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MASHING GENRES UP, BREAKING THEM DOWN: LITERACY IN THE AGE OF COPY-AND-PASTE[1]

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RESUMO

O trabalho investiga as práticas de construir significados resultantes da ação de copiar e colar. Quando a representação é produzida através da remixagem, a coesão não é mais um dispositivo necessário para a coerência, enquanto os textos são caracterizados pela combinação modular de temas, vozes, modos e gêneros, juntamente com a intertextualidade aumentada, implicitude e as multicamadas de significados. Textos compostos modularmente são cada vez mais frequentes em todos os contextos, modos e gêneros, enquanto os que são estruturados linearmente parecem essencialmente confinados a alguns gêneros escritos acadêmicos e educacionais. Discutimos exemplos de produções de escrita acadêmica dos alunos que revelam a influência das práticas semióticas baseadas em remixagem. As conclusões deste trabalho oferecem insights sobre as implicações para o ensino / aprendizagem de gêneros escritos.

Palavras-chave: Remixagem, Recontextualização, Coesão, Modularidade.

ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the sign-making practices resulting from the affordance of copy-and-paste. When representation is produced through re-use, cohesion is no longer a necessary device for coherence, while texts are characterized by modular combination of topics, voices, modes and genres, together with increased intertextuality, implicitness and multi-layered meanings. Modularly-composed texts are increasingly frequent in all contexts, modes and genres while linearly-structured ones seem essentially confined to a few educational and academic written genres. By discussing examples of students' productions of academic writing which reveal the influence of assemblage-based semiotic practices, the conclusions offer insights on the implications for learning/teaching of written genres.

Keywords: Remix, Recontextualization, Cohesion, Modularity.

1. The paper reworks the contents of the invited speech given at *IV SIGET* (The Fourth International Symposium on Genre Studies), 16-19 August 2011, Natal, Brazil.

1. Introduction

At 2011 Biennale of Art in Venice, *The Clock* by Christian Marclay won the Golden Lion.[2] The work is a 24-hour video made of thousands of excerpts of variously famous movies, each scene showing the time somewhere in the clip by means of e.g. a clock on the wall, a watch on somebody's arms, a mobile phone held in a hand or a character saying the time. This unique 24-hour mashup video is designed in a way that, when it is screened, each clip's featured time matches exactly the viewers' local time (up to the minute). In other words, beside being a thematically distilled compendium of cinema, the mashup functions as a real clock for its viewers. *The Clock* is an extremely sophisticated example of what art can do through remix. Yet remix has long crossed the borders of artistic production and stepped into everyday representation. Indeed digital technologies enable sign-makers to communicate by selecting and forwarding other people's texts and/or by selecting and assembling snippets of them in new texts.

Although assemblage-based text production is not a novelty of digital media, until recently representation through selection, assemblage and recontextualization had remained confined mainly to artistic and/or professional productions, giving birth to specific styles and genres, e.g. pastiche in literature and drama (DYER, 2007), collage in painting (GREENBERG, 1961), remix in music, fusion in cuisine, or "zapping programmes" for TV (PRECKEL, 2008)[3]. Professionally-produced text types composed through remix include movie trailers, TV/radio ads of music albums and the back covers of novels, when presenting an assemblage of excerpts of reviews of the work. At present, the widespread availability of digital technologies has dramatically increased remix as an everyday form of text production, and it has become a widely accepted sign-making practice in a variety of contexts.[4]

Indeed, as an affordance shared by all digital devices for text production and online semiotic spaces for text distribution, copy-and-paste enables us to produce representations more readily through selection and recontextualization than through re-elaboration of contents into new semiotic material. Undeniably, in online environments, it is now much easier to copy-and-paste a given text produced in any mode – be it a video, a picture, an audio file or some writing – than to re-narrate, describe, or paraphrase its content. In sum, thanks to the widespread availability of digital devices for everyday communication and representation, the production of texts through selection and

2. http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/news/marclay.html (retrieved 19 July 2011).

3. cf. *Blob*, an Italian TV programme, widely investigated in media studies (BEYLOT, 1998; DOMÈNECH, 2007; PORCELLI, 2007; MAGRÌ, 2009). Explicitly following the technique of *détournement* (ANONYMOUS, 1956), the programme is made of a collage of excerpts of TV shows of the day, the juxtaposition of which re-signifies them with satirical effects.

4. In fact, in mass production societies, remix characterizes all social activities involving goods consumption; for example, the decoration of our houses is usually the result of the selection and assemblage of ready-made pieces of furniture and the same can be said for the way we dress, while we seldom produce artefacts "from scratch". In *bricolage* societies (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1962), the signifier of creativity and identity/personality resides in the type of selection and assemblage rather than in design/manufacturing skills. While the latter are exclusive domain of professionals, consumers are now praised for their taste in choosing and combining items produced by others. Yet, this does not hold for every contexts; so, when students copy-and-paste excerpts of texts from other sources, they are rarely rewarded for their taste in selecting them; in educational contexts copy-and-paste is seen as an effort-avoidance activity at best, if not even as cheating, when the sources are not made explicit (on various takes on the phenomenon, cf. VILLANO, 2006; MOODY, 2007; BENNETT, 2011), while students are required to produce their "own" texts, whatever this may mean.

recontextualization of other texts has turned from genre produced by professionals (often artists) into everyday semiotic practice, in all modes, contexts and genres.

In reason of its diffusion, remix has been increasingly subject to investigation and some scholars consider it as a defining feature of our cultures (MANOVICH, 2005; LESSIG, 2008; MANOVICH, 2008). Currently, remix is being mainly investigated in media studies for its effects on cultural production and distribution (JENKINS, 2006a; DIAKOPOULOS, LUTHER *et al.*, 2007; JACKSON, 2007; BARD, 2009; SWEENEY, 2010) and its implications for media literacy and media education (JENKINS, 2006b; BUCKINGHAM, 2007; ERSTAD, GILJE *et al.*, 2007; BUCKINGHAM, 2008; KNOBEL and LANKSHEAR, 2008; STALD, 2008). Since the focus of these works is on cultural production, understandably they tend to privilege remix with artistic and cultural value, generally considering examples that distinguish themselves in reason of their aesthetics and/or the extent of visibility they reach.

To my knowledge, little has been investigated on remix as a mundane mechanism of text production, as an everyday semiotic practice that takes place in "ordinary" communication, regardless of the aesthetic quality or popularity of its product. Yet while the technique may require as little effort as a couple of mouse-clicks (PERKEL, 2006), which indeed motivates its diffusion, the social and semiotic practices and knowledge fostered by its use are quite complex. Even in the most "banal" instances of copy-and-paste, both the production and the interpretation of these texts in all modes involve practices and knowledge of reuse, resemiotization, remediation, intertextuality and metareflection, among others. Besides, the implications for *habitus* (BOURDIEU, 1977) and literacy are quite profound, also in consideration of the increasing complexity, fluidity and fragmentation of the generic landscape in which each of us participates daily. In this light, a social semiotic focus on remix as everyday sign-making practice could complement fruitfully the existing media studies on the subject, and shed some light on the rhetorical effects of this form of text production, its effects on genres and generic conventions in various modes and, hence, its implications for teaching and learning of literacy, especially of written genres.

The purpose of the present paper is to offer some insights into each of these aspects of remix, i.e., rhetorical effects, influences on genres and generic conventions, and implications for the teaching and learning of written genres. Far from being exhaustive, the observations here are meant to provide some reflections on the reach and impact of the phenomenon, and to hypothesize an agenda for future research on the subject. By examining selected examples of forwarded and remixed texts, the following sections will briefly discuss the two main semiotic practices deriving from the affordance of copy-and-paste, before discussing the shared characteristics of texts produced through remix and the implications for the literacy of writing. The paper attemptsto address the following questions:

- What are the semiotic practices deriving from the actualization of the copy-and-paste affordance in everyday sign-making?
- What are the shared features of copied-and-pasted texts?
- How do these shared characteristics impact on old and new genres in both informal and formal contexts?
- What are the implications of the widespread use of this practice for the literacy of written genres?

2. The actualization of the copy-and-paste affordance: Two main semiotic practices

Although the extant studies on remix focus essentially on texts constructed on assemblage, the mechanism of text production lying behind remix is shared also by the practice of text forwarding. It indeed consists of two activities, i.e., selection and re-contextualization – with a further one possibly added, i.e., the editing of the selected snippets to "fit" the new text. The combination of the two activities of copy (selection) and paste (recontextualization) is not only used to create assembled texts, but also to select a given artefact and recontextualize it as a whole in a new context, that is what is usually called "forwarding" or "sharing" in digital environments. The following section examines forwarding, while section 2.2 discusses remix.

2.1. Copy-and-paste as forwarding: Selection and recontextualization

As an example of forwarding, Fig.1.a. shows the picture of a work of art which I took with my mobile device at Venice Biennale in 2009. Since my smartphone is always connected online, it was quite easy to re-use the photo on the spot by turning it into my profile picture on Facebook (Fig.1.b.). The selection of a photo stored on my mobile representing a work of art that I had seen at the Biennale and its recontextualization in my Facebook profile is the mundane, banal, equivalent of Duchamp's revolutionary act of sign-making with his famous *Fontaine* (Fig.2). The mechanism is fundamentally the same; an existing artefact is selected, is taken out of its original context and is inserted in a new one. Through mere recontextualization, the artefact is repurposed, it is resignified and it is given a new genre – from a photo of personal memory to a profile picture (an avatar of myself) in Fig.1; from a public facility to a work of art in Fig.2.

As illustrated by this example, forwarding – the most basic, almost effortless, type of copy-and-paste afforded by digital devices – engenders a complex process of resemiotization; the same artefact shifts genres, is repurposed and is given a new meaning only by virtue of its new relation with the new context. It is re-*sign*ified; it is newly made as a sign since the same form is given a new meaning, in the same way as, following Kress (1993), a sign is made anew every time we "use" a word in a new utterance.

FIGURE 1

An example of selection and re-contextualization of a photo (a) as a profile picture on Facebook (b).

(a)   **(b)**

FIGURE 2

Marchel Duchamp's *Fontaine* displayed at SFMOMA.[5]

Besides the fact that the everyday availability of this affordance crucially promotes a new semiotic *habitus*, a new attitude toward the fruition of texts, reshaped toward re-use,[6] sign-making through recontextualization results in distinctive rhetorical effects that inevitably affect meaning-making processes. The recontextualized text looses the meaning it had in its original context, with which it establishes an intertextual link for those who can recognize the provenance of that text. In the new context, the text achieves inevitably a new meaning, but it lacks the cohesive devices that it would normally have if it were produced on purpose for that context. As a consequence, recontextualized texts often construct coherence through implicitness with the new context; hence their interpretation requires a certain amount of inferential work; besides, interpretations may construct a further layer of meaning when retrieving the intertextuality. In the example in Fig. 1., the recontextualization of the photo looses its original "work of art" meaning, while the latter stays latent as possible intertextual meaning (for those who can retrieve it); as a profile picture, the photo is re-signified as "me", however the "me" value is attributed to the picture only implicitly, by virtue of contextual factors; there is nothing in the picture that says "me", and one needs to infer it by the fact that the picture is placed as my profile picture, by virtue of its new genre assignment.

In sum, besides resignification, the recontextualization of a text as is inevitably produces (some degree of) intertextuality, implicitness and non-cohesion (the same holds for forwarded texts in interactional contexts, e.g. in emails and video exchanges, for a discussion cf. ADAMI, forthcoming). These features are possibly even more salient in remixed texts, as discussed in the following sections.

5. Source: http://www.mimiandmegblog.com/2009/07/san-francisco-part-5-sfmoma.html (retrieved 25 July 2011).

6. Having at hand a device that makes readily available the capturing of reality-as-artefact and its reuse for communication in different contexts prompts an utilitarian conception of what is experienced as text. Rather than (or more than) interpreting the intended meaning of the text in its original context, meaning making deals more with appropriating it for one's own purposes. This change afforded by digital technologies has great implications on how contemporary communication and representation are differently conceived of and practiced (for a more detailed discussion, cf. ADAMI and KRESS, 2010).

2.2. Copy-and-paste as remix: Selection and assemblage.

Another practice deriving from the affordance of copy-and-paste involves the selection of snippets of texts that are recontextualized into a new text through assemblage, thus creating a remix. This can be done in all modes. Indeed, user-friendly software applications have enabled the proliferation of music remixes as well as remix videos, which are crowding websites like YouTube;[7] analogously, easy-to-use image editing tools have made remixed images (often combined with writing) probably the most frequently and easily produced type of remix, at least judging from the fully-established conversion of *photoshop* from a proper name into a common verb, as testified by the Merriam Webster Dictionary.[8]

In assembling multiple texts together, remix may seem to involve more semiotic work than forwarding and thus would seem a more sophisticated or elaborated sign-making practice; in fact, many applications are now available for the automatic creation of collage texts; for example, the application *Friendmatrix*[9] creates a collage image assembling the profile pictures of one's Facebook friends according to an algorithm that attributes visual salience on the basis of the quantity of interactivity a given friend has with the profile. Similarly, the application called *My year in status*[10] creates a collage of the year's written statuses of a Facebook profile.

The production of remixed texts can involve effort and semiotic work to different extents, from automatic assemblage up to elaborated remixes where each snippet is manually chosen and edited to tune in with the others, as in *The Clock* mentioned in the introduction of the present paper.

FIGURE 3

Remix through juxtaposition.

In between the automatically-produced assemblage and the manually-edited one, text production through remix can combine snippets of previously-existing texts by merely juxtaposing them. Fig. 3 shows an artefact posted by my Facebook profile in June 2010. It combines a photo of the then Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, retrieved from an online newspaper, with a quotation

7. Among these, fan remix videos (JENKINS, 2006a) and political satire ones (JENKINS, 2010) are particularly popular (cf. also JENKINS, 2008).

8. http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/photoshop (retrieved 3 February 2012).

9. http://friendmatrix.co/ (retrieved 3 June 2011).

10. http://apps.facebook.com/my-year-in-status/ (retrieved 3 February 2012).

allegedly attributed to Honoré de Balzac, selected from a website of quotations.[11] The visual and verbal snippets are merely juxtaposed; they establish coherence through implicitness, given that they lack any type of cohesive ties between them, while the text achieves further – humorously critical – meaning through intertextuality, precisely because it is an assemblage of texts that were originally produced for different purposes. Here, besides the effort involved in retrieving and selecting the image and the quote, the manual effort required to assemble the text together was minimal thanks to the affordances of the Facebook interface, but the resulting text is nonetheless creative, in that it constructs a new meaning. Here again, creativity lies in the specific choices, in the texts that are selected and in the effects that they produce when they are juxtaposed, rather than in the production of original material "from scratch".

Besides paratactic juxtaposition as in Fig. 3, remix can also be produced embedding snippets of texts within other texts, constructing hypotactic structures, as exemplified in the image in Fig 4.a. The image remixes a well-known creation by the British graffiti artist Banksy,[12] shown in Fig. 4.b Already Banksy's original image itself uses the aesthetics of remix to create its meaning; indeed Banksy's flowers in Fig. 4.b produce a certain clash in the image, they stand out both visually and logically, both in form and content – in terms of the colours contrasting with the black and white of the rioter launching them, and of what may be more reasonably expected to be launched by someone in that pose and clothing, i.e., a cocktail bottle or a stone. Hence, Banksy's originality resides in having placed, through embedding, a bunch of flowers in the hands of what could be one of the many existing visuals of metropolitan rioters. By virtue of this clash, the rioter launching a bouquet of flowers, creates an effect of *détournement* (ANONYMOUS, 1956), which makes the meaning of the assemblage particularly subversive and rich in intertextual associations (cf. the pacifist slogan "put flowers in your cannons").

The re-remixed image in Fig. 4.a (resulted from a search on *Google Image* using the word "mashup") features on the blog *Generation Bass*[13] in a post where the blogger, a self-proclaimed DJ, announces a newly produced mix of mashup songs. It remixes Banksy's graffiti by replacing the bouquet of flowers with a musical note and by placing a *Copyleft* logo onto the rioter's trousers. In relation to the original, the re-remixed text in Fig. 4.a. constructs a further complex of meanings. The subversive effect of Banksy's original is here attributed to music; even more, it is attributed to a specific type of music, i.e., remix music, signified by the remixed image itself, along with the Copyleft logo, which, in opposition to Copyright, gives full freedom of reusing, remixing and distributing a given artefact.[14]

11. http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/h/honore_de_balzac.html Retrieved 5 June 2011.

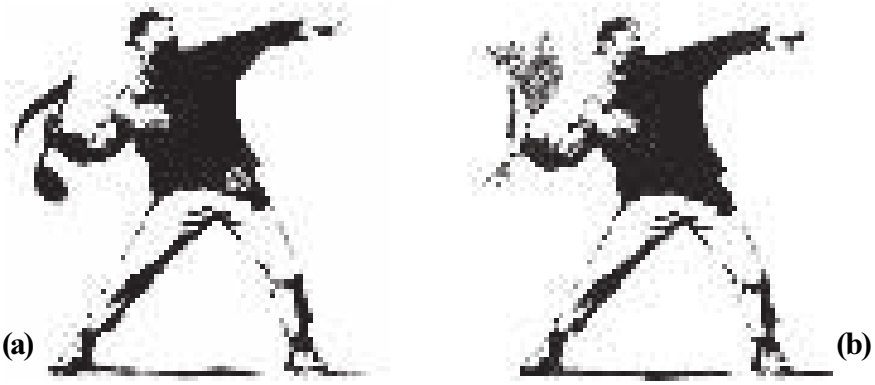
12. http://www.banksy.co.uk/indoors/flowerchucker.html Retrieved 12 June 2011.

13. http://generationbass.com/2009/05/10/global-mash-ups-mix/ Retrieved 8 June 2011.

14. For more information on Copyleft, cf. the related article in Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Copyleft (Retrieved 8 August 2011) and *What is Copyleft?*, by Richard Stallman at: http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/copyleft.html (Retrieved 8 August 2011).

FIGURE 4

Generation Bass remix (a) of Banksy's graffiti (b).



As in this case, remixed texts can hardly be considered as plagiarism even when the sources of the remix are not explicitly referenced; on the contrary, as in Fig. 5.a, viewers are meant to be able to recognize the sources to retrieve the full meaning. At the same time, to be an original creation, the remix does not need to conceal its derivational nature and pretend that the text is an "original" creation (whatever this may mean); rather, it is understood that the text reworks previous materials; even more, it constructs meaning precisely by virtue of intertextual reference and its originality resides in the editing, in the creative modification of the source and in the semantic network that the remix creates with it. In so doing, remix practices potentially subvert the criteria defining plagiarism, creativity, and originality, actualizing much of postmodernist theorizations (cf., for example, BARTHES, 1977; KRISTEVA, 1980; BAKHTIN, 1981; 1986) as mundane sign-making.

3. Remixed texts: Shared characteristics

In all remixed texts, the mechanisms of semiosis can be explained through Saussure's (1916/1931) notions of paradigmatic selection and syntagmatic combination. Paradigmatically, portions of given texts are selected out of an available repertoire of pre-existing texts, which are then syntagmatically combined to create a new text. Yet differently from selecting and combining single graphemes, phonemes or words to produce an utterance "from scratch", here selection and combination involve larger units, whole syntagms, or complex signs.

Text composition through larger building blocks produces distinctive rhetorical effects and has significant consequences for meaning-making. These are well exemplified in the remixed image (and writing) shown in Fig. 6. The image appeared re-posted[15] on my Facebook wall during the campaign for four referendums to which Italians were called to vote in June 2011. The four referendums asked Italians to vote on whether they wished to abolish four recently-approved laws – one that allowed the establishment of nuclear plants in Italy, two that allowed the privatization of

15. I could not trace the original website where the image first appeared. The frequency of recontextualizing practices multiplies the sites of appearance of a text, making it often quite difficult to find the source, where the text was first created. This also contributes to undermine any traditionally-conceived notion of authorship.

public water supplies, and one that allowed the Prime Minister, the President of the Republic and the two Presidents of the Chambers of the Parliament to refuse to appear in court for trial in reason of prior institutional engagements. The four referendums were largely ignored if not even boycotted by most political parties and they were silenced by Italian mainstream mass media and TV networks. As a response, a large spontaneous citizen-based movement grew and used all available online and offline means of communication to promote the referendums. During the months preceding the vote, many Italian Facebook profile pictures changed – through re-contextualization – to portray images promoting the referendums, while banners were hanged outside people's windows, leaflets were posted in people's mailboxes and events and happenings of all sorts were held to promote the referendums. As a result, all four referendums reached the quorum and the four laws were abolished (for a report written in the aftermath of the event cf. DUFF, 2011).

The text in Fig. 5 is one of the many artefacts that were created by "simple" citizens (i.e., being neither professional graphic designers nor political campaigners) and shared online during the massive and multifaceted grass-and-root participation to the campaign. It is neither one of the best nor one of the most popular examples of remixed texts that circulated during the campaign – many of which were political satire remixes. The background of the image in Fig. 5 presents what any Italian could easily identify as the referendum voting paper; it is remixed with the well-known image of Uncle Sam, with a call-out varying Uncle Sam's "I want you" slogan, and with the logo of the committee for the referendum on public water supply at the bottom.

FIGURE 5

A remixed text produced to promote the Italian referendum against the privatization of water supply.

The text in Fig. 5 illustrates well the main distinctive features of remixed texts, in terms of cohesion, coherence and compositional patterns. In remixed texts there is always a certain degree of non-cohesion; syntagms are always disconnected to some extent, precisely because the text is the fruit of an assemblage. In all collage-based texts the disconnection is the virtual marker of the remix, which enables viewers to recognize it as such. It is also the marker of the creativity of the

text, whose "originality" is given by the way previously existing texts have been mashed up. Besides, disconnection functions as a cue triggering viewers' attention; it is precisely in the assemblage where meaning has to be found. As seen when discussing the remix of Banksy's image (Fig. 4), here in Fig. 5 the attention trigger is the clash between the voting paper, Uncle Sam, the call-out and the logo, which signals where interpretation needs to be done.

At the same time, coherence is established by disregarding these markers of disconnection; the text "as a whole" – following both Halliday and Hasan's (1976) and van Dijk's (1980) definitions of coherence – can be reconstructed only if interpreted as if Uncle Sam were getting out of the voting paper and as if the slogan "I water you" made any sense well beyond the English-native meaning 'I nourish you with water'.

Moreover, assembled texts construct meaning through intertextuality, which is always intrinsically present precisely because the text is an assemblage of previous ones. In the example above, the meaning of the call-out as something like 'I want you to vote yes for water' can be reconstructed only by remixing its phrasing with Uncle Sam's original slogan "I want you", and then combine it with the logo of the committee for water, and with the crossed *SI* (Engl. "yes") on the voting paper. Non-cohesion and implicit intertextuality[16] produce inevitably a certain degree of implicitness, so that a great deal of background knowledge and inferential work are needed to make meaning out of the text in Fig. 5.

As regards compositional patterns, the assembled text is characterized by modularity, rather than linearity, and by the combination of multiple topics, modes, voices,[17] and genres. By virtue of the different snippets assembled together, the text here combines the topics of (a) voting, (b) water and (c) Uncle Sam (recalling by inference the topic of US army recruitment); it combines the modes of (a) image, (b) drawing and (c) writing; it further combines (a) the formal impersonal voice of the voting paper, which addresses the viewer indirectly as a citizen, (b) the authoritative voice of the state, personalized into a severe old man addressing the viewer directly as a patriot, and (c) the informal light-hearted voice of the callout, which addresses the viewer as a comics reader who seeks entertainment. Finally, it combines the genres of (a) the voting paper, (b) the comics, (c) the army recruiting poster, and (d) the political logo. In their turn, these genres combine together to construct a text belonging to yet another genre, i.e., the referendum campaign image.

To summarize, the following features characterize the remix:

- non-cohesion as distinctive marker of the type and of the creativity of the text;
- coherence constructed disregarding cohesion;
- implicitness;
- intertextuality;
- modularity of the composition;
- multiple topics, modes, voices and genres.

16. My use of explicit vs. implicit intertextuality refers to whether the source is referenced or not in the assembled text; it is not to be confused with Fairclough (2003)'s use of the two terms to distinguish between lexical and conceptual intertextuality.

17. Voice is here intended, following Eco (1994), as the implied authors speaking out of the rhetorical strategies of the text, which in their turn define the implied reader addressed by the text.

As discussed in the following section, because of the readily-available affordance of copy-and-paste, semiotic practices resulting in texts sharing the above characteristics are multiplying in all contexts, genres and modes, writing included.

4. Remix and written genres

As often happens with semiotic practices produced with the so-called 'new media', remix can be hardly considered as an entirely new phenomenon. Already in the '60s of the last century, artistic and political vanguards like the *Internationale Situationniste* theorized and practiced remix, which they termed *détournement* (ANONYMOUS, 1956). But as anticipated in the introduction here, the novelty today is that the availability of digital means of text production to large numbers of sign-makers has turned remix from genre and artistic/professional practice to ordinary representation in all contexts, genres and modes, writing included. The technical affordance has made it possible; the diffusion of the practice has made it socially acceptable, while its perceived novelty has made it fashionable.

Thanks to all these technical and social/cultural factors combined, remixed texts and their aesthetics have become increasingly frequent in many communicative contexts. Indeed, the features traced above for remixed texts characterize many of the texts we produce and consume, either/both because they are produced modularly through copy-and-paste and/or because they portray a modular aesthetics. This occurs also for texts relying mainly on the written mode.

It would be foolish to deny it; we already produce much of our writing through copy-and-paste, by moving paragraphs, inserting new text, and re-composing it in new ways. Even more, many texts that we read are modular and fragmented, like newsletters for example, websites, online newspapers (especially in their mobile versions), or Facebook and Twitter walls, which are a succession of different fragments of posts of various topics and genres that we scroll down one after the other. Besides, chat and text messaging exchanges, or emails forwarding other emails and links are often highly implicit and non-cohesive.

FIGURE 6

A collage-like designed two-page unit of an English textbook (source: BEZEMER and KRESS, 2010).

The shift toward a modular type of composition has widely affected even more formal types of written genres. Fig. 6 shows a double page of an English textbook, analysed by Jeff Bezemer and Gunther Kress in their survey on the change in textbook designs during the last century (KRESS and BEZEMER, 2009; BEZEMER and KRESS, 2010). Here the aesthetics of collage informs the design of the page, which follows a modular principle of composition, while the relations among the various modules (both the written ones and the images) are implicit and need to be established through inference.

In sum, many contemporary texts of all kinds and in all contexts share the characteristics of remixed texts. They are increasingly characterized by modularity and combination of topics, voices, modes and genres and they construct coherence through implicitness and intertextuality, rather than cohesion. As a consequence, new questions and challenges arise for the teaching of writing and for what constitutes literacy in written genres. Indeed, these characteristics are clearly at odds with the principles that are usually taught for writing.

In my Scientific English class of undergraduate students in various degrees in the Health Professions, I usually teach the importance of writing a linear and logically-structured text, consistent in voice and tone and complying with the convention of the genre; I devote a great deal of effort and time to cohesive devices, like discourse markers, and I always stress the importance of being clear and explicit, not to have the reader do any effort to infer the intended meaning; explicitness holds also for intertextuality, in the many sessions that I devote to referencing and quoting. Yet this type of literacy is required in very few written genres nowadays, like the student essay, the scientific article, the cover letter for a curriculum vitae, and very few others. Even the curriculum vitae is more modular than linear, while the scientific article is becoming increasingly navigational and re-usable.

In my experience, as a consequence of the increasing diffusion of modular types of text composition, when students engage themselves with linear types of writing, to which they are unfamiliar, the outcomes show the influence of the conventions that they usually practice as sign- and meaning-makers of modularly-composed texts. Even when referencing the sources in compliance to the academic genre, through copy-and-paste they produce texts that switch in voice and register. As an example, excerpts 1. and 2. are taken from a medical review produced by a group of my students as their mid-term assignment:

1. Although it is difficult to establish which women are more at risk than others, there are some factors that may increase the risk of depression during and after pregnancy[2]:

   - A personal history of depression or another mental illness
   - A family history of depression or another mental illness
   - A lack of support of family and friends
   - Anxiety or negative feelings about the pregnancy
   - Problems with a previous pregnancy or birth
   - Marriage or money problems
   - Stressful life events (e.g. health problems in the baby, marital discord, not having partner…)
   - Young age
   - Substance abuse
   - Significant premestrual mood symptoms.

2. Postpartum depression is not generally a condition that can be treated on your own, but is possible to do some things to improve the situation [16]:

   - Find someone to talk about feelings and goals.
   - Find people who can help you with child care, housework and errands.
   - Do something relaxing and take a rest more as possible.
   - Keep daily diary of emotions and thoughts to keep track of progress.
   - Join a support group.
   - Talk with other mothers to learn from their experience.
   - Don't make any big changes during pregnancy.
   - Focus on short-term, rather than long-term goals.
   - Spend time with partner or with close friends.

Excerpt 1. introduces a nominalised list with an impersonal voice and a formal register, whereas excerpt 2., which appears a few pages later in the text, presents a list using imperatives and addressing directly the reader. Mashup of voices and registers can even combine in the very same paragraph, as in the following excerpt taken from the same written assignment:

3. Non-pharmacological therapies are useful in the treatment of postpartum depression. In a randomized study [5] it was demonstrated that cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is as effective as treatment with antidepressant medicines for milder postpartum depression. It helps you improve the way you think and feel [17].

In excerpt 3., an impersonal scientific passive "it was demonstrated that" is followed by a more informal voice that addresses the reader directly "it helps you improve the way you think and feel". Made clear also by the sources that are referenced in the numbered notes and duly listed in the reference section of the review, the combination of registers and voices is here the result of the assemblage of information taken from texts belonging to two different genres, i.e., a scientific article for the passage using the passive, a website that popularizes the topic of medicine for the general public for the passage addressing the reader.

Buckingham (2007) terms "new digital divide" the clash in literacy practices that occur between informal and formal contexts. Yet, in the light of the increasing modularity of compositional principles shaping text in both informal *and* formal contexts (as exemplified by the professionally-produced textbook in Fig. 6 above, used for formal learning), it would be more sensible to investigate further what I would consider as a *new rhetorical divide*, or a new divide in compositional principles, between a wide range of multimodal texts in both formal and informal contexts and a small set of (mainly) written genres, which, quite significantly, inform the literacy of writing in schools.

5. Concluding remarks

The observations made in the present paper are not the result of an in-depth study on a wide set of data. Clearly, they are only meant to formulate some hypotheses and raise some reflections onto the need of more thorough research on the subject, in the light of the profound implications that new forms of text production have for literacy and the teaching of written genres.

Further research is needed firstly on remix as a mundane form of text production, in order to develop detailed descriptions and categorizations of the possible patterns of cohesion, coherence, and intertextuality, and the various degrees of implicitness and modularity, and their consequences for sign- and meaning-making. This research could be of interest to social semioticians, to explore, describe and explain a new sign-making practice.

A second strand of research could provide interesting insights to educators, by investigating the implications of these new forms of text production for educational contexts. There is indeed an urgency for education to keep track of the changes in our semiotic landscape. This by no means intends to suggest that schools should abandon the teaching of writing long, cohesive, linear and explicit texts; quite the opposite in fact. Keeping track of the changes means acknowledging that today students – like everyone – live immersed in a different semiotic landscape. Only a few decades ago, before digital devices entered our lives, students who started to learn writing experienced it almost exclusively in long, linear and cohesive mono-thematic/voiced/modal/generic texts in all formal and informal contexts, both in and outside school, while their experience of modular texts was mainly confined to oral practices, in casual informal conversation.[18] Today students arrive in the classroom as already formed sign-makers and meaning-makers of a wide array of modularly-composed multimodal texts and even their textbooks are increasingly modular (and multimodal). So, they are faced with more complex contradictions in literacy practices when they need to familiarize with more linear written genres; hence they need to be made aware of the different frame they are stepping into. Awareness could be fruitfully achieved by promoting students' metareflection of the difference in generic conventions, rhetorical strategies and compositional principles between the modular texts with which they are accustomed and the linear texts that they need to learn to complete their literacy. Research could help in this by providing educators with evidence-based elements and detailed analysis of the rhetorical and compositional differences of the two types of texts.

But research could also help educators to enlarge the types of texts in the curriculum. Not only students in their everyday sign-making, but also professionals live in a changed semiotic landscape. Their literacy does not involve solely the production of linear reports or commentaries and articles; they are also asked to communicate successfully via email, in forums and chats, on social networks and in all other interactive and multimodal forms of communication used in their professional networks (to this regard, cf. TRUPE, 2002). To be literate today means producing and interpreting multimodal texts in all the related genres that occur in these forms of communication. Hence a thorough screening would be needed of all everyday genres, and the semiotic practices and generic conventions that are applied in each of them, in each and every context, chiefly in the professional ones. The screening could be able not only to quantify and qualify the extent of the change in forms of text production, but it could also map out a possible continuum between maximum modularity and maximum linearity, to help educators update and possibly enlarge their curricula for the teaching of writing.

Finally, schools have not the sole purpose of "producing" literate professionals, but also – and foremost – of helping students develop their capacities overall. A further and possibly even more important strand of research could consider each of the features of modular vs. linear writing in relation to the abilities that the two practices foreground and background. Investigating the abilities needed to produce and interpret texts that lack cohesion, logical structure and linearity, means knowing which abilities are developed by practicing and experiencing this type of text-production.

18. Indeed, casual conversation switches often among genres, voices and topics, to an extent that some (PARADIS, PETTITT *et al*., 2010) argue that digital cultures are bringing back features of oral cultures.

Some of these abilities may result useful also for other domains and hence designing tasks of modular composition could be desirable to achieve certain educational purposes. Elaborating from the suggestions in Moody (2007) on different attitudes towards students' copy-and-paste in EFL teaching, further research could for example ascertain that whereas "traditional", linear writing develops more monological abilities, needed to express and hence construct a complete, cohesive, clear and explicit argumentation, new forms of modular writing may develop abilities that are more needed in dialogical argumentation, where one needs to be flexible, adapting to, inferring from and responding to different prompts, and to shifts in topics, voices and genres. Far from fostering the primacy of one or the other model, an analysis of the gains and losses of both the modular and the linear model of text composition could provide educators with a wider range of options among which to choose according to specific educational purposes, in order to help students develop a given set of abilities.

Such an attempt in research seems worth trying; digital technologies do not seem to be likely to disappear any soon from our lives, and banning copy-and-paste is proving to be a high-cost enterprise for schools, quite frustrating for teachers and overall fruitless in results. Investigating possible alternative approaches to copy-and-paste could be more sensible; in the end, each model of text-production may indeed foster a specific semiotic *habitus*, so that the two could complement each other for fruitful learning, and for educating successful rhetors and – hopefully – more complete thinkers and creators.

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