Steal this Paper

Plagiarism is the greatest thing that has ever happened to the arts. Though many professors will tell you not to steal the words of others, it is foolish to deny the potential benefits of incorporating another’s work into your own. Although all forms of literary robbery have served as foundations for masterpieces to be built upon, pilfering and outright stealing are not *as* essential to this craft. These re-imaginations, or remixes, have the capability to capitalize upon the “original” work while adding a distinctive twist. To begin, a brief definition is needed for these words. To “Remix” simply means “To mix again”, while to “Mix” is, “To combine two or more things to make one that is the same throughout.” Basic arithmetic tells us that this *combination* is innately different from its components, while Aristotle more eloquently states, “The whole is greater than the sum of it’s parts.” These changed-up, mashed-up re-tellings introduce “play” to a work, casting structure and meaning into motion. The user or audience becomes emancipated from singular presentation, free to formulate new connections, and push deeper into the many ideas that a work offers. From this chaos great works of art emerge, not of themselves, but as evolved mutations of preexisting materials. These conglomerations can be viewed with loathing, seen as abhorrent, grotesque and unnatural fusions akin to Victor Frankenstein’s monster. However, if one is open to changing their perspective, powerful new ideas and lessons can emerge from these creations: the decision is simply up to the viewer.

At a very young age, children are taught that it is wrong to steal. Taking things from others is portrayed as selfish, deceitful, and harmful. Later in life, when these budding young individuals begin to author their own papers, this lesson is repeated about the shameful act of plagiarism. They are taught that originality is not only a core component of a work, but an academic necessity. Even a research paper (like this one), which relies primarily upon the works of others, must contain endless citations and references to the “original” author and his or her works, their words becoming “okay” to “borrow” once I have attached his or her name to them. Still, teachers forewarn their students of the horrific implications that plagiarism has, and prophecize imminent expulsion from a university should they be discovered. While it may be noble to hold these students to a lofty standard when it comes to originality, the fact of the matter is that the words they “steal” from a famous author or an essay online may have never belonged to that person in the first place. While originality can be championed as an important component of art, no work exists *truly* independent of others. Artists do not mysteriously generate their own style and paradigm, but rather, they assimilate and twist the works of others until they have formed a vision “all their own”. In this sense, plagiarism will always remain the basis of creation; give it another name - perhaps inspiration or erudition - and admire how plagiarism takes on a different form.

Dadaism is an important art movement to consider when analyzing the concept of a remix, mostly due to the powerful statement it makes about *how* art is to be viewed. Typically, the final product of a *work* of art is the most important aspect, on display for all to see, while the process that created it may remain a mystery. Dadaism does away with the product as the core component, and instead places emphasis upon the malleability of the audience’s perspective, the *process* of the artwork. When thinking like a dadaist, the piece of art is not supposed to convey any one single message or lesson, but rather, reveal the importance of the thoughts and connections it invokes. In this sense, the content is not necessarily important, but rather, the growth and revelations the audience experiences while ingesting the work. Remixing falls within similar lines; though the total content of the piece will be similar to the original, perhaps even exactly the same, the message and perspective that the new-author chooses can illuminate different perspectives, offering new insight to a seemingly understood or “exhausted” work. Pieces that are remixed should not be seen as plundered reserves of knowledge, but as vital building blocks to further comprehension and reflection. The recycling of old content to breathe new life into a work is not something that should be criticized or scorned, but celebrated. The Futurists and Dadaists envisioned a world in which everything could constantly be made new, and their artistic and social movements failed as a result; the human race does not, as a whole, possess the ability to move forward at this incredible pace. These failures should underscore the importance of exploring a work over and over again, instead of being eternally impatient with the present, and longing for the “new” future.

The poem *Howl, One Letter at a Time* by Brian Kim Stefans is a fantastic example of how remix allows for a work to be expanded upon, while still being respectful of the original content. Though the words that make up the poem are the exact same, Stefans alters the way in which the content is presented to the audience, forcing them to read the poem from his perspective. The most important transformation occurs as Stefans moves the poem from page to screen, choosing electronic literature as his desired medium. Instead of opening a page to the entirety of the poem, a blank screen greets the viewer. This immediately removes a level of control from the audience; they are no longer free to peruse or access the material on their terms, and must simply wait for the poem to be presented to them. The opening line, “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness” is dripped onto the screen letter by letter; one has to stare at the screen intently in order to catch these phantasmal blips, and may or may not have difficulty following the message. The coquettishness of the letters captures the attention of the viewer and holds it hostage, cajoling them, challenging them to hang onto every little letter without forgetting where the piece moves as a whole. By removing the audience’s control, and moderating the speed at which the poem is exposed, Stefans piques interest far more effectively than a block of text ever could. Though the poem was initially penned by Ginsberg, Stefans does not add any new or original content, the new pace changes the method in which the poem is approached. It is not as if Ginsberg’s authorial intent has been pirated by Stefans - he simply channels the poem in a different direction, literally forcing them to view it through his desired lens.

The Lord of the Rings is one of the best known and celebrated works of literature of the last century. Children and adults alike are entertained by the mystical creatures and fantastical elements of the work, with both the books and films held in high esteem by those who have explored them. Unfortunately, many will be disappointed by the fact that J.R.R Tolkien did not single-handedly devise this legendary tale. Though it is fun to envision Tolkien in a fancy armchair, casually smoking a tobacco pipe while imagining Gandalf, Smaug, The Ring, and other such notable entities, the fact remains that he did not conceive Middle-Earth without a little help. The “One Ring to rule them all” bears an odd similarity to Richard Wagner’s Ring of the Nibelungs, which allows the owner mastery over the world. Though Tolkien himself denied any connection between the two, he did admit that they drew from the same source material, an ancient Icelandic poem known as the Volsungasaga. In either case, Tolkien employed many of the same components found in either of these works, but he did so in such a way that *seemed* original, and the public absolutely loved it. One particularly unforgettable episode that Tolkien had “remixed” was the ent assault on Isengard, in which an army of living tree-creatures lays siege to the fortress in which the villainous Saruman dwells. Tolkien himself admits that this awe-inspiring moment came to him when observing a performance of Macbeth, when the English army marched upon Dunsinane, guarded by shields made of the Birnam Wood. He felt that while this may have been a crafty way for Shakespeare to fulfill the Witches’ prophecy, it was simply not impressive enough. He decided to take the metaphor one step further and actually have the trees themselves assault the fortress, proving himself infinitely cooler than Shakespeare in the process. Tolkien’s books are littered with quasi-references like this one, and simply could not have existed without his imagination being spurred by other great works, yet nobody contests the legitimacy or prestige of The Lord of the Rings.

Whether you like it or not, the cycle of borrowing-from, being-inspired-by, and outright stealing from other works will continue endlessly due to a psychological phenomenon known as Cryptomnesia. This bizarre effect occurs when an individual has subconsciously absorbed information without realizing it, and later recalls it, causing them to believe it has come from their own imagination. The existence of this phenomenon should serve as an indication that plagiarism is not an act against nature, but an act of nature, a subconscious form of inspiration. Literary themes and plotlines often are borrowed, transformed, or modernized to great effect, remixed to suit a different audience or perhaps a different vision. Familiar characters or ideas, placed in a different context, allow for new forms of meaning and insight to be gleaned from them. In all of these artistic spheres, the recycling of material allows for more to come from less without harming the original, only making it more popular or enriched.

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