Clone this DVD!

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In the 2009 video *Tap Hop* there is an unlikely dance-off played out in an uncanny shot-counter-shot sequence. This split screen work syncs the dancing group Tip, Tap and Toe from the 1942 film *Pardon My Sarong* with the hip-hop moves of the New York City Breakers on the television show *Graffiti Rock* in 1986. If the substitution of one form of visual funk with another alone constituted this work it would be interesting, but nothing more. Indeed, it would underline the well-known cultural anthropology that any given style is a mutation of a predecessor. It is the re-voicing of each video with the sound of the other that makes this work truly remarkable. In the artists’ words, this sonic haunting “examines the formal and cultural connections between tap and breakdance”. The didactic tone here is important for *Tap Hop*, like much of Soda_Jerk’s work, is at once a “lesson” in how remix is not slavishly ripping off a pre-existing text, but creates a new text to be added to the historical archive of moving image-sound works. This notion of endless variation within a large, but finite set has gone by many names in the history of ideas, such as evolution and fractal geometry, complexity and chaos theory. The genre of remix, in a general or epochal sense of the next big thing, such as the gothic novel, CGI cinema or reality TV, is another name for this voracious permutation that underlies cultural production. *Tap Hop* shows that it was not Michael Jackson who invented the moonwalk at the Motown Twenty-Fifth anniversary awards in 1983. It
was Ray Winfield, the “Toe” of the famous vaudeville trio. But such is the changeability of common knowledge in the age of social media that it won’t be long before Winfield too will be outed as a copyist and his predecessor identified.

The title of this paper, then, is no sophistry. A direct quote from the artists stolen for fair use here today, it signifies the technical capacity of DVDs to be endlessly reproduced, creating legions of the same title like so many Martians coming off the assembly line in Tim Burton’s *Mars Attacks*. But in its own way it is also another lesson to do with the notion that all cultural production begins not with originality, but with copying.

For Dan and Dom Angeloro, the artists also known as Soda_Jerk, there is no beating around the bush. “Hack the planet” is a favourite phase of theirs. Let’s face it, appropriation, the anxiety of influence, artistic borrowing, reflexivity and the law of genre go back along way: the Latin poet Virgil accompanies Dante into Purgatory and Hell in two books of *The Divine Comedy*, a work that was itself influenced by Virgil’s *Aenied*, which was itself created in the shadow of Homer’s *Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and other works by Greek and Roman authors. Shakespeare, and nobody knows how, borrowed the classic five act play structure from Seneca, who plundered other Roman and Greek dramatists to craft the “Senecan” tragedy. Scratching the surface of the history of creative borrowing, of re-shaping and re-modelling, suggests that it is no surprise to know that all of Soda_Jerk’s work is underwritten by what they call the “zero originality clause”. Their aesthetic
principle is to use entirely found media samples in which they have had absolutely no hand in the making.

Unapologetic appropriation as cultural production, rather than thematic or stylistic enhancement, is contrary to the ideological ego of possessive capitalism associated with what the writer Timothy Reiss calls “the discourse of modernism”. Many years ago Thomas Stearns Eliot attempted to salvage the sanctity of a poet’s heightened thought and feeling as the basis of creation when he wrote of John Donne’s capacity to feel his thought “as immediately as the odour of a rose”. For Eliot the seventeenth century poets were truly original not in the formation of their verbal conceits but for their unprecedented capability, apparently, to think and feel in ways that you and I can only dream of. Intention, inspiration and sensibility were at the heart of their creative act. Not appropriation. So Donne, like Andrew Marvell and other metaphysical poets was a producer, an original. And of course the poet-genius was always male. In Soda_Jerk’s work production has never been so solitary. And unlike the metaphysicals they didn’t feel the need to look into their digestive systems as well as their minds. They share with the photographer Cindy Sherman and the writer-fimmaker Mark Amerika the notion that the executive work of being an artist now involves a dramatic ideological succession from production to post-production. The term post-production has a double inflection that refers in the first instance to after-effects, such as compositing, colour-grading and sound-mixing. But more dramatically and of relevance here it also refers to a more substantive Kuhn-like paradigm shift that has a name, such as the Copernican revolution or the Renaissance. Remix is the name we can give to this shift, a term akin to new

But this thought-experiment reveals that the singular vision of an auteur like Stanley Kubrick filters through the lens of his vision various sources not of his making. He is not unlike Eliot’s genius poet who forms new wholes while falling in love, reading Spinoza, typing and smelling cabbage cooking in a distant room; or in Kubrick’s case, smoking. We just don’t have a singular, oracular representation of the West in Edwin Porter’s *The Great Train Robbery* of 1903. There is John Ford’s *Stagecoach*, Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch*, Chuck Jones’ *Drip Along Daffy*, Clint Eastwood’s *The Unforgiven*, or Akira Kurosawa’s *Seven Samurai*. These directors of “the Western”, including Porter, were skilful adepts of Soda_Jerk’s “cut-sample-copy” as much as Mark Amerika’s “surf-sample-manipulate”. And with Gertrude Stein in mind, as well as Umberto Eco after her, a rose is a rose is a rose, right? In this Soda_Jerk share Eco’s sense of irony as the recognition of the already said, rather than Donne’s never-been-thought-or-felt-so-deeply sensitivity. For them
there is no anxiety of influence, but rather the giddy exhilaration of superfluity, of just so much stuff to work with. Since we became postmodern no one, as we know from Umberto Eco, can say the words “I love you madly” for the first time. However to say “As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly” quotes a sentiment and a statement that precedes your feeling and your utterance of it. So the work of post-production begins.

For Soda_Jerk’s the principles of post-production are two-fold: First, the contemporary world of DIY video and sound is flooded with found samples that can be re-used for another purpose, including, inter alia, more than one hundred years of moving image and sound history, countless genres, pop music and its various mutations from blues, punk and death metal to chip music. Secondly, and more dramatically, this same bounty reveals that any act of invention is always already a remix. Remix, in this more semiotic inflection to do with code, is after Noam Chomsky, the morphology of representation.

In Soda_Jerk’s early work there is a literal foregrounding and use of the sample as a free-floating signifier that is profoundly atemporal, promiscuous and always in excess of singular use: we are left with the suspicion that it may precede this usage. The Fair Use and Creative Commons movements’ adoption of this principle is reflected in Pixel Pirate II from 2006, a feature length piece of the carnivalesque that, in the words of the artists, is an “anti-copyright epic … [a] manifesto against the corporate control of cultural history”. The aesthetic principle at work here is the uncanny anachronism of culture and cultural reception, of when and by whom
something is experienced for the first time, which is generally out of time. As well, this anti-copyright polemic revels in the constantly changing nature of the past as well as the present under the voraciousness of the fractured and polymorphous nature of cultural familiarity. In *Pixel Pirate II* original intention and intellectual ownership are fragile notions. Endless remixability is the fire in the not so sensitive belly of culture’s ongoing-ness, from the time of Moses to teen movies to action cinema and video games. Did I forget to mention Elvis?

Cloned video identities of Elvis’ many film personas are sent back in time as anti-copyright warriors championing fair use, piracy and anti-copyright activism. *Pixel Pirate II* is hysterically didactic, highlighting the seams and sutures in digital compositing and cut and paste, the amplification of obvious sound samples taken hostage from one context and supplanted into another. It celebrates the degree zero originality of utterance and revels in quoting quotations of quotations of quotations and so on.

Here is Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, structuralism 101 and Joseph Campbell’s “hero’s quest” for beginners in action. Villain: Monkey; Hero: Mike Windgren from *Fun in Acapulco*.

Villain: The wrath of God from *The Ten Commandments*: Hero: Dr Peter Venkman from *Ghostbusters*. This binary variability can be applied to micro sound grabs from obscure 1960s sci-fi cartoons, to masters of ceremonies at 50s Elvis concerts and pre-recorded corporate warnings about copyright infringement on commercial video tapes. The endless capacity to quote someone else in another voice, from
somewhere else, from another time, has been historically represented and sanctioned by what James Joyce called “perverted commas”. Joyce, of course, should know about quotation as a creative act. In the “Nausicaa” episode of Ulysses he has Leopold Bloom thinking to himself, “For this relief much thanks”, having just masturbated while watching Gerty McDowell at a distance disporting herself on the strand at Dublin Bay. Ulysses exegetes eventually tracked the allusion down to Hamlet, Act 1, scene 1, line 10. Joyce does not refer to Shakespeare or to Hamlet, but in so doing he plants yet another detail of the Hamlet leitmotif of the father and son relationship that is woven throughout the text, along with the same theme in The Odyssey and the same theme in the lives of Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom, etc. And don’t get me started on allusion and intertextuality in Finnegans Wake.

Now before we move on avoid the mistake of thinking that after this fifty-two minute tapestry of quotations with their names on it that Soda_Jerk are closet self-possessive individuals of Enlightenment capitalism, anxious to protect their intellectual property. Remember their dictum scribbled in texta on the myriad copies of copies of their titles floating around wherever and whenever: Clone this DVD!

In one of the most celebrated instances of unashamed body snatching in the twentieth century George Clinton lured trumpeter Fred Wesley, bassist Bootsy Collins and several other musicians away from James Brown’s band in the early
1970s to join Funkadelic. Not satisfied with people, Clinton, former crooner of the late fifties doo-wop singers The Parliaments, famously appropriated the rhythm of funk, also known as Brown’s first law. The emphasis in funk on the first beat of the bar, the downbeat, not only souped up rhythm and blues to give it its “funky” sound, but also endowed that beat with its own epochal name, “the One”. Now in case you’re wondering, this journey into the history of black music is no musicological conceit. The connection between theft, borrowing or appropriating and the singularity of “the One” is an algorithm for sampling in any art form. This was the unwritten code that fuelled the experimentation of soul music as it chased the dragon’s tale, digesting rhythm and blues, soul, hip-hop, rap, turntablism, dub and beyond. The “One” in this instance is not a unicum that is without precedent, but that which is borrowed, hijacked, re-coded. When Brown’s sax player Alfred “Pee Wee” Ellis arranged “Cold Sweat” in 1967 he rhythmically funked Miles Davis’ 1959 “So What” to sculpt a new song out of a pre-existing one. Now here’s the thought experiment you need to chew over: if you happen to hear Davis’ song for the first time years after a solid diet of James Brown on iTunes, you will be stunned to realise how much it sounds like “Cold Sweat”. That anachronism of procession and precession in time and consumption is called “the One”.

Soda_Jerk’s ongoing Astro Black series is a micro history of “the One” as it has been explored and exploited through black music and culture grounded in funk, from the speculative AfroFuturism of Sun Ra, the Universal Zulu politics of Afrikaa Bambaataa, the turntablism of DJ Kool Herc and the mayhem of George Clinton and P-Funk. Sun Ra’s 1974 film Space is the Place concentrates this history of otherness
and opposition to a dominant norm. In a recent addition to the *Astro Black* series, *Race for Space* (2010), there is a curious discovery moment. The Apollo 11 astronauts land on the moon, supposedly *terra nullius*, to find that it is already populated, in this instance by afronauts; a colonial, indigenous moment of encounter that sounds familiar to us here in Australia (perhaps this quotation of colonialism is what the American space program was about after all). But it also sounds very much like any moment of conception when an artist rummages around in their mind to find that glint of inspiration, that unique trace of sensibility or truth that will kick start their originary act of creation, that no one has thought of before. This moment in *Astro Black* is, after the unlikely example of T. S. Eliot, the individual talent’s collision with tradition, the sensation of what it might be like at that moment to realise that your original epiphany is an unwitting appropriation of something not of your making that precedes you, something that you have heard before but have forgotten, sublimated or ignored. Here is Harold Bloom’s “anxiety of influence”, a trauma of precession that you will have to exorcise if you want to become a strong and original poet. Dig ... someone pinched “the One” before you did. But there is another response, a response that “stanks” as black musicians once would have said. That response might be that to remix that found idea is kind of cool and may lead to something that swings, while still being a riff blown by other cats before you. And that’s ok. Another name for that weird sensation of cool, of pleasing equanimity, is funk. And if you’ve got funk, you’ve got style.