

Music of a Witch's Line: Deleuze and Guattari, and Music Video Shreds

Michael David Székely

Abstract: A clip of Wynton Marsalis playing with a jazz orchestra on the Late Show with David Letterman appears on YouTube. As the performance progresses, Marsalis's usual exquisite tone and virtuosic playing slowly starts to reveal a certain disjointedness, exhibiting wayward passages, mishit notes, and cracks. Meanwhile, while struggling to maintain some semblance of a swing beat, the musical background of the string-infused jazz orchestra playing behind Marsalis becomes increasingly dissonant, sounding even a bit ominous – as if some bewitching force has been injected into the performance. What is happening? Enter the world of music video shreds. Following Deleuze and Guattari's work regarding "minor" languages, this essay addresses the relationship between music video shreds and their object as that of a "minoritarian becoming." The music video shred "minorizes" the original music video clip by not only stripping the audio from the original music video clip and replacing it with entirely new audio, but by playing with our expectations concerning the congruence of sound and image. In other words, the music video shred has to do with both art and culture, with both aesthetics and performativity.

For its part, the Urban Dictionary defines music video shreds, or "shreds" for short – the activity of which we would call "shredding," or "doing a shred of..." – as follows:

shred 1. inf verb: to extract the audio track from a video (usually featuring an overblown, over-rated rock guitarist) and replace it with perfectly synchronized, very well played rubbish. The joyful result of this painstaking process renders the featured musician looking even more totally fucking risible than they were already. 2. noun: A parody video clip likely to be removed from YouTube.^[1]

To a greater extent than other new audiovisual aesthetic practices, as well as "user-generated content," music video shreds seem to invite the question, "But is there more to it than that?" However, the more interesting, yet often neglected, issue whenever this kind of response is at play has to do with *why* we might want there to be "more to it than that" in the first place. In challenging and complicating our expectations and evaluation through a particular type of subversion with respect to the original video content, music video shreds, I wish to suggest, *affirm* both aesthetics and performativity. More specifically, they affirm aesthetic and performative *possibility*, or becoming (i.e. what art *does*, what art *might be*), instead of confirming what we think should be the case (i.e. what art *is*, what we think art *should be*).

Minoritarian music videos

Although it might just be the case that, were he alive today, Adorno would be horrified by shreds (whether because of their apparent amateurishness or what would likely be his generally cynical view of YouTube, the seemingly infinite and potentially unhinged origin of shreds), there is arguably a particular kind of political gesture with respect to shreds – a kind of politics out of that which is apparently apolitical. Shreds meet Schoenberg. His own commitment to Marxism notwithstanding, Adorno located the breakthrough and force of Schoenberg's serial atonalism more broadly in how it *not* submit to the socialist realism championed by some of his intellectual (and ideological) peers. Instead, for Adorno, what was radical was precise Schoenberg's insistence on his aesthetic, which is to say, on "formal" concerns. And yet, here again – and paradoxical though it might seem – it would also be misguided to consider Adorno's emphasis (vis-à-vis Schoenberg) on autonomy and formalism as somehow representing a kind of strict autonomist formalism! Although it had been necessarily relegated to a secondary role with respect to the championing of Schoenberg as political, Adorno's more *explicit* political commitment now returns in the form of Schoenbergian atonalism as *cultural critique*, as a bulwark against the "regressive listening" engendered by the commercial popular music of capitalist commodification, as a site of resistance to what, in his earlier, more Marxist (and Brechtian?) period, Roland Barthes called "mythologies."

However, beyond his contentious (to put it mildly) criticism of popular music in general, and jazz in particular, the immanent politics of Schoenberg's atonalism was still, in many ways, a largely oppositional gesture. Hence a rather curious result: by insisting on its aesthetic, Schoenberg's music was more immanently and subversively political; and yet, as uncompromising in its atonalism, Schoenberg's music necessarily assumed a position of isolation (and its most devout followers staking out a kind of protectionism). Now, let me be clear – I am neither asserting any kind of evaluative claim with respect to the aesthetic or political significance of Schoenberg's music vis-à-vis Adorno's criticism nor suggesting that Schoenberg should have done anything other than what he did. On the contrary, certainly for someone like Adorno, the stakes might have arguably been seen as much too high to *not* be uncompromising and oppositional in the fight for aesthetic autonomy. But then, this is the crux of the matter, isn't it? Assuming there is, in fact, a "culture industry," can we think and create beyond it? How does culture as politics proceed?

The deeper concern with respect to the discursive practices and advertisements concerning a range of cultural products and events that Barthes investigated in *Mythologies* was that they made these products and events – familiar though they might have been – appear *natural*. Barthes' critique then, is a theoretical intervention of immanence as subversion, a move to *de-familiarize*, or, what is similar, to make the familiar *strange*. Similarly, in *Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari write:

Minor languages are characterized not by overload and poverty in relation to a standard or major language, but by a sobriety and variation that are like a minor treatment of the standard language, a becoming-minor of the major language. The problem is not the distinction between major and minor language; it is one of becoming. It is a question not of reterritorializing oneself on a dialect or a patois but of deterritorializing the major language.^[2]

Meanwhile, in his later *Essays Critical and Clinical*, Deleuze reiterates that “the effect of literature on language [is that] it opens up a kind of foreign language within language...a becoming-other of language, a minorization of this major language, a delirium that carries it off, a witch’s line that escapes the dominant system.”^[3] This minorization makes language “scream, stutter, stammer, or murmur.”^[4] Our wager, broadly construed, is that *music video shreds make the “language” (or perhaps “signification”) of their subject matter – i.e. the images, gestures, movements, and so on that comprise the performative apparatus and dominant representations of celebrity, stardom, or “success” – scream, stutter, stammer, or murmur.*

But before we address how shreds accomplish these gestures, four general points of clarification with respect to Deleuze and Guattari’s discourse on minor literature might be needed.

First, for Deleuze and Guattari, the distinction between *major* and *minor* – or, “majoritarian” and “minoritarian,” respectively – is not necessarily (and sometimes not at all) a quantitative one. Rather, the distinction has to do with that which is the norm, the standard, etc. and, by contrast, that which pushes up against that norm – but precisely as immanence, as subversion, from within, not as opposition, per se: “We must distinguish between: the majoritarian as a constant and homogeneous system...and the minoritarian as a potential, creative and created becoming. The problem is never to acquire the majority, even in order to install a new constant.”^[5]

Second, and proceeding from the first point, the terms “reterritorialization” and “deterritorialization” also employed by Deleuze and Guattari are so named precisely because they have to do with the notion of a *territory*, which is to say that around which we stake a claim, around which we draw a boundary. Thus, to “reterritorialize” is to come back to a territory – i.e. to reinforce a claim and a boundary – while to “deterritorialize” is to uproot a territory – i.e. to challenge or resist its claim and boundary.

Third, in both pairings – major/minor and reterritorialization/deterritorialization – the relationship is, again, not so much one of opposition, but rather: *immanent* production of forces, tensions, shifts. This is why it would be more fitting to say something to the effect that music video shreds “push up against” their subject matter rather than simply that they work “against” (oppose) their subject matter. Nevertheless, to push up against something is still a gesture that embodies contingency and relationality. “It is in *one’s own* language that one is bilingual or multilingual,” write Deleuze and Guattari “Conquer the major language in order to delineate in it as yet unknown minor languages. Use the minor language to *send the major language racing.*”^[6]

Finally, when Deleuze and Guattari speak of *minor* languages as “delineating as yet unknown languages” and “sending the major language racing,” take these as creating so many “becomings”: “There is no becoming-majoritarian; majority is never becoming. All becoming is minoritarian.”^[7] In other words, minor languages create disruptions, resistances, possibilities, connections, perhaps newer territories, and newer problems. It is in this sense that minor languages are also political, but not in terms of representing any specific ideology or following a certain political program. Aesthetic subversion meets immanent critique.

Following Deleuze and Guattari, I thus envision the relationship between music video shreds and their object as that of minor to major, respectively. That is, the music video shred “minorizes” (through its “shredding”) the “major” original music video clip – and, we should be clear, its entire representational apparatus. For, as we have seen, although this process ostensibly entails stripping the audio from the original music video clip and replacing it with entirely new audio, the newness and invention of the music video shred exists precisely because of how it engages – parasitically, v might say – with the original video clip on different levels. Not unlike the challenge to the “aura” of artworks that Benjamin so keenly observed with respect to mechanical reproduction, the shred deterritorializes its subject matter not just in terms of music and sound in general, but also in terms of playing with our perceptions and expectations around performativity vis-à-vis sound, image, mannerisms, etc.

The discussions that follow are intended to further address the aesthetic provocation of music video shreds with Deleuze’s (and Deleuze and Guattari’s) formulations of minorization and deterritorialization in mind. More specifically, music video shreds will be investigated vis-à-vis other frameworks and contrasts. For example, are music video shreds, in essence, another form of parody? What is the difference between music video shreds and mashups? While ostensibly rather different types of questions, both address music video shreds as they relate to these “minoritarian” or “deterritorializing” qualities and ontological concerns. Finally, issues concerning agency – from the standpoint of both shredder and listener-viewer – will be addressed.

Music videos and music video shreds

In “Creation and Erasure: Music Video as a Signaleptic Form of Practice,” Mathias Bonde Korsgaard writes:

Since the visuals of any music video are created on the basis of a preexisting piece of music, it would seem obvious to think of a music video as a visualization of music. However, in this process of visualizing music, vision also becomes ‘musicalized’ as the images are structured around or react to musical features...the image enters into a relation with a musical feature at some point or another, whether it is an aspect of rhythm, melody, harmony, musical structure, or something else. The effect of this musicalization of the image is often that the image becomes multiple in attempting to mirror the multitracked nature of music. Thus, the musicality of the image assists in disrupting the standard ordering of vision as the dominant force of perception in audiovisual forms, giving birth to a specific kind of ‘audio-vision’ in which music and image mutually remediate each other.^[8]

I reference Korsgaard at length here not only because his analysis is both clear and comprehensive where the operations of music videos are concerned, but also because it contains a number of more succinct points that, addressed one by one, will assist us in articulating and analyzing the particular subject matter for this essay: music video “shreds.” That said, although we will group and reference such “shreds” as, in fact, a type of music video, we also find that their own operations actually relate *inversely* to the general music videos that Korsgaard describes:

- Music video shreds are *not* created on the basis of a preexisting piece of music.
Rather, music video shreds are created based on a preexisting *image* (video). The music of the original music video is replaced by the music (and/or other sounds, effects, etc., as the case may be) of the music video shred – that is, the music added by the creator, or “shredder.”
- Music video shreds represent something closer to a *musicalization of the image* than a visualization of the music.
However, unlike Korsgaard’s description of conventional music videos, this operation does *not* happen through what would seem to be a more *reciprocal* arrangement between music and image. That is, in music video shreds, the images are neither structured around nor are a reaction to the music and sound. The image in music video shreds does *not* “enter into a relation with a musical feature at some point or another...” In this sense, music video shreds are a *one-way street*, wherein the shredder does not arrange different audiovisual components so much as *replace* the audio component by inserting/superimposing her *own* musical/sonic component, “whether rhythm, melody, harmony, musical structure, or something else,” over the visual image. But in this case, a one-way street does not necessarily mean a lack of relationality. Our question will be what *passes between* the shred and its object?
- Music video shreds do *not* “multiply” the image by “musicalizing” it...
Unless by “musicalize” we might admit a Cagean gesture, where “music” might be grunts, whistles, gibberish, machines, found objects, etc., of which a music video shred might employ.
- Music video shreds do *not* “remediate” music and image.
Rather, music video shreds proceed by way of discordance.

An excerpt from the preface to a short interview with StSanders (whose real name is Santeri Ojala, originally from Finland), one of the original “shredders”:

If you haven’t seen a StSanders video on YouTube you’re really missing out. You’re especially missing out if you’re a musician because, like jazz, they need to be understood before they can be appreciated. What StSanders does is simple: he finds footage of famous guitar players, he takes out the audio and he overdubs his own poorly executed “shredding.” However, the cringe-worthy solos he records are so well synced up to the guitarists’ hand movements that many musicians have been tricked.^[9]

And more from a piece in the *The Guardian*:

In the clips we see axe heroes performing the fret-wanking solos that were a staple of 80s hard rock arena shows. There’s Slash, of course, Steve Vai, Joe Satriani, Carlos Santana and more.
The look of supreme concentration and smug gratification on the faces of these axe-masters is unmistakable. But as their fingers flicker across the fretboards something quite wrong is happening. As they’re mugging at their adoring audience it sounds like they’re carelessly hitting random notes, playing through a cheap amp, in a tiled bathroom. But the look on Joe’s and Stevie’s and Eddie’s faces is beautiful and oblivious.^[10]

As we garner from the above excerpts, the initial inspiration for the shreds of StSanders seems to have been those axe-wielding (which is to say, guitar-playing) musicians that the music community would come to refer to as “shredders,” e.g. Slash, Steve Vai, Joe Satriani, etc. Here, “shredding” refers to extremely fast, aggressive playing – fingers moving up and down the guitar fretboard playing musical passages with lightning-fast speed. Whatever one might think of aforementioned “overblown, over-rated” evaluation from the Urban Dictionary, what cannot be denied is that these initial shreds of “real” guitar shredders like Slash and Steve Vai *also* have great skill, technique, and dexterity on their instrument. However, while the spirit of these initial music video shreds of guitar shredders may have remained intact, StSanders and those that followed began taking as their subject matter just about any type of musician and musical genre that has been captured in a video (in most cases, one will find such experiments on YouTube), although, more typically than not, the selected musician is considered an accomplished entertainer in their particular genre.

So, for example, one might discover a clip of the wonderful jazz flamenco guitarist Paco de Lucia (<http://youtu.be/89zM9pZzt0U>), wherein the fiery intensity and focused intentionality that is apparent in the visual expression of de Lucia and his group (even for those who may be unfamiliar with his work in general) is rendered ridiculous by the aural presence of a clichéd ditty “Dueling Banjos,” which is itself rendered in a manner that, at the very least, is very much *not* the sonic equivalent of fiery intensity and focused intentionality. The shredder’s guitar follows de Lucia’s movements, mimick his fingers up and down the fretboard – but what we actually hear is playful, almost irreverent, nonchalant, casual. Moreover, if that isn’t enough, we also hear someone whistling “Dueling Banjos,” poorly, in the background, and, where we might expect either thunderous applause or enraptured silence, we hear something in between...the pitter-patter of a few pathetic handclaps here and there.

In yet another example, the late jazz pianist Michel Petrucciani – who happened to have a genetic bone disease that caused him to have an extreme short stature – lets out random, high-pitched grunts both as he prepares to play and during the performance (http://youtu.be/O6NfmS2_sDk). Meanwhile, the actual music that we hear from Petrucciani is, shall we say, much more simple and rote – one might even say childish – than his usually brilliantly fluid and technically masterful playing (more “Mary Had a Little Lamb” than the high sophistication of jazz piano). Moreover, the “approach” of his musical cohorts seems a bit...well, rickety, hesitant...as if, out of a fear of achieving a collective, flowing music, what we experience are a series of “accidental” solos.

Now, in this instance, we should acknowledge what is very clearly a certain irreverence – and, arguably, insensitivity – with respect to the play on Petrucciani's stature (indeed, one YouTube fan succinctly comments: "So fucking evil. I'm going to hell because I watch this every day.") At the very least, part of what drives the (in this case, comical) force of the Petrucciani shred is precisely the juxtaposition of Petrucciani's actual stature with the superimposed grunts, which, in truth, evoke something like the munchkins from *The Wizard of Oz*. To be clear, I will not pursue in any length the obviously problematic nature of such a representation – and may thus risk offending the ethicists. I would not shirk from the responsibility of this decision, except to simply say that, as with a great range of humor – perhaps "dark" humor, but certainly parody, satire, and the like – a great number of shreds *will* approach a certain ethical threshold, and we will gauge the imperfect balance concerning our axiological axes of aesthetics and ethics accordingly, as different pieces present different challenges along these lines.

In another example, Wynton Marsalis plays with a small jazz orchestra on *Letterman* (<http://youtu.be/D-57AlcPlrg>). After Letterman's introduction, reminding us about Marsalis' various accomplishments ("8 Grammy awards and a Pulitzer Prize...also Artistic Director for Jazz at Lincoln Center..."), the performance commences. But we are not even a minute into the proceedings when we start to notice that Marsalis' usual exquisite tone and virtuosic playing slowly starts to reveal a certain disjointedness, exhibiting wayward passages, mishit notes, and cracks. Meanwhile, while struggling to maintain some semblance of a swing beat, the musical accompaniment of the string-infused jazz orchestra playing behind Marsalis becomes increasingly dissonant, sounding even a bit ominous, as if some bewitching force has been injected into the performance.

It is clear that such examples bring up interesting problematics with respect to aesthetic experience and reception. Interestingly enough, it is with respect to the Petrucciani shred that the shredder, "rBennich," comments: "It doesn't seem to be obvious to some people that this is dubbed. I guess we did a pretty good job, then." Meanwhile, let us envision, for example, someone who, having come across the Wynton Marsalis music video shred on YouTube, remarks something to the effect of, "It's amazing that they can keep such a straight face." In such an instance, it is clear that this person is under the impression that the music they are listening to is *actually* the music being played in *that* performance captured on video. In other words they believe that Marsalis and his orchestra are actually in on the joke themselves. This might make for an interesting scenario, but of course, in this case, it would be mistaken. To put it in yet another way, Marsalis and company *are* the joke.

In one sense, these examples would seem to invite the question as to whether music video shreds represent a kind of esoteric activity that is best appreciated by, or most suitable for, musicians, or at least musical communities, above all others (we recall the earlier interview's suggestion that "You're especially missing out if you're a musician"). And if so, are they also more specifically suitable for musicians and fans who are familiar with the music/musicians being "shredded"? If music video shreds *are* primarily appreciated by those who are, to the greatest extent possible, in on the joke does, or should, this alter our aesthetic reception of them?

In another sense, rBennich's comment concerning the Petrucciani shred suggests a curious predicament wherein, in fact, the most effective ("better"?) shred will be the shred that is less noticeable as a shred. However, this would necessarily have to also entail the inverse of this: that the least effective shred will be the shred that is *more* noticeable as a shred. But here, we would do well to take some pause concerning the suitability of the descriptor "effective." Why? Because, in a curious case of the evaluative tables of aesthetics being turned, the "worse" the shred, the better the chance of people "getting" the shred. Perhaps the shred is so ridiculous, so unbelievable, so impossible ("That can't be what they're actually playing!"). But in so being, the shred has *succeeded*. For rBennich, tricking people meant success, but here again, if a shred is *too* successful, it risks failure. Failure? Perhaps we should rather say that, as with *trompe l'oeil*, the shred's "failure" is its success.^[11]

In order to situate the aesthetics of music video shreds, we need to consider music video shreds as encompassing both artistic and rhetorical play that cuts across a range of ontological concerns. If I hesitate to call shreds "art," it is not because I believe they are not artistic, or somehow unworthy of aesthetic attention, or lacking in aesthetic value. It is rather because calling shreds "art" entails framing shreds as art, which requires defining those properties said to be intrinsic to that art: ontology as amounting to "work of art." However, given the precarious situatedness of the music video shred – whose very modes of operating are both parasitical and resistant in relation to its object – a different ontology is called for.

Music video shreds as parody?

Given the earlier examples, we might take music video shreds as sharing a family tree that might also include such disparate examples as Weird Al (and parody tunes in general), French & Saunders (the UK comedienne specializing in TV parody), Mystery Science Theater 3000 (simulated real-time overdubbing of ridiculous sci-fi movies) and MadLibs. I want to take up the case of Weird Al specifically, since it is obviously the one most directly tied to music.

In essence, Weird Al does covers. But he transforms the original source material by changing the lyrics (and thus the meaning), typically toward a rather humorous bent, and creating something anew: parody-cover. For their part, music video shreds work with existing video footage – maybe editing a bit here, cropping a bit there, but typically not too much beyond this. As such, in an apparent nod to creativity and innovation, one might argue that, in contrast to shreds, at least Weird Al is altering the original material. Sure, he appropriates most of the fundamental aspects of the song outright, but he changes the lyrics, changes the flavor, and thus changes the meaning to a significant extent. But of course, it might be easy to forge or at least underappreciate – especially amidst the relatively mild and anonymous fame of music video shreds compared to Weird Al – that music video shreds actually engage in quite a bit of alteration. In fact, from a different perspective, music video shreds, in contrast to Weird Al, offer an entirely new "soundtrack."

Although it is true that most music video shreds involve a healthy dose of fun and parody, it would be wrong to say that such attributes sufficiently define them (and, as it is, we acknowledge a certain contingency here with respect to the consumer's general sense of humor). Music video shreds may or may not be imitations or exaggerations of what we are expecting to hear. One shred might take a clip of a heavy metal band and superimpose crazy, over-the-top, abominable, space-age pyrotechnic music. Another shred might take the same clip and make it sound like music fit for Bambi – the while (and here is the catch) being often very meticulous with respect to what seems to be happening technically.

In another music video shred “parody” of the Pat Metheny Group, for example, what we see the musicians doing seems completely different from the sounds we actually hear. It seems to extend beyond mere imitation. It is *not* a parody of jazz fusion or whatever. Rather, it sounds like a whacked-out free-for-all jam session. What is being “parodied” (if the term still works) is actually, and more directly, the gestures, mannerisms, affect, etc. of the musicians on display; in other words, their performativity. When asked a question having to do with why he started doing music video shreds, “StSanders” responded: “I got into this partly for the laughs. The other reason is more of a subconscious one. I’m an artist and I have a need to create something new. In this case the creation is an odd world in which the level of professional playing is at ‘music video shreds’ level.”^[12]

Music video shreds and mashups

Aesthetically, mashups are, generally speaking, dialectical experiments. Perhaps the most basic formula for a mashup would be: combine source object A with source object B, which begets mashup C. That said, as Miles Coleman points out, mashups “are created by utilizing *multiple* source objects to formulate a new one...[they] achieve aesthetic appeal by way of contrasting many *different* original objects.”^[13] Of course, such aesthetic dialectics are by no means a chance operation. Indeed, a “successful” mashup would imply that the alignment specific to the mashup register with viewer-listener. This is precisely why our aesthetic understanding of both the *production* and *reception* of the mashup is fairly straight-forward. As Coleman observes, the compositional elements of the mashup “are much more easily perceived as being distinct from one another.” As a result, “the *techné* involved in production...becomes a bit more obvious to an audience, even to those who are not familiar with the original texts themselves.”^[14]

In contrast to mashups, music video shreds present a more difficult (or at least different) kind of challenge to our aesthetic understanding. If, as Coleman writes, “mashups and remixes are contrapositions, constructed by way of dissection, aggregation, rearrangement,” music video shreds are what might be called *intrapositions*, constructed by way of subverting from within. This is, in essence, what we mean when we say, following Deleuze that music video shreds “minorize” the original musical content (the “shredded”) by introducing a language *within* it. The $a + b = c$ (to whatever degrees of variation) of the mashup becomes something like $a + a1 = a2$ with respect to the music video shred. Music video shreds are more parasitical, more immanent, than dialectical, or oppositional. Again, the music – or, more broadly, the audio – is completely different from the original. Yes, it is completely new, but again, its newness is contingent upon its engagement with the original content (in this case, what Deleuze would call the “major” language).

In more technical terms, music video shreds accomplish their minorization of the original video clip through superimposing one materiality upon another. I say “superimposition” instead of “substitution,” or “combination” (à la mashups), because it is important to note that, for example, even though the sounds of Wynton Marsalis’ trumpet are being substituted for the shredder’s trumpet, his orchestra for the shredder’s orchestra, the latter are nevertheless superimposed upon – literally, *placed over* -- the broader proceedings. It is not so much that we have forgotten that some substitution in the form of trickery has taken place, but it now exists within the superimposition. Now, to a certain extent, this idea is similar to remix and mashups, wherein the “aesthetic experience...comes not only from locating and recalling the mental images that might have been previously associated with the original objects that compose a remix or mashup but also from locating the instances of authorship that infect upon those images.”^[15] And yet, paradoxically, despite the obvious (unavoidable, even) presence of the shredder, or “author,” shredding alongside the video image, “locating instances of authorship” – which is, in a sense, a way of unifying and aligning the new object (mashup) while coming back to the original object(s) – would seem to become of secondary importance. Rather, what takes center stage in the music video shred is varying degrees of *dis*-alignment. In this sense, music video shreds represent a simple act, but a precarious ontology. Flesh and blood reality aside, the music video shred of Wynton Marsalis both is and is not Wynton Marsalis. More specifically, rather than pushing us back toward authorial intentionality, toward how the pieces of the puzzle were arranged, toward the dominant and familiar ways of recognition and reading performativity in musical texts, the shred pushes us rather toward the limits of recognition and reading, and thus toward a different kind of creative and critical engagement.

It is true that mashups and music video shreds share some similarities with respect to certain technical choices that are made in their production – and we should acknowledge that technical choices are undoubtedly still *aesthetic* choices as well: editing, synching, pacing, cutting, splicing, etc. In his discussion of mashups and remixes, Coleman has likewise referred to a broader range of “rhetorical choices – choices of addition, omission, transmutations, and transposition,” all of which could apply to shreds as well.^[16] Moreover, as with audio-visual mashups at least, music video shreds are also music *and* video. One of these media by itself would be insufficient. In the broader presentation of the music video shred, the “music itself” which, again, has replaced the music from the original video – fulfills a much different role than the music (or songs) chosen for the mashup. On the one hand, we have referred to the music of the shred as a kind of soundtrack to the video, as audio accompaniment to the visual image. For their part, audio-visual mashups would seem to more closely resemble music video shreds along the Brechtian lines we discussed a moment ago, but with at least one crucial distinction. Where the masher is more like a scientist who has overseen an experiment, but whose aesthetic “position” has now receded as the mashup unfolds before our eyes and ears, the shredder’s work *is* the shred as it unfolds before us. The masher cuts and pastes, while the shredder cuts and replaces. The masher re-reads, while the shredder re-writes. The masher mashes in the third-person, while the shredder shreds in the first-person. This means that autonomy *or* heterogeneity, identity *or* difference, agency *or* diffusion, becomes a false choice.

Amateur resistance

The third characteristic of a minor literature is that in it everything takes on a collective value. Indeed, precisely because talent isn’t abundant in a minor literature, there are no possibilities for an individuated enunciation that would belong to this or that “master” and that could be separated from a collective enunciation. Indeed, scarcity of talent is in fact beneficial and allows the conception of something other than a literature of masters.^[17]

Wild, irreverent, preposterous though it may sometimes be, the music video shred can, on one level at least, be seen as something *entirely* new, entirely different from the original. Here again, however, this is not to say that the shred’s newness and its difference are oppositional. The sounds of music video shreds *do*, generally speaking, follow the musical “cues” that we see in the video. The visual movements and articulations that we see in the video of music video shreds *do*, generally speaking, follow the sounds that we hear.

So, although music video shreds are “amateur” in one sense, they demonstrate a certain mastery as well. In a rather Brechtian gesture, the sound and image in music video shreds demonstrate a kind of incongruence, an “estrangement,” despite occurring simultaneously. Of course, as a reminder, it would be wrong to consider such estrangement as alienating. On the contrary, Brecht’s idea was that the disjointed, but synchronous presentation of sound and image now conspire toward new meaning. Similarly, the immanent gesture and subversion enacted by shreds vis-à-vis the minorization of such “master” representations in culture (here, music in particular) becomes a collective enunciation in the sense of which Deleuze and Guattari speak: “the conception of something other than a literature of masters.” It is not clear to me what it would mean to speak of a “community” of shredders in any explicit sense, since, for the most part, shredders are anonymous amateurs, coming and going, here and there, known more for the subject of their shred than for their own name or alias. And yet, there *is* a community of shreds, a collective enunciation of shreds.

In addition to their greater popular and commercial success, it might also be argued that mashups, despite the actual “mashing” itself, nevertheless demonstrate more reverence in their aesthetic orientation – a reverence with respect to their retention of the original musical materials used for the mashup. On the other hand, as we have seen, music video shreds *seem* more irreverent, often toying with parody. After all, someone, the shredder – and, anonymous or not, they are certainly *not* the famous notable or famous musician in the video – has, in a sense, hijacked the original music and added his or her own much different music. What *is* this music? It could be anything. Who *is* this shredder? It could be anyone.

Tag

Sympathizers and detractors alike might cite music video shreds for the willful irreverence they show toward their subject matter – which is to recall their parody – and the apparent absence of “real” musicianship – which is to recall their “amateurishness” – as well as, for all intents and purposes, their anonymity. Moreover, it may be that these very factors contribute to their status as a “minor” music, to being part of a “witch’s line.” If, as Deleuze and Guattari would say, music in general has fundamentally to do with “deterritorializing the refrain” (where, once again, to “deterritorialize” means, in essence, to *disrupt* or *uproot*, and the “refrain” is that to which we are compelled to return, like the “hook” in pop music), then the music video shred deterritorializes its music video object.^[18] It accomplishes this deterritorialization on *aesthetic* grounds vis-à-vis the “shredded” juxtaposition of (new) music and (original) video, but also on *cultural* grounds vis-à-vis its play and comment (“critique” would be overstated) concerning image – and, where applicable, celebrity – in music.

However, on my account, the deterritorializing of the music video object and the desituatedness of the music video shred itself – as it floats about the internet and YouTube with relative anonymity – need not imply that we are consigned to some sort of aesthetic relativism or apoliticism with respect either the production or reception of the music video shred.

Félix Guattari writes:

The artist – and more generally aesthetic perception – detach and deterritorialize a segment of the real in such a way as to make it play the role of a partial enunciator. Art confers a function of sense and alterity to a subset of the perceived world...the subjectivity of the artist and the “consumer” is reshaped. The work of art, for those who use it, is an activity of unframing, of rupturing sense...which leads to a recreation and a reinvention of the subject itself.^[19]

In “unframing” and “rupturing” its subject matter, the music video shred actually “recreates” and “reinvents” it, but, in doing so, it also “reshapes” us shredders and listeners. We have sought to situate this development in terms of *performativity*. The music video shred plays with/in the performative aesthetic and cultural identities of its object, which, in this case, includes both musician/musical group and genre. Since these are music videos, we are thus obviously dealing with an artistic performance, but we are also dealing with an *aesthetic* performance, in the broader sense of that term: *aesthetics as culture*. Moreover, there is also the performativity of the shredder, who is a kind of participant-observer. Or better, the shredder is like a fan who fulfills his or her dream of becoming a musical performer in a video, all the while adapting that dream to his or her own uses, to making that dream his or her own. As listener-viewers, we play sympathetic voyeur to the shredder’s wish-fulfillment.

Overstating – or, for that matter, romanticizing – the amateurishness of music video shreds woefully neglects the fact that most shredders not only demonstrate a great deal of musical talent and technological ingenuity, but they also take pride in their work as embodying a kind of homage to its subject. We should thus take his apparent irreverence with a certain serious grain of salt when StSanders responds to another question concerning advice for young guitar players whose playing sounds like the playing on a music video shred (the implication here of course being that it doesn’t sound good) by saying, “Keep practicing. When you get better, you can go back to being bad.”^[20] If music video shreds are “bad,” they have to be pretty “good” in order to be so. The deterritorialization accomplished by music video shreds is as much about *possibility* and *connection* as it is about disruption.

Notes

1. <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=shred&page=2>. As far as the removal of music video shreds from YouTube is concerned: *no* yet.
2. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “November 20, 1923: Postulates of Linguistics,” in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, tr. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 104.
3. Gilles Deleuze, “Literature and Life,” in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, tr. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 5.
4. Gilles Deleuze, “He Stuttered,” in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, tr. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 110.
5. Deleuze and Guattari, “November 20, 1923: Postulates of Linguistics,” 105-106.

6. Ibid., 105 (my emphasis for “one’s own”)
7. Ibid., 106.
8. See Mathias Bonde Korsgaard, “Creation and erasure: music video as a signaletic form of practice,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, Vol. 4, 2012 <http://www.aestheticsandculture.net/index.php/jac/article/view/18151>
9. <http://www.indabamusic.com/indablog/758-interview-with-stsanders>
10. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/musicblog/2007/nov/09/stsandersshredparodiesareh>
11. Special thanks to my colleague Carl Simpson from Wilfred Laurier University, who suggested this analogy to me when I presented a version of this paper at the annual Canadian Society for Aesthetics meeting in St. Catharines, Ontario, May 2014.
12. <http://www.indabamusic.com/indablog/758-interview-with-stsanders>
13. See Miles Coleman, “Mashing and remixing: using the quadripartita ratio in the aesthetic public sphere,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, Vol. 2013 <http://www.aestheticsandculture.net/index.php/jac/article/view/20350/29190> (my emphasis).
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, tr. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 17.
18. See especially Chapter 11, “1837: On the Refrain,” in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, tr. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 310-350.
19. Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, tr. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 131 (my emphasis).
20. <http://www.indabamusic.com/indablog/758-interview-with-stsanders>

Select Shreds

Backstreet Boys, “I Want It That Way”: <https://youtu.be/5q3P2xziA00>

The Beach Boys, “I Get Around”: <https://youtu.be/xYc4DT18EJg>

David Bowie and Mick Jagger, “Dancing in the Street”: <https://youtu.be/BHkhJG0DKc>

Elvis Presley, “Blue Suede Shoes”: <https://youtu.be/5Jd9AmepgdM>

Imagine Dragons, “Radioactive”: <https://youtu.be/ZQxuw9d2d28>

Michael Bolton and Kenny G (“Presenting two contemporary artists...one, the best saxophone players in the world...Kenny G...the other, the undisputed heavyweight champ of white soul...Michael Bolton...”): <https://youtu.be/7P6QYWqRxww>

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