

Affordance and Appropriation

The concept of *affordance* comes from the discipline of design, where elements of a design suggest the use of an object. James Gibson and Donald Norman are two of the main originators of the idea. For example, the handle on a teacup or mug suggests that is the part that you hold; the handle is the affordance to holding the object. Another example is that a control knob *affords* twisting. Affordance is a relatively new concept being only about 35 years old and its definition is still developing, but it has wide application, for example in such fields as Human Computer Interaction (HCI), User-Centered Design, and many other disciplines. Having audio available in a digital form can be said to be an affordance to the editing and manipulation of that audio.

The digital recording and manipulation of sound has been possible from a semi-professional and consumer level since the mid 1990s when consumer-oriented Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs) started to emerge for affordable personal computers. These platforms allowed audio to be cut and pasted with relative ease for the first time, but much had been made with these montage techniques for many years previously.

Making music with pre-recorded sounds dates back to the 1930s and 1940s (see Electronic Music). However, it is generally accepted that despite the early attempts, that making music with pre-recorded sounds started with the work of Pierre Schaeffer in 1948, in what is called *musique concrète*. Schaeffer was working at the French national radio and he had access to (then) audio recording via disk recorders. The aim of music concrète was to create a music based on recordings of everyday sounds. This was a logical outcome of earlier movements such as the Futurists in Italy and other composers (most notably John Cage with his *The Future of Music: Credo* speech and paper in 1937) who wanted the freedom to make music that included all sounds and pitches rather than being restricted to standard instruments and scales. Music concrète continued to develop and many composers worked in what became known as *tape music*, because the tape recorder became the standard tool as it offered much greater flexibility and editing potential than analog disk recorders. In many ways this is the precursor to the practice now known as “sampling”.

Analog tape recorder technology continued to enter the consumer and semi-professional realm. Les Paul developed overdubbing and multi-track recording in the 1950s. Consumer tape recorders were common by the 1970s. The Mellotron keyboard instrument in the mid 1970s used loops of pre-recorded tapes (string sounds and vocal “ahhs” for example) for playback. This was the first “sampler”, enabling standard instrumental technique to play back pre-recorded material. Digital sampling started with the Fairlight in the late 1970s, but it was still very expensive and out of reach for normal musicians. The Fairlight, and its main competitor the Synclavier, were digital samplers that allowed using standard montage techniques and also sequencing, to make music from pre-recorded sounds, but by the mid 1980s each instrument cost as much as an average house and was a specialist and elite item. This was soon to change with less expensive digital samplers entering the market from the mid 1980s, such as the Mirage (by Ensoniq) and Emulator keyboard instruments.

Digital technology had obvious advantages for music distribution and production: perfect copies could be made without generation loss because of lossless transfers, DAWs could use non-destructive editing, digital signal processing techniques enable

effects that are impossible to achieve in the analogue world. As digital music distribution became more common from the release of CDs in the early 1980s, and DAWs became more common and affordable, the process that began with Schaeffer of using pre-recorded sound to make music was more easily accomplished in the digital domain. From the late 1990s, with a large library of pre-recorded material, much of which was online and available for download, there was an almost irresistible urge for some to use the *affordance* of digital audio that allowed it to be cut and pasted (and appropriated) into new musical creations in ways the original artists or recordists had not envisioned.

Appropriation in musical composition is the process of borrowing certain aspects or techniques from a pre-existing work or individual and using such elements in the creation of a new work. The term *Cultural Appropriation* also exists in musical composition, which is the process of borrowing certain aspects or techniques from a specific culture and recontextualizing such elements into the new work of a differing culture. For example, the use of Middle Eastern or Balinese musical elements incorporated into the composition of a western music piece.

The recontextualization of appropriated and culturally appropriated elements and techniques can be directly attributed to the closely related concept of hybridization. The concept of hybridity in composition is to display the influence of one or more styles of music within a new work. Examples of such *appropriation* and hybridization can be found in works of the German Baroque composer George Fredric Handel, which are also directly related to the compositional techniques of Italian composer Giovanni Bononcini.

Considered a Bononcini rival, Handel was invited to London in 1720 to attend what was seen as a public competition set around the compositional values of each composer. The two were to write the second and third acts of an opera entitled *Muzio Scevola* in which a comparative analysis was undertaken to ascertain who the superior composer was. This in turn would expose to the public the composer accused of continually using *appropriation* as compositional technique. With both composers being backed by opposing political and social fractions, the outcome of the competition would end in Handel's favor with Bononcini losing the support of the public in relation to the legitimization of his compositional techniques and processes.

However, there is further evidence supporting the use of *appropriation* as a compositional technique in Handel's work, with the utilization of rhythmic phrases similar in structure to those found in popular European folk music pre-dating the baroque era.

In modern day composition, the continual development of digital technology allows for music of all genres to be constantly *appropriated* and often recontextualised into new works. This has become more prevalent through the compositional practice of Remixing or Mashups through the use of sampling and the use of Digital Audio Workstations (DAW's), which allow for pre-recorded (digital) material to be easily *appropriated* and also *culturally appropriated*.

The inception of such techniques were precipitated with the creation of the LM-1 Drum Machine in 1979. The LM-1 Drum machine was invented by American born

industrial designer Roger Linn who revolutionized the music world by creating a machine that was able to play pre-recorded drum sounds, and *sequence* them into patterns.

In 1988 an alliance between Roger Linn and the Japanese company AKAI led to the creation and development of the MPC (Music Production Centre). The MPC fast became the chosen tool for music production, allowing music producers to cut, copy, paste and manipulate sounds into musical arrangements with great ease and speed. The MPC allowed for pre-recorded sounds to be imported and the functionality and affordance of the device's hardware allowed for the development of a new compositional technique.

Bands such as *Beastie Boys*, *Public Enemy* and *Run-D.M.C.* were prolific in the use of the MPC's functionality through the late 1980's to early 1990's, creating musical history through this process, which later took the name of the Golden Age of sampling.

Although directly associated to the genre of Hip – Hop, the Golden Age was formed through the continual sampling, *appropriation* and recontextualization of pre-recorded music and sound. Often this formed the fundamental basis of the compositions of these practitioners. Music producers were able to compose with apparent *laissez-faire* freedom, releasing music without the permission of the artists who owned the original samples. The artists in the Golden Age were very successful, and their financial success made the owners of the original samples start to question if they should be paid a royalty for the use of their material. This started the litigation and moral questions surrounding appropriation.

Paul's Boutique is the second studio album from the Beastie Boys and it is rumored to have over 300 appropriated samples used in its construction; however, only the Beastie Boys and their production team (the Dust Brothers) know the true amount and origin of the samples used in the album. *Paul's Boutique*, still remains one of the most innovative pieces of work from the era, ranking 156 in *Rolling Stone's* 2003 list of the greatest 500 albums of all time.

The Golden Age was characterized by its diversity, innovation, quality and influence which can all be attributed to the design and functionality of the MPC.

Appropriation, *Cultural Appropriation* and *Re-appropriation* formed the basis of such innovative compositional techniques, with music producers being able to select the quality of music being sampled and incorporated into new works, thus aiding in the commercial success of their music. Incorporating varying musical textures through *cultural appropriation* ensured that music producers could create diversity through the technique of *appropriation*, which opened the door to the exploration and influences of more exotic music.

Remixing is the art of recreating a musical piece such that it is changed (in tempo, pitch, balance between parts and so on) but still a recognizable version of the original piece. Thus, remixing is primarily based around the *appropriation* and *re-appropriation* of smaller samples into a composition that are often supplied to the remixer by the original composer or artist. Such practice is a natural feature of

contemporary music production practice using DAW's and associated software and hardware platforms.

The commercial development, accessibility and packaging of music sample-packs, often available through online distribution channels, allow for hybridization and *cultural appropriation* to become prevalent features in such new works. Remix and Mashup artists such as Girl Talk have based their compositions around the copying and pasting of well know music samples, utilizing the technique of *appropriation* as the focus point for each composition. However, severe legal implications surround those artists who seek to implement such techniques without permission from the original artist.

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Further Reading:

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