



Title

Visual Rhetoric Remix, Jon Heggstad



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Abstract

In our participatory Web 2.0 culture, the art of remixing has become ubiquitous. While we might say that this practice, to some extent, has always been present in our cultural history, the number of remixes we now encounter on a daily basis indicates a series of new thresholds. From mash-ups to fan art to memes, remixing has reached an unprecedented level of saturation in our cultural landscape, but remixing can also point us down other trajectories as well. In reflecting on a prompt that I created but never assigned, I trace out some of these possible trajectories.

Keywords: Pedagogy, Remix, Visual Rhetoric, Failure

As a fairly new instructor—teaching undergraduate courses in film, writing, and digital rhetoric—I respond apologetically when students ask for past examples of assignments I’ve asked them to complete. Past examples don’t exist yet.

In lieu of student examples, I offer my current classes my own take on the assignments. A mentor in grad school once told me that whenever he created a new assignment, he made sure to complete the prompt himself before giving it to his class. I’ve appreciated this advice. Following or fumbling over my own steps provides me with an opportunity to refine my prompts. My students seem to appreciate this as well, having at least one “past example” to go off of.

What I hadn’t anticipated in following my mentor’s advice was how frequently I’d encounter little failures—projects that, once completed, would cause me to rewrite the assignment, leaving a wake of work that would never see the light of day. They remind me of

what Jack Halberstam said of encountering failure in the Academy: “[M]ight we rather take this opportunity to rethink the project of learning and thinking altogether?” (Halberstam 2011, 7).

In the fall of 2021, I taught a course titled “Visual Rhetorics of Science, Technology, and Culture,” which looked at everything from infographics to emojis. Preparing for the course, I’d selfishly looked forward to our unit on remix culture. Remixing was something I’d greatly enjoyed learning about when I was first introduced to it; I hoped my students would feel the same.

Ultimately, we spent five weeks thinking through this concept, bringing remixes alongside related terms like bricolage, pastiche, and parody. Through an early assignment for this unit, I wanted students to explore remixes on their own, thinking about where they’d previously encountered them. Students were therefore asked to identify crossover fan art and music mash-ups that highlighted the popularity of remixing in our Web 2.0 culture.

But that was the prompt I came to after the initial failure of the assignment’s first draft. Originally, I’d thought to have students create a remixed image of their own, selecting two source images that held distinct meaning and, by combining them together, illustrating how remixing might produce new meaning through a conceptual blending framework.

The painting pictured here marks my own attempt at this first draft of the assignment. Taking a photograph from a church website’s explanation of communion, I layered it on top of a screen-captured still taken during the climax of a gay pornographic video. Throughout the course, I’d been telling my students to experiment with new mediums, and so I painted my new scene onto a wood panel using acrylic paints before using Adobe Photoshop to touch it up.

And while the painting, itself, was not a failure in my mind—although it is admittedly a bit racier than what I generally offer my classes—it made me realize that I wanted students to focus more on a foundational familiarity with remix culture at the outset of the unit, and the final project (a more creative one) shifted to provide students with more specificity regarding the types of images that they should include, encouraging students to keep their remixes current by drawing source material from recent issues of *The New York Times* (an idea I borrowed from another instructor in my department).

In this way, the painting I created exists on multiple thresholds. Remixes, of course, always signify a crossing of sorts. One image crosses into another, but they arrive at a space that neither element previously occupied. As Lawrence Lessig writes, a remix “succeeds by leveraging the meaning created by the reference to build something new” (Lessig 2008, 76).

But the painting also stops short on its way to becoming a finished product. There was a purpose for it when I set out, but the target shifted. Like so much work created by early-career academics, it remains on the threshold—unable to stand on its own, unwilling to completely disappear.

Bibliography

Halberstam, Jack. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

Lessig, Lawrence. *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*. London, Bloomsbury, 2008.

About the Author

Jon Heggstad is a Lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, where he teaches courses on literature, film, new media, and rhetoric. His research focuses on representations of queer identity and queer family-making across media forms. His other recent works have appeared in *Transformative Works and Cultures*, *Queer Studies in Media & Popular Culture*, *Inside Higher Ed*, and *Public Books*.