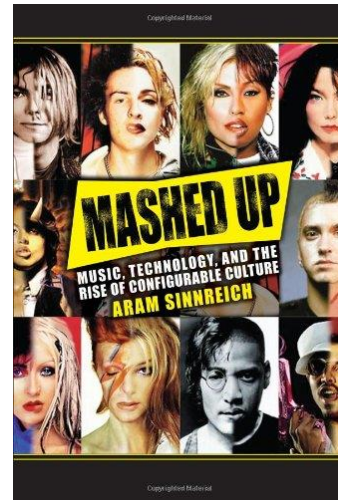


Aram Sinnreich, **Mashed Up: Music, Technology, and the Rise of Configurable Culture**, Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010, 240 pp, \$24.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by  
Qian Wang  
Yibin University, China

Popular music studies have advanced considerably since the 1970s. Comparatively, rock and pop have received more attention than other musical genres, with arguments or discussions often focused on issues such as politics, class, identity, youth, and ideology. **Mashed Up** makes a fresh contribution to this field not just because the book deals with the creation and production of sample-based music such as hip-hop and techno. More important, author Aram Sinnreich systematically examines how configurable technology and culture have brought music into a new era. The practice of remixing and creating mash-ups has become a widely employed creative technique in the popular music scene, which has refreshed the otherwise stagnant popular music industry. Meanwhile, configurable technologies such as P2P file sharing software and portable media/communication devices fundamentally blur the binary borders between many conventional classifications, such as that of art and craft. Sinnreich examines all these issues in the solid and fascinating academic studies that comprise *Mashed Up*.



The key term “mash-up” refers to configurable culture in the context of music and technology, and Sinnreich stresses that his research is in the field of critical information studies rather than cultural studies, science and technology studies, or information science. (p. 5). This approach demonstrates the unique value of “mash-up up.” Sinnreich draws on scholars in collective intelligence and participatory culture theories and highlights the broader impact of technology on cultural production and consumption in people’s daily lives.

Sinnreich states at the beginning that he has written *Mashed Up* because he cares “deeply about music, about society, and about the complex interrelations between the two” (p. 4). This book is not only about how music has been constantly configured in the context of musical materials, aesthetics, and styles, but also about the much broader context that includes social issues such as politics, policy, power, economy, and ideology. The logic of *Mashed Up*, thus, starts with the historical narrative of music as a controlled substance and introduces the key academic frameworks and theories for later arguments in Part I, “When the Mode of the Music Changes.” Sinnreich then focuses on musical practice in Part II, “Drawing Lines in the Sand,” and uses qualitative and quantitative data to show how the rise of configurable culture has profoundly challenged various traditional dichotomies and changed the discursive and organizational foundations of societies. In Part III, “The Lessons,” the author steps back and raises questions for future research while outlining five specific social, cultural, and economic principles that “offer an indication of how our society will reorganize itself in the wake of configurability’s disruptive power” (p. 180).

In order to analyze how configurable technologies continuously regenerate the power of music and reshape the social and political environment, Sinnreich differentiates the traditional "discursive framework" from the "modern discursive framework." The traditional framework involves the matrix of musical regulation, which is structured by three methods (legal, ideological, and commercial) and three sites (aesthetic, praxis, and technology) that form nine different categories. Innovation happens during the battle between regulation and resistance. Sinnreich uses the examples of ancient Greece and China to authenticate Plato's statement "the musical modes are never changed without change in the most important of a city's laws" (p. 15). The modern framework is made up of six binary distinctions between art and craft, artist and audience, original and copy, composition and performance, figure and ground, materials and tools, all of which have their own philosophical origins, social functions, and institutional foundations. Although the modern framework and modern social institutions have survived for more than 200 years, the rapid development of technology has threatened to undermine the foundations of the modern framework and restructure the reciprocal interdependence between communication technology and culture. As a result, the rise of configurable culture is inevitable. Configurable technologies will empower individuals to negotiate with institutions in determining what cultural products and information are needed and will also produce the collective intelligence of individuals, which will eventually challenge the mainstream, not only in the creative industries, arts, and popular culture, but also in social and political systems. Individual freedom will be in conflict with institutional authorship.

Configurable culture is similar to remix culture in terms of originality, uniqueness, and authenticity, but the creativity of mash-up runs much deeper and is more complicated than remixing. Configurable technologies as agents of democratized production and empowered consumption redraw the grey area between production and consumption, and essentially undermine the conventional dichotomies between the two poles. Extensive surveys and interviews with consumption-adjacent adults and production-adjacent professionals and practitioners provide Sinnreich with adequate data to demonstrate the fundamental weakness of the modern framework and to show why the insistence on separating art from craft put forth in the traditional dichotomies is just like drawing lines in the sand. Six short chapters that showcase views and opinions from respondents, informants, and interviewees reveal that configurable culture has led to ambiguity and subjectivity surrounding the six binaries. The erosion of the traditional boundaries scares political and commercial institutions because of the loss of tight control over authorship, legitimacy, ideology, copyright, intellectual property, and profit. Therefore, configurability is not just a technical term in the creation and production of music, but a political, social, and cultural issue in the production of power.

Beyond challenging the modern framework, what configurable technology and culture will bring to society is still uncertain. Sinnreich acknowledges that "the only development we can expect is the unexpected" (p. 179), but there are lessons we can learn from history. Echoing the resistance and regulation theories in chapter 1, Sinnreich points out that configurable music engenders resistance to musical regulation because the illegal characteristics of mash-ups make it politicized due to its practical resistance to legal regulation, technological resistance to ideological regulation, and aesthetic resistance to commercial regulation. Like the fate of other underground cultures, however, configurable culture cannot escape industry collaboration and co-optation, which will forcefully push it from the marginal into the mainstream and will simultaneously encourage and suppress the resistance of configurable musicians.

In the last chapter of *Mashed Up*, Sinnreich suggests that it is too early to conclude what new frameworks configurable technology and culture might create, but he points to five points from his research as indicators: configurable collectivism, the reunion of labor, the collision of public and private, the shift from linearity to recursion, and the emergence of DJ consciousness. These sum up the incompleteness, in-betweenness, and versatility of configurable products. Future technological innovations will change the infrastructure of network societies in the same way that the Internet and digitalization have changed the global political, economic, and cultural scene in the past two decades. The philosophy of technology and the aesthetics of technology and technoculture need to be skillfully introduced into the creativity, production, consumption, and communication of cultural products, as Sinnreich has done in *Mashed Up*.

Since *Mashed Up* is about technology, communication, culture, politics, and economy, future research by Sinnreich or other scholars might find it valuable to consider the three approaches of commodification, spatialization, and structuration suggested by Mosco (2009) in discussing the political economy of communication. Configurable technology and culture are a global phenomenon, but the spatialization of communication undoubtedly affects the flow of information, knowledge, and capital, which will constantly define the central and the marginal. As a result, the practice of configurable creativity and the production of configurable music can have a distinctive political, social, and cultural impact on both the local and the global, which might allow further inequality and exploitation between the central and the marginal and the developed and the developing. In the glocalizing world, what new framework will emerge and offer the method of configurability to global musicians awaits discovery by future research. Since popular music is created for global audiences as business or recreation nowadays, avoiding a homogenous understanding of authenticity, value, and aesthetics of configurable music will not be an easy task. *Mashed Up*, however, has done a good job leading the way.

### References

Mosco, V. (2009). *Political economy of communication* (2nd ed.). London, UK: SAGE Publications.