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An Erasmian Dance of Rhetoric in Remixes of *Brat* and *it's completely different but it's still*

*brat*

Pop culture is how social changes are made, and the rhetoric of that media is worth studying as a means to understanding our ever-changing society. Kermit Campbell shifts the conversation from theoretical to something very real in his analysis of the social implications of remixes. As the remix is able to reach an “increasingly global audience” (Campbell 228), he emphasizes the quality of rhetoric in music to combat the notion that it is a meaningless sequence of words. As a feminist collection, *Brat* inherently argues for women’s independence; as a countercultural form of feminism it further promotes women’s happiness in their free will.

Phillip Arrington argues that copious rhetoric is not about the quantity of words, but rather their “relevant and appropriate ‘interdependence’” and “ideational mutability” (546). For this discussion of remixed music, that means that the writing does not have to inherently or consciously relate to Erasmus’s goals so long as it implicitly meets those standards of Erasmian style. This releases the music artists from the burden that litterateurs often hold to have read work by Erasmus and/or engaged knowledge of that work during the songwriting process. Rather, the Erasmian idea of stylized text seeks to create poetic, purposeful language rather than just tossing in synonyms at random

(Arrington 557). I believe that the Erasmian primacy of independence connects contemporary pop culture with rhetorical traditions. Thus, this essay will investigate the rhetoric of a remix through the lens of Erasmian thought.

The summer of 2024, the album *Brat* by longstanding pop icon Charlotte Aitchison (Charli xcx) was released to immediate success (Williams para. 2). Listeners popularized a trend of “brat summer” (Williams para. 12) that encapsulated the album’s rebellious form of feminism as both a fashion style and a mental attitude. It calls back to the alternative femininity of 1980s women, combines it with the cyber-pop of the late 2000s, and works to reclaim the word ‘brat’ as a badge of independence (Williams para. 6-7, 11). Months later, after a series of remixed singles, Charli xcx re-released the entire album as a combination of the original *Brat* songs (disc 2) and a remix of each song with a unique featured artist (disc 1). The new discography, *Brat and it’s completely different but it’s still brat* (hereafter referred to as *Brat and*), provides a clear one-to-one case study for an analysis of the rhetoric of a remix in its words and sounds.

Due to the abundance of songs released on *Brat and*, this discussion will focus on two remixes: “Talk Talk featuring Troye Sivan” and “I might say something stupid ft. The 1975 & jon hopkins.” The remix “Talk Talk featuring Troye Sivan” (hereafter referred to as “Talk Talk”) turns the original text into a celebration of the speaker’s emotional independence. The accelerated, energized tempo partially conceals the desire for a developed relationship, though the burden of connecting is still placed on the second party. The remix of “I might say something stupid” (hereafter referred to as “I might say”) strips the façade of peace to reveal the turbulent inner dialogue of the speaker. The lyrics

are clipped down and flooded with soft piano that nearly doubles the song length. The result is a somber, heartfelt piece that forces the listener to feel its emotion. Though these two songs are distinct from each other, they're both prime examples of the complex rhetoric in a remix.

The discussion will be guided by the rhetorical theories of Desiderius Erasmus as a means of grounding and contextualizing this new media. Erasmus was a 15th-century rhetorician who wrote prolifically over the variability of language via a change in wording. He was raised into monastery life and, after studying outside of religion in his youth, entered the Augustinian order as a priest. He espoused Christian hedonism and emphasized the role of free will as an opportunity to do good deeds to earn salvation (Bizzell & Herzberg 581). Erasmus was a humanist for his time, and believed that better (and well-rounded) education would lead to a better society and be the “end to all atrocities” (Bindesen 690). His most influential texts include *On Copia*, *Ecclesiastes*, and *The Praise of Folly*. *On Copia* toys with the variability of wording as a rhetorical playground; *Ecclesiastes* develops the idea that good writing must come from good education and delight the audience (Bizzell & Herzberg 599-609, 588). His writing in *The Praise of Folly* utilizes a form of comedy through satirical ironies to create a false neutrality that both dissuades critics as well as invites allies (Martin 13). Additionally, as Bizzell & Herzberg describe, Erasmus purported that the “eloquent man of wisdom should take public stands on important issues” (582).

## Conceptual Aspects

### *The remix as a contextualized product*

Erasmus declared in *Ecclesiastes* that good reading must come from good context (Bizzell & Herzberg 588). A remix is deeply rooted in the original(s), and is likely to have been written through the education of the author in multiple genres, source texts, and styles. The remixed “Talk Talk” uses the same phrase, “talk to me” that appears in the original chorus (Charli xcx & Troye Sivan 0:37); the tempo, autotune, and synthesizer instrumentals are suitable for dance club music. “I might say” features Matty Healy of The 1975 who is “famous, but ... not quite,” similarly to Charli xcx (Charli xcx et al. 3:09), and the line “medicine makes me a problem” further draws on the context of drug abuse (Charli xcx et al. 3:05). As a longstanding pop artist, Charli xcx’s music adds further context to these remixes. Her hits such as “Speed Drive” and “Boys” injected her style into the genre, so that even listeners who are uneducated in her discography are familiar with the sound of the remixes. In addition to the newly-reached audience, the mere existence of *Brat and* implies that the *Brat* listeners received the original versions well and would be similarly interested in the new versions. Thus, it may be assumed that listeners of “Talk Talk” and “I might say” are able to interpret and/or understand the remixes because they are well-‘read.’

### *The remix as an individual product*

Several scholars agree that remixes create new meaning and should be viewed as unique creations rather than re-creations of the originals. Virginia Kuhn suggests that remixes are a subversive genre; its editing creates more meaning than simply moving

around sounds (5.3). Kermit Campbell describes music artists as “organic intellectuals” whose creations are novel and stem from valuable thoughts that critique and/or contribute to society (232). The integrity of a remix is mirrored in *On Copia*, which is described as an “unreadable text” that doesn’t have a purpose “beyond the trite one of... accumulating material,” yet “Erasmus is insistent that *copia* is abundance without redundancy” (Jardine 132). The same interpretation of *On Copia* also brings up Erasmus’s publishing business which worked to “produce major editions at speed in collaboration with more junior editors and *castigatores*” (Jardine 134), which suggests that Erasmus would approve of working with other artists to produce abundant music more efficiently. The creation of a remix creates an abundance of music, without duplicating music for the sake of quantity.

### *The remix as a novelty*

The role of novelty in a remix echoes Erasmus’s idea of invoking passion in the audience (Church 70). Club remixes are designed to impassion their listeners. The album *Brat and* was announced before it was released and stirred excitement with a countdown to the full release date. “Talk Talk” was released as a single nearly a month before the full album, which meant that it was among the first remixes of the album. Church’s second point about the element of surprise in a remix is both supported and contradicted by this case study of *Brat and*. The full album title emphasizes this; it openly states that “it’s completely different” yet “it’s still *Brat*.” Listeners may expect the same songs that were released on *Brat*, but will be surprised by the new content. However, after the discovery of the first playback, the album’s release to CD and streaming platforms means that listeners will have the ability to re-listen and develop familiarity. Erasmus seems attracted to the

“crazed quality” that causes people to not eschew what is familiar—to accept that they have lived in Plato’s cave (Martin 22). He writes in *The Praise of Folly* in a way that “will not permit readers to become too settled” (Martin 14). In a foreword to this work, Clarence Miller writes that the reason why Folly was “persistently misunderstood and attacked” was due in part to “the novelty of its literary form” (Erasmus xiv). To create a remix that is effectively different from the original, the artist must languish to their ‘follies’ and create chaos in their designs.

### *The remix as ‘madness’*

Erasmus’s work *The Praise of Folly* may be translated more accurately as the praise of “Madness” or “Insanity” (Bindesen 689), which shifts the meaning of the term ‘folly’ from silliness or mistakes into an actual mindset that is reflected outward. This translation makes the praise of ‘folly’ even more satirical: it’s not a reiteration of ‘innocence is bliss,’ but rather a mocking ‘it’s nicer to stay in Plato’s cave.’ A modern-day equivalent is seen in the “Brat Summer” trend, which seeks to subvert the constant surveillance of women’s bodies for the sake of mental peace (Williams para. 17). *Brat* and its remixes praise folly in the form of “*une soiree de fou*” or ‘an insane party’ (Charli xcx & Troye Sivan 2:43). Rather than seek control over the uncontrollable, the audience is invited to dance, be sexually free, and enjoy what they can. “Talk Talk” creates a narrative of inviting a sexual encounter prior to any further emotional relationship; “I might say” conveys the depressed lifestyle of a person who “rot[s] in [their] house” and imbibes alcohol when “nervous” (Charli xcx et al. 2:45, 2:54). The notion of a struggling, working-class woman and her languishing “class

unconsciousness” (Chaput 221) is subverted to idolize the ‘nasty woman’ who lives her life chaotically and irresponsibly.

## Interactive Aspects

### *Audience Emotion as Guide to Purpose*

By producing music under the same author (Charli xcx), the publishers assume that the audience is going to stay the same (fans of Charli xcx). Thus, there must be a rhetorical shift in the audience as well as the context—dance clubs versus private spaces—that makes the music of *Brat and* rhetorically discrete. Margie Borschke describes remix as an object for production that is “driven by the pleasures of the body” (22), which is to say that the *meaning* is not meant to change, but the *purpose*. This is true to each of the two remixes discussed here. Firstly, “Talk Talk,” takes on heavier use of autotune, beat drops, and synthesizer instrumentals, all of which contribute to a stronger style of dance club music. The audience is more likely to hear the song played in a dance club, where it is acceptable to dance—to move their bodies—out of enjoyment of the sound. The remix is created by a desire for entertainment, for the “pleasures of the body.”

On the other hand, “I might say” adds piano and guitar instrumentals to stretch the remix into a somber four minutes and ten seconds. Although the purpose of this remix changes, its form is driven by the antithesis of pleasures, i.e., a mascara-running, crying-in-the-shower level of sadness. Its production is driven by a change in purpose from casual listening to individual reflection. The inclusion of “I might say” on the *Brat and* album also serves to emphasize the energy of the other remixes. With condensed, repetitive lyrics, “I might say” forces the audience to pause and feel its meaning; this is discussed in more

detail below. In either case, the remixes are indeed created as a tool used for producing a new artifact for a different target audience.

### *Class Divide*

Additionally, Charli xcx is a high-grossing artist, with a higher income than her primary audience, and both remixes discussed here include several more famous names. To contend with this, *Brat and* addresses living as a series of “immediate, individualized goals rather than long-term change” to appeal to the working-class audience (Chaput 221). The quality of Erasmian style comes from the intentional choice of genre to reach the widest possible audience, and capturing the message within ludic writing (Bindesen 690). As a short form of media, remixes must work quickly to hook the listener, and the dissociative, ever-happy lifestyle described above as “Brat Summer” is an effective lure for that. The immediate goal of the audience is to enjoy themselves for a few minutes, not to think about their life.

Pop culture tends to “effectively [contain] working-class identity within the public and private needs of contemporary global capitalism” (Chaput 204), which, as a globally successful product, *Brat and* is not immune from. As such, the album’s remixes seek to incorporate the goals of the working class which can be bought: a flight “to Amsterdam” to stay in a “good hotel” (Charli xcx & Troye Sivan 0:54-56), accepting the loss of a cell phone for the sake of a party (Charli xcx & Troye Sivan 2:38), or a “house in LA” (Charli xcx et al. 3:28). The remixes also include concepts that the working class can relate to more than constant partying, such as sex and ‘rotting’ at home (a colloquial term that means to do little to no physical or mental work out of exhaustion or depression). By connecting in



these ways to the audience, the remixes of *Brat and* are better able to communicate the message of each piece.

### Technical Aspects

In Virginia Kuhn's essay "Rhetoric of Remix," she defines a remix as "a digital utterance expressed across the registers of the verbal, the aural, and the visual" (1.5). Another scholar reviews the aesthetic qualities of a remix through the eyes of Kenneth Burke as he "essentially equates an aesthetic experience to a rhetorical experience: it is immediate, individual, and emotional" (Church 70). With these six defining features—verbal, aural, visual, immediate, individual, emotional—we may begin to explore the true complexities of the rhetoric of a remix. It is a distinct medium from alphabetic text for most of these qualities. While this essay is limited to the verbal and aural aspects of the two remixes discussed here, there are visual cues present. The remixes are also immediate in their quick reworking from the original album release, individual in their many connections to the audience as discussed above, and emotional as a primary purpose for their composition.

In Miller's foreword to *The Praise of Folly*, he admits that the reader's role in the text is to "construct[] the epilogue which Folly refuses to give" (Erasmus xxv). Transferring this notion to a remix reminds us that, though the song is interactive and designed for the specific intended audience, the listeners do not receive any sort of conclusion. Instead, they must draw on their own conclusions if they wish to take away any lessons from the text. If the listener is willing to put in the effort of engagement, then—and only then—are

they able to truly understand the message that a remix sends, the deeper meaning behind the message, and perhaps even the spirit of the author within that complex message.

However, the target audience includes both fans and casual listeners, which means that the majority of listeners will not reach further than a shallow understanding of the song. So, without developing an academic analysis of the text, how can the audience draw value from it? Although there is more at play in the composition of the piece, the audience is most likely to construct their own interpretation based on the pathetic appeal of the song's sound.

### *Sounds, Instrumentals, and Metalinguistics*

"Talk Talk" has a happy, upbeat feeling to it because it has a fast-paced beat and dynamic tone shifts in the lyrics and accompanying instrumentals. These are associated with quick movements and unconstrained action. As music made for a dance club, the sound may also be associated for some with even less constrained action due to alcohol, flashing disco lights, and the shared energy of a similarly engaged crowd of people. The heavy use of autotune obscures many of the lyrics, so the most often repeated (or clearest) words become the majority of the song's message. In "Talk Talk," these words are "talk to me," "French," "Spanish," "plan," and "go back to my place," which build a meaning of the beginning of something exotic and erotic. For those who are more engaged with the song and willing to read the lyrics, these positive associations from the sound will carry through a closer interpretation of the lyrics. The medium of a song does not allow for the lyrics to be understood without their sound.

This remix is joyful, but, just as Erasmus tried to “tell the truth with answers”, the resulting text contains a deeper meaning (Bindesen 689). The opening letter of *The Praise of Folly* dedicates it to Erasmus’s friend Thomas More, as a “jeu d’esprit” that still retains “learning” (Erasmus 2). Erasmus goes on to criticize, under this guise, the variety of “foolosophers” prevalent in his field (Erasmus 13). Though he was an Augustinian monk, Erasmus detested the orders and priorities of priesthood, and sought a higher purpose for himself and society through education (Erasmus 179). This hidden meaning of his work was contested just as much as *Brat*’s reclamation of grunge is, just as all critiques of society are attacked.

The most notable sound in the original album *Brat* is autotune; the remixes take on this quality in part but make room for smooth vocals from the featured artists. Many artists have a trademark sound to “distinguish their sound from others’ and provide listeners an immediate indexical association with their name,” to build their “brand” via the sound of the music (Wallmark para. 5). The *Brat* brand is a heavy vocoder affect that makes the notes of the lyrics vibrate with a high-pitched, buzzy quality associated with technology. When Charli xcx sings in “Talk Talk” and “I might say,” her vocals are altered with this effect. In contrast, Troye Sivan’s opening verse is unaffected; Matty Healy’s verses in “I might say” are similarly unaffected.

While this makes sense for the featured artists to lack a sound quality that isn’t associated with their brand, it’s important to note here that the autotune is applied to the female singer but not to the male singers. As a form of digital vocal fry, Wallmark suggests that this may be a reflection of the “androcentric tendency of commentators to view male

speech as the normal, unmarked category and female vocality as deviant,” which is even more evident when assessing “cases such as creak that involve sex-atypical pitch modulations” (para. 32). In using the autotune effect, Charli xcx makes a statement about her voice (both literally and metaphorically) that reclaims her music as personal while retaining a genre-appropriate sound. By rejecting the autotune, Troye Sivan and Matty Healy place themselves outside of the song’s message.

This has two rhetorical effects. Firstly, the song’s message retains Charli xcx as the central figure despite her co-authorship of the remix. As previously mentioned, *Brat* is a feminist collection, so the reification of that quality in *Brat and* creates a link between the remixes and the originals. Secondly, the remixes offer new insight from the featured artists as testimony to the message rather than a rewrite. This subtle play of sound posits the remix as a congruent—not synonymous—composition to the original.

### *Featured Artists*

As a popular artist, Charli xcx is obligated, per Erasmian thought, to make opinionated music, which suggests that every featured artist in the remixes of *Brat and* is held to the same obligation. I would argue that, even if a featured artist does not introduce new opinions to the remixed text, they are implicated in the opinions of the original. However, in the case of *Brat and*, the original lyrics and sounds are not preserved in the remixes as they would be in a traditional remix composed via sampling. Thus, the featured artists have the unique ability to change the meaning of the piece by reordering, re-composing, and rewording the lyrics. For example, the chorus of “Talk Talk” is originally “I wish you’d talk, talk / ... Wish you’d just talk to me” (Charli xcx 0:30-0:36), but is reworded

as “Talk to me in French/ Talk to me in Spanish/ Talk to me in your own made-up language/ doesn’t matter, if I understand it” (Charli xcx & Troye Sivan 0:38-0:45). The original text is composed of repetitive longing and pleading, whereas the remix is written into a whirlwind of novelty. The titular phrase of “talk, talk” is disassembled, and the verb ‘talk’ is converted from a conditional wish into an imperative command. From the foundation of the lyrics, the entire song’s tone shifts through the remix.

Kuhn describes a remix using the word *rhapsody* in its original meaning of ‘stitching together’ (2.3). The featured artists take over the song’s meaning by “stitching” the original work into a new design. In “Talk Talk,” Troye Sivan takes over the pre-chorus and post-chorus, and inserts a narrative of regaining control over a relationship via a “plan” (Charli xcx & Troye Sivan 0:53). This version of stitching involves clipping, as well. In “I might say,” this means that the voice of Charli xcx is nearly removed from the remix. The piano played by jon hopkins cuts out the dance club synthesizers, and the vocals by Matty Healy use less autotune than Charli xcx’s signature *Brat* sound involves. “I might say” becomes a ballad that cannot be situated among dance club music. By changing the setting in which it is playable in, the featured artists create a different listening experience for the audience, and thus finally inspire a new range of interpretation of the song’s message. Somber ballads are usually played in solitude, in a quiet place to hear the soft piano, so the lyrics are more distinguishable, and the listener can easily reflect on them as they play. The full force of the emotional distress of the song can be felt by the listener by these simple changes in sound that the featured artists make.

## Conclusion

Through the changes of wording and sounds, remixes adhere to the Erasmian principle of copious rhetoric to produce a similar yet distinct meaning to the song's message. Also, just as Erasmus considered the recipient of his writing as carefully as his words, each remix is carefully directed to a particular audience through the sounds of its genre. The strong connection between the Erasmian style and modern-day use of rhetoric within remixes is proof that Renaissance-era contributions are still relevant to the current field, and that our contemporary literature still contains rhetorical value despite its (many) different forms. The latter half of this calls to a lack of scholarship in this area. Though pop culture develops more rapidly than academic discussions, there is still benefit to understanding the ways in which rhetoric is present in our surroundings. If a remix of a popular dance club song can influence the way in which women are perceived—as is the case in the two songs discussed here—it should be considered a genre worth analysis. *Brat* and its remixes are a prime example of the active interchange of ideas involved in a social movement.

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