Palin/Pathos/Peter Griffin: Political Video Remix and Composition Pedagogy

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Abstract

Political video remix has emerged as an important form of civic action, especially during the recent 2008 election season. Seeking to explore the ways in which political video remix can be integrated into rhetorically-based writing classes, we present three qualitative case studies of students' composing of video remixes in a fall 2008 course on "Political Rhetoric and New Media." Drawing on interview data and analyses of student work, we argue that political video remix assignments can potentially 1) enable students to compose activist texts for wide public audiences, 2) heighten students' understanding and application of key rhetorical concepts, 3) offer an opportunity for students and teachers to explore the delivery and circulation of digital texts, 4) highlight the important roles that parody and popular culture references can play in activist rhetoric, and 5) encourage students and teachers to question the conventional privileging of "originality" in composition classrooms. We also analyze how students' composing of remixes is influenced by the activist, technological, and popular culture literacies they bring to the classroom.
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1. Introduction: Political rhetoric in the age of YouTube

If the U.S. 2004 presidential election was the year of the blog (Lee, 2004; Rainie, 2005), the 2008 election was clearly the year of YouTube (Burgess & Green, 2009; Dietel-McLaughlin, 2009; Jenkins, 2008). Many of the candidates posted videos to YouTube, and these videos were responded to by numerous video bloggers (Vargas, 2007). As part of a presidential debate jointly sponsored by CNN and YouTube, users of the site submitted video questions—both "serious" and "parodic" in nature (Dietel-McLaughlin, 2009; Jenkins, 2008). In addition to crafting their own video content, YouTube users also often posted edited clips of media footage of the campaign, seeking to employ digital video tools to compose, amplify, and circulate a particular view of a candidate (Burgess & Green, 2009). Furthermore, many YouTube users have created complex remixes that combine clips of candidates with numerous popular culture references. For example, the democratic presidential primary was invigorated by a parodic remix of Apple's 1984 advertisement that positioned Hillary Clinton as the Orwellian PC and Obama as the radical Macintosh (de Vellis, 2007). Later in the campaign, voters circulated the "Yes We Can" remix in which the hip-hop artist, will.i.am, collaborated with others to transform Obama's Iowa primary victory speech into a catchy song (WeCan08, 2008). This video was then transformed

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again to create a "John.he.is" remix that presented McCain as being highly negative and committed to the status quo (Election08, 2008).

Beyond these well-known, "professional" remixes, YouTube has also hosted numerous remixes composed by seemingly amateur or "prosumer" (Anderson, 2003) composers: George W. Bush singing the U2 song, "Sunday Bloody Sunday" (rx2008, 2006); John McCain singing an old school rap song (headzup, 2008); Hillary Clinton dodging obviously fake bombs in Kosovo (unak78, 2008); and many more. Despite the fact that many of the political remixes found on YouTube and other digital spaces are often quite humorous and/or irreverent in nature, they also can have a substantial influence on how candidates and issues are viewed (Dietel-McLaughlin, 2009; Warnick, 2007). In this sense, the digital political remix is an important form of citizen action that should be of interest to composition scholars and teachers. If political video remix is one way in which young people participate in public civic discourse, then it makes sense for us to engage students in both analyzing and *producing* these kinds of texts (Dietel-McLaughlin, 2009).

Although scholars have called for compositionists to attend to the implications of political remix, there has been very little research that focuses on *students'* composing of remixed activist videos. To this end, we present three case studies of students who composed political video remixes during Fall 2008 in a first-year, honors writing class on "Political Rhetoric and New Media."

In seeking to analyze students' composing of political video remixes, we were particularly interested in engaging the following three questions:

1) How are students' remixes influenced by the cultural ecologies (Selfe & Hawisher, 2004) in which they are produced?
2) What kinds of rhetorical work do students' remixes accomplish, and what kinds of rhetorical choices contribute to making a remix effective in reaching, engaging, and persuading its audience?
3) What do students report learning from the process of composing and distributing remixes?

2. Literature review: Remix composing as multimodal literacy practice

With the rise of contemporary digital technologies that transform words, images, and sounds into numeric representations (Manovich, 2001), it becomes increasingly possible and common for everyday composers to craft remixes or assemblages by editing and rearranging existing texts. In light of the rising prevalence of remix as a form of composing in which youth engage (Jenkins, 2008; Lessig, 2008a; Miller, 2004), numerous compositionists have called for us to teach students to craft remixed texts that creatively recombine existing audio, video, and alphabetic elements (Brooks et al., 2006; DeVoss & Webb, 2008; Dietel-McLaughlin, 2009; Digirhet, 2008; Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 2007; Reid, 2007; Rice, 2006; Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009; Sirc, 2004). Although these scholars often point to digital technologies as a key impetus for valuing remixed composing, it is important to note that conventional print writing often relies as well on the re-arrangement of existing quotations and concepts (Hess, 2006; Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 2007; Lessig, 2008a). Furthermore, we should remember that contemporary digital remix artists regularly draw upon and extend the practices of past avant-garde artists and writers who composed well before the digital age (Delagrange, 2009; Rice, 2007; Sirc, 2004; Ulmer, 1994).

In articulating the value of teaching students to compose digital remixes, scholars have argued that experience with remixed composition can: encourage students to develop a critical understanding of issues of intellectual property and fair use (DeVoss & Webb, 2008; Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 2007); offer students a powerful method of invention (Delagrange, 2009; Rice, 2006; Sirc, 2004); provide a relatively accessible way for students to begin experimenting with digital multimodal composing (Anderson, 2008; Brooks et al., 2006); and prepare students for composing the kinds of remixed texts that are increasingly common in workplace and civic realms (Dietel-McLaughlin, 2009; Johnson-Eilola, 2005; Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009). In this study, we seek to extend this work by offering qualitative evidence of what students can learn about political rhetoric and activism by crafting video remixes.

In addition to drawing on scholarship about remix specifically, we also have been influenced by numerous scholars who have advocated that compositionists engage students in composing multimodal texts that blend images, words, and sounds (Diogenes & Lunsford, 2006; Hocks, 2003; Journet, 2007; McKee, 2006; New London Group, 2002; Selfe, 2007; Shipka, 2005; WIDE, 2005; Wysocki, Johnson-Eilola, Selfe, & Sirc, 2004; Yancey, 2004). In particular, we have been inspired by scholarship that has offered case studies of students' composing of multimodal texts, showing that many students find multimodal projects engaging (Anderson, 2008; Ellertson, 2003; Ross, 2003); that students