



# Remixing References

REVIEW by [Thomas Burkhalter](#)

Contemporary tracks remix sounds from different places and times. To analyze the manifold constellations in and shapes of these remixes is challenging. Peter J. Burkholder made a first attempt, here is yet another. From the Norient book *Seismographic Sounds* ([see and order here](#)).

Contemporary tracks mix samples of sounds and music from local, regional and global contexts. These samples become published on online platforms like SoundCloud, promoted via social networks, re-played in concerts and DJ-sets – settings in which they receive new attributions. Simon Reynolds describes contemporary tracks as mixtures of «time-travel» and «seance», Kodwo Eshun speaks of «sonic fictions», and Josh Kun of «audiotopia».

To research these settings systematically – and not only partial aspects of it (i.e. history of remix, copyright, practice in rap) – would offer a fascinating field of research. Probably it was Peter J. Burkholder (1994) who undertook the most extensive research attempt in that matter so far, when he analyzed «types of musical borrowing» in euro-american art music. Overwhelmed by the complexity of the task and sheer number of examples, he concluded that «the history of borrowing in Western music has yet to be written» (2001: 5). Today this seems possible, with software able to keep track of great numbers, and with new possibilities to connect and publish large amounts of data in readable ways. Such an analysis would be fruitful on various levels: it would offer a path towards an analysis of music that is close to contemporary practice; it would highlight the complexities at play in each track; and it would open options to compare remix strategies over time, for example finding similarities and differences with musique concrète, soundscape composition, Plunderphonics or what Eduardo Navas calls [«regenerative remixes»](#).

## Multi-disciplinary Approaches

The Burkholder update that I suggest here combines sound analysis with methods from cultural studies and ethnomusicology (interviews and participant observation, «multi-sited ethnography» (Marcus 1995), «multi(web)sited ethnography» (Koch 2013) and «digital ethnography» (Hsu 2014). Its research perspectives are: «music-making as a practice» that involves processes of music-making and production; «music as a media product» that involves reception and further processing of tracks; «musician as an actor» that involves all spheres that affect the musician as a human being and artist. The «Referenzanalysekatalog» (RAK) (catalogue to analyze the use of references) that I suggest here serves as a guideline and

questionnaire: it shows the layers that are at stake when a musician remixes references from another place or time into his or her music. I define music as a media product, because cover arts, title and media appearances of the musician are each factored into how a track is perceived.

## The Referenzanalysekatalog (RAK)

### 1) Analytical Focus

- Reference Material: What sounds are being worked with?

### 2) Sampling

- Input: How is this reference material sampled? (field recordings with which microphone and recorder; digital samples of pre-recorded media material)
- Selection: What is selected from the reference material and used in the new media product? (a melody, a rhythmical pattern or break, a scale, a sound, lyrics)

### 3) Aesthetical Remix Strategies

- Technology: With which devices is the reference material remixed? (tape, vinyl, digital sequencers)
- Editing and Manipulation: How and to what extent is the reference material edited, manipulated and altered? (tempo, running direction, filtering of frequencies, repetitions, volumes, panorama, pitch)
- Effects: Which effects are added? (delay, reverb, harmonizer, ring modulator)
- Impact: How present and recognizable is the reference material in the new media product?

### 4) Symbolic Processing Strategies

- Positioning: What position does the new media product take in regard to the remixed reference material? (homage, parody, total abstraction)
- Citation: Is the reference material openly cited and credited? (in booklet texts, media clippings, pictures, interviews)
- Motivation: What reasons does the producer give (in interviews, texts) for remixing the reference material?
- Knowledge: How much knowledge does the producer have of the remixed reference material?
- Relation: What is the producer's relation to the referenced material? How does he/she feel committed to it?

### 5) Habitus (Position/Perspective)

- Conditions of Production: Where and how was the media product produced? (professional studio, home studio, laptop)
- Finances: What are the financial realities of the media product?
- Market Orientation: On which reception platforms is the media product sold and discussed? What new meanings get attached to the media product and to the remixed reference material on the various reception platforms?

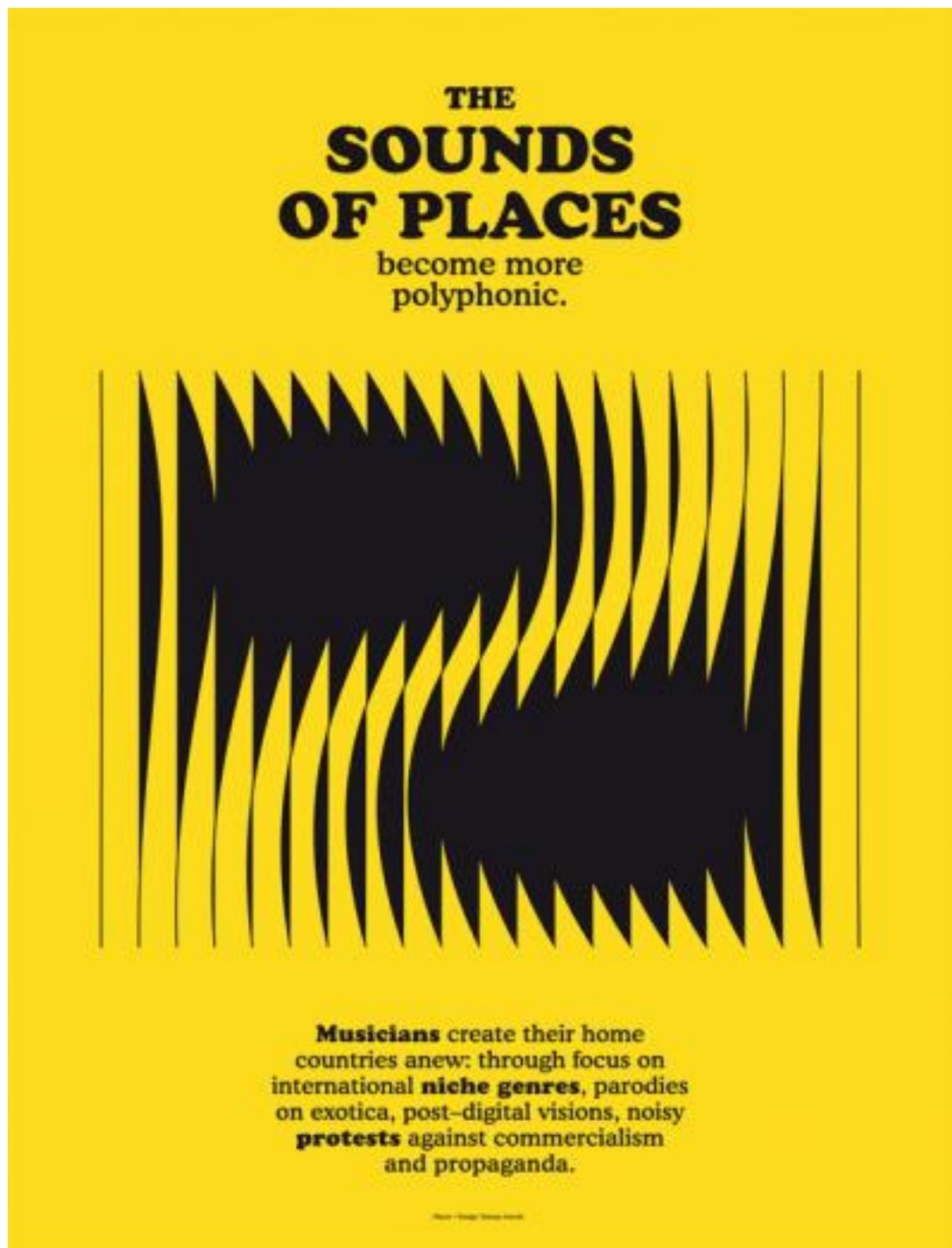
- Location: Where do the producers of the new media product live and work?
- Status: What is the producers' background? (cultural, social, economic, gender, educational)

#### **6) Legal and Ethical Matters**

- Legal/Ethical: What are the discussions/arguments surrounding the media product? (legal, ethical, philosophical)

The goal of the RAK is to create a systematic approach to remix culture that observes inter-relations between musical and non-musical levels and highlights discourses and controversies that are at play – when a track for example remixes sounds from a specific war (see [Herbert](#) or [Clarke](#)), or from other cultural contexts (see [OY](#) or [Xander Ferreira](#)). A large amount of analyzed examples, collected and discussed multi-locally, could lead to a typology of remix culture. This approach, I believe, would lead into ethnomusicologist Veit Erlmann's twenty-year-old suggestion to analyze the ways in which histories of cultural, social, or political contexts «are inscribed into music» (Erlmann 1995).





→ list of references

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Thomas Burkhalter, PhD, is an anthropologist, multidisciplinary artist, and writer from Bern, Switzerland. He is the founder and director of Norient (winner Special Prize for Music 2025 – Swiss Music Prizes) and the Norient Festival. Currently, Burkhalter's focus lies on his new music/AV duo, [Melodies In My Head](#), and the podcast [Long Take: Life as an Artist](#). He is a co-editor of the 2025 released book [Home is Where the Heart Strives](#) (Norient Books). Burkhalter has co-directed documentary films, including [Contradict](#) (Berner Filmpreis 2020, Al-Jazeera Witness), and created AV/theatre performances. He is the author and co-editor of several books, such as [Local Music Scenes and Globalization: Transnational Platforms in Beirut](#) (Routledge) and [The Arab Avant Garde: Musical Innovation in the Middle East](#) (Wesleyan University Press). His experimental radio feature, *Gqom Edits – A Durban Visit*, was nominated for the Prix Europa in 2017. Burkhalter teaches regularly at universities, leads workshops for arts institutions, and, since 2022, has produced the Norient Mixtape for Swiss National Radio SRF3. He currently serves on the board of the ERC/UKRI-funded project [Beyond 1932](#) (King's College London), [Echographies: Journal of Sound Ethnography](#) (Chicago/Zürich), and [C:Pop – Transdisciplinary Research Center for Popular Music Cultures and Creative Economies](#) (University of Paderborn). Burkhalter's work combines personal and global perspectives, often in close collaboration with artists and thinkers from across the world. Follow him on [Instagram](#), [Research Gate](#), [Academia.edu](#), [Bandcamp](#), [Spotify](#), or [Meta](#).

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