

# Book Review: Of Remixology: Ethics and Aesthetics after Remix by David J. Gunkel

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*Is remix a revolutionary creative practice or an illegitimate stealing of other people's work? In **Of Remixology**, David J. Gunkel challenges the terms of this debate by arguing that both arguments are predicated on shared values, despite ostensibly opposing goals. This book provides an accessible, lively and impressive conceptual mashup of the conflict between the so-called copyright and copyleft that offers much of interest to users and producers of creative content, writes **Nicole Shephard**.*

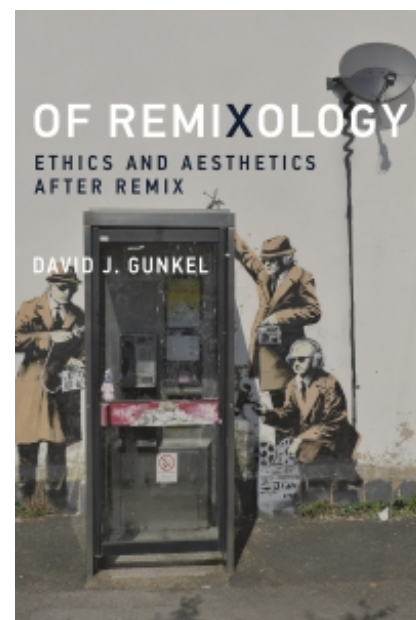
***Of Remixology: Ethics and Aesthetics after Remix***. David J. Gunkel. MIT Press. 2016.

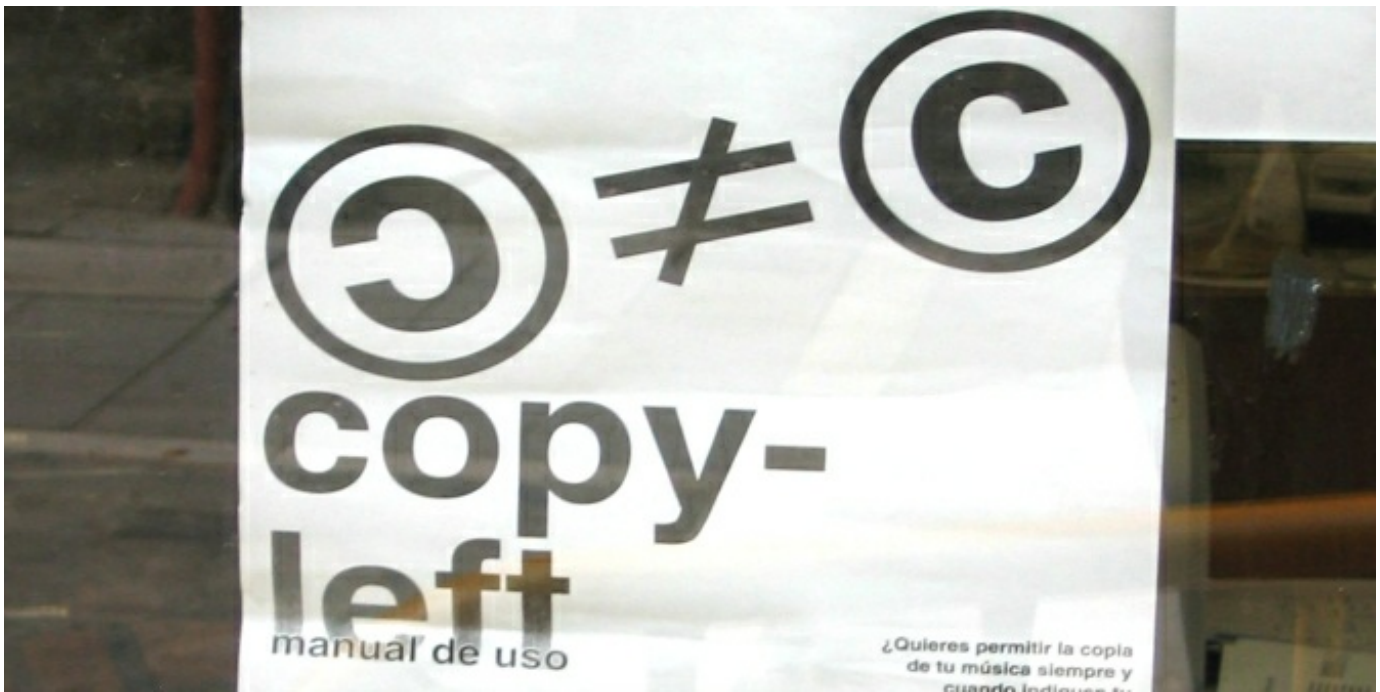
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To anyone who has attempted academic writing – or any kind of writing for that matter – it will go without saying that originality relies on many sources beyond one's own ideas. But while for some [everything is a remix](#), others fight harder than ever to protect intellectual property, if the proliferation of content takedown requests based on copyright is even a partial indication. The premise of *Of Remixology: Ethics and Aesthetics after Remix* is that defendants and critics of remix, for better or worse, base their arguments on the very same logic while pursuing opposing goals. The book then provides an impressive conceptual mashup of the so-called copyright and copyleft.

Author David J. Gunkel is a professor in Media Studies at Northern Illinois University, where his research and writing engages with the philosophy of technology, ICTs, new media and ethics. In addition to being an award-winning researcher and teacher, he is also a co-founder and managing editor of the *International Journal of Žižek Studies*.

In *Of Remixology*, he elegantly shows how the axiology found in Plato (in a nutshell: good original vs. bad copy) is so engrained that two diametrically opposing sides of the contemporary debate can ground their arguments in the same values. On the one side are those who seek to strengthen copyright to protect an original author's claim to their work. They regard remix as unoriginal and lazy practice, as plagiarism and as a criminal offence. On the other side (often termed copyleft), we find the critics of the established order who call for a reform of copyright legislation, value remix as original and creative in itself and liken it to 'the folk art of the future' (xx). The common denominator is the value placed on originality, innovation and the hard work it takes to be creative. *Of Remixology* re-examines the often unquestioned assumptions that enable the copyright and the copyleft to essentially '[agree against each other](#)' on these matters. With this book, Gunkel aims not at resolving this (dis)agreement, but to re-examine the terms on which it is carried out.





**Image Credit: (José María Mateos CC2.0)**

The book is structured into three sections. The first, titled 'Premix', disentangles the terminology by explaining concepts like collage, sampling, mashup and remix, and explores how and to what ends these sometimes overlapping, sometimes synonymous and sometimes distinct monikers have been used. Tellingly, 'the object of *Of Remixology* is not some thing, practice, or phenomenon that would be called "remix" but the way it has been conceptualized, studied, and debated' (26). Gunkel's project is thus a study of the study and discourse of remix rather than an empirical exploration of remix as such. The remainder of 'Premix' examines the material basis for remix: recording technology. Writing is established as the first technology of recording; with writing as a means to transcribe and reproduce words beyond their initial utterance begins the long history of valuing originality as that which came first temporally while relegating representation to a lower status.

It turns out that in the copyright/copyleft debates, as elsewhere, 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' (Lorde 1981). What *Of Remixology* proposes instead is to re-visit its foundations. In the context of remix, this means returning to Plato's *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates takes us through what is at stake in recording and reproducing 'original' works, and what indeed counts as original. The platonic axiology revolves around notions of originality, innovation and authorship, and is organised hierarchically so that only a 'live' event is the real thing, while any recorded version is a derivative imitation.

The chapters in the second section, 'Remix', tackle the particularities of this distinction between an original work and its copies, and revisit Roland Barthes's proclamation of [the death of the author](#). Gunkel makes a case for repetition, distinguishing a negative understanding of it as just more of the same from positively valued repetition as a creative force that always already includes difference. Perhaps ironically, Gunkel reads Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze and many other venerable dead authorial figures against the grain to critique a well-trodden fetishisation of the original author without giving up on the value of creativity and the creation of original content.

The book's central argument follows in the third section, titled 'Postmix', where Gunkel remixes Jacques Derrida and Slavoj Žižek to formulate new ways of approaching the study of remix and, by extension, its relationship to debates around intellectual property. According to Gunkel, 'the copyright gets the remix wrong but does so for the right reasons, while the copyleft gets the remix right but for the wrong reasons' (xx). The project of remixing Plato's axiology is the red thread Gunkel skillfully weaves through the whole book. 'By occupying the Platonic tradition, [...]

sampling crucial moments in its articulation, and then recombining and reconfiguring this source material' (xxx) he arrives at an alternative axiology.

Gunkel identifies simulation as neither original nor copy, repetition as endless re-circulation and its unauthorised nature as the defining elements of such an alternative approach. Following the proclaimed 'death of the author' (see Barthes and Michel Foucault), the creation of art/text/music certainly has not ended, but the recognition that all manners of creative work draw on what is already available has increased. The remix DJ then becomes the figurehead of Gunkel's modified axiology. In practice, *Of Remixology* asks us to let go of the desire for 'the one true original' (175) and the authority that comes with eternal authorship. One of the few concrete recommendations the book makes is that claims to originality should come with a short expiration date, after which a work would go over to the public domain and be available for others to remix and sample.

While I found myself wishing that the concluding chapter were as substantive as the ones leading up to it, this book offers a great deal of conceptual insight. It is particularly original in applying remix as a methodology to re-purpose theory in novel ways that relate directly to the lively contemporary debates around intellectual property and copyright. Despite its engagement with a plethora of academic sources, *Of Remixology* makes the philosophers and media scholars it draws on relatable and accessible to wider audiences. Remix scholars, philosophers, students of media and communication, readers interested in the wider 'copyright wars' as well as anyone who would consider themselves a user and/or producer of creative content will find much food for thought in this book.

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**Nicole Shephard** has completed her PhD at LSE, where her interdisciplinary research at the Gender Institute explored the becoming of transnational subjects by the means of transnational, intersectional and queer theories. She is a researcher and writer interested in gender and queer theory, migration, the gender/technology nexus, digital cultures and the intersections thereof, and currently expanding her freelance practice. She tweets as [@kilolo\\_](#).

*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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