

## Musical Battleground

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Imagine, if you will, the goody-two-shoes strains of Cliff Richard's 'Summer Holiday' spliced with an old blues murder ballad. The rhythm and the backing are seamlessly matched so that Cliff appears to be dueting with a killer. Or clips of David Attenborough's Kalahari-dwelling meerkats projected on to a nightclub wall. The scene jump-cuts into Tomorrow's World footage from the 1970s, uniting meerkats and an unsuspecting Judith Hann, who are 'remixed' together and set to a dance beat.

The first of these unlikely-sounding scenarios is the kind of thing that makes Sir Cliff sweat at night – and leads him to lobby for protectionist extensions to copyright (though, in truth, even his profile as a butt of juvenile pranksterism is in decline). And the second may be coming soon to a nightclub near you. In a bid to encourage people to sample the riches of its online 'Creative Archive', the BBC ran a VJ (video jockey) competition to find the best video mix that uses this freely available material; there were 400 entries.

As more and more of our media are provided digitally, we have an ever-increasing scope to tailor what we receive, manipulate it and re-present it to suit our own taste. Personal Video Recorders can be used to create personalised programming (and skip the boring bits and the ads), while the latest computers enable us to re-mix music, video and text resources to make secondary artworks. The question is, though, is this 're-mix, re-package' culture a democratising, user-friendly trend, or is it just a licence for derivative plagiarism and the undermining of strong, coherent voices in the media and arts?

Our laws were not conceived with digital media in mind: strictly speaking, you break the law in the UK if you simply copy tracks from your CD collection to your iPod. But public service broadcasters and media organisations are among those staking out areas of legitimate copying and re-use that do not turn us all into criminals. They are obliged by their remit to be more open and less protective about their 'content' and what the audience does with it, and, in cases like the BBC, its scale enables it to experiment in ways that private corporations would find difficult to justify to shareholders. Through the Internet we digital citizens can share the content we obtain and manipulate. Turning this potential to public good leads the BBC, for example, to commit to "support social innovation by encouraging users' efforts to build sites and projects that meet their needs and those of their communities".

The BBC's initial contribution to the pilot of the Creative Archive – an initiative in which the British Film Institute, Channel 4 and others are also involved – is 100 hours of TV material, which anyone in the UK can download, view, re-mix and re-distribute. The only constraints are that remixes should not be commercial, defamatory or 'soapboxing' (i.e. distorting Auntie's words to undermine her claim to impartiality).

The agenda behind these initiatives isn't just to develop the nation's cultural wealth. "The Archive will also help develop 'media literacy,'" says Lord Puttnam. "The ability for schools and young people especially to use video and audio 'clips' from creative work of all kinds can only be an enormous spur to innovation as well as to the development and training of new creative talent, by nurturing skills such as editing and sound production."

Music is the digital battleground on which most blood has been spilt, though again there are tame and legitimate cases of digital manipulation. Music fans enjoy compiling their own virtual compilations of recordings and then publishing the list of songs as a 'playlist'. As you share your lists with others online, you play the role of a DJ, or curate a sequence of music that tells a new story or brings a new perspective to an established repertoire. And sharing the playlists is legal as long as you don't share the copyrighted recordings in the lists without permission.

The first digital transgressions in music came when pop musicians started 'sampling' others' work – typically a few seconds or less – in their own recordings. A legal and commercial framework is now in place to support sampling, but computer power has moved on, and a new practice, known as 'mash-ups', splices together full song-length chunks of music and lyrics to make a hybrid, second-order track. Last year a DJ pasted together a rap album and a Beatles album. Attempts by the Beatles' record label to prohibit the derivative work provoked widespread online civil disobedience, with many websites offering the mash-up album as a free download for 24 hours. "It's clear that this work devalues neither of the originals. There is no legitimate artistic or economic reason to ban this record," said Nicholas Reville, co-founder of the activist organisation behind the protest. "Remixes and pastiche are a defining aesthetic of our era. How will artists continue to work if corporations can outlaw what they do?"

But are the products of this 'remix culture' any good? Though technology has made it almost embarrassingly simple to re-appropriate media in the way that Kurt Schwitters and William Burroughs did more painstakingly, few of the works made with the new tools come near to matching those predecessors. Now that the means to collage and cut-up our news, audio and video are installed in many a suburban living room, the ends of these practices seem to have been shorn of the radical, disruptive credentials that were once claimed for them.

Advocates of a rich digital public domain like to remind us that all great artists draw from the common pool of culture to make their work. But in the drawing and the filtering, the origins are fused together, warped and re-cast. These are resolutely 'analogue' transformations. The trouble with digital content is its obdurate fidelity and the integrity of its bits: even when two tracks are mashed together, they do not lose their identities; you hear first one, then the other, then their collision. You may hear the tracks differently thereafter – as Borges argued a version of Don Quixote reconstituted word-for-word in the 20th century would be different, and richer, than Cervantes' book – but the bits are still the same.

"Bad artists copy; great artists steal," as Picasso is alleged to have said. The problem is that in our digital era, we are condemned to copy, and stealing turns out to be almost literally impossible. If you download a video clip from the Creative Archive, or a music track from a legal or illegal site, all you get is a digital copy: the original file is left intact where you found it.

Like it or loathe it, though remix culture is fashionable with the funding agencies excited by its interdisciplinary combination of cutting-edge technology, media craft skills and exploitation of cultural heritage. If William Burroughs were doing his tape cut-up pieces in London today, NESTA (the National Endowment for Science Technology and the Arts) would be bending over backwards to give him a fellowship.