mass-produced lines.”²¹

Yet their vision, while overarchingly critical, is understandable and even enticing as a skeptical view of capitalism and mass culture. Who hasn't seen the same recycled movie plots trotted forth year after year or the same songs played on the radio day after day and not bristled at the extent that a few large corporations have a vice like grip on the markets for products such as movies, music, and books. The rise of giant media conglomerates in the last few decades such as AOL-Time Warner, Disney, Sony, Viacom, and News Corporation has seemingly given primary control of traditional media markets to a handful of companies. In 2007 for example, just four companies, Universal Music Group, Sony BMG Music Entertainment, EMI Group, and Warner Music Group combined for 86.6% of the US marketshare for music sold.²² Indeed, while one can argue about the ability or desire of the biggest media companies to instill a dominant cultural ideology through their products, it cannot be argued that consumer access to traditional sources of media has increasingly been controlled and filtered by a smaller and smaller number of giant media companies.

²¹ Ibid, 135.

²²IFPI Market Research, “Music Sales Data 2007 – US, UK, & Canada,” *International Federation of the Phonographic Industry*, <http://www.ifpi.org/content/library/MUSIC-MARKET-DATA-2007.pdf>.

Yet, as the traditional media platforms have come increasingly under the control of a select few massive media conglomerates, the personal computer and the Internet have created a platform that opens up entirely new areas of media production and consumption for a vastly wider variety of content producers and gatekeepers. The relatively low cost of professional level media production software and hardware combined with the massive distribution network enabled by the Internet gives almost anyone with access to a computer and the Internet the ability to produce content that can be seen by just as many if not more people than any traditional media distribution platform. This development has enabled large groups of people traditionally classified as consumers to actually move back and forth between consumer, producer, and distributor roles and in the process modify the distinct class and power dynamics traditionally underlying each term.

In the three most prominent scholarly articles that focus on mashups, there is little discussion of the broader implications that the computer and the Internet create for long-term media production and consumption processes. Instead, the authors view the technological developments through a limiting framework that closely mirrors the strict oppositional relationship between producers and consumers that is laid out by Adorno and Horkheimer. Namely, that the culture industry (represented by the big music labels) is a monolithic, anti-consumer force that operates in the name of profits at the expense of creativity and agency of its consumers, whom it is perpetually positioned against. On the other side of this equation is the oppressed consumer, overwhelmed with the saturation of the current media landscape and its ideological messages, utilizing modern computing technologies to send its own oppositional messages. The mashup is therefore seen as the

weapon of these weary and frustrated consumers in a war of subversion against the forces of the hegemonic music industry.

In “The Apolitical Irony of Generational Mash-up: A Cultural Case Study in Popular Music,” Michael Serazio begins by stating, quite approvingly, that the mashup is a “clever and fitting expression” of today’s youth media experience.²³ What Serazio means by today’s youth media experience is apparently the rejection of mass-mediated culture put forth by the culture industry. To make his point, Serazio quotes Robin Balliger who argues, “Oppositional music practices not only act as a form of resistance against domination, but generate social relationships and experience which can form the basis of a new cultural sensibility.” Serazio agrees, pegging the mashup as an oppositional musical practice and later noting that technology is a tool that helps the audience “fend off” and “produce contentious counterpoints” to the culture industry.²⁴ In effect, the mashup becomes an act of cultural resistance to the “culture factories.”²⁵

Serazio sees the success of this resistance to the culture industry as belied by the ability of the “music culture hegemony” to adapt to the mashup’s impact. Serazio further argues that “Big Music” has “re-appropriated the underground art of re-appropriation” and that the mash-up has “sold out.”²⁶ To Serazio, the fact that the mashup was quickly utilized by record labels and prominent mashup artists signed deals with the big record labels signaled a cultural power play by “Big Music” and a failure of mashup artists to stick to their principles. Serazio’s reading embraces the reification of Marxist concepts

²³ Michael Serazio, “The Apolitical Irony of Generation Mash-Up: A Cultural Case Study in Popular Music.” *Popular Music and Society*, 31(1): 79.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 86-88.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 81.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 88.

stemming from Adorno to frame the mashup against the backdrop of powerful producers and resistant consumers. To Serazio, the mashup is a cultural weapon whose inherent purpose is to empower and arm resistant consumers in their fight against the mass media. It is in this way that consumers are the rightful owners of the mashup. Therefore, any crossover between the two sides is an act tantamount to cultural treason. What Serazio seems to neglect, however, is the possibility that the mashup is devoid of the oppositional meaning placed on it and is just another entry in a long line of creative musical processes that should certainly be available to any music creator who wishes to use it.

In further analysis, Serazio begins to express deep skepticism about the mashup concerning the substance of its expression. He laments that mashups are “surprisingly vapid” when it comes to carrying a real political message. Further, Serazio expresses uncertainty that mashups carry *any* message at all. He eventually settles upon the idea that mashups are merely “detached, wry commentary,” the sonic equivalent of reading *The Onion* or wearing a humorously ironic T-shirt. Serazio further cements this idea of the mashup as an empty message in his final paragraph where, after quoting an inspiring passage from Angelica Madeira about the political empowerment found in music, he states his uncertainty about what the mashup even has to say. A tinge of regret and disappointment highlights this conclusion as Serazio reluctantly accepts the mashup’s failure to deflate the institutional power of “Big Music” and carve out a substantial and sustainable area of cultural resistance. His final equation of it with flaccid, harmless, for-profit commentary presents the mashup as nothing more than a defeated foe, conquered

by the hegemonic structure that neutered it and turned it into a bastardized, money-making appropriation.²⁷

In “Danger Mouse’s *Grey Album*, Mash-Ups, and the Age of Composition,” Philip A. Gunderson takes a broader and more idealistic approach than Serazio in his view of mashups, yet still fundamentally sees them as nothing more than an oppositional tool in the ideological warfare between the culture industry and its resistant audience. Gunderson begins by making the extravagant claim that mashups “have shown how the recording industry has been rendered superfluous by advances in music production technology.”²⁸ Gunderson implies that the recording industry’s only reason for existence was to control the means of production of music making. Now that the ability to make music was open to anyone who felt like trying, the music industry’s value is nonexistent. Gunderson buttresses this implication by approvingly suggesting that the mashup is a significant step toward Jacques Attali’s “age of composition”, a socialistic ideal where consumers produce music for themselves. In this “age of composition” the traditional opposition of the “active producer and passive consumer” would disappear as the consumer acquires the necessary tools to become an active participant in the creation and dissemination of media.²⁹

Unfortunately, Gunderson sees the mashup not as modifying this traditional opposition, but eventually destroying it. He, like Serazio, sees the process of making a mashup as a conscious effort to undermine the music industry. He declares *The Grey*

²⁷ Ibid, 91-92.

²⁸ Philip A. Gunderson, “Danger Mouse's *Grey Album*, Mash-Ups, and the Age of Composition,” *Postmodern Culture*, 15(1): 2.

²⁹ Ibid, 5.

Album to be not only a lesson in history but also “itself an *act* of resistance.” Further forcing the mashup into one role is Gunderson’s, like Serazio’s, insistence that a mashup must employ the use of humor and irony in order to properly subvert the music industry and make a statement about the contemporary media landscape. Indeed, Gunderson declares that a “sense of humor” is “immanent to a good mash-up.” Further, in his conclusion, Gunderson states that Danger Mouse, through the *Grey Album*, implies that art could only move forward when “repressive pieties are broken down and humor injected into the mix.”³⁰

Yet Gunderson does hit upon valuable insight into the broader structural changes that have changed society’s relationship to information when he states, “the increasingly wide availability of powerful computers in advanced capitalist countries suggests a gradual democratization of technology that does foster utopian impulses.” Ultimately, however, Gunderson views this democratization as a destructive, rather than a modifying, force, claiming it “threatens all industries that have traditionally profited as the producers and gatekeepers of information.” To Gunderson, this threat is best exemplified by the mashup, which he sees as not merely agitated commentary but a musical “war machine” burning within the confines of mass music.³¹

Gunderson’s theoretical framing in the article implies that by giving the subordinated the physical tools to produce their own culture they will finally overcome the “ruling class.” Yet there are problems with his analysis. Despite conventional framing of producers and consumers as not only opposites, but also enemies, Gunderson fails to

³⁰ Ibid, 5-7.

³¹ Ibid, 3-9.

acknowledge that the mash-up is itself a byproduct of capitalistic production and subservient to the materials made available by the process it supposedly upends. If the “age of composition” subsists solely of consumers making music for themselves, the mashup will also cease to exist.

In “Confessions of an intellectual (Property): Danger Mouse, Mickey Mouse, Sonny Bono, and my long and winding path as a copyright activist-academic,” Kembrew McLeod discusses mashups primarily as a concrete illustration of how copyright law and modern conceptions of intellectual property are outdated. Through his own personal involvement in the act of digital civil disobedience known as *Grey Tuesday*, McLeod provides a first hand account of the uncomfortable legal area mashups, their creators, and their supporters find themselves in and offers a brief, but insightful, summary of the shifting producer/consumer dynamic and what it means for current interpretation of copyright law.

Yet, while McLeod does well to understand what this shifting dynamic means legally for our understanding of copyright and intellectual property, he fails to see beyond conventional oppositional framing when understanding the mashup culturally. His association of the mashup with cultural resistance to outdated copyright laws and the aggressive practices of large copyright holders presumes a cultural resistance to the industry itself and its products. After linking mashups to a broader strain of audio collage, arguing its place in a respected lineage including *musique concrete* and tape music he, like Serazio, pigeon-holes mashups purely as ironic media commentary. He argues

mashups “demolish the elitist pop-cultural hierarchy that rock critics and music collecting snobs perpetuate.”³²

McLeod further argues that mashup makers demolish this hierarchy by undermining it, again, with humor. After offering examples of specific mashups that result in humorous juxtapositions McLeod overarchingly rules that making a mashup “requires” listening for a song that will “hilariously undermine the authority of another.”³³ While McLeod offers a convincing analysis of how certain mashups do have fun with arbitrary designations between genres and artists, his declaration that this fun only exists in the realm of malicious subversion and undermining speaks more to his framing of the mashup than actual evidence. Indeed, rather than rely on how the source material is actually used, McLeod, Serazio, and Gunderson focus almost exclusively on *what* source material is used. Their assumption that ‘sacred’ works are chosen solely so they can be undermined dismisses the massive adoration for certain songs among consumers that makes the work ‘sacred’ in the first place and contributes to the mashed version’s success. Further, their collective insistence that subversive humor and irony are inherent components of the mashup is an attempt to strip the mashup of the openness of expression and composition found in all other musical forms and reify it as a static ideological practice of resistant consumers.

The viewpoints presented by Serazio, Gunderson, and McLeod define the mashup and its meaning almost solely based on musical displays of subversion aimed at the mass

³² Kembrew McLeod, “Confessions of an intellectual (Property): Danger Mouse, Mickey Mouse, Sonny Bono, and My Long and Winding Path as a Copyright Activist-Academic,” *Popular Music and Society*, 28(1): 82.

³³ *Ibid*, 85.

media. By doing this, they pigeon hole the mashup into an existing discourse on mass media subversion without fully acknowledging the unique cultural implications and complexities of increased consumer engagement with media production. In *Quotation and Cultural Meaning in Twentieth-Century Music*, David Metzger provides an excellent example of this discourse. In a chapter entitled “Sampling and Thievery,” Metzger explores how sampling had been transformed from an artistic tool into an act of cultural resistance against mass media. Through the extensive use of warfare terminology, Metzger argues that “theft musicians” such as Negativland, John Oswald, and the Tape Beatles, are “enlisting” quotation in a larger fight against the mass media.³⁴ According to Metzger, this fight encompasses complimentary critiques on the dehumanizing nature of the mass media as well as an opposition to stringent copyright laws. To Metzger, these two issues are practically inseparable since the illegality in the borrowing is “central” to the cultural critique of mass media domination.³⁵ Going even further, Metzger later argues that the harshest critiques contained in the music, the cultural commentary about mass media and its “effacement of individuality,” are primarily produced by the ‘stealing’ of samples in the face of inevitable legal consequences rather than in the way they are actually used.³⁶

The mashups discussed in the articles of Serazio, Gunderson, and McLeod and Metzger’s “theft music” are similar in many ways. They all utilized unauthorized samples from popular music, were legally controversial, in some cases came under massive legal fire, and were arguably at odds with the contemporary mass media establishment. By focusing on and extrapolating these commonalities to the entire mashup form, Serazio,

³⁴ David Metzger, *Quotation and Cultural Meaning in Twentieth-Century Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003), 163.

³⁵ Ibid, 176.

³⁶ Ibid, 187.

McLeod, and Gunderson seem to argue for the inclusion of the mashup into Metzger's "theft music", or "quotation as resistance."³⁷ In doing so, they reaffirm Adorno and Horkheimer's framing of producers and consumers as a strictly negative and oppositional relationship that subsists solely of competing exertions of dominance and resistance.

Unfortunately, this viewpoint is extremely limited. While McLeod, Serazio, and Gunderson insightfully make the case as to why certain mashups fit into the idea of "theft music," they fail to recognize that the mashup, by their own admission easily constructed through accessible and ubiquitous tools, is a symptom of a much larger consumer engagement with media production and distribution. Many mashups are nothing more than fan tributes or attempts to cash in on a new trend. Their existence does not necessarily oppose the mass media even though they do help in modifying the traditional consumer/producer relationship. As many mashups as there are today (and indeed, a quick internet search will produce a staggering amount of results), it is inconceivable to expect that they all harbor a resistance against the very songs and companies that they draw from.

This neglect of the more politically neutral aspects of the mashup are a result of the reification of Marxist terms that has shaped much of the discourse of popular music around two oppositional classes: the dominant media producers and distributors and the subordinate consumers. According to Dominic Strinati, this framing relegates cultural production solely to the realm of how they relate to the struggle between these two classes. This mode of analysis, which Strinati labels as "class reductionism," results in affixing the more neutral and politically independent "autonomous effects" of cultural

³⁷ Ibid, 184.

activities with the same static, ideological intentions of whichever class it is determined to emanate from.³⁸ As Raymond Williams argues, cultural activities are not necessarily conceived with neatly defined ideological and political parameters. While we must acknowledge and analyze the ways cultural activities interact with and are used by ideological forces, we must first recognize what Raymond Williams calls the “finite but significant openness” of these activities.³⁹

By repositioning the mashup from an ideologically saturated sonic assault on hegemonic forces to a musical byproduct of increased consumer engagement with media production we can begin to see the ‘openness’ of the mashup. While the mashup quickly found itself thrust into a legal and cultural battle upon its arrival, it has since sustained itself as a popular form for many different creators, professional and amateur alike, to use. Not just a tool in mass media subversion, it is not uncommon to see mashups utilized as official remixes for big label acts. Even outside of the big labels, mashups have shed the perception of a legal and cultural weapon to become a common way for many people to interact with and celebrate the music they love. As the prominent mashup artist Girl Talk will illustrate, many mashups are created that embrace and celebrate the mass media.

³⁸ Dominic Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge 2004), 156.

³⁹ Williams, 114.

Chapter 2: Girl Talk: A Case Study

The prominent mashup artist Girl Talk, aka Greg Gillis, is illustrative of two key aspects of the social and technological milieu surrounding the mashup that are currently ignored or downplayed by a reified Marxist discourse. First, Gillis' gradual rise to fame was made possible by the personal computer revolution that removed technical and economic barriers that would have proved insurmountable otherwise. Second, Gillis' work trumpets and emphasizes the pop hook in celebration of the music industry. This passion is further seen in Gillis' famous live shows where traditional performer/audience relationships are broken down in favor of a collective party atmosphere with Gillis as a participant. These two elements, Gillis' entrance into full time music production and his work itself, do not correspond to generalized Marxist interpretations of the cultural role and impact of the mashup. Instead, they provide an excellent illustration of not only how the mashup can be used to celebrate mass media and "mainstream" music but also how the technological developments enabling the mashup are collapsing historical separations between media producers and media consumers

Many of the first-wave mashups came from established DJs and full-time musicians. As the mashup first emerged in British dance clubs, it was initially the province of European club DJs looking for something innovative and creative to get people to dance. As the popularity of the mashup grew and the ability of the internet to

distribute legally ambiguous media was further cemented through the increased use of file sharing services, the mashup spread beyond professional DJs like Soulwax and Danger Mouse and began to realize its place in a broader realm of consumer interaction with media.

As discussed earlier, Serazio, Gunderson, and McLeod's framing of the mashup creates a distinct, oppositional relationship between consumer and producer. This framework results in interpretations that view the technological developments that have enabled the mashup merely as an increased arming of resistant consumers in a perpetual war against the culture industries. What these interpretations fail to understand is that these technological developments blur, rather than reinforce, the distinctions between producer and consumers. They allow non-musicians to create and produce professional-quality media as a hobby as well as allow amateur musicians easier methods of creating, recording, and distributing their works.

These people have come to be labeled 'bedroom producers.' The term, non-existent before 2001, emphasizes the amateur nature of the process (despite the success of the artist). In an album review for Irish Public Broadcaster RTE, Luke McManus describes bedroom producers as "lone rangers" that "operate in an introverted world of Apple G5's and dirty coffee cups, working through the night, lit only by the blue light of their computer monitors."⁴⁰ This description, while romanticized, nonetheless hits upon a key point. Many of these 'bedroom producers' operate outside of the traditional sphere of professional media production and distribution that has historically separated professional

⁴⁰ Luke McManus, "Album Reviews – Four Tet – Everything Ecstatic," *RTE Entertainment*, <http://www.rte.ie/arts/2005/0707/fourtet.html>.

musicians and media producers from their audience. This new class of creators blurs the line between consumer and producer and operates as a fluid link between the two.

Greg Gillis is a prime example of this ‘bedroom producer.’ Gillis, like many people, became interested in music as a teenager and went on to join a noise-rock band during his high school days. The music, like it does for many people, eventually had to take a backseat to real world economic and educational considerations. As he proceeded through high school, college, and into an engineering career, music increasingly became more of a personal hobby. His job as a biomedical engineer was a typical professional job, requiring 8+ hour days, five days a week. This left little time for music creation.⁴¹

In decades prior, it would have required significant personal and financial dedication to continue to make and record music. The traditional band route required scheduling coordination with other band members and financial investments into instruments as well as performing and recording technologies. Typically, amateurs could only choose between prohibitively expensive studio time and the poor fidelity of self-recording. The resulting recordings were then usually shopped around as demos in hopes of acquiring backing from a record label. Only then, would a band be able to produce professional sounding music.

However, thanks to the rise of the personal computer, the digitization of music, and audio editing software, Gillis was able to produce and record professional quality music in his own house, on his own time, on his own consumer-level laptop. He generally produced his music after he arrived home from work, around an hour a day. Under the

⁴¹ Stereogum Blog, “Quit Your Day Job – Girl Talk,” 7 February 2007, http://stereogum.com/archives/quit-your-day-job/quit-your-day-job-girl-talk_004530.html.

moniker of Girl Talk, he eventually acquired a small fan base in his city of Pittsburgh and landed a deal with the label Illegal Art. Generally, he would only perform shows on Fridays and Saturdays. Then, on Sunday he would drive or fly back to Pittsburgh in order to be at work Monday morning.⁴²

His persistence eventually paid off as the 2006 release of his third album, Night Ripper, started to earn him acclaim in the music press. His extensive use of samples plus the virtuosic way in which he manipulated them allowed him to stand apart from a crowded field in the surging genre of the mashup. As his fame continued to increase, his day job continued to restrain him. Gillis continued working his full time job, only performing shows on weekends in cities in close proximity to Pittsburg. It was only in May 2007, after continued success, that Gillis was able to quit his job and become a musician full-time.⁴³

What is notable in Gillis' story is the way in which technology provided a path for his success. Many people own instruments and play them in their spare time as a hobby. To transform that hobby into actual quality recordings used to be a very expensive process. The advent of music production software, however, has enabled the recreation of a studio setting in a home at a miniscule amount of the cost and has allowed more people access to professional recording and producing technology. Further, music creation software itself allows many people (like Gillis), to create music entirely on their computers, eliminating almost all additional costs outside of the computer (which many people already own for other uses) and software (which range in price from free to a few

⁴² *Pitchfork Media*, <http://pitchfork.com/features/interviews/6415-girl-talk>.

⁴³ M. Hugh Steeply, "Girl Talk - Manufacturing Nostalgia, Pushing Squares," *Tiny Mixtapes*, December 2007, <http://www.tinymixtapes.com/Girl-Talk,4911>.

hundred dollars). While talent and creativity certainly played a huge role in Gillis' success, the ability to produce and record professional-quality music at a drastically reduced cost in his own home significantly helped him clear many economic and logistical hurdles that previously hampered amateur musicians in producing and distributing their own music.

By significantly lowering the economic and technical cost of entry to produce and distribute professional quality music, the personal computer and the Internet have allowed many people to engage with music production as a hobby or commercial pursuit. Most importantly, as seen in Gillis' experience, they can do it without being forced to adopt music as their chosen profession or commit large sums of money to it. This dynamic encourages much greater participation in music production and interaction by amateurs and novices and serves to cripple many of the key distinctions that have historically separated them from music producers.

In addition to his status as a "bedroom producer," Gillis' further undercuts the oppositional framework utilized by Serazio, Gunderson, and McLeod by musically embracing and vocally defending Top 40 music. His work, which emphasizes and idolizes the catchy pop hook, compliments his defense of "mainstream" music, expressed in numerous interviews, as works containing much emotional and nostalgic attachment as they interweave through so many people's life experiences. Underlying this defense is a rejection of the common negative perception of the "mainstream" that is a byproduct of reified Marxist framings of the music industry.

Under these reified Marxist interpretations, the hegemony of the music industry is a dominating static structure that transmits its ideological message to the subordinate consumers through its mass produced acts. Thus, anything that enjoys widespread success and enters the ‘mainstream’ is typically perceived as an artificial and inauthentic tool to increase profits and ideological dominance. This cultural demonization of the mainstream helps explain why so many commentators see the mashup purely as an act of media subversion. If mainstream music is the province of the record labels, and mashups, which use mainstream content, are the province of the consumers, then the mashups must be subversive and mocking in order to maintain an oppositional relationship.

In “Mainstreaming: From Hegemonic Centre to Global Networks,” Jason Toynbee offers up an alternative, and nuanced, understanding of the “mainstream.” Specifically, Toynbee argues that instead of understanding the mainstream as a static structure imposed on indiscriminate consumers, we should understand it as a process that brings together many people into a “common affiliation to a music style.”⁴⁴ Like many scholars, Toynbee understands this process of ‘mainstreaming’ as indicative of a larger hegemony. But unlike Serazio, Gunderson, and McLeod, Toynbee attempts to understand hegemony not as a negative ideological structure imposed on subordinate classes but as a process for organizing and maintaining social relations. While his interpretation accepts hegemony as being reflective of a dominant set of values, it is important to understand that it also adapts to and accepts counter values as it constantly shifts to sustain itself. Toynbee’s concluding argument is to understand mainstreaming in the same way, as a

⁴⁴ Jayson Toynbee, *Making Popular Music* (New York: Oxford University Press 2000), 150.

process that incorporates a certain set of values, but one that is also responsive to the interests of the consumers that sustain it.

Throughout the many interviews he has given, Greg Gillis has repeatedly expressed a similar sentiment as Toynebee and defended the notion of the mainstream, stating that pop is “sincere and up-front”⁴⁵ and that his album Night Ripper “champion[s] top 40 stuff.”⁴⁶ Further defending mainstream music from the perception that it is somehow inauthentic, Gillis says:

I don't really view pop as superficial. When people dance to these songs at their weddings, lose their virginity to these songs, remember their childhood by these songs, I can't think of anything less superficial. I'm not trying to be subversive with my work. I am celebrating top 40 as the soundtrack to many peoples' lives.⁴⁷

To Gillis, mainstream pop songs, routinely criticized as mass-manufactured and devoid of meaning, take on significantly personalized and authentic connections with people as they become embedded into the fabric of their lives. As time passes, those songs increasingly become powerful nostalgic connections to those key moments or eras. Gillis' music attempts to tap into those connections and draw out the emotional resonance they have for many people. Thus, much of the success of Gillis' albums and performances depends on wisely selecting specific moments of specific songs that will produce the greatest nostalgic impact on his audience. While he has proved adept at this process in America, European audiences have proven to be much more difficult for Gillis. His unfamiliarity with the day-to-day cultures of various European countries has limited his ability to create music that consistently resonates with European audiences.

⁴⁵ Mark Richardson, “Interview with Girl Talk,” *Pitchfork Media*, 6 October 2008, <http://pitchfork.com/features/interviews/7522-girl-talk>.

⁴⁶ *Pitchfork Media*, <http://pitchfork.com/features/interviews/6415-girl-talk>.

⁴⁷ Alex Mudge, “Interview: Girl Talk (w/Greg Gillis),” *Aural States*, 7 October 2008, <http://auralstates.com/2008/10/girl-talk-interview-w-gregg-gillis.html>.

As he freely admits, his performances in Europe are subsequently “hit-or-miss” because it’s “impossible” for him to know what any given song means to the people he is performing for.⁴⁸

Gillis’ obvious reverence for the cultural and nostalgic power of pop music is most explicitly reflected in the idolization and tribute he pays to memorable pop hooks in his songs. Instead of creating the typical mashups of two complete songs mixed together, Gillis employs a rapid-fire use of a wide variety of samples to create incredibly unique, intricate, and relentlessly energetic songs. Any given Girl Talk song is likely to use dozens of different samples. Within these songs, there is no easily identifiable song structure. Instead, Gillis’ albums are constructed as one long dance mix. Within this mix, Gillis uses the familiar dance technique of building tension at moderate tempo and then climaxing into a higher tempo “chorus.” Gillis almost always centers these choruses on a well-known and memorable pop hook that is allowed to completely play through.

A close study of Gillis’ song “In Step” from his album Feed The Animals reveals the central place reserved for memorable pop hooks in Gillis’ music. “In Step” essentially contains three separate sections of building tension and a releasing climax, each connected to the next by short transitions. The first section starts out with a verse from one hit wonder Drama’s briefly popular rap song “Left, Right, Left” layered over the backing melody to Roy Orbison’s “You Got It” and the percussion from Jermaine Stewart’s “We Don’t Have to Take our Clothes Off.” As the tension begins to build under the repeating loop of Orbison’s song and Drama’s escalating verse, Gillis begins to insert backing vocals from Orbison’s song, teasing the eventual playing of the song’s chorus.

⁴⁸ Richardson

Finally, the tension releases into the full chorus of “You Got it” as a new, faster percussion emerges and Drama’s verse is cut and replaced with repeated snippets of the chorus from the same song, forming a backing beat which lingers in the background as Orbison’s chorus plays out.

The song then transitions to the next section, which, after a few disparate samples, settles into the instrumentation to Nirvana’s “Lithium” moments before the aggressive guitars and Kurt Cobain’s screams are unleashed in the chorus. Layered over this is a repeated snippet from a verse from Salt-N-Pepa’s “Push It.” The tension created from the looping of the acoustic Nirvana sample and the repeated Salt-N-Pepa vocal snippet gives way to the full chorus of “Lithium,” which is paired with the teased verse from “Push It” and again, a new, faster percussion sample. After the verse from “Push It” ends, the chorus from “Lithium” continues to play out by itself for another eight seconds.

The end of “Lithium” immediately transitions to the final section of the song, a layering of rapper Ludacris’ verse from Fergi’s “Glamorous,” the opening instrumentation from Earth, Wind, & Fire’s “September,” and the percussion from INXS’ “Need You Tonight.” The INXS sample eventually gives way to a faster percussion sample from Kraftwerk’s “Tour De France” as Ludacris’ verse continues and the Earth, Wind & Fire sample loops. Again, the section climaxes into the chorus from “September” as Ludacris’ verse drops out of the song and additional percussion is added. One loop of the “September” chorus fully plays out before Gillis begins to mix it with the chorus to “Glamorous.” The song then transitions into a short outro.

These three separate sections all operate under roughly the same formula: The instrumentation from an incredibly well known and successful song is initially paired with rap vocals and percussion. As the sampled verse goes on, the song builds more and more tension as the sampled instrumentation loops and teases the eventual arrival of the pop hook. Finally, the song releases into the memorable chorus as climactic percussion is added and all other elements fade into the background. This formula is repeatedly found in Girl Talk recordings, including his most famous mashup, a pairing of Notorious B.I.G.'s verse from "Juicy," with the instrumentation and chorus from Elton John's "Tiny Dancer."⁴⁹

What this technique does first and foremost is to celebrate the memorable pop hook and harness its nostalgic connections and time-tested success. Whenever Girl Talk chooses a hook to anchor a climactic release, it is almost always one that has enjoyed lasting commercial and/or critical success. He then builds up to the hook by teasing it through the use of the instrumentation or snippets of vocals before releasing into the hook. Once Girl Talk releases into the hook, however, he puts his rapid-fire sampling technique in check and allows the hook to be the sole focus of the song for at least one full loop. This can be seen in the first section of "In Step" where Drama's verse drops out and he immediately drops to the background as Orbison's hook takes the forefront and the song plays uninterrupted for a full 15 seconds (which is quite a lot of time in a Girl Talk song). This same practice is seen again in the final section where Ludacris' verse, just like Drama's, drops out and the chorus to "September" plays uninterrupted for 18 seconds. Even in the middle section, where the guitar chorus to "Lithium" seemingly

⁴⁹ Maggie Reeb, "Girl Talk Pumps up the Volume," *The Flat Hat*, 3 March 2009, <http://flathatnews.com/content/70225/girl-talk-pumps-volume>.

shares the stage with a verse from “Push It,” Gillis still pays tribute by allowing the “Lithium” chorus to play on its own for another eight seconds after the verse from “Push It” ends.

Gillis’ use of memorable and successful pop hooks as climactic anchors for his songs as well as his tendency to let them fully play out with minimal interruption indicate Gillis’ reverence for the power of pop hooks and pop music itself and illustrates his trust in their emotional impact on his listeners. His music, in a sense, functions as a celebratory dance for the record industry that effectively carves out pedestals for the most memorable and meaningful pop hooks and places them on full display in the signature moments of each song while lesser known hooks and verses are used as supporting elements.

Girl Talk’s celebration of pop music extends from his music to his live performances as well. His performances, which frequently resemble a house party more than they do a concert, are not just a celebration of mainstream pop music but are also reflective of Gillis’ background as a “bedroom producer.” Gillis, who never set out to be a full-time musician, never fully experienced or internalized the separation between professional musicians and their audiences that are inherent to much of the professional music sphere. As such, his concerts fail to reflect the performative distinctions that acknowledge and reinforce that separation in favor of a less hierarchal relationship between performer and audience.

In his book *Musicking*, Christopher Small argues that music is not just an isolated, created ‘thing’ but rather a social activity. Embodying this idea in the word “musicking,” Small emphasizes many social elements of music performance and listening that are

neglected amidst the heavy focus on the formal elements of the work itself. By analyzing all aspects of a musical performance, from the dress and customs of the performers and the audience to the structure of the concert hall, much can be learned about the real and idealized relationships and values in the society itself.

In discussing the relationship between the audience and the performer, Small analyzes how the structure of a classical concert hall imposes established social rules onto the performance, noting that the building itself “dramatizes and makes visible certain types of relationships.” The separation of the performer and the audience by an elevated stage acts as a social barrier that establishes the performer as the dominant and the audience as the subordinate. While this setup of the stage and the separation of performer and audience is so commonplace and accepted as the parameters of musical performance, these relationships, as Small notes, “are not god-given.” Humans created the separate spheres for the performer and the audience and those spheres necessarily reflect a set of social values.⁵⁰

While Small’s analysis is focused primarily on the classical music performance, his work applies just as well to other spheres of music performance. While a pop, rock, or hip-hop concert is much less formal than a classical performance, they generally reflect many of the same social relationships and utilize the same structural separations of audience and performer. Indeed, many of the things Small discusses, including the elevation of the stage, performer dress, and the backstage isolation of performers are so

⁵⁰ Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 27.

commonplace across many genres of music that they are taken for granted as inherent aspects of most commercial music performances.

Girl Talk's live shows modify the traditional separation of the audience and the performer into a more ambiguous blend of the two. At a typical Girl Talk show, Gillis performs his mashups from his laptop. Instead of just playing the same songs as on his albums, he works with established templates and mixes and matches sample loops from his library to create a structured, but unique live mashup. By doing this, Gillis can 'perform' for the crowd at the same time he allows himself ample time to interact and dance with the crowd while the rest of the song he creates plays out.

Not only does Gillis dance and interact with the crowd, he further erodes the separation between performer and audience by encouraging the crowd to come up on stage and dance with him. As he states in an interview with *Venues Magazine*:

I'd like people to be able to watch it as a show but also I love to just break down that barrier and have people be apart of it. My favorite shows are when I go and I just feel like I'm a part of the show; I'm not watching it, I'm in it... I'm comfortable on stage alone and I've played that many times but with the shows a lot of people like to be involved and I like to get them involved. I like to make it a celebration and a party; I want to be a part of that rather than conducting it.⁵¹

Gillis' shows eliminate the social barrier between performer and audience and merge the two into one entity. The arrival of the audience onto the stage removes the physical and symbolic separations that the elevation of the stage and the isolation of the performer enforce. At the same time, Gillis' constant forays into the crowd as his music plays on without him momentarily dilutes Gillis's status as performer and allows him to act out as a member of the audience.

⁵¹ Rich Coleman, "Greg Gillis/Girl Talk Interview," *Venues Magazine*, 11 December 2008, http://www.collegian.psu.edu/venues/2008/12/11/gregg_gillisgirl_talk_intervie.aspx.

The symbol of clothing is also important in Gillis' live shows. As Small further details, the 'uniforms' of musicians are another important element that sets them apart from their audience. As society has evolved, the style of dress for various types of musicians has evolved as well, but it has always remained a conscious decision by the performer in the message they send to the audience.⁵² As Jaap Koojiman argues, this is an especially important aspect of popular music, which has increasingly celebrated the visual and the spectacle over the musical.⁵³

In Gillis' case, his shows are famous for his almost ritual declotting. Many nights, he shows up in a number of layers, more than one would reasonably expect, only to continuously remove them as the show proceeds. The night eventually culminates in Gillis dancing among the crowd in nothing more than a pair of boxers. It may be tempting to analyze this as the rejection of dress in performance, but as Small reminds, even those musicians who wear casual clothing and seem to have no regard for the concept of a uniform are still making a conscious performance decision and should not be understood as having completely "shucked off" stylistic distinctions between themselves and the audience⁵⁴. Thus, while Gillis' dress (or lack of) is rooted in performance, and he has admitted as much, the fact that this performance is based on removing all forms of dress can still be seen as representative of the message he wants his performance to send. The removal of clothes is an orchestrated removal of the familiar stylistic distinctions that we associate with certain performers. In the process of ridding himself of these

⁵² Small, 66.

⁵³ Jaap Koojiman, "Michael Jackson: *Motown 25*, Pasadena Civic Auditorium," In *Performance and Popular Music: History, Place, and Time*, ed. Ian Inglis (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 120.

⁵⁴ Small, 66.

distinctions, he eliminates further barriers between himself and the audience as he stands before them absent of even the most basic commodities.

The removal of these social obstructions turn Gillis' shows from a performance into a party. By allowing the crowd to engulf him and by joining them in dancing, Gillis shifts his status from performer to consumer and allows the songs he samples to take center stage. He further emphasizes the songs he samples by playing longer cuts than he does on his album, in order to "give them more room to breathe."⁵⁵ The result is a social activity that fulfills the stated mission of Girl Talk: to celebrate pop music. As Gillis himself declares when discussing the celebratory nature of his shows, "it's the environment that truly gets to the bottom of this music."⁵⁶

An observer plopped down into the middle of one of these shows would likely perceive much of what they saw as a chaotic and spontaneous event. Indeed, a crowd of people dancing around a laptop that may or may not be controlled by a scantily clad man is more indicative of a raucous house party than it is a concert. It is important to remember, however, that this scene is not organic. Gillis is still the orchestrator and authoritative figure of the experience. The removal of his clothes happens at many of his shows and has become one of his performative trademarks. The audience's dancing around him on stage is also a tradition at his performances and still must be initiated by Gillis. The practice was established early on in his career when he would repeatedly encourage the audience to get up on stage with him as a way to increase the energy of the

⁵⁵ DJ Ron Slomowicz, "Interview with Girl Talk," *About.com*, 12 January 2008, <http://dancemusic.about.com/od/remixersproducers/a/GirlTalkIntervi.htm>.

⁵⁶ Luiza Olesczuk, "Mashin' It Up: An Interview With Girl Talk," *Cool Junkie*, 28 September 2008, http://www.cooljunkie.com/interviews/mashin_it_up_an_interview_with_girl_talk_671260.html.

show.⁵⁷ As Small argues, however, the orchestrated qualities of any relationship put forth by the performer, while ultimately the expression of a performative organization, is still legitimate to analyze as it brings into existence relationships felt to be ideal by the show's participants⁵⁸. In Gillis' case, his show establishes a much more reciprocal and interactive relationship between producer and consumer. It is not surprising that Gillis, who rose to fame outside of the professional sphere of music creation, shies away from performative elements that reflect and reinforce that sphere. Instead, his shows embody the same consumer/producer ambiguity that he possesses as a 'bedroom producer.'

What Gillis' music and live shows ultimately reveal is an embrace of pop music that undermines the subversive context so often placed upon the mashup as well as a rejection of the concrete and oppositional framing of consumer and producer labels. Gillis' live shows imagine a modified relationship between consumer and producer that is complex and much more fluid than traditionally presented. Gillis, as the performer, is the initial producer of the show. The audience, full of paying customers, is the initial consumer. Yet, the show themselves are conceived of as celebrations of pop music in which Gillis is not so much the performer as he is the guide. In this way, everyone, including Gillis, is a consumer of the songs that are being manipulated. However, since the producers of the songs being celebrated are not there, Gillis and crowd together 'produce' the celebration.

⁵⁷ Dan Hyman, "Summertime Music Festival: Girl Talk Interview," *Time Out Chicago Blog*, 4 June 2009, <http://www3.timeoutny.com/chicago/blog/out-and-about/2009/06/summertime-music-festival-girl-talk-interview>.

⁵⁸ Small, 49.

Together, Gillis' rise to fame, his music, and his live performances illustrate just how distinctions between producer and consumer are increasingly becoming blurred. On a technical level, the development of the personal computer and Internet has significantly lowered the financial costs and equipment needed to produce professional quality media. This has led to a social blurring of the terms as they begin to no longer reflect distinct class separations and instead become temporary identities that can be performed by anyone. This shifting between consumer and producer is reflective of a larger social process of consumer interaction with media that has not only spawned the mashup, but has reorganized production and consumption processes for all forms of media.

Chapter 3: The Current Media Landscape

As evidenced by Girl Talk, the personal computer and Internet revolutions have destabilized the traditional labels of producer and consumer. The notion of a ‘producer’ is no longer tied to a certain professional sphere for each type of media and is no longer founded on the economic power relations it has with the ‘consumers.’ Instead, the labels have become blurred as traditionally identified consumers are much more interactive with the media they consume and much more capable of producing their own, from something as simple as a personal blog about a specific interest to an extensive musical or video production. As a result, the current media landscape is now filled with established large media producers as well as an incredibly large array of consumer producers. The efforts put forth by established media producers and various copyright-reform organizations to shape the cultural, social, and economic impact of these consumer producers reflects the ongoing cultural negotiation that is indicative of a dynamic hegemonic process.

It cannot be denied that consumers are being given a much larger hand in the production, distribution, and consumption of media. We are in an age where it is possible (and profitable) for companies to interact extensively with their customers, allow those customers to directly influence and partake in content creation, and to allow consumers to customize and decide what ways to receive and consume that content. However, it must be realized that while power dynamics in regards to content creation and distribution have shifted toward increased consumer involvement, much of this involvement largely

operates under the control of established media producers. Indeed, as consumers have been increasingly able and willing to participate in media production, many established companies have successfully integrated consumer participation in their media production process while still asserting legal and editorial control over that participation and retaining all of the money that results from it.

Therefore, the current state of increased consumer engagement with media is one of limited and controlled empowerment. As the tactics of established media producers show, user-generated media has been carefully integrated into content platforms, promotions, and advertisements. This integration centers on showcasing the company approved user-generated content while simultaneously excluding the users themselves from the revenue streams that such content generates. The same established media producers also, through the help of an aggressive copyright law, curtail or stymie much consumer interaction with their works, commercial or otherwise, that they do not approve of. While no copyright holder can ever stop the distribution or viewing of all works utilizing their content (ala *The Grey Album*), the relentless pursuit of copyright infringement by the large media companies in combination with extremely harsh penalties for copyright infringement and a vague and subjective definition of “fair use” has created an environment in which anyone using copyrighted material in a work must be prepared to go to court. As Lawrence Lessig argues in *Free Culture*, this state of affairs is producing a culture where “an extraordinary amount of creativity will either never be exercised, or never be exercised in the open.”⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), 185.

An Open Practice

One result of the personal computer and Internet revolutions is a greater amount of ‘quoting’, remixing, and manipulating of digitally available media among consumers. These processes exist in a varying amount of forms, such as musical, video, and web application mashups, user-created music videos, and highlight reels.⁶⁰ Many of these works end up on Youtube, fan sites, message boards, or other Internet repositories. Sometimes, they became extremely popular and get wide coverage from the national printed press as well as Internet buzz, leading to further remixes or parodies.⁶¹ The motivations behind the number of audio and visual remixes out there also vary. Some are celebrations of their material, some are critiques and criticisms, and some are merely humorous manipulations. In addition, much user-generated or user-manipulated content on the web does not focus on the mass media. Even a cursory search across the Internet will reveal many works and remixes that are full of originally produced video, music, and photographs.

While some of prominent media manipulators, such as Girl Talk, make money off their work, the vast amount of media remixes and manipulations are freely available and produced to be seen, not bought. While this is undoubtedly due in part to strict copyright laws, many remixes are made out of passion for the works involved, desire to exhibit

⁶⁰ For an explanation of the web app mashup, see Anne Eisenberg, “Do The Mash (Even if You Don’t Know All The Steps),” *New York Times*, 2 September 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/02/technology/circuits/02novelties.html>.

⁶¹ There are numerous examples of this, with the most famous probably being the parodies of a key scene from the movie “Downfall” and Chris Crocker’s ‘Leave Britney Alone’ video. See Virginia Heffernan, “The Hitler Meme,” *New York Times*, 24 October 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/26/magazine/26wwln-medium-t.html> and Samari Jafiri, “Leave Britney Alone guy is new Web star,” *USA Today*, 21 September 2007, http://www.usatoday.com/life/television/2007-09-21-2473607412_x.htm, respectively.

technical skills, or a general interest in media remixing, not a desire to sell a product. A good example of this can be found in Mike J. Nichols and his remake of *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*. In 1999, *The Phantom Menace*, the long awaited first prequel to the beloved *Star Wars* Trilogy, was released to mixed reviews. The most virulent criticism levied at the film by its most hardcore fans was the inclusion of Jar Jar Binks, a CGI alien who took up large amounts of screentime and was derided as being inserted solely for comedic relief and to appeal to children.⁶²

A year later, Mike J. Nichols began to anonymously distribute *Star Wars: The Phantom Edit*, a re-edit he did of the film. As he states in the iconic *Star Wars* opening text introduction, "Being someone of the 'George Lucas Generation' I have re-edited a standard VHS version of "The Phantom Menace," into what I believe is a much stronger film by relieving the viewer of as much story redundancy, Anakin action and dialog, and Jar Jar Binks as possible." The re-edit, which garnered many favorable reviews (many of which claimed superiority over the original film), soon grabbed the attention of Lucasfilm, who attempted to prevent distribution of the film. However, the film became increasingly distributed across the Internet and underground tape networks. Eventually, Nichols put out a statement reiterating his refusal to sell any copies of the movie, as well as his love of the original *Star Wars* movies that spurred his re-edit.⁶³

As the *Phantom Edit* shows, remixing and manipulation of mass media materials is not just done to critique, subvert, or mock the mass media. There are many people out

⁶² Eric Henderson, "Even an Insider Found Jar Jar, Well, Jarring," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 June 1999, <http://articles.latimes.com/1999/jun/21/entertainment/ca-48611>.

⁶³ Andrew Rogers, "Exclusive Chat with 'Star Wars' Revisionist Phantom Editor," *Zap2it*, 6 June 2001, <http://web.archive.org/web/20080210085028/http://movies.zap2it.com/movies/news/story/0,1259,---6923,00.html>.

there willing to invest substantial time and resources into modifying and manipulating preexisting media, despite the potential legal threats and lack of monetary compensation, in order to improve, comment on, or celebrate the original works. These acts operate outside not only traditional consumer/producer labels but the common ideological parameters historically tied to each term.

To better understand how this fits in with a dynamic hegemonic process it is useful to refer back to Raymond Williams' statement that cultural activities have a "finite but significant openness." Taken as a whole, increased consumer engagement with media reflects a common desire among people to produce and manipulate text for a multitude of reasons. As Lawrence Lessig argues in *Remix*, this "Read-Write Culture" is nothing new. Humans have been quoting and remixing each other's words and music for as long as they have existed. It was just limited to the printed word and musical composition. Now, the digital age has, through the personal computer and the Internet, "removed the economic censor" and allowed people to interact with other forms of media the same way they have always interacted with the printed word and composition.⁶⁴ At its root, the current movement toward increased consumer engagement with media is an updated outlet for a common form of expression. The ubiquity of and easy access to personal computers and the Internet combined with the many free and simple programs and websites available to produce and distribute audio, video, and text allows a diverse range

⁶⁴ Lawrence Lessig, *Remix* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), 83.

of voices to be heard that cuts across almost all ideological and socio-economic backgrounds.⁶⁵

Sanctioned Mixing

Despite the inherent ‘openness’ of increased consumer interaction, however, there are still efforts to steer the movement toward certain ideological and economic goals. Many efforts, such as the Open Source movement, Free Culture, and Creative Commons are attempting to lessen economic and legal restrictions on the sharing and manipulation of media in an effort to reduce corporate control and influence over public access to and interaction with media.⁶⁶ Some of the most notable products of these efforts are *Wikipedia*, the user-generated and maintained open source encyclopedia, and the creative commons licenses, a variety of licenses that producers can place on their work that allow various levels of public remixing and sharing.

In contrast, many of the traditional, large media producers have attempted to maintain control of their works by creating sanctioned spheres in which consumers can interact with and remix their content. Through aggressive legal action against unauthorized use of copyrighted materials and the funneling of consumers to producer-owned remix spheres, large media producers have attempted to shape the nature of consumer interaction and manipulation of media as subservient to and dictated by the wills of the content producer. In addition, these media producers assert their claim over

⁶⁵ While certainly not widespread, there have been more than a few notable homeless bloggers in recent years. See Penny Anderson, “Homeless Blogs Open a Door on a Rough World,” *The Guardian*, 30 June 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/joepublic/2009/jun/30/homeless-blogs-websites>. Also, see Pam Flessler, “Homeless Advocate Goes High-Tech,” *NPR*, 9 June 2009, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=105047997>.

⁶⁶ For Mission statements, see <http://creativecommons.org/about/>, <http://www.opensource.org/docs/osd>, and <http://freeculture.org/manifesto>.

any content that stems from these spheres by forcing the consumers to agree to terms of service contracts that explicitly relinquish all copyrights to the media producer in question.

Shortly after Warner Brothers acquired the rights to the *Harry Potter* franchise in September of 1999, the company began to systematically distribute cease and desist letters to the many *Harry Potter* fan sites that operated on the web. The optics of the maneuver were quite bad, as J.K. Rowling originally encouraged fans to take an active role in celebrating the series and many of these site operators were young, dedicated fans of the series. Many people questioned and criticized Warner Brothers' decision to try and shut down these sites despite the positive attention it brought to the *Harry Potter* brand. In a ZDnet article published during the controversy, Warner Brothers' spokeswoman Barbara Brogliatti provided the reason:

"We're trying to bend over backward to come up with a unique arrangement to adapt our policy if we can," says Brogliatti, explaining that Warner Brothers has considered licensing the domain name to Field for free. As long as Warner Brothers gets final say on content, Miss Field would be free to maintain the site and bring in the fans.⁶⁷

Warner Brothers was not interested in shutting down the sites, but in obtaining legal and editorial control over any of the content produced there. It pursued that control despite the bad press that sending legal threats to young and dedicated fans would obviously bring.

As the *Harry Potter* ordeal shows, large media producers, in an effort to shape the nature of increased consumer interaction with media, have begun to tolerate and even

⁶⁷ Stephanie Grunier, "Warner Bros. Claims Harry Potter Sites," *ZDnet*, 21 December 2000, http://news.zdnet.com/2100-9595_22-96323.html.

encourage consumer remixing of media as long as they assume editorial control and legal copyright of the works. Lucasfilm, for example, which aggressively pursues anyone who uses footage from the Star Wars films, maintains a site which allows users, after signing up as a member, to use footage and music from the Star Wars movies as well as their own footage to make any videos they wish (excluding common disqualifiers such as nudity, adult language, racism, etc.). These videos, once approved by screeners in Costa Rica, are then featured on the site. Before being allowed to create any videos, however, the user must agree to a terms of use that explicitly relinquishes all rights to any work produced by the user to Lucasfilm.⁶⁸ In addition, users do not receive any form of compensation that the site generates through ads. Instead, revenue is split between Lucasfilm and Eyespot, the company that handles the video editing and viewing platform⁶⁹

Many major musical acts have also encouraged sanctioned remix contests to promote their albums. In 2004, David Bowie and Audi jointly ran a mashup contest that asked users to mashup any two of Bowie's songs for a chance to win an Audi car.⁷⁰ The band Radiohead has also run two contests for their 2008 album *In Rainbows*, one for the song "Nude" and one for the song "Reckoner." Each contest allowed users to purchase the separate components for each song from iTunes (such as vocals, bass, drums, piano, etc.) then create and upload their remix to Radiohead's website for people to vote on. Radiohead's contests differ from Bowie's in that not only was there no prize money

⁶⁸ "Star Wars mashups Terms of Service," *Star Wars.com*, <http://www.starwars.com/welcome/about/mashup-copyright>

⁶⁹ Sarah McBride, "Make It Yourself 'Star Wars'," *Wall Street Journal*, 24 May 2007, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB117997273760812981-search.html>.

⁷⁰ "Bowie Asks Fans to Bootleg Songs," *BBC News*, 26 April 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/3659143.stm>.

awarded for the top vote getters, but users also had to purchase each song stem individually⁷¹.

Uniting these two contests are terms of service contracts that strip every entrant of all legal ownership to the works they create. For example, in the terms of use for the David Bowie mashup contest, the contract states,

“Each entrant into the Contest hereby irrevocably grants, transfers, sells, assigns and conveys to the Sponsors, their successors and assigns, all present and future right, title and interest of every kind and nature whatsoever, including, without limitation, all copyrights, all music and music publishing rights, and all rights incidental, subsidiary, ancillary or allied thereto (including, without limitation, all derivative rights) in and to the Mash-Up(s) for exploitation throughout the universe, in perpetuity, by means of any and all media and devices whether now known or hereafter devised (the "Rights")⁷²

The terms of use for the Radiohead remix contest utilizes similar terms.⁷³ While the winner of the respective contests would gain substantial prizes and exposure for their work, all other entries would be the property of the respective labels to use and monetize as they see fit with no benefit for the artist other than a sense of creation and participation.

On the surface, these sanctioned remix spheres seemingly acknowledge the legitimacy of ‘remix’ culture by their mere existence. Yet, while they are encouraging interaction with copyrighted materials they are simultaneously undercutting much of the

⁷¹ Radiohead’s decision to charge for the stems is quite interesting considering that consumers were able to download *In Rainbows* for free when it was first released.

⁷² Liza Sabater, “David Bowie’s mash-up contest is a crock of shit,” *Culture Kitchen Blog*, 27 April 2004, <http://www.culturekitchen.com/archives/000682.html>.

⁷³ Their key sentence: all rights in and to any remixed versions (“Remixes”) of the song “Reckoner” (“the Song”) created by the Entrant shall be owned by Warner/Chappell Music Ltd (“WCM”) and to the extent necessary the Entrant hereby assigns all rights in the Remixes of the Song to WCM throughout the World for the full life of copyright and any and all extensions and renewals thereof. (<http://www.radioheadremix.com/terms/>)

empowerment and spirit behind remixing texts. By exerting absolute legal control over all works produced and forcing those works to be subservient to similar content screening processes as that of originally produced mass media these media producers are maintaining hold over the legal and editorial authority that increased consumer engagement with media inherently challenges.

Consumers as workers

Expanding on these sanctioned mixing spheres, many businesses also enlist consumers in the production of original advertisements, information, and ideas. This is seen across a wide range of platforms include the use of “citizen journalism” by news organizations and the use of consumer-created commercials by a wide variety of businesses. These media producers are adapting to the inevitable increase in consumer-generated media by folding it into their own content, giving the specific consumers some measure of reward, either money or exposure, but still obtaining all legal control of the content produced.

This model of leveraging the expertise and production of consumers to supplement existing content is present in traditional media companies and new media companies alike that. An example of this in new media is the political news website Talking Points Memo (www.talkingpointsmemo.com). This left-leaning political site has broken or pushed numerous high-profile political stories such as Trent’s Lott’s remarks at Strom Thurmond’s retirement party in 2002, the Jack Abramoff Scandal in 2005, and the political firing of eight U.S. Attorneys in 2007. Josh Marshall, the founder of the site and its only employee for many years, regularly makes blog posts asking for the site’s

users' assistance in reading through massive government files recently released or in getting officials on the record about certain positions⁷⁴. Marshall has frequently referred to his site as a hybrid of traditional journalism and 'crowdsourcing' and acknowledged his audience as the most vital asset his site possesses.⁷⁵

In the mainstream media sphere, CNN utilizes a similar dynamic with its iReport website (www.ireport.com). iReport is set up as a citizen journalism website where users create video or pictorial reports and upload them to the site. The front page of the site presents the newest and the most popular reports. Outside of standard copyright infringement, hate speech, and decency exclusions, anything can be uploaded and viewed. To stress this point, iReport's slogan is "Unedited. Unfiltered. News."

CNN uses iReport as a feeder site where it picks the best and most relevant reports and airs them on its various programming. To assist the users in their pursuit of CNN airtime, the site contains an "assignment desk" section that lists the topics CNN is currently most interested in. By uploading their videos to iReport, users agree to allow CNN to use their work for free in any way they want. While the website initially failed to resonate with users, the recent Iranian election protests created a surge of interest in iReport as many Iranians submitted their images and video to the site. CNN used many of those images and videos and touted iReport as a reflection of the rise of citizen

⁷⁴ A few examples of these posts from the past year:

<http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com/archives/221237.php>

http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com/archives/2009/05/eyes_and_ears.php

http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com/archives/2009/04/reader_alert.php

http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com/archives/2009/03/let_us_see_too.php

http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com/archives/2009/02/need_your_help.php

<http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com/archives/246304.php>

⁷⁵ Bill Moyer's Journal, "Transcript: April 27, 2007," *PBS*, 27 April 2007, <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/04272007/transcript2.html>.

journalism. The use of the local images and videos were an instrumental element in the coverage that CNN was repeatedly praised for.⁷⁶

Yet when CNN airs an iReport during its programming, it does not compensate the creator of the report. This is because when a person submits a video or picture to iReport, they give CNN joint-ownership of the work. In the terms of service to the site, it clearly states:

You hereby grant to CNN and its affiliates a non-exclusive, perpetual, worldwide license to edit, telecast, rerun, reproduce, use, create derivative works from, syndicate, license, print, sublicense, distribute and otherwise exhibit the materials you submit, or any portion thereof in any manner and in any medium or forum, whether now known or hereafter devised, **without payment to you or any third party**. (Emphasis added)

Therefore, the only reward for a user whose iReport is shown on CNN is exposure and the airing of a report the submitter presumably finds important.

Many companies have also utilized legions of fans to help produce advertisements. Usually, this is done through some form of contest. A special website is usually set up where users can vote on submissions and upload their own. At the end of the contest, the commercial with the highest votes is shown on TV. A wide variety of large companies, including Nokia, Amazon, Audi, Heinz, Converse, Sony, Chevy, Jeep, MasterCard, Jet Blue, and Chrysler have run user-generated commercial contests or promotions in the past few years. The Super Bowl, annually the biggest and most prestigious showcase for commercials in America, has frequently been the site chosen for the unveiling of the winning commercials for the more extravagant contests. In 2007,

⁷⁶ Beet.TV blog, "CNN's iReport had 1 million page views on Monday: Iran Crisis is "Enormous Moment in Citizen Journalism," *Beet. TV*, 25 June 2009, <http://www.beet.tv/2009/06/cnns-ireport-had-1-million-page-views-on-monday-iran-crisis-is-enormous-moment-in-citizen-journalism.html>.

when user-generated advertisements were still new and getting substantial amounts of press coverage, Pepsi, Doritos, General Motors, and the NFL all aired their own user-generated commercials, all winners of their respective contests.⁷⁷ In one of the most publicized contest to date, Doritos offered a \$1 million grand prize for a person to produce its 2009 Super Bowl commercial.

Initially questioned as possibly just a fad, user-generated commercials have emerged as a conventional and accepted method of advertising.⁷⁸ The reasons for this are fairly straightforward. User-generated commercial campaigns, when done right, can create much more publicity than a traditional ad campaign at less cost. Outside of the cost of actually promoting the contest, very little costs are incurred. For example, a grand prize of \$20,000, a significant sum to most people, pales in comparison to the cost in hiring an ad agency to produce an average 30-second national spot. As an article in the Washington Post states, user-created commercials are a “cost-savings bonanza” for advertisers.⁷⁹

Even when commercial contests end up being just as expensive as traditional commercials due to massive promotion for the contest, there are still many more elements involved in contests that create additional publicity that a traditional ad campaign cannot

⁷⁷ Paul R. La Monica, “Doritos: You create our Super Bowl commercial,” *CNN Money*, 14 September 2006, http://money.cnn.com/2006/09/14/news/funny/doritos_superbowl/index.htm.

⁷⁸ Eric Fanner, “Leave It to the Professionals? Hey, Let Consumers Make Their Own Ads,” *New York Times*, 4 August 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/04/business/media/04adco.html?ex=1312344000&en=cb4c6604da68212a&ei=5088&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss>.

⁷⁹ Frank Ahrens, “\$2 Million Airtime, \$13 Ad,” *Washington Post*, 31 January 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/30/AR2007013001534.html>.

provide.⁸⁰ Outside of the actual showings of the winning commercial, the company gains additional penetration from media coverage of the contest, the viewing of submissions and interaction with the contest site itself by entrants and those interested in the contest, and the viral marketing that results from discussion and display of the videos across internet forums and websites.

To place all of these developments and reactions into a workable theoretical context, it is useful to go back to the concept of a dynamic hegemony. As Raymond Williams, Dominic Strinati, and Jayson Toynbee all argue, hegemony is a process for organizing cultural and social relations. It is, as Williams details, “a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits.”⁸¹ These changing pressures and limits, in this case the rise of consumer-generated media, illustrate the nuance and adaptability of the hegemonic process. To maintain its existence, a hegemony has to acknowledge and work with opposing or evolving values. As Williams’ states:

The reality of cultural process must then always include the efforts and contributions of those who are in one way or another outside or at the edge of the terms of the specific hegemony.⁸²

By enveloping and adjusting to emerging cultural contributions, hegemony avoids becoming the one-way static ideological structure that so many regard it as.

The current process of negotiating with increased consumer-engagement and incorporating it into our cultural, social, and economic structure is indicative of this

⁸⁰ To see some of the problems with User-generated commercial contests, see Louise Story, “The High Price of Creating Free Ads,” *New York Times*, 26 May 26 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/26/business/26content.ready.html>.

⁸¹ Williams, 112.

⁸² Ibid, 113.

definition of hegemony. There are a number of organizations attached to increased consumer engagement with media that have pushed for, and at times succeeded in, enacting substantial change in the economic structure associated with media production and consumption.⁸³ In contrast, traditional media producers have used a combination of legal threats, sanctioned mixing, and the enlistment of consumers in content production to maintain legal and economic control over works they are associated with while sacrificing some elements of creative control to the public. While a case can be made that mere exposure or one-time rewards are an unfair trade for perpetual ownership over content, many of these contests and business models enjoy success and receive positive responses from consumers. Further, competition among businesses for press and quality content has resulted in increasingly larger payouts and new business models that offer royalties to the participating consumer.⁸⁴

All of these differing processes and influences detail how the emergence of consumer-generated and consumer-manipulated media does not fit neatly into the oppositional and dominating relationship between producers and consumers framed by reified Marxist terminology. Indeed, there is plenty of media produced from this movement that is in cooperation with or subservient to dominant mass media producers, as well as much that is not. Additionally, the distinctions between consumers and producers themselves are collapsing as consumers gain the ability to produce and

⁸³ As an example, Barack Obama's web team has used open source tools in the construction of administration websites and has licensed all materials on those websites through Creative Commons. See Kevin Merritt, "How Obama Will Use Technology," *Washington Post*, 24 January 2009, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/01/24/AR2009012400646_pf.html.

⁸⁴ Threadless, an online T-shirt store where users submit and vote on designs, pays out a cash prize of \$2000 for an accepted design as well as an additional \$500 every time the shirt is reprinted. See <http://www.threadless.com/submit>. Interestingly enough, it was only after the launch of a similar company with higher payouts, Designbyhumans (www.Designbyhumans.com), that Threadless started offering money for reprinted designs.

distribute professional-quality media on their own. What these developments represent is not a long-awaited consumer insurrection. Instead, they reflect a widespread cultural practice newly empowered by technological advances that is being used by existing ideological forces in a hegemonic negotiation to shape its impact on existing cultural, social, and economic relationships.