

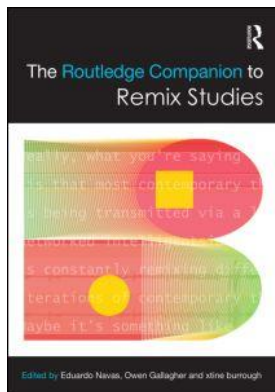
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Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

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The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies

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Toward a Remix Culture

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315879994.ch4>

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Published online on: 08 Dec 2014

How to cite :- Vito Campanelli. 08 Dec 2014, *Toward a Remix Culture from: The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies* Routledge

Accessed on: 23 Sep 2019

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315879994.ch4>

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4

TOWARD A REMIX CULTURE

An Existential Perspective

Vito Campanelli

The purpose of this chapter is to frame Vilém Flusser's utopian reflections in relation to the advent of a telematic society in light of a remix culture. In remix culture a work is never completed, it functions rather as a relay that is passed to others so that they can contribute to the process with the production of new works. This dynamic was already obvious in the mid-1980s to Flusser, who argued that in an information society messages are sent to receivers so that they can synthesize them as new messages. With the aid of Flusser's work, and theories by Lévi-Strauss, Tarde and Le Bon, I will frame remix as a pervasive mass phenomenon in which the creation of new information becomes the fundamental criterion for distinguishing between the heterogeneous cultural forms labeled as remix.

Toward a Telematic Society

During his career the media philosopher Vilém Flusser analyzed a number of sociocultural dynamics, in particular those arising from the diffusion of the first computers and their subsequent role in the progression toward a "telematic society" (according to Flusser, this would be the first society that methodically seeks to increase the sum of available information). Some of his reasoning concerning this new form of sociality seemed to be beyond the horizon of possibility during the times in which they were formulated (mid-1980s to early 1990s). Indeed, he anticipated some constitutive aspects of contemporary culture, whose main compositional paradigm appeared to be remix. An in-depth exploration of the distinctive features of a remix culture will be discussed in later sections of this text; at this point it should be clarified that the use of the term "remix" refers to an irreversible process of hybridization of sources, materials, subjectivities, and media ongoing in contemporary society. Focusing on its significant cultural impact we can consider the remix as Manovich defined it, as a metaphor for the generalized amalgamation and digitalization of culture.¹ Manovich argues that today many cultural and lifestyle contexts (music, fashion, design, art, Web applications, user-generated media, food, etc.) are governed by remixes, fusions, collages, and mashups. If postmodernism (Jameson)² was a defining paradigm of the 1980s, "during the 1990s remix has

gradually emerged as the dominant aesthetics of the era of globalization,” therefore we can call it “the cultural logic of networked global capitalism.”³

A few years before Manovich, Flusser created an interesting parallel between the ways in which “nature” (the world) creates new information and the ways humans create new information. He first notes that because the information “in the world” seems to arise randomly (that is to say beyond any possible intention), the world itself appears as just one of very many chance configurations (*möglichen Zufällswurfen*). From this perspective even the human brain is no longer generated according to some “creative plan” (*schöpferischen Plan*), but by the chance biological development that itself came into being accidentally as the result of chemical processes. Like any information in the world, the human brain is bound to decay, in fact it tends toward disgregation and disinformation (the second principle of thermodynamics is a constant reference for Flusser).

Flusser argues that the way information decays is as important as its production. He contends that information is produced through improbable accidents and decay occurs through probable accidents. If this were true it would be incorrect to argue that we experience an *ex nihilo* creation constituted of a linear progression from the void toward a predetermined goal (“heat death”). We are not in front of the “universe of linear history” but are actually part of a dull game of dice (*sturen Würfspiel*) in which all improbable cases must happen, sooner or later, and all dice rolls must lead to a plausible situation: the dissolution of information.⁴

According to Flusser, information cannot be produced from nothing; every dialog presupposes the existence of some information stored in memory. To put the point another way it presupposes an earlier discourse that delivered (transmitted) the stored information.⁵ Flusser established that all the information is synthesized from previous information (as we shall see later, this assumption is very important from the perspective of the remix); moving from this assumption he states that humans do not create but play with prior information, however—unlike nature which plays by sheer chance (without method)—their play (following the method of dialog) is acted with the purpose of producing information.

Here emerges the first important handhold for supporting the attempt to frame Flusserian insights within the perspective of the remix: For the media philosopher, dialogs are sort of “guided” (*gelenkte*) games of chance, through which information already present in the world is combined (remixed) in all possible ways to construct new information.⁶ However it should be clarified that the concept of “intention” cannot refer to “mythical entities” (*Fabelwesen*) as a form of “free spirit” or “eternal soul.” We must instead think in the following terms: the so-called “I” is considered as a nexus point in a web comprising streams of information in dialog and, at the same time, a warehouse/storage (*Lager*) for information that has passed through.⁷

At this nexus point, represented by the “I,” unpredictable and improbable computations occur, in other words: new information is made. This new information is experienced as intentional (or as freely produced) because each “I” is a unique nexus point that, by its position and the information it stores, it is distinguished from all other nexus points. Even the telematic society envisioned by Flusser is composed of this unique character. Flusser, who anticipated the informational paradigm of the networked society,⁸ suggested that this form of social organization differs from all previous forms because it is “the first to recognize the production of information as society’s actual function.”⁹

Self-conscious of its actual function, it is also a free society, but one whose freedom has little to do with the tradition of Judeo-Christian anthropology. Here we face a

socialization of freedom, that is to say the disappearance of broadcast centers radiating communicative rays out from a center (according to the electric circuitry presiding over a society dominated by unidirectional media). The key point here is the emergence of senders-receivers¹⁰ who, by integrating their decisions in a network with those made by other nodes, give rise to comprehensive decisions as a “cosmic superbrain” (*kosmisches Übergehirn*). Therefore, in a telematic society the process of information production takes place on a social level, but the single “I,” the single node on the network, maintains its singularity. In other words, the socialization of the production of information (of decisions and freedom) does not dissolve the “I” but fully realizes it in comparison with others, to the extent that “I” is the one to whom someone says “you” (“*ich*” ist, *zu dem jemand* “*du*” sagt). According to Flusser, the telematic society is a real “information society” in which human beings experience their freedom by playing methodically (utilizing a knowledge base and strategies for play) with information and, in doing so, they give birth to a “rising tide” (*steigernde Flut*) of information capable of opposing entropy.¹¹

Flusser underlines that the production of information is “a game of assembling existing information” (*ein Zusammensetzspiel mit bereits vorhandenen Informationen*).¹² Moreover, the reasoning Flusser develops regarding the functioning of chamber music (*Kammermusik*) as a model for the telematic society in general, offers a cue for an interesting analogy with remix practices. He notes that the foundation of this musical practice is an original score, thus a program, but scores take a back seat during the execution as musicians give life to improvisations. These improvisations can be compared to the *variations* that characterize the creative act of Jamaican DJs, who, as we shall see later, are foundational to modern remix culture. According to Flusserian categories chamber music is cybernetic, it is in fact “pure play” staged “by and for the players.” Listeners—Flusser writes—are “superfluous and intrusive” as the method of chamber music is the participation (*strategia*) and not the contemplation (*theoria*).

Upon closer investigation, remix culture is also characterized by the prevalence of the participatory over the contemplative. Full immersion in remix culture can only be achieved through participating in the act of remixing. In chamber music and in remix culture each player is both a sender and a receiver of information; in both cases the ultimate goal is to synthesize new information.¹³

Intersubjective Conversations and the Disappearance of all Authorities

Flusser addresses another key issue for a culture dominated by reuse practices—the question of authorship. In the universe of technical (and telematic) images it no longer makes sense to speak of “author” (*Autor*) and “authority” (*Autorität*). Automation of the processes of production, reproduction, and distribution make such terms unnecessary. The creative modes of production of the past were based—as Flusser notes—on an inner dialog (*innerem Dialog*); on the contrary, today most of the information is not produced by individuals but by dialogic groups and, moreover, the statute of the work has been radically changed by the technical possibilities of infinitely reproducing and editing each work. In the telematic society envisioned by Flusser, all information is synthesized through intersubjective conversations and its purpose is to be modified by the receivers and put back into the flow as new information.

More than anything else, the infinite reproducibility of information undermines the Latin myth of the foundation by the “author” (Romulus who founded Rome) and those social structures based on the principle of “authority” (linked with an “author”). Flusser

fully comprehends what was to become the foundation of remix culture when he argues that reproducibility and the automatic distribution of messages lead to the disappearance of all authorities. Under the regime of reproducibility “authority” becomes redundant. The romantic myth of the author, the idea that there are “originals” produced by “great people” as a result of inner dialogs must give away in the face of information that waives any claim to originality and realizes the possibility of being automatically everywhere and in a constant state of replicability. Hence social structures are created in which the idea of the individual founder is renounced in order to create a society open to dialog and to its reproducibility (a prelude to “reproducible societies”).¹⁴

For Flusser the outer dialogs, potentially open to participation by all, and intersubjective conversations involving human and artificial memories are far more creative than works created by traditional authors. They also generate “creative enthusiasm” (*schöpferische Begeisterung*) and a widespread consensus with respect to the information society. We can therefore say—with Flusser—that the telematic society does not abolish the concept of “creation” but rather invests it with its real meaning, that of intersubjective activity, directed not toward the creation of works, or of “objects,” but toward messages that will appear to other human beings as “challenges” (*Herausforderungen*) to generate eternally reproducible and infinitely synthesizable new information.¹⁵ These last statements ultimately overcome every doubt about the possibility of reading Flusser’s reflections on the advent of the telematic society from the perspective of remix culture.

Flusser closes his reasoning on contemporary creativity with a confession that he, too, found himself carried away with the *inebriation* of the game. He expresses the hope that others consider his reflections with the same playful spirit, transmitting and modifying them in turn.¹⁶ Is it possible to imagine a more explicit invitation to remix?

Remix as a Mass Phenomenon

The arguments that Flusser developed about the creativity specific to a utopian telematic society can be connected to the perspective that today we live in a *culture of remix*. He imagined a networked society in which the production of new information can only be conceived in a dialogic game with preexisting information stored in memories, anticipating the general character of remix as a social practice. This approach is crucial to my interpretation of remix, indeed I believe that, rather than facing an artistic (and therefore elitist) practice, we are now encountering a pervasive mass phenomenon. Remix is a game made possible by new technologies (particularly by the development of postproduction techniques) and by the incredible amount of cultural material that the so-called digital revolution has put, literally, in everyone’s hands. It is a game perfectly consonant with an era in which “technocodes” based on “technoimages” have replaced the linear code (written texts) as the main model of thought. It is a game that favors the surface and, taking place only at a surface level, is allergic to depth, such as specificity, truth, authenticity, definitivity, and so on.

The act of remixing collocates itself in a gestural *continuum* in which in-depth analysis and a critique of reassembled cultural objects are not entitled to citizenship. Very often we are faced with simple routines in which the materials to be remixed,

are selected solely for their aesthetic surface, as when images are juxtaposed due to their complementary chromatic scales, regardless of their symbolic value or meaning. Furthermore, machines frequently remix automatically, even if the

primary input is sourced from humans, which further undermines the capacity for critique.¹⁷

If this is true, it would appear misleading to generalize and overestimate the sporadic remix episodes that are strongly aware of meanings and values connected to each cultural object remixed (remixes made by artists or by other “communication professionals”). These lucky episodes coexist next to billions of cultural objects produced through the same modalities of creative reuse of existing materials and it is possible to argue that, in purely quantitative terms, they represent nothing more than a drop in the ocean of remix.

Analogously, I deem problematic the claim that a remix operates as a transparent surface, in which the reassembled materials remain half in sight. To support this interpretation means considering the practice of remix as a reflective exercise or as a reflection on the elements of the past involved in the practice of the remix and, ultimately, denying any discontinuity between the “original” and the “new.”¹⁸

On the contrary, to consider the remix as something that can (also) lose track of the cultural objects from the past (recontextualized in the present) opens up the possibility of interpreting the remix as a revitalization, entering a new vital life inside sources sclerotized by the passage of time. In the footsteps of Maffesoli, I prefer to think of the remix as an expression of that new form of being-together (that the French sociologist calls “societal”) in which modern productivism gives way to a ludic atmosphere. As Abruzzese notes,

the practices of remix . . . are not only able to act through operations of deconstruction of the existing and of recombination of the emotional and cognitive investment’s “objects” derived from such a deconstruction. But, in their accumulating one on the other, they are also interventions of progressive deletion of the normative tracks included in the expressive systems that they incessantly remedied. To the point that in some cases the remix is as effective as much it erases the historical memory, dispelling, for objective or deliberate ignorance, the capital of its traditions and interpretations.¹⁹

Framed in this manner, remix is seen as a constitutive element of a new cultural reality that disrupts the moral (think of the disruption of copyright) and shared codes and promotes the free gushing of a confused flow of emotions-passions-sufferings able to give back vital effervescence to cultural heritage.²⁰ In turn, the heritage becomes—thanks to its progressive digitalization—an endless catalog from which remixers can draw with both hands.²¹

A Gigantic Playground

Remix involves all domains of human action and not only because the need to reshuffle the sources of one’s own culture is common to all human history, but mostly because it is an evolutionary duty essential to the progress of the human species. Both biological and social evolution takes place by means of minor variations, and then through a repetition of patterns—accordingly the evolutionary model is given by repetition-innovation. Assuming this perspective, one must conclude that when referring to remix, one does not mean that the phenomenon is new: to use fragments of previous works is simply what human beings have always done in arts, in sciences, and in all fields of the intellect. Therefore, if it is true that the attitude to remix has marked every era, we must admit that it is equally true that in recent years we have been witness to phenomena that justifies calling contemporary culture a “culture of remix.”

I would like to highlight two significant phenomena: the far-reaching spread of post-production tools (available to almost anyone who has at least a computer) that allow for sampling and the overlapping of sources at a rate that would be simply unthinkable just 30 years ago; and the exponential multiplication (through digital media, especially the Internet) of sources that one can access at virtually anytime and from anywhere. As Flusser writes, in a telematic society all information is at our immediate disposal: “the whole universe awaits me at my terminal as a gigantic playground.”²²

Although it seems reasonable to argue that human beings have always lived in a remix culture, this conviction should not prevent us from delineating the specificity of the present era, a specificity that, in my opinion, is produced by the possibility of reusing cultural material in a way never experienced before.²³ The incredible opportunities to mix and hybridize the amazing amount of digital data to which one has access, simply imposes the act of doing so: “Individuals are forced to think in terms of post-production and remix, if they are to be able to face the everyday overload of digital information” to which their minds and their *machinic appendices* are exposed daily. “Remix is an ‘evolutionary duty’, arising from every human’s innate need to personally transform the materials available to them.” If true, this might explain why “the practice of remix is more necessary to the contemporary age than ever before.”²⁴ As Flusser predicted, the information available to human beings has now reached “astronomical dimensions” and is no longer storable by the human mind, hence the need for artificial memories.²⁵ The digitalization of culture (the tendency to bring all analogically produced human culture into the digital domain) is one of the dynamics that has most encouraged the emergence of a remix culture, to the extent that it is today possible to say that “humans have never had so many materials *in their hands*,”²⁶ which is to say: *so many materials to remix*.

Another important assumption is that a characteristic of digital media includes one that Lev Manovich defines as *modularity*: the organization of media objects into distinct and separate elements, which can be accessed separately and easily changed and combined with other parts in endless combinations.²⁷ Digital technologies also play a decisive role, in that they make it possible to work on discontinuous samples (pixels, polygons, fonts, etc.) aggregated in modular structures (new media).

Flusser had already realized that organizing media objects into distinct particles would have a decisive influence on the contemporary game that recognizes images as surfaces. In fact, as sciences dissolve *reality* into punctual elements, the purpose of the contemporary gesture of *Einbildungskraft* (to compute concepts through a peculiar attitude—not to be confused with the traditional concept of imagination) can be nothing other than to give the appearance of surface to points (giving an apparent concreteness to punctual elements) and thereby to return from the most extreme abstraction (scientific theories) to the *representable*, the *conceptualizable*, and the *manageable*. According to Flusser, technical images express the attempt to grasp, through flat surfaces (such as pictures), punctual elements that are all around us (photons, electrons, informational bits, and so on) and to fill in the spaces that open up between them. This gesture can be accomplished only thanks to an apparatus that, through its own interface, makes graspable and manageable punctual elements otherwise intangible for human hands and fingers.²⁸ In conclusion, modern technology on one hand offers a growing number of increasingly modular media objects (already very suitable for being remixed); on the other hand, it makes selecting, assembling, editing, and publishing elements of the infinite digital data flow simpler than ever before and more cost-effective.²⁹ All of these elements together

(the simplicity of remix operations, the movement toward digital media, and, above all, media modularity) prelude, as noted by Manovich, a progressive hybridization of visual languages and, therefore, a state of “deep remixability” (or *total remixability*), a condition in which *everything* (not just the content of different media but also languages, techniques, metaphors, interfaces, etc.) *can be remixed with everything*.³⁰

Do It Yourself

Many authors have reconstructed the history of the liberation of users from a (mostly modernist) condition of passive consumption of cultural objects.³¹ Flusser’s model of the “discursive society” takes a similar form: Messages are irradiated in a unidirectional way from centers/senders. What these types of theories lack is an account of do it yourself (DIY) as a mass phenomenon; that is, the masses participate rather than only artists. In this sense it is easy to observe that since the 1950s, in response to the progressive massification, specialization, and automation of the production of goods, as well as to the increasing specialization of work duties, the desire to regain possession of a more direct relationship with things spreads in all directions. This is a desire that drives Western workers to perform a series of activities (usually at home) without the aid of professionals, and often without any specialist knowledge.³² Of course, an in-depth historical perspective of DIY is beyond the scope of this chapter, though I would like to emphasize that no process of gradual erosion of the boundary between producers and consumers has been possible without rooting in society (at least in the West) the attitude of creating things using available materials (overabundant in an era of opulence) and knowledge (easily accessible even before the Internet—consider the popularity of manuals devoted to DIY philosophy). A history that discusses only the avant-garde (or anti-avant-garde) practices of *Do It Yourself* seems profoundly one-sided as an individual who keeps on walking with only one leg.³³ To summarize, without diminishing the decisive contribution of the practices introduced by the avant-garde and counter-avant-garde, it is essential to remember the importance of phenomena that involved Western society in a much more comprehensive way.

The potential for a more widespread DIY culture—including home repair, model-, and prototype-making and many of the heterogeneous activities connected to “hobbies”—has been noted by some philosophers and has become a privileged field of investigation in cultural studies. Beyond this specific research field, it is useful to remember the concept of *bricoleur* (which denotes a way of thinking and working halfway between the concrete and the abstract) at the heart of the reflections of Lévi-Strauss. Although the French anthropologist identified this attitude in non-Western societies,³⁴ his reflections can be seen to refer to amateurs in general. Framed in this way, they are precious precisely because they mark the distance between the specialized practices of the engineer (a metaphor of the industrial universe) and the way of thinking and working of the *bricoleur*. In Lévi-Strauss’s interpretation, the *bricoleur* is someone who works with their hands, someone who uses different tools than those used by professionals. Thus the *bricoleur* behaves primarily as a collector: before any action he/she will browse his/her tools imagining possible uses (the *bricoleur* “interrogates all the heterogeneous objects of which his treasury is composed to discover what each of them could signify”).³⁵ However, the most characteristic here is the addressing of the existent leftovers of human works, in other words, reorganization of the existing *is prevalent in respect* to creating from nothing.

The *bricolage* of the present era uses leftovers of the “‘already seen’, that which are openly transmitted and displayed in the media universe.”³⁶ They are then reused, reassembled, and put back into circulation as messages (signs) and, in doing so, determining new uses and trajectories, and possibly altering meaning. But—this is the aspect that I want to emphasize most—the act of the *bricoleur* is functional to a system, such as the present one, in which social rooting presupposes the repetition of signs. The contemporary *bricoleur* (the remixer) is part of *the flow* and thus promotes its unstoppable *flowing*.

As mentioned before, the automation of production, as a consequence of the technological innovations of the second half of the twentieth century, ignited in Western workers the desire to regain a more direct relationship with things. This dynamic can be compared to that which nowadays propels the inhabitants of a hyperglobalized world to react to information overload—what Flusser describes as the “flood of (technical) images.” Even netizens desire a *more direct relationship with things*, but things have lost their materiality and today appear mainly as information flow.³⁷ On a closer look, the practice of remix is precisely an answer to this need: remixing a media object (be it content, a *medium*, a language or a thought pattern) means appropriating it, offering a personal version of images, sounds, and whatever else pushes contemporary individuals/remixers to desire (or to the illusion of desiring). In other words, remixing takes the value of *making one’s own* the object of desire (despite the ephemeral transience that this gesture assumes in the frame of contemporaneity).

It would appear that the only way to enjoy the infinite flow of information that passes through us at every moment is now a process of selection, editing, and promoting the flow in new contexts or personalized forms. Besides being an evolutionary duty, remix therefore assumes an important specific weight even on an existential plane: in fact, the feeling of appropriating elements of the flow *comforts* the contemporary individual offering, on the one hand, the opportunity to assert his/her social consistency through the dialog with others (the Self that finds him/herself entering a remixing relationship with the Other), on the other, the *inebriation* of having one’s own purpose (though it is quite obviously an illusion) to set against the machines’ will to program humans to incessantly feed on the flow.

In terms of Flusserian media philosophy *purpose* is a typical conditioning of historical thinking, a kind of ballast that forces the questioning of everything and always prompts a search for underlying reasons. Precisely for this reason, rather than *purpose*, it is preferable to speak of an *engagement* against nature and above all against the inevitable natural decay of information. From this standpoint, the production of new information can be interpreted as an engagement against being forgotten; in fact it is well known that all artificial storage media are subjected to the second law of thermodynamics and, sooner or later, they will decay along with the information stored in them. Electromagnetic information instead, as “pure” information (information that does not require a material *medium*), may, according to Flusser, allow human beings to escape “the curse of being forgotten.”³⁸ With respect to memories, which escape the laws of nature, forgetting becomes an “information strategy” no less important and necessary than learning (that is to say acquiring information).

For Flusser redundant information should be deleted as the informative material should be stored, for this purpose we must learn to differentiate them. One of the main tasks of a telematic society is thus to acquire, through dialog, competency in differentiation (telematics is considered by Flusser a genuine school for freedom: “*Telematik als*

Schule der Freiheit).³⁹ In the light of these considerations it is possible to rephrase the distinction (absolutely central to Flusser) between the “natural” and the “cultural/human” production of information in the following terms: Natural production is uncertain, it is a “blind play of chance,” it decays over time. Cultural/human production is strategic, it is an intentional game set in the opposite direction of the inevitable decay. The intentional aspect of the strategic–dialogic game with “pure” information allows a new way of approaching the question of freedom, which in Flusser’s construction becomes “what fights against death” (against being forgotten). Seen from this point of view, only those who are competent at differentiating between redundant information and informative information are free. To use the words of Flusser, freedom is the “human engagement in producing information against entropy, decay, death.”⁴⁰

Imitation and the Social: The Foundations of Remix Culture

At this point, to fully understand the true importance of remix culture, it is essential to focus on some ideas that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century when the principle of imitation of an original model was defined in different fields and was considered the common matrix of cultural and social growth. Among the most interesting positions is one created by Gabriel de Tarde, who, in *Les lois de l'imitation* (1890)⁴¹ describes the mechanism of “selective imitation.” Tarde identifies two presuppositions: the role of imitation for social life is analogous to the role of heredity in biological life; and every social repetition comes from an innovation. Every human invention (which inaugurates a new kind of imitation) engenders a new series, so that the invention of gunpowder is to social science what the blooming of a new plant species is to biology, or the birth of new matter to chemistry: these “repetitions are also multiplications or self-spreading contagions.”⁴²

The conception of society proposed by Tarde is based on the rejection of utilitarianism: *Sociality* does not depend on economic (as in the interdependence of needs, mutual assistance, provision of services, and so on) or normative (like the rights established by law, customs, and conventions) relationships, but rather from an imitative relationship. Since society is imitation, and imitation is essentially a phenomenon of contagion of “belief” and “desire,”⁴³ these “beliefs” and “desires” give shape to society. In fact the stability of social institutions is connected to the unanimous beliefs that they embody, while the revolutionary impetus of the desire constitutes the engine of progress.⁴⁴

Gustav Le Bon, in the footsteps of Tarde, also assigns a pivotal role to contagion in the formation and entrenchment of opinions and beliefs: In addition to determining the intellectual orientation the contagion would also enable the individual to disappear inside the crowd (collective souls whose main feature is the near absolute psychic solidarity of the constituents’ minds).⁴⁵ A single passage is sufficient to clarify his viewpoint: “Ideas, sentiments, emotions and beliefs possess in crowds a contagious power as intense as that of microbes.”⁴⁶ The same imitation, which Le Bon also considers decisive in determining the social dynamics of crowds, “is in reality a mere effect of contagion.”⁴⁷ A proof of Le Bon’s statement is the fact that in most cases, imitation is unconscious.⁴⁸ As Le Bon describes, a “special atmosphere” for contagion is created, “a general manner of thinking”⁴⁹ and opinions and beliefs are propagated “by contagion, but never by reasoning.”⁵⁰

Getting back to Tarde, one of the peculiarities of his thought is that imitation and innovation are not presented as logical opposites: the imitative waves follow one another

and overlap themselves, crossing each other and outlining a new model to be imitated. He argues that in order for the novelty introduced by innovation to settle, it must be transmitted through imitation. For Tarde, therefore, imitation is the *conditio sine qua non* of progress, to the point that the initial spark, the original act of imagination of an anthropoid had, as an effect, not only the acts of imitation which have issued directly from it, but also all the acts of imagination that it suggested and which in turn have suggested new ones, and so on indefinitely.⁵¹ This suggests that only the innovations that are imitated assume social relevance.

In this regard, French sociologist and philosopher Bruno Karsenti has given rise to an interesting reinterpretation of the historical opposition between Tarde and Durkheim⁵² and writes that:

considered in the abstract, an imitation is no more than a repetition, an infinite reproduction of the same. Considered in concrete terms, however, imitation becomes pluralized. Multiple flows emerge, within variable relations of composition or substitution. In this context, repetition becomes variation.

Furthermore: “against a background of repetition, differentiation not only can, but indeed must necessarily take place.”⁵³

Tarde’s dynamic characterizes a remix culture. This is already evident in the practice of those Jamaican DJs and producers who, at the end of the 1960s, gave birth to the first modern remix culture by creating new or altered *versions* (revisions) of already existent songs.⁵⁴ In Jamaican dub the repetition is never a return to the identical, and, as Tarde stated, repetitions lead to changes. This aspect becomes even more manifest in digital networks, where in order for remix innovation to take root in the networked society it needs to be subsumed into a flow of continuous repetition.⁵⁵ Paraphrasing Tarde, who has stated that an idea spreads thanks to the rooting of the languages of communication into conversation⁵⁶—we can suggest that remixes become popular through their rootedness within the aesthetics of repetition. The repetition is the “living environment” in which forms and styles of remix culture are born and spread, and it is almost superfluous to mention that contemporary communication, especially the Internet and more specifically social media, represent the ideal *breeding ground* for the diffusion of ideas, beliefs and trends (memes) which, as with viruses (*virus ideas*), propagate through the network by infecting the minds of those who come in contact with them.⁵⁷

If these assumptions are true, it can be argued that in the contemporary world innovation is possible only within the framework of a practice of remix, in other words, inasmuch as every construction takes the form of reusing and building upon existing materials, it can be deduced that nothing is created out of nothing. Remix culture can therefore be seen as the final destination of that process of disintegration of the modernist myth of originality which, under a series of concentric forces (economic, social, cultural, and technological ones), finds its fulfillment with the global expansion of digital media. If in the artistic avant-gardes of the twentieth century there was still a fundamental ambiguity, concerning the cultivation of the romantic myth of originality (even if their practice contradicted what they professed at a programmatic level), it is in contemporary art that the concept of originality falls into deep crisis and the place of the artwork is ultimately taken over by practices like pastiche, collage, cut-up, quotation, appropriation, and all the grammar of gestures that characterize postmodern art.⁵⁸ Nevertheless the system of contemporary art, in its various components (artists,

curators, gallery owners, collectors, museums, etc.), is stuck in a paradoxical defense of “originality” (understood as the possibility of attributing the authorship of a work to the solitary genius of an alleged artist). It is therefore only in the remix culture that the originality, in its literal sense of *something that exists from the beginning* or something that is not copied or imitated, finally dies.⁵⁹ To use the words of Flusser, the myth of the author succumbs when facing information that, relinquishing any claim to originality, opens the possibility of being *automatically* anywhere, in a state of constant replicability.⁶⁰

Discursive and Dialogic Remixes

Bringing the discourse back to the general Flusserian categories may be useful for distinguishing between two types of activities which may be, in a very broad sense, labeled as remix: the simple copy of a media object (for example sharing on one’s own website a picture published in a different context) and the hybridization of two or more sources (for example modifying videos with other media objects, such as background music). First of all, it must be said that there are doubts about the possibility of considering sampling or the simple *copy/paste* a real remix—it is in fact often a mere duplication or displacement of unedited information (except for the different contexts in which they are published). Eduardo Navas claims that such cases cannot be considered remixes, even if they are still important because they demonstrate how the key principles of the logic of remix (in particular sampling) are extended to all media⁶¹ and more generally to contemporary culture as a whole. Aware of this *misuse* I choose to continue to define “remix” as the simple copies of preexisting cultural objects even if my choice is instrumental: Indeed my aim is to demonstrate that these activities, while confirming the initial premise that is the transformation of remix in the compositional paradigm of contemporaneity (one thinks in terms of remix even when not producing real remixes but simple copies), are functional to the diffusion and circulation of information but do not add anything to the cultural fragments transmitted. I therefore propose to call them *discursive remixes* as discourse is the most typical system of information transmission in a society dominated by “unidirectional media.” Clearly, the architecture described by Flusser is not reflected in the reality structured by endless *copy and paste* operations: in these cases there are no rays (media channels) that radiate outward from the center (the sender) to reach individual receivers, nevertheless it is possible to maintain the metaphor of the ray as long as one imagines these channels of communication as consisting of a large number of points, or better, from all the nodes (of a network) which retransmit and *copy and paste* the same information. As with broadcast media there is no dialog with the source that issued the original message, sampling is in fact an amplification of the reach of the original message and, at most, a likely (but not obvious) adherence to its content. The situation is however quite different because rays are not mono-directional but technically reversible. The lack of dialog between the original sender and those who copy and retransmit the message is therefore not to be attributed to the technique but to a lack of willingness to communicate or to the prevailing of a new form of dialog—that certainly would not be appreciated by Flusser—in which the *dialogic exchange* is nothing more than a copy to which, in abstract terms and with a huge dose of optimism, one could assign the value of an implicit adherence to the system of values, beliefs, and desires at the base of the copied message.

One element that I wish to emphasize is that we must recognize the full citizenship rights of *discursive remixes* within remix culture. In fact, if it is true that innovation comes from repetition (Tarde) it is just in these infinite chains of *copy and paste* that small differences emerge from the copied model as well as the ability to create new information and escape the natural tendency to entropy.

Of course, in addition to *discursive remixes* there are *dialogical remixes*—those in which the game with information (which we have seen to be the cornerstone of both a remix culture and the utopian telematic society envisioned by Flusser) is fully realized. The *dialogical remixes* are in fact addressed at what Flusser calls “creative receivers”: they process them (remix them) giving rise to new information. Here new information is not intended to be “concluded, complete, perfect” but to enrich the information already existing in the world so that others can creatively continue the game.⁶² Assuming this perspective, it follows that the *remixer/creative receiver* is not committed to producing something (a work, even if open in the manner of Eco), but to the (creative) process itself.

Dialogical remixes, corresponding to the informative images of Flusser and to the innovations of Tarde, while not escaping the fate of *discursive remixes* (to constantly feed the flow of information required by machines), are the only way to avoid succumbing in the relationship with apparatuses. In order not to be programmed by the apparatuses it is necessary to devote oneself to their reconfiguration and programming, in other words it is necessary to say: “I want to have my program so that I won’t be subject to anyone else’s.”⁶³

In a *society dominated by unidirectional media*, senders possess the programs, and we are possessed by them; hence the need to dispossess and to socialize programs. In a fully realized *society of information*, that is to say a society in which centralized senders were overcome, it would no longer make sense to speak of dispossession; one should rather think in terms of dialogical programming and therefore more than using “one’s own program” it would be appropriate to use the formula “programs of others.” In a *telematic society*, as Flusser points out, there is no longer the need to possess one’s own program to reduce the fear of succumbing to someone else’s program. What is really fundamental is having the “programs of others” in order to edit, remix, and share, in turn, with others.⁶⁴

Notes

- 1 Vito Campanelli, *Web Aesthetics: How Digital Media Affect Culture and Society* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2010), 190.
- 2 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).
- 3 Lev Manovich, *Software Takes Command* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 267.
- 4 Vilém Flusser, *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder* (Gottingen: European Photography, 1985), trans. *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 87–90.
- 5 Vilém Flusser, “Photo Production” (1984), unpublished typescript from a lecture delivered at Ecole Nationale de la Photographie, Arles (France), February 23, 1984. It is available in the Flusser Archive, Berlin.
- 6 Flusser, *Into the Universe*, 90.
- 7 It is important to underline that Flusser goes beyond the traditional opposition between Darwin and Lamarck, indeed he applies his reasoning to acquired (Lamarck) as well to inherited information (Darwin).
- 8 Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).
- 9 Flusser, *Into the Universe*, 92.
- 10 This interpretation of Flusser is partly consistent with the concepts of “demassification” and “prosumer” proposed by Toffler, see Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981).
- 11 Flusser, *Into the Universe*, 91–94.

- 12 Ibid., 95.
- 13 Ibid., 162–163.
- 14 Ibid., 95–99.
- 15 Ibid., 99–103.
- 16 Ibid., 104.
- 17 Campanelli, *Web Aesthetics*, 198.
- 18 For the concept of “reflexive remix,” see Eduardo Navas, *Remix Theory: The Aesthetics of Sampling* (Vienna: Springer, 2012). See also Navas, “Regressive and Reflexive Mashups in Sampling Culture,” in *Mashup Cultures*, ed. Stefan Sonvilla-Weiss (Vienna: Springer, 2010).
- 19 Alberto Abruzzese, introduction to *Remix It Yourself* by Vito Campanelli, xi. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.
- 20 Michel Maffesoli, *Le temps des tribus. Le déclin de l’individualisme dans les sociétés postmodernes* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1998), trans. *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society* (London: Sage, 1996).
- 21 Vito Campanelli, *Remix It Yourself. Analisi socio-estetica delle forme comunicative del Web* (Bologna: CLUEB, 2011), 11.
- 22 Flusser, *Into the Universe*, 126.
- 23 Campanelli, *Remix*, 15.
- 24 Campanelli, *Web Aesthetics*, 194.
- 25 Flusser, *Into the Universe*, 99.
- 26 Campanelli, *Web Aesthetics*, 194, original emphasis.
- 27 Manovich, *Software Takes Command*. On the concept of “modularity,” see also Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).
- 28 Flusser, *Into the Universe*, 15–23.
- 29 Campanelli, *Remix*, 18.
- 30 Manovich, *Software Takes Command*, 267–277.
- 31 Toffler (1981), Lévy (1994), Castells (1996), Bruns (2006), Deuze (2006), Jenkins (2002 and 2006), Lessig (2008), Shirky (2008), Schäfer (2011), just to quote a few authors.
- 32 Campanelli, *Web Aesthetics*, 203.
- 33 Ibid., 204.
- 34 Lévi-Strauss relates bricolage to the mythical thinking: it is in fact the method by which primitives organized their myths, their worldview, their language, their society and—ultimately—their thinking and its rules. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1962), trans. *The Savage Mind: The Nature of Human Society Series* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1966).
- 35 Ibid., 7–18.
- 36 Campanelli, *Web Aesthetics*, 205.
- 37 According to Flusser, science and technology, “these triumphs of Western civilization” have “eroded the objective world around us into nothingness”: “reality” is disintegrated in dimensionless points (quanta) or—as Flusser puts it—“everything is a swarm of points” (Flusser, *Into the Universe*, 38). “What remains are particles without dimension that can be neither grasped nor represented nor understood. They are inaccessible to hands, eyes, or fingers.” But they can be calculated and computed by means of computers (Ibid., 10).
- 38 Ibid., 108.
- 39 Ibid., 112.
- 40 Ibid., 105–114.
- 41 Gabriel de Tarde, *Le lois de l’imitation* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1890), trans. *The Laws of Imitation* (New York: Henry Holt, 1903).
- 42 Ibid., 17.
- 43 These two fundamental poles of Tardian sociology are not referable to feelings (to pure affective states), they are rather mental powers, psychic powers that take a decisive social value by virtue of their measurability, by an identity that endures unchanged while transferring from one individual to another, by the ease with which they are communicated and by their strong contagiousness.
- 44 Gabriel de Tarde, “Qu’est-ce qu’une société?” *Revue Philosophique*, XVIII (1884), 489–510.
- 45 Gustav Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1895), trans. *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: Digireads.com, 2008).
- 46 Ibid., 60.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid., 66.

- 49 Gustav Le Bon, *Les lois psychologiques de l'évolution des peuples* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1895), trans. *The Psychology of Peoples* (New York: Macmillan, 1899) 174.
- 50 Le Bon, *The Crowd*, 61.
- 51 Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation*, 43.
- 52 About the opposition between Tarde and Durkheim see Mike Gane, *On Durkheim's Rules of Sociological Method* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 52–56.
- 53 Bruno Karsenti, "Imitation: Returning to the Tarde–Durkheim debate," in *The Social after Gabriel Tarde: Debates and Assessments*, ed. Matei Candei (New York: Routledge, 2010), 50.
- 54 The decisive role of the DJ culture in fostering the emergence of a remix culture is emphasized in: Campanelli, *Web Aesthetics*, and Navas, *Remix Theory*.
- 55 Campanelli, *Remix*, 44.
- 56 Gabriel de Tarde, "L'inter-psychologie," *Bulletin de l'Institut Général Psychologique*, 3 (1903), 91–118.
- 57 Campanelli, *Remix*, 41.
- 58 Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).
- 59 Campanelli, *Remix*, 45.
- 60 Flusser, *Into the Universe*, 95–104.
- 61 Navas, "Regressive and Reflexive Mashups," 165.
- 62 Vilém Flusser, *Die Revolution der Bilder. Der Flusser-Reader zu Kommunikation, Medien und Design* (Mannheim: Bollman, 1995), 59–65.
- 63 Flusser, *Into the Universe*, 155.
- 64 Ibid.

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