

PLAGIARISM: AESTHETICS OR CONTEMPORARY MOVEMENT?¹

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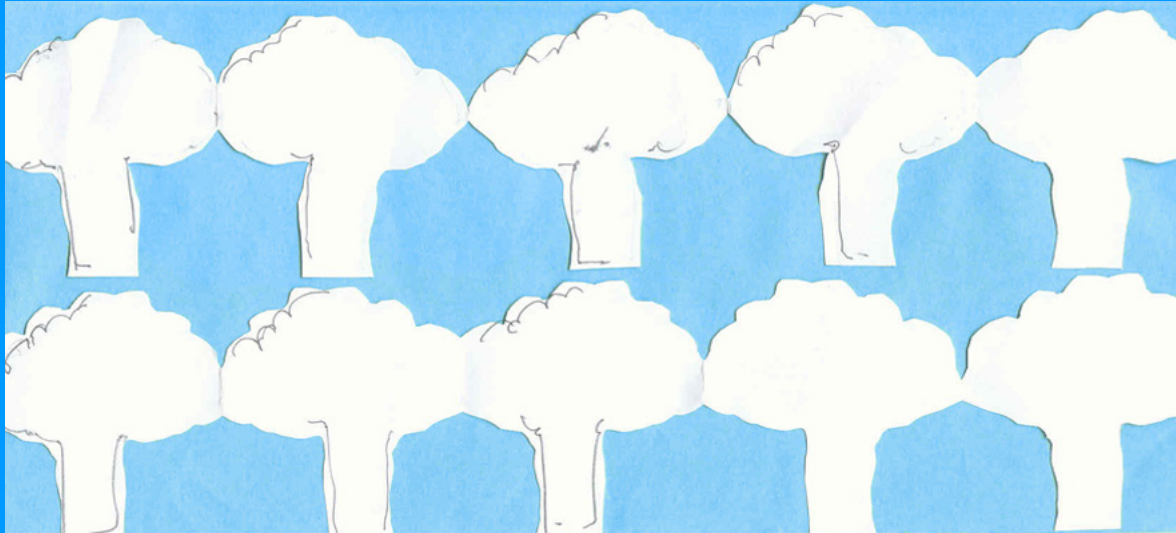
Recommended citation || PERROMAT AUGUSTÍN, Kevin (2011): "Plagiarism: aesthetics or contemporary movement?" [online article], *452°F. Electronic journal of theory of literature and comparative literature*, 5, 115-127, [Consulted on: dd/mm/aa], < <http://www.452f.com/index.php/en/kevin-perromat-augustin.html> >

Illustration || Xavier Matín

Translation || Laura Piperno

Article || Upon request | Published on: 07/2011

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Abstract || This article deals with the status due to plagiarist proposals, and with the possible existence of a programmatic unity under the label of *Plagiarism*. In order to do so, plausible historical models and appropriation poetics are considered, a quest is led for founding acts as well as a comparison of some of the trends grouped under the label of “Plagiarism” and postmodern poetics.

Keywords || Intertextuality | Plagiarism | Afterpop | Postmodern poetics | Appropriationism | Neoism | Ciberpunk.

In the last decades, a considerable number of authors have taken on and demanded their condition of “plagiarists”. It seems that postmodernity is not marked by Saturn’s sign, but by “Borgesian” Pierre Menard’s; as if current poetics and aesthetics, once forgotten the romantic urges of originality and authenticity, were redefining plagiarism not as an obverse of Literature, but as its own definition in an inexhaustible system of recursive self-referentiality. Moreover, the proliferation of manifests, from more or less extensive or influential groups under the label of “plagiarism”, “appropriationism “ and the like, makes us ask about the existence of a more global coherent movement, beyond episodic fashions, within a stability of aesthetic or practical approaches. Should we think about “plagiarism” as an inherent feature, that is, necessary, in postmodernity or, on the contrary, should we always write it in capitals, as the designation of a self-governing movement, with multiple affiliates in national contemporary literatures beyond collective designations, with their own genealogies, schools and subgroups?

What comes next is an attempt to answer this question, keeping in mind that categorical taxonomy is always a reducing simplification of reality, and that the latter tends to exceed the labels and chronologies assigned to it.

Through history, at least since texts are signed by their authors, the accusation of plagiarism has been constant in the literary field. Authors have always been accusing one another of appropriating someone else’s work and claiming other people’s authorships for themselves. Inversely, through two and a half millennium of western Writing, most texts are sprinkled with *identifying marks* that allow them to differ from one another, as well as the person who wrote them. In every age, to be branded as “plagiarist” (in the unlimited ways in which this vague notion can be personified: *copyist*, *thief*, *epigone*, *follower*...) is maybe the harshest possible discrediting in the literary world. Therefore, the history of Letters is also the story of writers’ efforts to show and secure the literary parenthood of the produced texts. We face a historic combat whose visible traces date from before modern affiliation marks were established (from the registry in National Libraries, the issue of privileges, the ISBN...), in prefaces and postfaces, in the pretexts (titles, notices to the reader, covers) or in *the body of crime itself*, in fictions or in the narrative voices, in manifests or poetic *pragmatics*; all of them places where writers *play it safe*, take on affiliations, traditions and loans, accept the intertextual condition of their creatures or, on the contrary, by following a diametrically opposite strategy, they claim their primacy, their absolute or relative originality against tradition and canon.

However, there is a lineage of writers, an always minority or quickly overthrown party, traditionally *Malditist*, ludic and experimental;

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1 | I gather and continue in this article some ideas I defended in my doctoral thesis: *El plagio en las literaturas hispánicas: Historia, Teoría y Práctica*; now available online: <http://www.e-sorbonne.fr/sites/www.e-sorbonne.fr/files/theses/These_LePlagiat_KevinPERROMAT.pdf>.

necessarily in the periphery of the literary canon, as its payroll includes those works and authors who have infringed, over the different periods, the rules governing western Literature. Those writers sometimes performed a literature based on parody, rewriting or appropriation of pre-existing texts, a practice itself that can be considered orthodox or even canonical (just think about *Petrarquism*), but in any event (intentionally or not, a priori or a posteriori) they found themselves excluded from the main stream of Literature (the protean *mainstream*) and ended up relegated to the condition of “plagiarists” or to similar positions outside the orthodox fields of Writing. The destiny that History has set aside for those “false authors” (that explains the widespread dread aroused by the accusation of plagiarism) is the most absolute oblivion of their texts and, at best, the teratologic memory of their author’s names preserved in the *index prohibitorum* (*the anticanon*) of their censors.

0. Possible precursors

However, it is not difficult to write up a list of possible candidates for the role of precursors of *Plagiarism*. Borges maintained that “each generation chooses its precursors”, which could explain authors and critics’ recent interest in certain figures of the literary tradition. With no eagerness to be exhaustive, we can point out: the practice of centos in the Law Roman Empire (where Ausonio’s *Nuptial Cento* stands out), the classic Arabic imitative poetics (where plagiarism –*sariqa*: “theft”– was a rhetorical figure equivalent to a “loan”), the explicit intertextuality of Provençal troubadours’ *Gay Knowledge* and the massive, systematic and even anonymous rewriting from Middle Ages, which made this period’s experts to (mistakenly) decree, until not long ago, the absence of real figures of author during such period.

Likewise, postmodern authors and critics have paid preferential attention to certain secondary traditions within ancient western tradition, representatives of a combinatorial or cryptographic poetics that could be identified with the emblematic figure of R. Llull and was completed by precursors invented by Borges and subsequent generations (postmodern Parnassus, again with no eagerness to be exhaustive): Leibniz, Laputa’s discursive machines discovered by Gulliver, Montaigne and Pascal’s praxis for the quote, the logical-mathematical paradoxes proposed by Lewis Carroll, Laurence Sterne’s quotational and typographical experiments (to call them in any way), the Cabbala, the mathematical and combinatorial poetics (as practiced, for example, by Juan Caramuel), or any of the Baroque and Renaissance intertextual games focused on rewriting and repetition. In short, postmodern authors tend to favor all that allows a “literature of exhaustion”, in terms of John Barth: texts and

procedures to open the chain both recursively and indefinitely.

The third type of precursors, maybe the most evident one of them all as it includes all the authors who have identified themselves in writing as “plagiarists” or have proposed “plagiarism” as a creative channel, is yet to be recorded. In this collective I include authors who go beyond Erasmus’ proposal to “learn to write” copying chosen fragments from masterpieces (as, in general, this advice was aimed to minors, who cannot be considered real authors). There were bolder (or more insolent) authors who advised to copy, to intersect in one’s work other people’s fragments or whole works as a way to reach literary glory faster. Those proposals go from the most official and traditional ones, like Baltasar Gracián’s advices on “the adaptation of the old line, of some text, or authority” in his treatise *Wit and the Art of Inventiveness* (1648), to the different *Art of Writing* based on a combinatorial version of Aristotelism (and the doctrine of clichés) in the late Baroque, and the most openly cynical ones by Sieur de Richesource, creator of the “Plagianism” (with an en), method to “write without effort” (*The Mask of Orators*, 1667), or by Cristóbal Suárez de Figueroa, who did a fervent (and ambiguous) defense of *plagiarismo* in *The passenger* (1617).

1. La Fontaine: *Plagiarism* is (officially) born

A qualitatively different attention is the received by the figure of the count of La Fontaine, who in his *Poems and Chants* proposed and carried out a systematic and subversive rewriting of preceding canonical texts. What explains the foundational role granted to the false Uruguayan count is not so much the method used (known and practiced by canonical authors of French Literature, as Pascal and Montaigne before), but a series of particularities: 1) La Fontaine holds a privileged place in the modern canon of poetry with regard to avant-gardes and elites; 2) “literal rewriting” as the best way to *deconstruct* the *idées reçues* receives more than a favorable reception in the context of the revolutions of the post-Gutenberg era; 3) he has a damn aura that has been traditionally used, as in the case of Rimbaud, to guarantee the authenticity of his proposals.

In fact, the history of modern Literature offered other practical previous and later uses, some possibly even more revolutionary than the ones proposed by the Count. One century before, the *Tristram Shandy* by Sterne had raised great controversy due to its uninhibited appropriation and adulterated quotes. The opportuneness of La Fontaine’s proposals could be explained by the confrontation with another work that, for similar reasons, has fascinated modern critics, though from a different perspective: the great “novel about

nothing”, the sought “definitive work” by Flaubert, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, whose protagonists are devoted *Sisyphus modo* to the literal copy of all the knowledge of western Writing.

Lautreamontian texts can be read as manifests or as a specific political praxis, which is a capacity that has been exploited not only by postmodern critics, as J. Kristeva or M. Foucault, but by all a series of heterodox and peripheral seduced by the Count’s subversive tactics. This way, Ulalume González de León, a Mexican writer of Uruguayan origin, puts the second volume of her *Plagios* under the Count’s protection; or Leopoldo María Panero, the divine “madman from Mondragón”, an established heterodox in the Iberian Parnassus, explicitly titles a book of poems from 1999 as *Teoría lautreamontiana del plagio*.

2. The appropriationism of avant-gardes: from surrealist collage to pop cut’n’paste

The Lautreamontian slogan “plagiarism is necessary; progress demands it” resounds in nearly all avant-garde displays of the 20th century. Whether implicit or explicit, the reference to the Uruguayan’s creative plagiarism, via literal recycling of tradition, provides different, more or less subversive, marginal or avant-guard procedures with a stable coherence, which we could emblematically summarize in the praxis of collage in Dadaist tradition, the ready-made of Duchampian lineage and, in a more flagrant way, as it is neutralized by its success, in the pop appropriation of Andy Warhol and the *détournement* of mass media. Moreover, it is possible to say that, broadly speaking (from the cut-up, so characteristic of certain periods and 50’s and 60’s currents to the corrosive “appropriations” of the latest street artists, with Banksy as one of the most known representatives) frictions between avant-guard works and Intellectual Property are a constant feature of contemporary art.

On a strictly literary plane, dadaist and surrealist appropriation procedures inaugurated a way now overused by avant-guard literary fashions. The authors gathered in OuLiPo coined the expression “anticipated plagiarism” to designate the object-origin of the games-transformations, with the warning that the object could be designated *a posteriori*, that is, according to some similarity detected after the Oulipian experience. Georges Perec made up *Life: A User’s Manual*, as a “systematic plagiarism” of different Works; Marcel Bénabou, another eminent member of the OuLiPo, declared “not to have written any of his books” (*Pourquoi je n’ai écrit aucun de mes livres*). In the meantime, the situationists and protagonists of May of ‘68 replaced the ideological coordinates required by Lautréamont’s radical

proposal and hammered the post-Marxist slogan about the priority of conquering “means of symbolic production” before economists, in order to materially transform society.

In order to complete the destruction of the old representations of the “individual as a language creator” inherited from all the different romanticisms, Jorge Luis Borges, not by chance one of the speakers among the avant-gardes in both the New and Old Continents, provided postmodern figurative paradigms (whose archetype is the paradoxical and infinite speculation) with a series of topics and emblematic characters: César Paladión (most illustrious plagiarist), Pierre Menard (second author of *The Quixote*), the *immortals* (we all are Homer) or the anonymous creators of *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, a possible world where plagiarism only exists as one more Borgesian paradox, as *all literature is a plagiarism*. There are numerous possible examples; I choose one, the end of the short story *The immortal*: “only words remain. Words, displaced and mutilated, words of others, were the poor pittance left him by the hours and the centuries” (2005: 544).

The death of both the author and his declensions (a change of tendency: the predominance of language over the individual) meant the parallel develop, on the theoretical plane, of these ideas; a recurrent speech in the work of Bajtin, Kristeva, Foucault, Barthes, Derrida and other representatives of Formalism and the so-called *French Theory*, in whose texts it is frequent (and not a coincidence) the exemplary use of Borges’ parables.

3. Feminists and guerrilla fighters of plagiarism

The elements evoked before were the breeding ground for different movements and schools (if one may use this term) from the 60’s and 70’s to generalize the appropriation procedures with subversive or political intentions. The condemnation of “one-dimensional” (conformist, mechanical and standardized) capitalist or commercial art allies with the radical demands regarding gender equality and social justice. These movements made an extensive use of appropriation. In French, this notion has been frequently expressed as *détournement*, an ambiguous term harboring different meanings of the “deviation, displacement and parody” of the hegemonic forms, often of a more media origin, both the commercial or “capitalist” ones and those considered male chauvinist and “imperialist”. This way, the appropriation of registered trademarks (and all the efforts of the affected companies to avoid it) has regularly caused incidents of the artistic chronicle in recent decades.

On the literary plane, the Canadian expert Marilyn Randall has gathered these trends in what she has called “guerrilla plagiarism”, a label that would include both post-colonial and feminist and rebellious authors, characterized by the strategic and subversive use of appropriations. Within this category, authors like Kathy Acker, a *punk* and feminist artist, author of devastating versions of great male classics of canon and mass literature (from *The Quixote* to Harold Robbins’ novels), as well as Stewart Home, a versatile artist, still working, who was one of the organizers of the different *Festivals of Plagiarism* celebrated in the United Kingdom in the 80’s. Home belonged to different movements, heir to the Situationism, the *Mail Art* and the Appropriationism, for which he wrote manifests that received ironic designations such as *Plagiarism* (indistinguishable from “plagiarism”) and *Neoism*. The goals of the following movements had a marked rebellious character: on the one hand, they were a *punk* and anarchist refusal of consumer society and the “commodification of culture”, a transformation of society through the texts, programs and slogans used as *weapons of mass persuasion*, while on the other hand, they supported some kind of democratization of culture, an inversion of roles between readers and authors through a *hyperironic* version of self-help manuals: a DIY literature (Do It Yourself).

Both Acker and Home, maybe the most committed writers to the *plagiarist* movements of the last two decades of the 20th century, have a troubled relationship with the legal frames of Artistic Property. The first had to defend herself from legal attacks and threats caused by her feminist and subversive appropriations, what made her defend herself publicly and explain the scope of her plagiarism; the latter placed in front of his writings a warning that allowed “the distribution, reproduction and copy” of the documents, in a kind of *anticopyright* that anticipated the *Creative Commons* permissions of the 20th century. Despite the pessimism of some of its organizers (Home considered that the Festivals of Plagiarism were a failure), it seems obvious that these and other experiences considerably influenced on movements like *Letrism*, as well as on authors and collectives like Luther Blisset, Wu Ming and other alternative platforms to modern authorship based on exclusive property and other capitalist forms of cultural production.

4. Late postmodern aesthetics: plagiarism, post-poetry after-pop

The non-exhaustive review outlined before allows us to draw some provisional conclusions. *Plagiarism*, whether as a creative procedure or a programmatic notion, has been present in different movements and periods, although it has become very important in relation to

avant-gardes and Postmodernity. Currently, this feature has been emphasized, with numerous movements demanding or assuming it: Post-poetry, After-pop, Punk Plagiarism, Post-plagiarism, Copyfight or, in plastic arts, proposals like the Appropriationist Visual Poetry practiced by the Spanish artist César Reglero.

Likewise, it is remarkable that Cyberliterature, the generic modality of these technological times par excellence, has generalized forms that are equivalent to plagiarist or appropriationist procedures. This is due to fundamental constituents like the notions of hyperlink (language) and community (Web), from which authorship is decided collectively and always in a relative manner. This way, fandoms continue the collective fictions (or maybe we should call them “mass”) in texts referring to both authentic documents (created by the headlines of royalties) and other texts created collectively (and often reported for infringing the copyright of the documents originating them). Other artists take advantage of the cybernetic possibilities in literary devices that force us to reflect on the most fundamental premises of writing and reading. Thus, the Argentine artist and expert Belén Gache, or the French Amélie Dubois², have worked on the figure of Pierre Menard and on procedures that, for convenience, we could classify as “plagiarists”.

However, the most conventional literature has not been indifferent to the concerns of the most radical or alternative proposals. It is a while since plagiarism and other undecidable limits of writing and artistic authorship have become privileged themes of contemporary fiction, short stories, novels, comics, films or plays. Thus, for example, we can mention plays and authors of writing literature, like *Por favor ¡plágienme! (plagiando sistematizada y progresivamente)* by the Argentinean writer Alberto Laiseca; the “estética de la repetición y del plagio” by the also Argentinian writer Ricardo Piglia; and the fictions by the Bolivian Edmundo Paz Soldán (*Fugitive river*, 1998, 2008); or by the Spanish writers Pablo Sánchez (*La caja negra*, 2005), Pepe Monteserín (*La conferencia: el plagio sostenible*, 2006) and José Ángel Mañas (*Soy un escritor frustrado*, a novel from 1996 adapted for the bigscreen in France as *Imposture* by Patrick Bochitey in 2005). This phenomenon is not an exclusive characteristic of the Hispanic world: in 2004, David Koepp adapted in *Secret Window* a bestseller about the subject written by Stephen King, starring the globalized Johnny Depp; and other global authors have made use of plagiarism as the background of their stories, like the Swiss Martin Suter (*Lila, Lila*, 2004). There are many more other possible examples.

Another important aspect to be highlighted is the proliferation of media and legal scandals around plagiarism. In recent years, it is almost predictable that authors enjoying bigger prestige or commercial success are the subject of accusation of false authorship, imitation

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2 | I recommend watching the *Coloquio perpetuo* by Belén Gache. Random generator of dialogues between Alonso Quijano and Sancho in: <<http://textodigital.com/P/Q/CP/>> [24/04/2011]; as well as the *Máquinas de escribir (Machines à écrire)* by Amélie Dubois, inspired by the absurd inventions, discovered by Gulliver: <<http://amelie.dubois.syntone.org/?p=134>> [24/04/2011].

or misappropriation of other people's materials. This increase in the number of conflicts has both economic and epistemological explanations, which are related, from my point of view, with the inherent contradictions in the current models of cultural production. Sometimes, rows among writers become in turn in narrations and testimonies of the writer's postmodern condition, as it happens with the French author Marie Darrieussecq (*Rapport de police. Accusations de plagiat et autres modes de surveillance de la fiction*, 2010) and with the American Neal Bowers (*Words for the Taking: The Hunt for a Plagiarist*, 1997).

A first explanation of the interest shown by the compulsive representation of plagiarism, pretense and quotation, both from a fictional and a theoretical perspective, is to interpret it as one of the ways in which Postmodernity faces its eschatological anguishes. In this sense, *globalized* literature presents self-reflective features common to the broadest aesthetic trends. This thematization is especially directed towards massive reproduction, *replicability*, cloning and the exponential multiplication of objects, processes that invert the traditional values of cultural singularity and authenticity. The critics of *Late Postmodernity*, like F. Jameson, Paul Virilio, Homi Bhabha (hybridization), Agustín Fernández Mallo (Post-poetry) or Eloy Fernández Porta (After-pop), Linda Hutcheon or the contributions of *Critical Art Ensemble (utopian plagiarism)* –just to mention some of the most representative ones– have underlined the polymorphic and ubiquitous character of the contemporary artistic speech, which includes the plurality of the media, incorporating it both in the body and in the possible uses and manners of the reading of works.

All the evoked so far seems to tip the balance towards the interpretation of plagiarism as a particular and ephemeral label for common features to contemporary art; or more precisely: to latent possibilities sharpened by contemporary art. After all, since the first decades of the past century, the critics are forced to read every text as an *intertext*; resourcefulness of written word, which can be tracked to considerably further origins, even since the beginning of the western reflection on writing. In short, the supposed characteristics of Plagiarism as a movement would just be common features to the whole of contemporary art: self-referentiality, semantic indeterminacy, inclusion of heterogeneous speeches, overflowing of legal property, etc.

In any event, it is necessary to explain the latter point, as there are several reasons to group together these trends and to consider that they point out a programmatic unit and a literary specificity. As it has been mentioned before, the writers and collectives demanding in different moments and latitudes "*Plagiarism*" as a collective proper name are numerous, even in recent years. In 2005, an exhibition

was organized under this title in the Casa Encendida in Madrid. It gathered artists, experts and thinkers from different fields, included reflections and works of analysis as cyberliterary, musical or multimedia examples of appropriations, and *détournements*. It is also advisable to remember the reviews by the curators of the exhibition *Plagiarism*, Jordi Costa and Álex Mendívil, on contemporary art and the management that the legal machinery and cultural industries made of it:

The coercive and punitive system results in a homogenous culture, cut on the same patterns, which ended up protecting and promoting exclusively those who take part in it. All this leads to the current artistic and cultural condition of plagiarism, understood more as an element of guerrilla than as an alternative instrument of creation (Costa y Mendívil, 2005: 35).

In my opinion, here it rests the main argument when it comes to find a unifying and specific element that allows us to talk in terms of unity of movement, strategic and ideological identity among the movements treated in the exhibition and the components of the Festivals of Plagiarism from the 80s. Indeed, the organizers included in the exhibition distinguished representatives of the *Copyleft* and the *Copyfight* (like Lawrence Lessig, author of the emblematic and influential *Free Culture*), both of them alternatives to the capitalist model of copyright, as Neoism's propositions were in their day, providing it with a clear critical, political and ideological orientation. In this sense, it is worth mentioning that other nearer proposals, like Letrism (a direct heir to the Art Strikes and Neoism) share the same utopian and rebellious ideology with the authors and artists gathered in *Plagiarism* (2005). However, despite this apparent unity of ideas and declared aims, no writers and no critics, beyond these punctual events and actions, seem to declare common aesthetic propositions or artistic praxis different to other postmodern trends. If Plagiarism existed as an artistic movement, even in its more ephemeral forms, it would make up a very peculiar type, as it lacks the usual organs, as if its members conserve a free of movements that, for this very reason, invalidated the unitary aims.

For all these reasons, it is possible to come to various conclusions. On the one hand, in every age and in parallel with the most restrictive interpretations, there have always been transgressor proposals in relation to conventional limits or to the usual representations of the literary elements, of which plagiarism (in small letter) would be the postmodern embodiment. On the contrary, *Plagiarism* seems to have a bigger entity as an extreme appropriationist or intertextual procedure than as a specific literary trend or movement. Despite the fact that different movements have explicitly claimed it at an international level and that it is possible to find common interests and influences among all them, *Plagiarism* seem to be more a utopian horizon of art than a coherent or united movement. This is all what

can be confirmed so far. In any event, it is too soon to know how far these trends will take us and if ultimately a movement with suitable aesthetic proposals will arise.

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