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BREAKING HER OWN RULES: DAYNA MCLEOD TALKS TV REMIX

Submitted by [Mél Hogan](#) on Mon, 08/08/2011 - 07:12

The following is an interview I conducted with video and performance artist [Dayna McLeod](#). McLeod's work is ripe with humour and socially charged situations and she has received funding for video projects from the Canada Council and the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec. Over the course of the last month, we have been exchanging emails about her video editing process, drawing particular attention to self-imposed rules and the politics of remixing popular television shows. The following transcript contains the highlights from this conversation.



Mél Hogan: Describe your process for working on videos like *Nothing Compares to You*. How much time did that video take to make – from finding scripts to editing, etc. What are the steps in making a video like that: Watching shows, finding scripts, mapping out content. Tell me everything in detail, unless, of course, it's a secret.

Dayna McLeod: *Nothing Compares to You* took 6 months to make. I downloaded the first season from a bittorrent site, and found the first season of scripts transcribed by fans at tvtdb.com. These transcripts were saved as pdfs, making them easy to search. At first, I had made some fairly insane rules for myself that I later broke: originally, I searched the transcripts for each word in the song in order; so if I took "It's" -the first word of *Nothing Compares 2 U*- from episode 1 and found it, then I would search for "been" from the next episode, in order, until I found it. So if I didn't find "been" until episode 5, then I would start my search for "seven" in episode 6, and the search would continue numerically and loop back to episode 1 once I reached the last episode of season 1. These rules proved to be insanely tedious, and I threw them out after working on the piece for two months, when I had only gotten through the first verse. It was really important for me to have House perform the entire song—a rule I only broke twice, ie: Foreman says "yard" because not only does House never say "yard" (for the line, "in the backyard"), I could not make him say it by splicing together words, as I did with other words that I couldn't find him saying,



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intact. I also wanted to ensure that House was on camera when he said each word, which also proved to be impossible.

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[*Nothing Compares to You*]

MH: Tell me more about these rules. How do you decide which rules to set for yourself? Why have rules in the first place?

DMC: For found footage/quick-cut projects like this, I need to have rules. Otherwise, it's too easy to get lost in all of the possibilities, especially when I'm looking for such small sound bites. The rules seem to write themselves at first and are a bit of a rush: can I meet my own challenge? It's like I'm competing against myself. Sometimes setting rules is the best way to jumpstart my brain to a better solution, and throw the rules out completely. That's extremely satisfying; setting rigid rules and finding a better process that makes these rules seem ridiculous.

MH: Why do you do what you do? What time of day do you work? Is the process meditative? How many hours in a row can you work at this?

DMC: I'm not sure if this video making process was particularly meditative; it was more of an endurance challenge. I usually work at night, or all day, depending on the project and my other time commitments. A project like this is both addictive and repulsive; addictive because it's a challenge to see if I can do it, and repulsive, because after about 5 hours in a row of working on it, I start to force words to work, and they don't, and it's frustrating. Also watching the same show over and over again, especially in 1-second sound bites, becomes annoying and irritating, especially when you aren't having success, or you only make it through one line in an editing session. That's how I know when to stop, when I can't stand the show or the searching anymore, and I start to force things that I end up undoing when I come back to the edit.

MH: You show your work online, at festivals, in performances. Can you tell me a bit about how these work for you? What each context provides?

DMC: Obviously, there is a huge difference between watching work in a festival and watching it on a computer or portable device. I house almost all of my videos on my website at daynarama.com. This is a portfolio site, and given the digital reality of media, is a way to show work to anyone with a relatively good internet connection, anywhere in the world. But festival play is my favorite way to show work; sitting in a theatre watching videos with likeminded festival goers is fantastic, and similar to a Cabaret audience, you know if your video is funny, not funny, boring, or entertaining because everyone reacts naturally. I also use video in my performance work, often playing with the false reality of projection, characterization, improv and karaoke.

MH: How do you choose your themes? Why popular TV shows?

DMC: I love tv: I love bad tv, I love good tv, and I will pretty much watch anything. I think it's fair to say that I'm a critical viewer, but I also enjoy watching. I don't see myself as a passive viewer, and these videos are essentially my interactive participation in existing mainstream culture.

In television, there are repeating patterns of storylines that we can see in different series. For example, shows often have Christmas, Hanukkah or holiday themed, birthday, or “issue” oriented episodes. For me, these “issue” shows become a fairly significant marker of our media culture, a snapshot of where we are socially: Natalie almost gets raped in *The Facts of Life* (1) (1981) during a mugging and empowers herself by taking a self-defense class. Dana Plato wears blackface to confront a racist boyfriend in *Diff'rent Strokes* (2) (1980). After 4 seasons, Ellen DeGeneres comes out on her show, *Ellen* (3) (1997). These were all significant tv moments for me as an evolving viewer, having grown up with tv, and seeing the power of it. These examples were also considered to be ground-breaking, but in contemporary television, these themes are as commonplace as a Christmas special within a series. “Racism”, “gay”, “abuse”, “eating disorder”, “molestation”, “rape” are commonplace themes, and the reason I put these in quotes is that they are often heavy-handed, especially in sitcoms and dramedies. Lately, I’ve become distracted by when these agendas overwhelm the show itself: *Don’t Ask Don’t Tell Gay, Gay, Gay*, is an example of me short-cutting an episode of *Boston Legal* by cutting it down to the essence of what the maker’s agenda is, ie: the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy of the US military.

[*Don’t Ask Don’t Tell Gay, Gay, Gay*]

MH: This kind of collage work is really your signature style. How would you describe your work aesthetically, politically and artistically?

DMC: YouTube and online attention spans have demonstrated to me that you have about 15 seconds to capture someone’s attention, and maybe 1 minute to keep it, if you’re lucky, so I like to get to the point quickly, and this is why I love the short video format.

Aesthetically and artistically, the collage videos are about the content and cutting to the chase. Recently, I’ve been working with both an additive and reductive process: *Nothing Compares to You* is additive- I’m searching for specific content and putting it together to make something new from the source material. *Don’t Ask Don’t Tell Gay, Gay, Gay* and the Secret Messages series are reductive because I’m taking the episode or film, and cutting out the irrelevant content (to my rules). After the challenge is met, I then have to make decisions about the final cut- adding the sweeping melodramatic chords from the song for *Nothing Compares to You*, the timing of the music, do I cover up the cuts for words I’ve spliced together, how do I end the piece, what happens in the 20 second bridge in the middle of the video? These are all choices that get resolved in the edit, but are obviously integral to the final version.

Politically, most of my work is pretty fucking GAY. It doesn’t apologize or assume the victim position, the quiet queer, the polite lesbian, the normative gay. And critics, audiences and programmers tell me that that in itself, is political: I’m here, I’m queer, get used to watching my videos.

[*Ultimate SUB Ultimate DOM*]

MH: Your work is, I think, a commentary on television culture itself, and so the projects demand that TV be your pool of sources. Who do you imagine as your audience? Does it matter if they are well versed in television culture or pop culture? How important are those common reference points?

DMC: This is a good question, because it keeps coming up. I think the best way to address this is to look at 2 pieces that I've made for essentially the same (queer) audience.

Ultimate SUB Ultimate DOM: Maria Von Trapp & Mary Poppins imagines Maria Von Trapp from *The Sound of Music* as a submissive to the Mother Superior, begging for mercy and looking for a spanking, and Mary Poppins as the Mother Superior, wielding a dildo-sheathed umbrella and a ball-gag. Cut to a monologue about this fantasy scenario, I used footage from both films to illustrate this fictitious relationship, assuming that most viewers, queer or straight would be familiar with these characters. However, if you don't know who these character are or aren't familiar with their embodiment by Julie Andrews, does this matter? Are the signifiers of Nun and British Nanny clear enough for you within the video to enjoy the subversion of putting them in an S&M scenario? And, contrarily, if you are intimately familiar with these characters, then you will hopefully enjoy references to their actions that I make outside of the video that might not be clear to others, like Maria being punished for dressing children in drapery, or Mary Poppins' umbrella fetish. *That's Right Diana Barry, You Needed Me*, is a very Canadian piece and I don't think it will play much outside of Canada. Originally commissioned as a performance for Anne Made Me Gay curated by Moynan King and Rosemary Rowe at Buddies in Bad Times in Toronto, this video uses Anne Murray and Anne of Green Gables in a karaoke mash-up. I cut the 1984, made-for-CBC television version of Anne of Green Gables starring Megan Follows, to Anne Murray's, *You Needed Me*. Now, if you're already asking who the hell Anne Murray, Megan Follows or Anne of Green Gables are, or what the hell the CBC is, well, I feel we have our answer.

I also see this work as related to [6 Degrees of Kevin Bacon](#); whenever I watch tv or film and see actors appear in something else as a different character, does this add to your viewing experience or take away from it? Do the antics and drama that actors get up to off camera (hello Mel Gibson and Charlie Sheen) impact how we watch media? Does it affect the story? Try it: the next time you watch something with an actor you've seen before, think of everything you know about that actor, and every show you've seen them in – how does it affect the story you're watching right now?

[That's Right Diana Barry, You Needed Me]

MH: You distribute your works internationally and nationally. Has there ever been a copyright issue? Do you worry about copyright at all? Are distributors reluctant to distribute your stuff b/c you don't clear rights? (Clearing rights would be impossible in your case.)

DMC: I use artist-run distribution centres in Canada to distribute my work, but festivals and broadcasters with copyright infringement policies won't play these kinds of work, for fear of legal action because the copyright infringement becomes their (financial) responsibility.

MH: Tell me how you see copyright as a political issue.

DMC: Invariably, when I show work that contains copyright material, someone will ask how can I make it- how do I "get around" copyright. These are good questions, and ones that I take very seriously. In 2000, I won an online contest for Best Comedy and Audience Choice Award for *How to Fake an Orgasm* as part of the PlanetOut Queer Short Movie Awards. This video is a one-shot monologue with PJ Harvey's album, *Rid of Me* playing in the background. I used it because she moans and screams rather dramatically throughout the album, and I wanted to time my talk about faking orgasms with these outbursts. PlanetOut wanted to distribute all of the winners (there were 5 categories) on dvd, but insisted that I clear the rights to this music. I couldn't, and did not end up on the dvd. This was an important lesson for me, because it made me aware of the implications and consequences of using copyright material in my work right at the beginning of my video art career, and I made a choice to continue, because my work is about pop culture- it needs the original property in order to critique it. Without Julie Andrews as Maria Von Trapp and Mary Poppins, *Ultimate SUB Ultimate DOM* is meaningless. Without Dr. House, Prince or Sinéad O'Connor, I could not make *Nothing Compares to You*.

More and more mashup artists are citing Fair Use (in the US) (4) as a means to legally use copyright material, a pre-emptive strike against legal action because Fair Use allows for parody, and as long as there is no damage to the original property in the marketplace, then it is A-OK to use. (5) However, one is supposed to ask for permission from the property holder to claim Fair Use if we haven't afforded to purchase the rights, so we are essentially asking permission for legal approval to subvert the very thing we are using. Another concern I have with even talking about Fair Use in relation to my work is that by doing so, I am acknowledging that I've done something wrong and that someone else, an authority [read: "The Man"] needs to approve it.

And sure, there is the argument that these corporations, (who have put a stronghold on media culture) are the ones making the property in the first place- it's theirs, they own it. But what about us as consumption junkies? I was brought up with Mickey Mouse™, Coca-Cola™ and Nike™. We went to Disneyland, I had the watch, the bedspread, the t-shirt, the videos- I drank the Kool-Aid™. Don't I "own" part of this culture? Don't I have "rights"? When I repeat a *Family Guy* joke, do a James Bond impression, say "just do it" or sing a song in the shower from a Disney musical, aren't I enforcing the brand? Isn't it mine, too? Aren't I... helping? Or do I owe someone money for my soapy rendition of,

When You Wish Upon A Star? And perhaps this is an example of my watching too much Law & Order, but who evaluates whether or not my use of the material is damaging to the original property? Paranoid projections on my part assume that making two wholesome, family-friendly characters like Maria Von Trapp and Mary Poppins lesbian lovers with a taste for S&M, might be considered harmful to the Disney Corporation™ by the Disney Corporation™. Much like my queerness, I don't see my art practice as illegal.

Notes:

- (1) "Fear Strikes Back", Season 3, Episode 2, original air date: 11/4/1981: CBS Entertainment. "*The Facts of Life* Season 3 Episode Guide." tv.com. CBS Interactive Inc, 2011. Web. 23 Jul 2011.
- (2) "Skin Deep or True Blue (a.k.a.) Guess Who?", Season 2, Episode 22, original air date: 2/20/1980: CBS Entertainment. "*Different Strokes* Season 2 Episode Guide." tv.com. CBS Interactive Inc, 2011. Web. 23 Jul 2011. .
- (3) The Puppy Episode (part 1 and 2) Season 4, Episode 22, original air date: 4/30/1997: : CBS Entertainment. "*Ellen* Season 4 Episode Guide." tv.com. CBS Interactive Inc, 2011. Web. 23 Jul 2011.
- (4) Nolo. "What Is Fair Use?." fairuse.stanford.edu. Nolo, 2010. Web. 1 Aug 2011. .
- (5) I reference this American approach to copyright here and not Canada's Fair Dealing policy because of the murkiness of international copyright policies/laws and because of American global domination in the realm of familiarity and media culture, similar to my reasons for using American generated material in the first place: media culture identity trumps Canadian identity.



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