

JUSTIN BIEBER FEATURING SLIPKNOT:

Consumption as Mode of Production

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A musical mash-up typically consists of two recognizable recordings that are synchronized such that the vocal(s) of one track are combined with an instrumental version of the other without significant edits.¹ The ontological presence of a mash-up band is thus only to be found in the virtual domain—that is, the artists in question have never actually performed together. The virtual music collaborations enabled by mash-up producers invite us to encounter the musical result in ways that are very different from those we apply to non-virtual music collaborations, and, as scholars, we are therefore compelled to analyze the music in a different way as well. Moreover, mash-up music encourages us to rethink what musical authorship, creativity, and musicality means to us today. Because mash-ups often consist of nothing but macro-samples, and often simply of two full-length samples that have hardly been edited at all, mash-up producers have been criticized for lacking talent and creativity; for example, McLeod writes: “Despite my appreciation of them, I do not mean to idealise mash-ups because, as a form of creativity, they are quite limited and limiting.”² This perspective might also help to explain why scholars usually approach the musical mash-up from a sociological or juridical orientation with a focus on its extramusical features, and, in

¹ I am very grateful to Anne Danielsen, Hedda Høgåsen-Hallesby, Nils Nadeau, and Sheila Whiteley for their insightful comments on this chapter. I would also like to thank Paul Harkins for inspiring discussions about mash-up music.

² Kembrew McLeod, “Confessions of an Intellectual (Property): Danger Mouse, Mickey Mouse, Sonny Bono, and My Long and Winding Path as a Copyright Activist- Academic,” *Popular Music and Society* 28, no. 1 (2005): 86.

turn, why adequate attention has not been devoted to the aesthetics of mash-up music in and of itself.³

I will begin this chapter by arguing that the proliferation of mash-up music cannot be seen in isolation from the development of a virtual music environment consisting of virtual studios and virtual distribution platforms. After this contextualization of mash-up music, I will briefly discuss the music's aesthetic in terms of the principles underlying the music and its effects on listeners. These principles and effects will then be considered further through my analysis of the recent mash-up "Psychosocial Baby," produced by Steven Nguyen (aka Isosine), which combines Slipknot's "Psychosocial" with Justin Bieber's "Baby." Through this analysis, I will explore the ways in which this mash-up might generate a unique musical experience, emphasizing that part of the meaning of mash-ups lies in their intertextual play and the matrix of significations inscribed within them. I will then seek to assimilate the author figure in an alternative way that speaks to the contemporary state of artistic reproduction. This chapter argues that although the distinction between consumer and producer seems to blur within this new virtual music environment that is characterized by the aforementioned musical ecosystem, production has not been *reduced* to consumption. Instead, consumption must be studied as an important *aspect* of production.

Virtual Bands in a Virtual Environment

While musicians have quoted existing music for centuries in the guises of rewriting, reperforming, and—following the development of recording technology—copying musical sequences into new works, the digital sampler, which was introduced in the 1980s, facilitated

³ For a brief review of the scholarly discourse that has been constructed around mash-up music, see Ragnhild Brøvig-Hanssen and Paul Harkins, "Contextual Incongruity and Musical Congruity: The Aesthetics and Humour in Mash-Ups," *Popular Music* 31, no. 1 (2012).

the technique of copying and reworking musical sound sequences from existing recordings. Hip-hop pioneers soon embraced the sampler's ability to facilitate their already established practice of extracting sound sequences from existing recordings via two turntables, which in turn guaranteed the sampler's influence upon the genre; during the late 1980s, hip-hop recordings were characterized by sonic collages of quotations from other music recordings. However, music-sampling activity markedly *decreased* during the 1990s, when copyright holders started to require higher fees for their music when sampled, to bring more cases of copyright infringement into court, and to insist on stricter punishments for transgressions. It soon became economically unviable to sample other recordings legitimately, so most producers instead started to recreate the samples in question by hiring musicians to simply mimic or quote the sequence (this required royalties to go to the songwriters but not to the copyright holders), or they obscured the samples almost beyond recognition.

In contrast to the dominant trend of the 1990s, a second wave of sample-based music emerged at the start of the twenty-first century. This "new wave" of sample-based music is the result of several factors, the most prominent of which is the irreversible erosion of music gatekeeping, which has long served to block the reuse of unauthorized material. This erosion has followed upon the expansion of the Internet and its new distribution platforms, including peer-to-peer (P2P) networks⁴ and other social networking services, all of which made it much easier to share and distribute musical files. In this new virtual environment, the sheer quantity of user-generated activity makes it impossible for rights holders to control the distribution of their copyrighted material. Instead of being forced to hide the use of samples by sampling

⁴ The P2P network is basically a network consisting of nodes without a server-based central infrastructure; it allows for direct communication between personal computers. P2P networks entered the music economy when the online service Napster adapted it for the purpose of music file-sharing in 1999. While Napster only lasted for two years, similar music-centered P2P services have followed and continue to expand in capacity (see Wikström, *The Music Industry*, 149).

only small bits or otherwise obscuring the samples until they are practically unrecognizable, this new wave of sample-based music is instead characterized by the frequent use of quite recognizable *macro-samples*—that is, samples of significant (and legally actionable) length.⁵ This chapter focuses upon macro-sampling's emblematic musical form: the mash-up.

It was producers like Richard X (Girls on Top), Mark Vidler (Go Home Productions), and Roy Kerr (the Freelance Hellraiser) from the UK, as well as Soulwax (2 Many DJs) from Belgium, who ensured that mash-ups became a pop phenomenon at the turn of the twenty-first century.⁶ If the mash-up scene was initially mostly British, it soon went global, thanks to web forums such as GYBO (Get Your Bootleg On)⁷ and underground clubs devoted to mash-up music.⁸ The mash-up scene generated a lot of media attention, including reviews by major news publications such as *Newsweek* and the *New York Times*,⁹ partly because of the

⁵ It was Paul Harkins who first used the term to describe mash-up music in his article “Microsampling: From Akufen’s Microhouse to Todd Edwards and the Sound of UK Garage” (2010). Here, he distinguishes between “microsamples” and “macrosamples,” tracing the former term to Curtis Roads and the latter to plunderphonics pioneer John Oswald (see Harkins, 2010: 180–184).

⁶ Girls on Top received particular attention with “We Don’t Give a Damn About Our Friends” (Tubeway Army vs. Adina Howard) in 2000, 2 Many DJs with “Smells Like Teen Booty” (Nirvana vs. Destiny’s Child), the Freelance Hellraiser with “A Stroke of Genius” (the Strokes vs. Christina Aguilera) in 2001, and Go Home Productions with “Ray of Gob” (Madonna vs. the Sex Pistols) in 2003.

⁷ The mash-up website GYBO has been one of the most popular forums for mash-up producers and fans, all of whom can vote for the “Bootleg of the Year,” post mash-up reviews, links, and events, and discuss production techniques as well as legal issues (see www.gybo5.com). Other mash-up sites include www.mashstix.com, www.mashuptown.com, www.mashupciti.com, www.mashuphits.com, and www.bootimashup.com.

⁸ See Sam Howard-Spink, “Grey Tuesday, Online Cultural Activism and the Mash-Up of Music and Politics,” *First Monday* (July 4, 2005), and John Shiga, “Copy-and-Persist: The Logic of Mash-Up Culture,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24, no. 2 (2007): 94.

⁹ Shiga, “Copy-and-Persist,” 94.

tendency of mash-up producers to use copyrighted material without clearance. In the mid-2000s, in fact, several mash-up producers and distribution networks received cease-and-desist orders from various music copyright holders. However, such attempts to create a gatekeeping mechanism for music in cyberspace inevitably fails, and as a consequence, the development of virtual distribution platforms and archives has given bootleg music a means of survival beyond the various copyright jurisdictions. In fact, the cease-and-desist requirements that have saddled particular mash-up projects, such as the famous *Grey Album* (2004) by Danger Mouse (aka Brian Burton),¹⁰ seem to have contributed more to the success of mash-up music than to the curtailing of its production and circulation.

The proliferation of mash-up music must also be seen to be partly the result of the increasing accessibility of user-friendly virtual music studios in the guise of cheap (or free) DAW (Digital Audio Workstation) programs and the increasing affordability of powerful computer hardware. As mentioned, a mash-up usually implies a production in which two recognizable recordings (or full-length samples) are synchronized in such a way that the vocal of one works with an instrumental version of another, without significant structural edits to either party. Modern DAW programs simplify the technical aspects of creating a mash-up—one can match the keys and tempi of different tracks in almost no time at all, for example, using the software’s auto-detection methods. Moreover, in contrast to analog speed alteration, tempo and pitch can be digitally manipulated independently of one another, allowing the speed-altered sounds to retain their original pitch levels or the pitch-altered sounds to maintain their original tempo. Digital speed and pitch changes also diverge from analog operations in terms of being able to preserve sound quality and therefore produce a

¹⁰ For a thorough examination of *The Grey Album* by Danger Mouse, and its relation to legal issues, see Shara Rambarran, “‘99 Problems’ but Danger Mouse Ain’t One: The Creative and Legal Difficulties of Brian Burton, ‘Author’ of *The Grey Album*,” *Popular Musicology Online* 3 (2013).

realistic result. In terms of separating the vocal tracks of a sample from the instrumental tracks, there are several methods (such as using an EQ filter or phase inversion), but often one can locate a cappella and instrumental versions of most anything on the Internet and go from there.

Such virtual studios began to encourage those who once thought of themselves as strictly music consumers to become music producers as well. In the act of mashing two musical tracks, the “masher” goes from being a consumer of these tracks to becoming the producer of the mash-up. Along the way, interestingly, the originators of the mashed sources go from being the producers of their own individual music to becoming “consumers” of this (now shared) altered version of their music. We are, in other words, witnessing a blurring of the boundary between producer and consumer on several levels. By relying on macro-samples, these contemporary forms of music recycling, even more so than 1980s sampling, challenge traditional notions of authorship, creativity, and musicianship, and mash-up producers are thus often considered to be consumers who are playing with music for fun rather than competent producers who are creating something viable and new. One of the reasons for this might be that the musical value criteria in play here, as well as in the discourse on popular music more generally, are dominated by the ideology of the Western art music tradition, which is closely linked to an author figure who is understood to be an original, virtuous, and individual genius who creates something from scratch through sheer (even visionary) talent and manual dexterity. If one tries to understand mash-up music through this author-based lens, it will be rashly reduced to uncreative copying, outright stealing, plagiarism, and, consequently, copyright infringement. I believe, however, as Michel Foucault (1991 [1969]) and Roland Barthes (1977) argued in the late 1960s and mid-1970s, that the figure of the author—and, in effect, the ways in which we understand concepts such as creativity, originality, and musicianship—is historically conditioned and

discursively defined. If the figure of the author is a construct, then the content that we invest in it is also prone to alteration. As Derek B. Scott points out, a new art world needs a new rationale and new standards of criticism and judgment “or its activities will not be considered art.”¹¹ Although mash-up music does not introduce us to a wholly new art world—the idea of collage has been manifest in music since at least the fifteenth century—the aesthetics of mash-ups has not yet been properly addressed in a scholarly context (contrary to other forms of sample-based music and to collage forms within other fields of art). The study of mash-up music makes explicit the current need to rethink and redefine the traditional notions of authorship, creativity, and musicianship; otherwise, the discourse will continue to suggest that the music of mash-up artists is, as Paul Théberge puts it, “not only *derivative* but *parasitic* in character.”¹²

While it is true that “virtually any consumer can now play the role of producer thanks to digital music technology,”¹³ as Michael Serazio writes, the production of successful mash-ups in fact demands particular skills, although these might be different from what we traditionally view as “musical” talents. As argued in Brøvig-Hanssen and Harkins, 2010, A+B mash-ups, that is, mash-ups that consist of virtual collaborations between two artists and their performances, are often based upon two key concepts: *musical congruity* and *contextual incongruity*. Mash-ups are often intended to violate the conventions of otherwise established categories, such as high and low, serious and playful, black and white, mainstream and underground, or rock and pop. For example, mash-up producers Mark Vidler and Jeremy Johnson both state that they always try to juxtapose samples from very different musical

¹¹ Derek B. Scott, *Sound of the Metropolis: The 19th-Century Popular Music Revolution in London, New York, Paris, and Vienna* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 93.

¹² Théberge, “Technology, Creative Practice and Copyright,” 149.

¹³ Michael Serazio, “The Apolitical Irony of Generation Mash-Up: A Cultural Case Study in Popular Music,” *Popular Music and Society* 31, no. 1 (2008): 82.

styles,¹⁴ and *Salon* journalist Roberta Cruger argues, “The more disparate the genre-blending is, the better; the best mash-ups blend punk with funk or Top 40 with heavy metal, boosting the tension between slick and raw.”¹⁵ The fact that mash-up bands only exist virtually is not only made obvious by the recognizability of the individual tracks incorporated but also by the unlikelihood that the mashed artists would ever perform these mash-ups as such.

If mash-ups are to be understood as more than a one-liner or act of genre-blending bravado, however, they should also function on a musical level, establishing a musical dialogue between the mashed tracks. If, for instance, the musical elements compete for the listener’s attention, the aesthetic result might be the experience of hearing two colliding recordings rather than one coherent track. Shiga quotes one contributor to the mash-up website GYBO who points out that talent within a mash-up setting is “the capacity to recognise shared properties between different songs, or the capacity to reorganise the musical and aural relations of recordings so that they sound like they are *components of the same song*.”¹⁶ Put simply, the *art* in the mash-up is in its juxtaposition of samples to produce a coherent piece of music that at the same time generates a feeling of incongruity. It is the experiential doubling of the music as *simultaneously* congruent (sonically, it sounds like a band performing together) and incongruent (it parodically subverts socially constructed conceptions of identities) that produces the richness in meaning and paradoxical effects of successful mash-ups.

In what follows, I will analyze a relatively recent mash-up, called “Psychosocial Baby,” with an emphasis upon both the music’s underlying principles in terms of its

¹⁴ Francis Preve, “Mash It Up: It’s Caught On in a Flash, and the Hottest Mash-Up Producers in the World Are on Hand to Show You How to Do Your Own,” *Keyboard Magazine* 32, no. 1 (2006).

¹⁵ Roberta Cruger, “The Mash-Up Revolution,” *Salon* (August 9, 2003).

¹⁶ Shiga, “Copy-and-Persist,” 103. My emphasis.

contextual incongruity and musical congruity and the ways in which this music is experienced by listeners. I will try to demonstrate that the act of combining already existing music can be understood as innovative and creative if the repeated material is selected and combined in such a way that it manages to put into motion a play of various meanings and associations, thus making us experience the repetition as something old but new.

The Virtual Collaboration between Bieber and Slipknot

Steven Nguyen, who goes by the pseudonym Isosine, released an enormously influential mash-up in June 2011 as part of his bootleg album *Mashup Manifesto* that he titled “Psychosocial Baby.”¹⁷ As the title implies, this mash-up consists of the vocal tracks from the 2008 single “Psychosocial” (*All Hope Is Gone*, Roadrunner Records) by the heavy (nu)metal band Slipknot and the instrumental tracks from the 2010 smash hit “Baby” (*My World 2.0*, Island, RBMG) by the Canadian teenage-pop phenomenon Justin Bieber. The video that features “Psychosocial Baby” has today achieved over fourteen million views on the audiovisual Internet platform YouTube. Since the primary distribution channel for “Psychosocial Baby” is YouTube, my analysis of the music of this mash-up cannot be separated from the video that features it; the music and the video were made, and, moreover, are usually experienced as a unified piece, and they must therefore be analyzed as such. When mashing Slipknot’s “Psychosocial” with Justin Bieber’s “Baby,” Isosine slowed the former slightly while raising the pitch by two semitones to make it fit with the harmonies and tempo of the latter. The instrumentation of “Psychosocial” is filtered out, so that only Corey Taylor’s voice can be heard (or Isosine downloaded it as an a cappella version in the first place). “Baby” is not altered at all, it appears, except that Bieber’s voice has been filtered out

¹⁷ The music video of “Psychosocial Baby” can be accessed at YouTube:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=kspPE9E1yGM (12.12.13).

of most of the track. Technically speaking, Isosine has done little else to produce this mash-up; both the vocal sample of “Psychosocial” and the instrumental sample of Bieber’s “Baby” appear in their entirety. Yet through the following analysis I will try to demonstrate that the act of selecting and extracting samples, of inhabiting and appropriating them, of decontextualizing and recontextualizing them, is also a perfectly legitimate mode of artistic production and creation that involves both a creative and an interpretive act of appropriation. As mentioned, the mash-up concept seeks to exploit a contextual incongruity between the mashed tracks in a way that associates them despite their divergence. I will start this analysis by discussing the contextual incongruity between Slipknot and Justin Bieber before I move on to a discussion of the musical congruity and dialogue that exist between the mashed sources. These two perspectives inform both the aesthetic principles lying behind the production of this mash-up in particular, and A+B mash-ups more generally, and the experiential effects that these principles (and their sonic result) generate.

Because of our general tendency to conceptualize music as a spatiotemporally coherent performance produced by co-present musicians, the manifestly virtual band of Slipknot featuring Bieber comes across, first of all, as very funny, because these performers present themselves and are presented by the media (and, most importantly, are usually experienced) as vastly different artists.¹⁸ Slipknot is a nu-metal band that claims to be inspired by bands such as Black Sabbath, Led Zeppelin, Slayer, and Primus. Justin Bieber, on the other hand, is a teenage pop phenomenon who has expressed his admiration for the music

¹⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer and Immanuel Kant were among the first to explain humor by pointing to incongruity or to the violation of our perceptual patterns that results in the understanding of something as odd or unusual. As Blaise Pascal once pointed out, “nothing produces laughter more than a surprising disproportion between that which one expects and that which one sees” (quoted in John Morreall, “Traditional Theories of Laughter and Humor,” in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. J. Morreall (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), 130).

of Destiny's Child, Boyz II Men, Usher, and Michael Jackson.¹⁹ In "Psychosocial Baby," metal collides with teen pop, but more than that, the personas of the members of Slipknot (in particular) collide with the persona of Justin Bieber (in particular).

In an age when most controversial and mischievous concert-stage behaviors have become formulaic at best, Slipknot still manages to shock and offend some portion of their listeners and spectators. This is, of course, partly due to the band members' embrace of primal stunts in the Ozzy Osbourne tradition, such as urinating, masturbating, and playing with dead animals onstage, diving from high balconies, physically abusing themselves, throwing and shooting things at the audience, and wrecking expensive equipment.²⁰ But what is most attention grabbing is the way in which they present themselves as epitomizing a musical "wolfpack"²¹ that is out of control and even ready to kill with its music. The band consists of no less than eight (originally nine)²² intense and violent stock characters, each of whom wears an individually customized horror mask and coveralls marked with a number from zero to eight. Slipknot's music and lyrics express a dark hatred toward the world in general that is also reflected in their theatrical music videos of doomsday scenarios.

While Slipknot's way of handling the world's injustices, perceived or otherwise, might be best described by their lyrics to the track "Surfacing" (*Slipknot*, 1999, Roadrunner/Attic/I Am)—"Fuck it all, fuck this world, fuck everything that you stand for"—Justin Bieber has (or at least used to have) a decidedly more constructive and politically

¹⁹ See Jason Arnopp, *Slipknot: Inside the Sickness behind the Masks* (London: Ebury Press, 2011), and Cathleen Falsani, *Belieber! Faith, Fame, and the Heart of Justin Bieber* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Worthy Publishing, 2011).

²⁰ For a description of Slipknot's behavior in several of their concerts, see Arnopp, *Slipknot*.

²¹ The metaphor of a "wolfpack" is borrowed from Gene Simmons, the bassist of Kiss, in his description of Slipknot as quoted in Arnopp, *Slipknot*, 221.

²² The band's bassist, Paul Gray (#2, The Pig), died May 24, 2010.

correct approach. He usually presents himself as a polite, affectionate, and humble celebrity who occasionally hugs reporters and fans, gives away concert tickets, and donates money to dozens of charity organizations and projects. Notwithstanding his young age (he was born in 1994), he claimed, at the time when “Baby” was released, to take his responsibility as a role model for millions of teens and tweens around the world very seriously: “It’s really easy to do something good, whether it’s helping an old lady across the street or, you know, just doing something small for your city, helping out picking up garbage—whatever you can do. Little things make such a difference.”²³

The members of Slipknot also take their responsibility as role models very seriously, but they are ciphers for a very different (sub)cultural group. For their fans, the most important thing is that Slipknot does not sell out but continues to represent “the others”—those who are not comfortable with society’s conventions and do not fit in there. Their adoption of horror masks is, according to Slipknot’s main drummer, Joey Jordison (#1), an attempt to confront society’s interest in the calculatedly alluring or “perfect.”²⁴ Similarly, Slipknot’s lead vocalist, Corey Taylor (#8), explains the coverall numbers as a symbol for how far people take commercialism: “[We’re] basically saying: ‘Hey, we’re a product!’”²⁵ Justin Bieber’s

²³ Quoted in Falsani, *Belieber!*, 177. Considering Justin Bieber’s more recent behavior, this quote may come across as “yesterday’s boy”: During the last year (2013), Bieber has been accused of repeatedly driving too fast in his Ferrari, drinking and smoking marijuana, attacking photographers, drawing graffiti at unauthorized places, and going to strip clubs and brothels. While this “bad boy” behavior does not support his claim to take his responsibility for his position as a role model very seriously, several fans have defended him, either in terms of claiming that these are nothing but false rumors, or in terms of excusing and trivializing this recent behavior. Other “Beliebers” have expressed their disappointment or even outrage at the situation, while other fans do not seem to really care.

²⁴ Quoted in Arnopp, *Slipknot*, 44.

²⁵ Arnopp, *Slipknot*, 80.

pretty face and fashionable style sense directly validate all of the entertainment industry's standards that Slipknot criticizes. The cover of a 2011 issue of the magazine *Vanity Fair* depicted Bieber with red lipstick kiss marks all over his face, and that same year he appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone* under the headline "Super Boy,"²⁶ which speaks to Bieber's embrace of his mainstream appeal and sweeping popularity.

The stereotypical differences between the presented personas of the Slipknot members and Bieber are reflected in the lyrics, the music, and the video of the mash-up. The introduction of "Psychosocial Baby" is taken from Bieber's "Baby": Bieber, who is softly singing "a-o-a-o-a-o-a" over a riff of delayed keyboard chords played in a thin, clavichord-inspired 1990 sound, is pictured in a bowling hall together with friends, flirting with a girl. So far there is no hints that this will be a mash-up. But just as Bieber's soft, prepubescent voice is to enter with the first verse of the track, we instead hear the guttural shouting of Slipknot's Corey Taylor. The music has not changed, so Bieber's vocal line might still play on in the back of our heads, with its simple, cheerful, triad-based melody and love-confessing lyrics. Taylor supplants this straightforward narrative of teenage love with an aggressive and monotone chant about something much darker.

In Slipknot's "Psychosocial," Taylor's lyrics are supported by a deep bass, two down-tuned hi-gain electric guitars playing a space-occupying percussive riff, and a steady and powerful drumbeat supplied by the band's main drummer and two percussionists. The mash-up abandons this aggressive and forceful music for the naive and easily digestible teen pop music of Justin Bieber. The first verse of "Baby" consists of nothing but the keyboard riff from the introduction (mentioned above), plus drums. In contrast to the massive drum sound of Slipknot's "Psychosocial," the drums of "Baby"—a compressed kick drum and a house-inspired dry and loud clap-snare (as well as some instances of a snare drum roll)—are thin

²⁶ Falsani, *Belieber!*, 115.

and sound synthesized. While the Slipknot sound buttresses Taylor's dark message, the Bieber sound emasculates Taylor and makes him seem ironically displaced.

Taylor's vocal performance is kept at its original length, for the most part.²⁷ In the fourth verse, Taylor's third line is replaced with Bieber's "I'm goin' down, down, down, down," before they perform a virtual mash-up duet: Taylor sings "I think we're done, I'm not the only one" while Bieber sings "And I just can't believe my first love won't be around." At this moment, then, Isosine tracks the Slipknot lyrics atop Bieber in such a way that the mash-up becomes a discourse on innocent teenage love, from multiple perspectives, including that of nu-metal. The link promptly becomes farcical, when Bieber's featured rapper Ludacris enters the mash-up with his own meek, laidback reminiscence of young love, which ends with the phrase: "She woke me up daily, don't need no Starbucks." While it is difficult to grasp the meaning of Slipknot's lyrics to "Psychosocial" (some have suggested that the track is about the Iraq war, others that it is about social decay or religious and anti-religious extremity),²⁸ it is clearly not about teenage heartache, and Corey Taylor would *never* start singing about Starbucks. Yet here he is, the mash-up implies, and Starbucks just went by.

When Taylor's vocal is introduced, the clips from "Baby" are replaced by clips from Slipknot's "Psychosocial" video, which, in contrast to the music by Bieber, reflects the dark message of the lyrics. Slipknot is shown performing their music while surrounded by burning flames, with a white wooden building in the background. Given the tropes of the metal genre, this scene might evoke the burning of churches (though the white building does not have a steeple and the flames are well in front of it), confirming our stereotypical notions about metal. The flames might also evoke a straightforward doomsday scenario, in which Slipknot

²⁷ There are two versions of the "Psychosocial" video, one of which excludes the "limits of the Dead" lines of the album version. In the mash-up, these lines are also missing.

²⁸ Dominic Lovell, "A Semiotic Analysis of Slipknot's 'Psychosocial,'" Online column (August 1, 2009).

is headed for hell to face eternal punishment; band member Joey Jordison wears a crown of thorns here, as did Christ when he was crucified, which appears to support this association with the day of the Last Judgment when, according to the Creed, Christ will judge the living and the dead. Moreover, in the middle of the video, there appears a nine-pointed star (a “nonagram”) of flare torches that, according to Slipknot, symbolizes the unity of the band’s original members,²⁹ but it might also evoke a pentagram, supporting the stereotype of the metal genre in general as sinful and satanic. Whether these anti-Christian allegories are intended as such or not, they set up yet another contrast to Bieber’s more innocent video (and also to the persona of Bieber—he calls himself a conservative Christian and ends each of his concerts by saying “God bless you” or “God loves you”).³⁰

While Slipknot and Bieber present themselves, and are presented by the media, as opposing stereotypes—Slipknot as the aggressive and repellent and rebellious metal band, and Bieber as the mainstream, commercially and politically correct pop phenomenon—the big picture is, of course, more complex for both recording artists. For example, Slipknot’s attempt to defeat the whole pop-cultural concept of image results in a conspicuous image in its own right, and, instead of being experienced as aggressive and frightening, it might also be considered almost cowardly to be as confrontational as they are while hidden behind a mask. Despite Slipknot’s hostility and boorish onstage behavior, the members are, according to biographer Jason Arnopp, generally likeable and even relatively traditional people.³¹ Moreover, to some metal fans, the members of Slipknot have already “sold out” by embracing nu-metal’s fusion of other genres, such as hip-hop and pop (nu-metal is a subgenre of heavy metal and is usually described as a gentler version of its “older brother”). Similarly,

²⁹ See www.slipknot-metal.com/main.php?sk=nonagram (08.22.13).

³⁰ Falsani, *Belieber!*, 131.

³¹ See, for instance, Arnopp, *Slipknot*, 136.

while the media, and Justin Bieber himself, long presented his artistic persona as humble and politically correct, the media-constructed narrative has, during the last couple of years, realigned and now presents a rather more rebellious Bieber than was the case when his hit “Baby” was released. While Bieber’s innocent teenager image once seemed virtually bulletproof and as much the culmination of the system as its product, then, this image is now starting to show cracks. Nevertheless, it is the listener’s oversimplified assumptions about and stigmatization of genres and individual musicians that fuel mash-up artists and their pointed play with such stereotypical contrasts, to the delight (and edification) of mash-up fans. And yet, through its musical congruity, which foregrounds unexpected *similarities*, the mash-up seems to suggest that these presumably incompatible tracks are not as different as we thought but may actually have something in common.

Despite the cultural, ideological, and music-stylistic incongruity of these two tracks, the tracks manage to mingle into a coherent musical amalgam. The verse, in which Taylor performs in a monotone, is obviously easier to line up with Bieber’s music than the chorus, because it does not require tonal synchronization between the melody and the chord progression (although structural elements such as tempo, time signature, rhythmic subdivisions, and breaks must be aligned regardless). In the chorus, Taylor ceases his guttural shouting and instead sings a rather memorable melody, which is, by the standards of some metal loyalists, already a traitorous move, even in the context of Slipknot’s instrumentation. In the context of Isosine’s mash-up, needless to say, it becomes downright embarrassing within a metal context, as Taylor’s catchy melody soars above the quantified and predictable pop music of Justin Bieber. Notwithstanding their very different stylistic musical language, the tracks are made to share the same pitch material; the mash-up thus functions harmonically as well as rhythmically.

The harmonic outline of the chorus of “Baby” is C-Am-F-G (I-VI-IV-V), a formula used in multiple pop songs. What makes the melody of “Psychosocial” and the chords of “Baby” fit so well harmonically is that the music of “Psychosocial,” which is pitched up from G-minor to A-minor, appears in the relative minor key to “Baby,” meaning that the two tracks then share the same scale. Taylor’s originally minor-key melody becomes a major-key melody in the mash-up, because the chords supporting the melody are replaced (a fifth in the original Slipknot melody becomes a major third in the mash-up version and the minor third becomes the tonic center). See figure 1 for an illustration of how the harmonic accompaniment of Taylor’s vocal melody is changed in the mash-up.

Figure 1. The first transcription illustrates the harmonies of the vocal line in Slipknot’s “Psychosocial” (here transposed from G-minor to A-minor, as is done in the mash-up); the second transcription illustrates how the harmonies of the same vocal line, still performed by Slipknot’s Corey Taylor, have in Isosine’s “Psychosocial Baby” been replaced by the harmonies of Bieber’s “Baby.”

The image shows two musical transcriptions of a vocal line in 4/4 time. The first transcription is for Slipknot's "Psychosocial" (transposed to A-minor) and the second is for the mash-up with Bieber's "Baby".

Transcription 1 (Slipknot's "Psychosocial"):

- Chords: F, C, G, E7, Am, C, F
- Lyrics: and the rain will kill us a - ll if we throw our - selv - es a - gainst -

Transcription 2 (Mash-up with Bieber's "Baby"):

- Chords: C, G, E7
- Lyrics: - the wall and no one else can se - e the pre - ser - va - tion of the mar - tyr in me

C Am

and the rain will kill us a - ll if we throw our - selv - es a - gainst -

F G C

5
- the wall and no one else can se - e the pre-ser - va-tion of the mar-tyr in me

This new tonality, particularly when rendered by the rich, trancelike synthesizer strings of “Baby” as they arpeggiate the tonic chord in quarter notes, lightens up Taylor’s melody while subverting his lyrical message.

The musical congruity between the tracks thus seems to at once emphasize their contextual incongruity *and* call into question the stereotypes associated with them. Mash-up music demonstrates that the construction of identity is both founded on and strengthened by an antagonist or “other;” while the mash-up of incongruent samples emphasizes the stereotypes inherent to both, because their differences are highlighted by their immediate juxtaposition.³² As Gerhard Falk points out, then, the construction of identity is related to our tendency to stigmatize: “All societies will always stigmatize some conditions and some behaviors because doing so provides for group solidarity by delineating ‘outsiders’ from ‘insiders.’”³³ Given the accompanying musical *congruity*, however, the mash-up also makes us *question* those stereotypes; “Psychosocial Baby” might even suggest to some listeners that Slipknot and Justin Bieber are *not* so different as they had assumed. One reason for this is

³² The fact that the construction of meaning or identity depends on difference and thus is relational has influentially occupied several poststructuralists, including Jacques Derrida, who states, “Language, or any code, any system of referral in general, is constituted ‘historically’ as a weave of differences” (Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 12).

³³ Gerhard Falk, *Stigma: How We Treat Outsiders* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2001), 13.

that mash-ups, in their very superimposition of samples, reveal previously unnoticed aspects of the music. “Psychosocial Baby” manages both to preserve its samples’ differences *and* undermine them in favor of a newly coherent whole. If we expect Justin Bieber and Slipknot to have little in common, the mash-up presents a successful virtual collaboration between them both *despite* and *because of* the very distinct matrices of associations that are integrated in the mash-up, and attendant social conventions are thus challenged as well as confirmed. By emphasizing both the expected differences and the unexpected similarities between the mashed sources, the mash-up does not necessarily satirize one or the other but instead criticizes or pokes fun at the stigmatization of both from (in the case of “Psychosocial Baby”) opposite ends of the music spectrum.

While I have here tried to demonstrate how mash-ups might be understood as commenting on the apparent social stigmas in music culture, others have interpreted mash-ups as satirizing the music or artist(s) of one of the mashed sources while favoring the other. Along these lines, several Slipknot fans have expressed their profound distaste for “Psychosocial Baby,” perhaps because they interpret it as suggesting that Slipknot is not an authentic metal band, or that they, with “Psychosocial,” has sold out. Slipknot vocalist Corey Taylor, on the other hand, salutes it:

Ah, “Psychosocial Baby,” that is fucking hilarious! . . . I love it when anybody takes the piss out of me because you . . . you take yourself too seriously and that’s when you get knocked out, if you don’t laugh at yourself. I thought it was great. I was like, “This is fucking beautiful!” The way it was put together . . . There are so many kids that are pissed off about it that it makes me laugh. You know, this is fucking amazing. You either get it or you don’t.³⁴

Mash-ups have also been subsumed into larger social or cultural critiques. For instance, some critics, particularly in the United States, have interpreted mash-ups that combine black and

³⁴ Corey Taylor, freely transcribed from www.youtube.com/watch?v=CPNBUSY2M-Q (08.22.13).

white artists (such as Danger Mouse's *The Grey Album* or Evolution Control Committee's *The Whipped Cream Mixes*) as implicit critiques of racial essentialism and the segregated marketing of the music and media industries.³⁵ An alternative interpretation is that such mash-ups contribute to bridging the gulf between racial categories and support musical miscegenation. Mash-ups have also been cast either as transcending the high/low dichotomy of the cultural popular music hierarchy or as bridging these social chasms.³⁶ Whatever the cultural readings of this music, all of this meaning making happens in the listener's constant oscillation between the new and the original contexts of the sampled material. The creative and innovative aspect of mash-up music lies in its very capacity to put into motion such an oscillation—that is, to create an experiential tension between the virtual and the non-virtual, and between the overtly articulated and the covertly implied.

Consumption as Mode of Production

In 1969, Foucault predicted that we will reach a point where the figure of the author will no longer be important at all: “I think that, as our society changes, at the very moment when it is in the process of changing, the author function will disappear.”³⁷ American scholar David Gunkel (2011) believes that this moment has come and argues that mash-up music “provides a persuasive illustration and functional example of an alternative configuration of artistic creativity after the passing of the figure of the author.”³⁸ The reason for this, he continues, is

³⁵ See Charles Taylor, “A Love Song to Bastard Pop,” *Salon* (August 9., 2003).

³⁶ See McLeod, “Confessions of an Intellectual (Property),” 84, and Brøvig-Hanssen and Harkins, “Contextual Incongruity and Musical Congruity,” 100.

³⁷ Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?” in *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thoughts*, ed. P. Rabinow (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 119.

³⁸ David J. Gunkel, “What Does It Matter Who Is Speaking? Authorship, Authority, and the Mashup,” *Popular Music and Society* 35, no. 1 (2011): 16.

that the mash-up producer functions more as a *scripteur* than an author, in the sense that his/her task involves mixing and remixing “scripts”—that is, existing recordings—instead of creating something from nothing. Contrary to Gunkel, I find that, although the mash-up producer does indeed function as a *scripteur* or curator, the mash-ups themselves indicate that even within this “configuration of artistic creativity,” the author remains a central and functional figure—if, that is, we rethink the traditional notions of authorship, creativity, and musicianship with which we are working.

In order to grasp mash-up aesthetics, it is not enough to point to the traditional music-analytical parameters of lyrics, melody, harmony, and rhythm (by, for example, examining the melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic complexity of the music in order to legitimize its aesthetic value). We must turn to an alternative source: the study of these samples’ play of internal and external relationships and their particular modes of functioning anew. As literary theorist Linda Hutcheon points out in her work on parody and adaptations, these forms of cultural recycling demonstrate a use of repetition that is interesting not for its similarity but for its *difference*—in these removed contexts, that is, the repeated material is at once the same, and yet different.³⁹ The samples used in “Psychosocial Baby” have been changed not in the sense that the “texts” have been altered but in the sense that the contexts have been switched out, banged together, at once engaged and abandoned. Mash-ups consisting of nothing but copied full-length samples are thus not necessarily parasitic in character. They can also be understood as revisions, reworkings, reappropriations, and re-evaluations of the past. Nicolas Bourriaud expresses the existential quandary of the contemporary artist in any medium in a way that sheds light on the mash-up producer as well: “The artistic question is no longer: ‘what can we make that is new?’ but ‘how can we make do with what we have?’ In other words, how can we produce singularity and meaning from this chaotic mass of

³⁹ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 166.

objects, names, and references that constitutes our daily life?”⁴⁰ In contrast to the notion of the “autonomous work,” part of the aesthetic of the mash-up lies in its acknowledgment and indeed embrace of the intertextual play that converges existing meanings in order to form a new one.

This latter observation directs us to another demonstration of the author’s centrality to mash-up music: the fact that so much of the mash-up’s meaning derives from the listener’s understanding of it *as a mash-up*—that is, as a calculated collision of recognizable and disparate sources, and thus as something that only exists within the virtual domain.⁴¹ As such, mash-ups are in fact fundamentally based on mash-up fans’ recognition of their samples’ authors, here understood as “artist brands.” This is why mash-up producers choose samples from popular or classic recordings and generally edit them only subtly, to make it easier for listeners to recognize them. Mash-up producers seem to assume that listeners are well acquainted with a wide range of musical styles and genres, but they generally avoid esotericism. While there will always be listeners who feel excluded regardless, mash-up producers generally trade obscurity for listeners’ accessibility to the material, in order to enhance the appeal of their work and broaden their audience base. While the use of contemporary sources might limit the longevity of the mash-up (unless the music manages to survive the passage of time), it nevertheless “offers the *possibility* of greater consumer participation,”⁴² as Serazio states. While Julia Kristeva’s objection to the notion of the

⁴⁰ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay; How Art Reprograms the World* (New York: Lukas and Steinberg, 2005), 8.

⁴¹ Of course, mash-ups can be appreciated even if the sources are not recognized, thanks to, for example, the artistry or intricacy of the musical dialogue (and general congruence) between the juxtaposed tracks. The point is that if the listener does not recognize the sources, or is unaware that the music in question represents a juxtaposition of samples, it will not be recognized *as a mash-up* but instead as something else.

Serazio, “Apolitical Irony of Generation Mash-Up,” 85. Emphasis in the original.

autonomous work, as well as the search for meaning as something inherent in the text,⁴³ might be interpreted as the “death of the author,”⁴⁴ the listener’s constant negotiation with references to outside texts in mash-ups must instead be understood as an intertextual play in which the authors of the samples are constantly acknowledged and recognized. In a number of ways, then, mash-ups do *not* prove the passing of the author but instead supply a functional point of departure for rethinking and redefining what authorship might be.

Conclusion

Borrowing Hutcheon’s descriptions of various forms of media adaptations (that is, media incarnations or remediation), we might characterize mash-ups as conducting an “ongoing dialogue with the past” that “creates the doubled pleasure of the palimpsest: more than one text is experienced—and knowingly so.”⁴⁵ When we listen to mash-ups, we experience an oscillation between the new context of the sampled music and the samples’ original contexts, and it is this ambiguity or double meaning of such heterogeneous halves forming a compelling whole that supplies the exciting friction and irony within the mash-up aesthetic. Like Hutcheon’s descriptions of adaptations and irony, the mash-up is “intensely context- and discourse-dependent,”⁴⁶ and, the mash-up meaning operates in the space between the virtual

⁴³ Kristeva developed her theories of *intertextualité* in her reworking of Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiotics and Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogism (see Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980)).

⁴⁴ In his theoretical deconstruction of the author figure, Roland Barthes famously stated that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), 148).

⁴⁵ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 116.

⁴⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), xiv.

and the non-virtual—a space in which both the virtual and the non-virtual depend upon the other in order to generate meaning.

Mash-ups such as “Psychosocial Baby,” contest the traditional notions of musical creativity, originality, and authorship in the sense that the mash-up artist acts as a “curator” of already existing music. I have, however, argued that even in mash-up music, the author has *not* ceased to function; the culture of the new virtual music environment caters for the author figure even as it challenges it. The production of mash-ups is not a mode of consumption; instead, consumption has become a more explicit mode of production. Bourriaud sees artistic mastery in our contemporary environment (in which music recycling, or what he calls “postproduction”—a new production of an existing recording—is the dominant art form) as a “matter of seizing all the codes of the culture, all the forms of everyday life, the works of the global patrimony, and making them function.”⁴⁷ The art of mash-up music lies not in the creation of something entirely new or original in the traditional sense. Like other recycled art forms, the art and “newness” of mash-up music derives from its very collection and combination of something preexisting, in a way that makes it *function* anew. As such, mash-up music gives prerecorded music, previously assumed to be the final product, an afterlife. As Serazio puts it, “A song, once thought to be a completed project upon delivery to the consumer, is now forever unfinished—putty in the hands of a potential Acid Pro alchemist.”⁴⁸

If the ubiquity of digital recycling in popular music means, as Andrew Goodwin suggested in 1988,⁴⁹ that pop might eventually eat itself, mash-ups pointedly avoid that fate

⁴⁷ Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, 8.

Serazio, “Apolitical Irony of Generation Mash-Up,” 84. ACID Pro is a DAW program by Sony Creative Software.

⁴⁹ I am here referring to Goodwin’s article “Sample and Hold: Pop Music in the Age of Digital Reproduction,” first published in 1988 but reappearing in 1990 in Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin’s anthology *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word* (London: Routledge).

by reinventing the past, finding the new in the old and announcing it with both gusto and irony.

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