Elizabeth Fu

Tesla Schaffer

ENGL 131 S

5 November 2012

Short Assignment 4: Lethem

In Jonathan Lethem’s essay, “The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism”, he examines visual, musical, and literary works of art to explore their paradoxical assumptions regarding copyright laws and intellectual property—one’s ideas. Plagiarism is universally recognized by most as what the New Oxford English dictionary defines as “the practice of taking someone else’s work or ideas and passing them off as one’s own”; claiming others’ work as your own. Similarly, appropriation is defined as “the action of taking something for one’s own use, typically without the owner’s permission”; often in an altered visual, musical, or literary form constructed to convey a specific purpose—often political or moral (Oxford). In contradiction, Lethem regards the laws that govern the use of intellectual property, abstract thoughts and ideas, to be arbitrary. New ideas are not comprised of thin air. There is no avoiding building upon existing ideas simply because humans are naturally inclined to judge and opinionate, which develops existing intellectual property: ideas and concepts alike.

Modern society’s cultural, technological, and creative aspects constantly adjust to accommodate our rapidly evolving society. New innovations often arise from previous developments without recognition of the original source. Lethem challenges this convention by deconstructing works of art to derive their original meanings. Lethem frequently finds that a work’s original conveyance is vastly different from the latest edition he derived it from.

Lethem traces art to their original sources to derive works’ individual purposes. Based on his compilation of works and their relatable purposes, he vaguely distinguishes the boundary between plagiarism and appropriation of intellectual property; therefore he does not conclude a concrete standard to which works should be credited. Lethem shares an abundance of occurrences that exemplify that alteration to a work modifies its original connotation, but does not explicitly state his position on the morality of altering intellectual property without citing all contributors to the most recent edition of the works.

Lethem’s abundance of examples within each medium of art conveys his statement that art is influenced; therefore there is no clear distinction between plagiarism and appropriation of intellectual property. Lethem regards notable artists’ works such as Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* and Leonard Bernstein’s *West Side Story* as “copied nearly verbatim from Plutarch’s *Life of Mark Antony*” (515). Then he questions the origin of *Life of Mark Antony* and concludes that artists—visual, musical, and literary—do not “[create] out of void but out of chaos”. Ideas are not dreamt up without influence or idea; the works of others inspires them. In the case of *Life of Mark Antony*, Lethem claims that Shakespeare and Leonard Bernstein were “awakened by the work of a master,” namely Plutarch, a Greek historian, biographer, essayist, and magistrate of Ancient Rome (515). Lethem unwaveringly upholds his notion that ideas are built upon one another, typically without the dishonest intent improper accreditation.

Through the derivation of cases in which the recipient of accreditation is subjective—it is virtually impossible to pinpoint the origin of an abstract, physically intangible piece of intellectual property—in an inclusive sphere of contexts, Lethem forms a well-rounded argument that the distinction between plagiarism and appropriation of intellectual property is arbitrary. Therefore he is unable to provide an accurate universal standard to which works of art and their intellectual property should be credited. Lethem is thorough in deriving cases involving the discreet differences between plagiarism and appropriation from a variety of different contexts. He cites cases involving the morality of the manipulation of ideas: alteration, improper accreditation, existential and surreal use, commercial profit, and the hypocritical governing of ideas.

Intellectual property or ideas are essentially abstract concepts. Yet some argue extreme extents to which these concepts should be recognized. Existential and surreal ideas conceptualized by thinkers and philosophers such as Freud have been long built upon to develop the world man functions in today. To what extent do we need to credit original sources—can we even pinpoint the original source? Lethem provides a case where “a series of judicial decisions [required] the photographer [to obtain] permission before [capturing] and [printing] an image,” as if the “photographer [was] stealing from the person or building whose photograph he shot, pirating something of private and certifiable value?” (516). The conception of copyright that gives Congress the authority to rule the illegal “stealing” of intellectual—intangible and abstract—property whose origins are virtually impossible to pinpoint proves to be somewhat unnecessary.

In another instance, the capitalistic nature of commercial appropriations is discussed. Disney has long been the face of childhood innocence. Under this cover, the corporation has successfully obtained centuries-old—if not, ancient—folktales, made their blissful alterations into children’s stories, and sold them commercially for fortunes. Lethem practically screams that the “extent of [Disney’s] outsourcing [is obviously] evident” (521). Disney has the finances and therefore power to draw a catalogue of work of others: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Fantasia, Pinocchio, Dumbo, Bambi, Song of the South, Cinderella, Alice in Wonderland, Robin Hood, Peter Pan, Lady and the Tramp, Mulan, Sleeping Beauty, The Word in the Stone, The Jungle Book, and the Treasure Planet*; yet it fails to publicly credit the original creative concepts of Shakespeare or De La Soul (521).

The extent to which the claims of intellectual property are claimed is vast. Every possible idea and concept in the world has its original thinker. But the extent to which we address these original thinkers is subjective. Lethem conceives an example regarding common knowledge. From where does common knowledge originate? He defines the ownership of common knowledge as “[belonging] to everyone and no one,” and its purpose “controlled only by common consent,” signifying the universal exchange of common knowledge (523). Such common knowledge extends from the knowledge of the location of the human nose to that of mathematical concepts.

Lethem does not explicitly state his position on the ethics of neither plagiarism nor appropriation; therefore leaving his audience without a more defined perception of the boundary between the two terms. Instead, he instigates more questions within his readers’ minds that help form their own line of distinction between plagiarism and appropriation. Furthermore, Lethem notes that copyright laws are arbitrary to impose upon intellectual property; how can a thought be traced to its original thinker? Without a clear distinction of the context in which works of art require accreditation to contributors, Lethem leaves the threshold of which the boundary between plagiarism and appropriation remain open to the reader’s opinion and interpretation.

In conclusion, Lethem is somewhat successful in defining a slight difference between plagiarism and appropriation. Plagiarism is commonly regarded as the blatant claim of other’s work as one’s own. Whereas appropriation involves the alteration of previously established intellectual property that has been changed, thereby maintains an altered meaning. Both terms are similar; they refer to the alteration and improper accreditation of previously established intellectual property. Although Lethem’s well-rounded article develops the reader’s standpoint on the morality of altering works’ original meaning without accreditation of the original source; his overly detailed cornucopia of examples overwhelms the reader. Without a definitive standpoint regarding the righteousness of altering pieces of art without proper recognition, Lethem fails to explicitly distinguish the difference between plagiarism and appropriation; thereby the line between the two terms remains indistinct and open to interpretation.

Works Cited

Lethem, Jonathan. "Lethem: The Ecstacy of Influence: A Plagiarism." *Acts of Inquiry: A Guide to Reading, Research,and Writing at the University of Washington : With Readings*. By Allison Gross and Stuart Greene. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011. N. pag. Print.

Simpson, J. A., and E. S. C. Weiner. *The Oxford English Dictionary.* Oxford: Clarendon, 1989. Print.

Elizabeth,

There are some great things about this paper- your quote integration was fantastic, and you’re a very good writer with the ability to construct complex and coherent sentences in a variety of structures. However, I think you may have missed the mark a little in the emphasis here- there was a lot of summary above, and I couldn’t quite locate your specific claim about the article. As I suggested in my comments, remember that your reader will have read Lethem, and that we are interested in what YOU claim about him- how effective was his argument? What are the limitations of it? What are the consequences of what he’s claiming? You touch on these ideas in some places, but I think they need to be more of a governing force. Overall, good start- this just needs to be tweaked a bit.