

On the Ecstasy of Plagiarism

In his renowned work “The Ecstasy of Influence”, Jonathan Lethem argues that plagiarism is an unavoidable, essential tactic to creating great art, through arguments like that of copyright being detrimental to culture and through the essence of his piece being a plagiarism itself. Lethem breaks his essay into multiple sections where he covers important components to his overall thesis which can all be summarized by the idea that “substantially all ideas are second hand, consciously and unconsciously drawn from a million outside sources, and daily used by the gamerer with a pride and satisfaction born of the superstition that he originated them”(68). His implication in this cynical line is that all ideas are recycled from past inspirations that we as humans have observed, whether knowingly or not, and anointing genius to one’s supposed “original” ideas is simply an act of ignorance and arrogance.

One of Lethem’s most imperative claims in his essay is that plagiarism is an essential part of creating new and noteworthy works. In his section “Surrounded by Signs” Lethem states, “we’re surrounded by signs; our imperative is to ignore none of them” (63). Lethem’s implication here is that we, as human beings, writers, and artists alike are constantly surrounded by inspiring feats from the music we listen to, to the books we read, and the shows we watch. Our job as consumers of culture is not to avoid these “signs”, but to spot them, absorb them, and use them to contribute new, valuable works to the ever expanding web of human culture.

The essence of Lethem’s work being a plagiarism also comes into play in strengthening his claim on the beneficiality of plagiarism: the quote he uses on page 63 about being surrounded by signs comes directly from Steve Erickson’s novel *Our Ecstatic Days*. Erickson’s work, released in February of 2005, is a fantasy novel that encompasses intense motherly love and fear,

parallel universes and lifespans, and paranormal events all in one complexly intertwined in a “profoundly disorienting story saturated in metaphors of birth and apocalyptic decadence” (Kirkus). Erickson’s fictional, sci-fiesque novel is far different from Lethem’s essay on plagiarism in culture, but Lethem’s choice to use such a seemingly disconnected source is not random: Lethem took from a previous, unrelated work he read and rejuvenated its meaning to add value to his own, new work, showing the beneficial and essential nature of taking from signs, words, phrases, and anything that compels us as creators to create truly great works.

Another key claim to Lethem’s argument is the notion that copyright is detrimental to the advancement and upholding of human culture. Lethem explains at length the negative effects of copyright on culture through the exploration of concepts like intellectual property, public domain, and “the commons”, all of which point to Lethem’s conclusion that copyrighting material and limiting what is available for people to use to recreate is merely an institutional “attempts to take from all the people just for the benefit of a few” (Lethem 67). This time quoting from Harry Truman’s speech at the everglades, Lethem implies here that copyright is an economic ploy to provide benefit for large corporations while taking away artistic inspiration from the greater good, therefore negatively affecting culture as a whole by privatizing the signs that surround us and lessening the expansion of great works.

An important assumption that arises from Lethem’s argument is that he does not believe true originality of thought or work exists. The above quote mentioned from page 68 regarding the concept that all ideas are a compilation of past ideas and inspirations provides a basis for Lethem’s view on originality. To understand one’s view on originality however, it is also important to consider one’s perspective and audience. Lethem, for example views originality from the perspective of an established novelist who has spent his life trying to formulate new

works for a living, and therefore has had enough experience with the give and take nature of literature and culture that he formulates his opinion and expresses it to his audience- likely other established writers and appreciators of culture- in a positive way. A contradictory point of view can be seen in Fordham University's academic integrity policy in which the university expresses to its audience- the student body- their goal to "to foster and recognize originality of thought". Fordham's stance differs greatly from that of Lethem's in that the university emphasizes the importance of originality, therefore implying that original thought not only exists but is essential to a wholesome and effective education. Fordham's view on originality is written from the perspective of a university trying to guide students towards being able to formulate their own works the way Lethem has done, resulting in a drastic difference in opinion on what originality is or if it even exists.

As a student of Fordham University myself, the values of academic integrity and originality of thought have been instilled in me since the day I applied to the school. Originality has, until now, been engraved in my mind as something essential to strive for in order to be a successful student and writer, and plagiarism its antithesis. Having read Lethem's work I no longer feel that taking ideas from other's works is taboo or wrong, but rather an informed and essential way of adding value and dimension to my work. Lethem at no point implies that passing off another's work as one's own is okay, but has rather made me understand the value that taking in signs from the world around me can have on my writing and artistic endeavors as a student and beyond, and allowed me to see plagiarism and original work not at enemies but as two things that, when used responsibly, can even go hand in hand.

Works Cited

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