

# **PUMPING IRONY**

## **STRENGTH THROUGH SAMPLING**

CAVEAT LECTOR<sup>1</sup>—remember the 1988 international hit single of the British pop act M/A/R/R/S called “Pumping Up the Volume”? It was “made up largely of pieces of about thirty other records.”<sup>2</sup> So too, what you are about to read on the topic of sampling is “conspicuously self-enacted,”<sup>3</sup> as I turn

**Linda Hutcheon**

up my personal “oversampling digital filter,” which “increases the sampling rate” and “raises the sampling noise so far above the audio spectrum that it is virtually impossible for it to interfere with your listening”<sup>4</sup>—or reading.

Heidegger. And I say “attributing” to Heidegger because I don’t quite see violence and Heidegger in the same way. Heidegger talks much more about an implosion than an explosion. Therefore, to me, the notion of violence does not depict with what Heidegger is concerned.

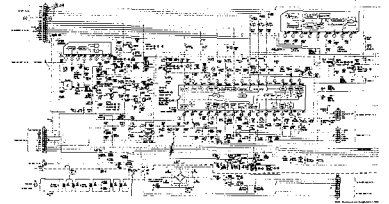
About the ordinary, you said something like “it’s an institutional over-determination of meaning.” The ordinary is also communication. The ordinary is the basic versus the complex, or the mediated. In being the basic, the fundamental, it is also the fragmentary, which is an important dimension in Cavell. It is what gets communicated—but in a fragmentary way, in an ineffable way—and still has meaning and still stays and still resists.

So these two dimensions intersect each other—the two dimensions, the residual dimensions of resistance, but residual, not radically dispersed, not radically disso-

We have been indirectly challenged to “move and sustain meaning at the same time”<sup>5</sup> in a postmodern “field of copies” where “the original is hard to find in amongst its impostures.” But the “field of copies” is both a “killing field” and a “field of dreams”; it is the space of the postmodern, of “supplementarity,”<sup>6</sup> of “reduplication,”<sup>7</sup> of “intertextuality,”<sup>8</sup> when it is only as “part of prior discourses that any text derives meaning and significance.”<sup>9</sup> It is also the space—or sound—of sampling. The sampler, “the digital sampling music computer,” is “potentially the most postmodern musical instrument yet invented,”<sup>10</sup> for it can “digitally encode any sounds, store them, and enable the manipulation and reproduction of those sounds within almost infinite parameters,”<sup>11</sup> thus eroding “the divisions not just between originals and copies, but between human and machine-performed music” and putting “authenticity and creativity in crisis.”<sup>12</sup> Sampling is an important part of our “appropriation culture”: “From the techno funk street rhythms generated by the master-DJs of scratching, mixing, and matching, to the neurochemical sublime of body/

machine interfaces, the new appropriation culture everywhere feeds off the 'leaky' hegemony of information technology—a technology that must always seek out ways of simulating prestige for its owners because its component architecture does not recognize the concept of unique ownership of 'electronic property.'"<sup>13</sup> Property, ownership, and authenticity are not postmodern words; appropriation, sampling, and parody are. "Mobility and permeability" define the aesthetic of the "postmodern self" as "fractal subject."<sup>14</sup> "As Benjamin's 'age of [mechanical] reproduction' is replaced by our 'age of electronic reproduction,' the trends that he discerned are further extended. Reproduction, pastiche, and quotation, instead of being forms of textual parasitism, become constitutive of textuality."<sup>15</sup>

Enter the Tape-Beatles, the "*focus where the avant-garde and popular culture meet*"<sup>16</sup>—a "dedicated group of world renowned cultural embezzlers."<sup>17</sup> These are the apostles of "retrofuturism"—"making use of all the grand and brilliant innovations that great artists the world over have come up with in over a century of magnificent work."<sup>18</sup> Recording on the PLAGIARISM label (their "registered trademark...*After all, it's our idea*"<sup>19</sup>), the Tape-Beatles "compose others' output with cost-effective wit, desperately edged" and "tackle thorny issues like parody, the private joke, and 'irony'—archiving others' music for their own research."<sup>20</sup> Their recordings provide a fine "guide to current copyright controversy,"



Signal circuit diagram

including “examples of unregistered, transcontextualized, and copyright protected works” that set up an aural space “where ideas and their consequences are not ownable.”<sup>21</sup>

luted, not non-existent. They are not virtual, but they are resistant.

**AUDIENCE B:** My question is primarily for Andy Payne. I will lead up to it by saying that after the last Culture Lab I went home annoyed with the David Duke guy [Ronald Jones] and, finally, annoyed with myself because I hadn't really got past the strategist way in which that person was dealing with David Duke. I want to ask Andy Payne about his thesis so I can go home...

**PAYNE:** With your money's worth?

**AUDIENCE B:** ...with peace of mind. I found all of the panelists, with the exception of Andy Payne, being very clear, and I could actually follow them ninety percent of the time. I particularly enjoyed the discussion.

But in the case of Andy's, I am mystified because I can't tell to

But sampling and appropriation do violate copyright laws, which “affirm and value such abstractions as originality, creativity, and authorship”<sup>22</sup>—and are concerned with the “market implications for the original art and artist.”<sup>23</sup> It is in precisely this context that “appropriation's effectiveness, as a form of criticism, lies in the fact that appropriation is a political, as well as artistic, act.”<sup>24</sup> Hence the politics of Brian Boigon's *Speed Reading Tokyo*, with its superimposition of “all the information schemes you have ever seen” to create “an architecture of infotainment,”<sup>25</sup> or his Alphabetical Machine Implant with its “core sample of cultural notations.”<sup>26</sup> Hence the politics of the Guerrilla Girls' appropriation of the semiosis of posters in their role as “Conscience of the Art World.”<sup>27</sup> Hence postmodern appropriation artist Barbara Kruger's willingness to waive “copyright costs” for an academic's—

my—reproduction of her work, saying “I have a very problematic relationship with the notion of copyright anyway.”<sup>28</sup>

But tell that to the New York district court that found copyright infringement in Jeff Koon's parodic appropriative sculpture of photographer Art Rogers's picture of two friends and

their new litter of eight puppies that appeared in his 1988 "Banality Show."<sup>29</sup> Are parodic appropriation and "recontextualizing" as a mode of critical commentary not covered under section 107 of the American copyright laws as constituting "the fair use of a copyrighted work...for purposes such as criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching...scholarship or research"?<sup>30</sup> *Harvard Law Review Notes* says "no," but argues that there should be a "Parody Defense to Copyright Infringement."<sup>31</sup>

Parody is legally threatening because it "makes obedience and transgression equivalent, and that is the most serious crime since it cancels out the difference upon which the law is based."<sup>32</sup> Parody joins appropriation and sampling to force "a reassessment of the process of textual production"<sup>33</sup> in a context where capitalism dovetails with a Romantic aesthetic of singularity, originality, and authenticity. Yet, surely, "visual, literary, and musical artists alike constantly refer [and have referred] to the work of others in their creations.... This sharing and borrowing of ideas and styles of expression is an important element of the creative process in [any]...interactive and dynamic society."<sup>34</sup> But we still persist in calling this a postmodern "Age of Plunder."<sup>35</sup> Is it only "popular culture...[that] appears to be driven solely by the 'it sure sounds familiar' agenda"<sup>36</sup>? "We always live in a market... and therefore always find it economical to pay others to locate and sample" some of the vast "array of possible goods available to us in our 'supermarket' of late capitalist culture."<sup>37</sup> We call these samplings "reviews," sometimes we

call them “theory.” Sam Weber’s article “Reading and Writing—Chez Derrida”<sup>38</sup> is about Jacques Derrida’s *La Carte Postale* and its “motifs of repetition, iteration and reversible circulation”<sup>39</sup> but Weber’s deconstructive text “itself, at many points, both incorporates and paraphrases Derrida’s text,”<sup>40</sup> thus enacting the “transformative...disruptive power”<sup>41</sup> of repetition—or sampling.

what extent it’s my own lack of proper grounding in philosophy; or whether it is his way of presenting—which I find quite obscure and very hermetic—and what that represents as a choice of delivering, staking out a position, and what it represents to you instrumentally. You may disagree totally and think that ninety percent of the audience can easily understand what you are saying. I would say that maybe ten percent could really understand what you are saying.

And just to bracket that, I would say of Linda Hutcheon, I can’t understand why people were being amused and finding the way in which you were presenting things, in fact, humorous, while it seemed to me that Andy Payne was exposing this extreme mix of things in a way that I find hermetic and obscure. I don’t understand what the purpose of it is. Maybe it is my problem, not your problem. But, again I am interested in what your

Commentators have now isolated “three strands of digital sampling in pop production,”<sup>42</sup> and I want to suggest that these three have their analogs in our contemporary intellectual arena, too. First, “hidden” sampling—“steal[ing] a sound,” “motivated largely by economics”<sup>43</sup>—is what we call “plagiarism” without the “registered trademark” of the Tape-Beatles.<sup>44</sup> The “more explicit” samplings that “celebrate playfulness” and “deconstruct the original text”<sup>45</sup> but remain a “radicalism [that] takes place in...the mainstream”<sup>46</sup> is what we call “deconstruction.” Then there are those “who have made an aesthetic out of sampling...a *politics* out of stealing.”<sup>47</sup> These

include the Foucaultians with their “promoting...of anonymous discourse”<sup>48</sup>; but they also include traditional scholars, for, are not scholarly footnotes but the traces of academic sampling? The scholar, I submit, has been a sampling, Lévi-Straussian “bricoleur”<sup>49</sup> whose creations “always really

consist of a new arrangement of elements,"<sup>50</sup> of messages "which have... been transmitted in advance."<sup>51</sup> The intention of "intellectual 'bricolage'"<sup>52</sup>—a.k.a. scholarship—has always been "the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich"<sup>53</sup> the "heterogeneous repertoire"<sup>54</sup> of culture. Not unlike the Tape-Beatles, scholars have always been in the "business...[of] the recycling of registered icons that are adding to our already unmanageable stockpiles of cultural waste."<sup>55</sup>

"But moments of change and reinvestment of cultural energy, especially those ushered in by new cultural technologies, are never just moments of replication, reproduction, and further domination. They are also moments of reformation, when opportunities exist to contest, reconstruct, and redefine existing terms and relations of power as part of the task of modernizing cultural resistance."<sup>56</sup>

In this spirit of "modernizing cultural resistance," then—and only minimally with tongue in cheek—I would like to offer this article you are reading, this bricolage of samples, as the "ecologically correct" form of knowledge for the 1990s, as a discursive form that recycles existing texts in order to confront and resist a postmodern world of information overload in dire need of waste management. Maybe Walter Benjamin foresaw this postmodern moment too—a moment when the "creative," and, I would add, the critical, would become "the merest variant, with contradiction for its father and imitation for its mother."<sup>57</sup>

- 1 Leonard Cohen writes these words of warning to his readers on the tiles beside the bath in which he sits in the National Film Board film *Ladies and Gentlemen... Mr. Leonard Cohen*.
- 2 Andrew Goodwin, "Sample and Hold: Pop Music in the Digital Age of Reproduction," in Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin, eds., *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word* (London: Routledge, 1990), 258.
- 3 Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 117.
- 4 Yamaha CDV-1600 player brochure.
- 5 Brian Boigon, address to Culture Lab symposium, Toronto, Ontario, 10 February 1992.
- 6 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 243.
- 7 Douglas Crimp, "On the Museum's Ruins," in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic* (Washington: Bay Press, 1983), 44.
- 8 Julia Kristeva, *Séméiotikè: recherches pur une sémanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), 255.
- 9 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 126.
- 10 Goodwin, "Sample and Hold," 261.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid., 262.
- 13 Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 212.
- 14 Arthur Kroker, Marilouise Kroker, David Cook, "Panic Music," in *Panic Encyclopedia: The Definitive Guide to the Postmodern Scene* (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1989), 155. In A. S. Byatt's novel, *Possession*, an academic character ponders subjectivity in literary, not musical, terms: "Were these thoughts original, Maud wondered, and decided almost inevitably not, all the possible thoughts about literary subjectivity had recently and strenuously been explored." A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1990), 250.
- 15 Peter Wollen, "Ways of Thinking about Music Video (and Postmodernism)," *Critical Quarterly* 28.1-2 (1986): 169. Sampled in Goodwin, "Sample and Hold," 258.
- 16 The Tape-Beatles, *A Subtle Buoyancy of Pulse*, unpaginated booklet that acts as liner notes to tape of the same name.
- 17 "Ralph Johnson [sic]" on liner notes to *Music with Sound*, a 1991 CD by the Tape-Beatles.
- 18 Tape-Beatles, *Subtle Buoyancy of Pulse*.
- 19 Ibid., italics theirs.
- 20 *Music with Sound*.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Wendy Griesdorf, "If Only Mother Nature Could Sue Wordsworth for Copyright Infringement..." 1991 unpublished essay for Intellectual Property Law course with D. Vaver, University of Toronto Law School, 2.
- 23 Griesdorf, "Mother Nature," 8. This point raises interesting questions about who should be paid for sampled work—like this.
- 24 Elizabeth Wang, "(Re)Productive Rights: Copyright and the Postmodern Artist," *Columbia VLA Journal of Law and the Arts* 14 (1990): 281.
- 25 Brian Boigon, *Speed Reading Tokyo* (Tokyo: P3 Alternative Museum, 1990), no pagination.
- 26 Ihor Holubizky, review of this work in *Etc.* 14 (Spring 1991).
- 27 Catalog to Nina Felshin's exhibit, *No Laughing Matter* (New York: Independent



- Curators Incorporated, 1991), 22–23.
- 28** Barbara Kruger, letter to Linda Hutcheon, 1989.
- 29** *New York Times*, 22 September 1991, B1. For this and the other references in this paragraph, I have sampled from Griesdorf, "Mother Nature."
- 30** 17 U.S.C.S., section 107. For the Canadian equivalent, see the Copyright Act R.S.C., section 27 (1985).
- 31** "The Parody Defense to Copyright Infringement: Productive Fair Use after *Betamax*," *Harvard Law Review Notes* 1395 (1984): 97.
- 32** Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 40.
- 33** Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (London: Methuen, 1985), 5.
- 34** Paul Tackaberry, "Getting in Tune with the Sound of the Future," *Globe and Mail*, 4 January 1992, C7.
- 35** Goodwin, "Sample and Hold," 267.
- 36** Shannon Kari, "The Best of the Sixties," *Globe and Mail*, November 1991, C1.
- 37** Smith, *Contingencies of Value*, 99.
- 38** Sam Weber, "Reading and Writing— Chez Derrida," in *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 45.2 (1983): 41–62.
- 39** Smith, *Contingencies of Value*, 207, n. 40.
- 40** *Ibid.*
- 41** Weber, cited in Smith, *Contingencies of Value*, 119.
- 42** Goodwin, "Sample and Hold," 270.
- 43** *Ibid.*
- 44** This is not unique to pop music production. In composing the music for his famous opera *Carmen*, George Bizet "refused to visit Spain in order to pick up local musical color, but he was not above lifting a folk song from Ciudad Real for *Carmen's* first act snatch of defiance." Anthony Burgess, "Introduction" to his translation of the *Carmen* libretto for the English National Opera (London: Hutchinson, 1986), ix.
- 45** Goodwin, "Sample and Hold," 270–71.
- 46** *Ibid.*, 271.
- 47** *Ibid.*, italics his.
- 48** Annabel Patterson, "Intention," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 143.
- 49** Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 18.
- 50** *Ibid.*, 21.
- 51** *Ibid.*, 20.
- 52** *Ibid.*, 17.
- 53** *Ibid.*
- 54** *Ibid.*
- 55** Brian Greenspan, letter to Linda Hutcheon about the Tape-Beatles, December 1991.
- 56** Ross, *No Respect*, 213.
- 57** Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," sampled in Griesdorf, "Mother Nature," 1.