

THE PROBLEM WITH PLAGIARISM

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Abstract

This study examines the concept of visual plagiarism within a contemporary cultural context shaped by postmodern design theory and the digital information age, as a challenging concern for tertiary level graphic design education.

This paper does not condone plagiarism, however it asks design lecturers to reconsider taken-for-granted assumptions that students operate in an unambiguous environment of 'wrong' and 'right' when it comes to the concept of visual plagiarism. It seems that graphic design students find it increasingly difficult to navigating the grey areas between plagiarism, appropriation, homage, inspiration, 'referencing', coincidence and 'accident'. Disturbing as this may be at an ethical level, it is perhaps not surprising when one considers the contemporary world in which we live and work. This environment is actively shaped by postmodern ideas of appropriation, digital 'sampling', digital reproduction and the Internet experience as an infinite repository (resource) of textual and visual information. The 'remix' realm within which students operate reinforces postmodern concepts of appropriation and affect students' understanding of and attitude towards plagiarism. Furthermore, in a postmodern design context, the term plagiarism can be problematic, as there seems little consensus as to where the lines can be drawn between 'borrowing' or 'referencing' (postmodern appropriation or pastiche) and 'stealing' (plagiarism).

This paper briefly describes and contextualises terms relating to the topic, including pastiche, parody, and appropriation. Secondly, the features of contemporary culture including issues such as digital reproduction and the Internet experience are examined insofar as they can be seen to construct, encourage or support understandings relating to plagiarism. As a qualitative study this paper assimilates information from a variety of literature sources including Fredric Jameson's work on the postmodern concept of 'pastiche' to map out terms and concepts which provide a theoretical foundation.

A critical evaluation of the theories and concepts surrounding visual plagiarism and of the complex, often-contradictory contexts within which students operate, provides insight into the challenges faced, as a first step approach towards addressing the problem in a pre-emptive rather than punitive manner.

Key Words: *plagiarisms, visual communication, education, graphic design, appropriation*

Introduction

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2011) defines the act of plagiarism as "to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own", "use (another's production) without crediting the source", "to commit literary theft" and/or "present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source". Fundamentally, plagiarism is about copying without giving appropriate credit to the source. In graphic design practice visual plagiarism refers to "the unauthorized use or close imitation of existing artwork and the representation of it as one's own original work" (MacAvery Kane 2011).

In the university context, plagiarism is viewed as an academic offence resulting in disciplinary action for the offender. A distinction can be made between plagiarism motivated by intent to cheat or lie, or occurring out of ignorance or inexperience of correct attribution or referencing techniques. The legal implications of intent in plagiarism are not fixed (Corbin 2007:1). Some research contends that intent cannot be considered as a determining factor in a plagiarism defence (Standler 2000:2). Offering lack of intent as defence can become an easy 'blanket' plea for any accused plagiarist and "intention is arguably the most subjective... and also the most difficult to ascertain" (Sutherland-Smith 2008:73). Alternatively, some studies insists that an element of intent must be present to convict a plagiarist and that inexperience or negligence should be considered a valid defence, specifically in education where

students are still developing knowledge and skills (Beute, Van Aswegen, & Winberg 2008, Howard 1995:788, Sutherland-Smith 2008:32).

It is perceived that incidents of plagiarism in universities are on the increase (Park 2003:471-472) and as such, most universities have policy documents in place that define plagiarism and outline the consequences of plagiarism. Policy documents however, are not designed for the classroom and students need to be taken through a process where policies are contextualised and explained, and models of good and bad practice are provided (McCarthy & Rogerson 2009:4). Encouragingly, regarding written plagiarism, there are numerous comprehensive guides available to tutor students and to contextualise the topic and provide practical information on how to reference appropriately and avoid plagiarism. In creative fields however, specifically the visual arts, there does not seem to be an equivalent thorough and matured approach. An informal online search and review of library documents using keywords referring to plagiarism in writing and plagiarism in the visual arts respectively, highlight the comparative differences in regularity and comprehensiveness of information sources available for use in the classroom. Moreover, in the visual arts there is perhaps still much to be done to develop policies that can deal with the unique attributes of the discipline. *The Guardian*, a UK newspaper quotes Dr Margo Blythman, academic director of teaching and learning at the University of the Arts London: "I'm not sure it will be possible to come up with a definitive set of guidelines," she says, "but at least people will be forced to discuss plagiarism. At present, nobody in the arts really seems to want to even think about it" (in Crace 2007). Anecdotal evidence suggests that without comprehensive guides for visual arts students, lecturers rely on policy documents, which in many instances use definitions similar to the ones provided at the beginning of this paper. These types of policy definitions do incorporate visual plagiarism broadly, but do not provide adequately for formative learning opportunities where students can engage with the issue thoroughly.

As this paper investigates, visual plagiarism is a complex and in some ways problematic notion for graphic design students, as theoretical postmodern conceptions of appropriation and pastiche, as well as the effects of mass digitalisation of the information age undermine conventional notions of what constitutes visual plagiarism and affect students' capacity to work within visual plagiarism policies. As exploratory research, this paper examines the impact of digital information technology, including copy culture, digital reproduction and the Internet experience, insofar as it can be seen to construct, encourage or support understandings relating to plagiarism. Terms relating to the idea of what constitutes legitimate and illegitimate copying in graphic design will be described through the lens of postmodern theory, including the concepts of pastiche and appropriation, as well as parody, homage, 'accident' and 'coincidence'.

Digitisation, the Internet and World Wide Web

... the Internet produces a deep cultural belief that information is, legitimately, copyable and redistributable. Copying is more than just copyright infringement of music and software. It is a defining, multi- faceted feature of Internet behaviour and culture. (Allen 2003:2)

The Internet has been implicated in the perceived increase of plagiarism incidents at universities (Sutherland-Smith 2008:101). Even further, "some educators view the Internet as the greatest plagiarism tool since the copy machine" (Mayfield 2001:1). This culpability manifests in a variety of ways, including, technical and cultural implications of digitalisation and replication, such as changing perceptions of authorship and originality (Fitzpatrick 2011:14) and the notion of 'copy culture' (Allen 2003).

The ever-increasing profusion of digitalised information characterises the contemporary information age. Graphic design itself has been revolutionised by digitalisation, as designs are now produced on computer in contrast to previous mechanical systems. Today more than ever before, graphic design visuals are available on the Web in various guises – as part of portfolio showcases, historical and reference repositories, as well as commercial and/or free stock libraries, amongst others. Search engines, such as Google, support image searches and can present graphic designers with a vast array of designs or visual elements including vector graphics, photographs or illustrations that can be used as inspiration, examples or components within designs. It is common practice for designers to surround themselves with 'inspiration' and graphic examples that they can draw from as part of the design process. With digitalisation, boundaries are dissolving as the tools for the production and consumption of graphic designs are brought together onto the computer screen. The problem for lecturers occurs when the source of inspiration becomes the final design, or is too similar to the final

design, and is then submitted for assessment. Other problems implicating plagiarism occur when designs contain elements that have not been appropriately attributed. *Wired* Magazine cites John Barrie, founder of the plagiarism detection tool Turnitin, “students are using the Net as a 2 billion-page searchable, cut-able encyclopaedia” (Mayfield 2001:1).

Today, the technical facilities inherent in the Internet and digitalisation encourage a culture of copying. Digitalisation facilitates easy access to information via vast storage capacities online and locally and the easy replication of even large amounts of information with effortless copy and paste functionality. Copying is pervasive online, in subtle ways like the caching of Websites and more obvious ways, such as the use of the use of ‘mirror sites’ (Allen 2003:2). This is further evident in the replicating of information that takes place in ‘cc-ing’ contacts into email messages, re-posting information on blogs, the use of mailing lists and built-in functionality in a growing number of websites that allows one to link/replicate information to utilities such as social media sites and re-post information with the click of a button or two. Lethem (2007) explains “[i]n the contemporary world, though, the act of ‘copying’ is in no meaningful sense equivalent to an infringement—we make a copy every time we accept an emailed text, or send or forward one—and is impossible anymore to regulate or even describe”. In addition, ever more, information is being saved or downloaded from the Web, even where the usual saving processes are not permitted, there are numerous ‘download’ utilities available that can circumvent security systems that have been embedded precisely to protect copyright. Taking this further, Allen (2003:2) points to a misconception, amongst significantly the younger generation, that everything on the Internet is ‘free’.

The fact that a significant amount of ‘free’ information – including freeware or shareware utilities, books, documents, images, graphics, fonts, music and movies – certainly adds to this impression. The free nature of some information, in conjunction with the seeming abundance that infinite digital copying offers, can colour the assumption of users that all information, as long as it can be accessed and saved electronically, regardless of copyright protection or ownership, is also ‘free’. In addition to this, the Internet was built and developed in a community of information sharing and the “original framework of the Internet may be characterized as cooperative and non-proprietary” (Bruketta 2010:4). There still exists a strong influence of openness, sharing and community evident in Web models such as wikis and open source software development. Here the sharing, building and transforming of information are seen as ways of enabling greater creativity and innovation in a communal way. However, in an academic scenario the approach is different, as students are often assessed as individuals and are required to recognise authorship and attribution in a conventional and systematic way. Graphic design students assimilate and replicate digital information almost unconsciously on a daily basis as they ‘play’ – browsing and saving images and Web pages for visual inspiration, while engaging with social media sites such as Facebook and copying music or downloading movies, and simultaneously ‘work’ – developing graphic design work for academic assignments. The computer as an Internet connected entity blurs many boundaries and students are finding it more challenging to distinguish between the “different requirements of academic work and the enticing practices of being online” (Allen 2003:4).

In an age of information overload, permeated with infinite digital copies, the concept of ‘original’ becomes perhaps difficult to identify and as the idea of authorship and originality is dissolving, a new generation of students are emerging who do not necessarily recognise plagiarism in a conventional way. A *New York Times* magazine article comments accordingly (Gabriel 2010:1):

It is a disconnect that is growing in the Internet age as concepts of intellectual property, copyright and originality are under assault in the unbridled exchange of online information, say educators who study plagiarism... Digital technology makes copying and pasting easy, of course. But that is the least of it. The Internet may also be redefining how students — who came of age with music file-sharing, Wikipedia and Web-linking — understand the concept of authorship and the singularity of any text or image.

Copy culture, Sampling and Remix are creative cultural practices and concepts that have emerged as responses to digital replication (multiplication) and assimilation processes and attest to the significant cultural shifts that digital technology and the Internet offers. These terms refer to a variety of related creative practices of copying and combining pre-existing samples of music/sound, video and art, which challenge the boundaries of copyright law and concepts of originality and authorship. Here conventional boundaries blur and a reciprocal influence emerges between consumer and producer and copy and ‘original’. ‘Amateur’ consumers become creative ‘producers’ as they assimilate samples

of commercially produced sound, images and video and reconstitute them as creative multimedia assemblages using digital home computers and equipment. These remix practices lead to theoretical debates regarding artistic and creative integrity as well as copyright and ownership implications. Legitimacy aside, for an emerging generation the very act of 'remixing' in itself nullifies the need to attribute ownership or reference to the authors of the components, as the product that results from remixing is considered to be 'new' and 'original' (Bruketta 2010:3). Graphic design students as part of the emergent culture are not unaffected and it stands to reason that their perceptions of what constitutes 'original' and 'copyright', important factors relating to the concept of plagiarism, may not be in line with what is considered convention, not to mention academic policy. As such, the complexity of acceptable and unacceptable practices of appropriating and copying visual material may become a minefield for graphic design students to navigate, particularly so for inexperienced ones.

Appropriation In Graphic Design

Designers discussing plagiarism usually distinguish it from homage, appropriation, quotation, or eclecticism. There are no clear boundaries between these modes of use and plagiarism. Judgments are often made not on the basis of the work, but on the basis of the respect one has for the author of the 'copy'. (Swanson 2003:152)

Postmodernism refers to Western theoretical and creative approaches that dominated during the 1980s, the attitudinal implications of which are still particularly relevant in contemporary design theory and practice. Features of postmodernism include, pluralism and complexity, 'pastiche', inclusivity rather than exclusivity, a blurring of boundaries between 'high' and 'low' culture, embracing of appropriation practices, resistance to universalizing systems and authoritative standards and the challenging of convention and rules (Poynor 2003:11-12). At the height of postmodernism in graphic design a trend of 'retro design' and 'appropriation' approaches featured strongly, earning this time period the title "the age of plunder" (Poynor 2003:71). Appropriation in the visual arts refers broadly to creative practices where 'borrowed' or appropriated elements are used in the creation of a new work (Şahiner 2007:1). Issues of ethics and originality of appropriation become contentious, where proponents of appropriation art and design, see it as a legitimate creative and expressive practice, while cynics question it for its lack of 'originality' and 'ethics' (Şahiner 2007:1).

Jameson's (1983) conception of 'pastiche' is useful in providing a theoretical context for this phenomenon, which during the 1980s and still relevant today, undermined previous conventional notions of 'originality' and 'newness'. Jameson (1983:113) describes pastiche and parody as "the imitation or, better still, the mimicry" of styles and approaches. Unlike previous modernist approaches that promoted and pursued the ideals of universality, postmodernism in many ways generated and celebrated multiplicity and heterogeneity, resulting in diverse pluralistic approaches in graphic design practice that defied convention and rules. During modernity where a collective universal ideal was being pursued, art and design 'voices' could engage in a conversation, sometimes 'agreeing' and other times poking fun or commenting negatively. Jameson (1983:113) refers to as this type of mimicry as parody. Parody relies on a shared sense of understanding, as "there remains somewhere behind all parody the feeling that there is a linguistic [read artistic or design] norm in contrast to which the styles of the great modernists can be mocked" (Jameson 1998:114). In a postmodernist way parody is being superseded by pastiche. As postmodernism's pluralism displaces the very idea of modern universality (Anderson 1996:6) it becomes increasingly difficult to share a "norm against which a parody can register its comic effect" (Poynor 2003:72). In a way that parody multiplies, yet still connects creative approaches with each other, pastiche multiplies and disconnects. As a result, pastiche exists as a contemporary cultural feature that reproduces and mimics without reference to any 'original' – thus as "blank parody" (Jameson 1983:114). The modernist conception of originality is deeply affected and "writers and artists of the present day will no longer be able to invent new styles and worlds—they've already been invented; only a limited number of combinations are possible; the most unique ones have been thought of already" (Jameson 1983:115). So, "in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum" (Jameson 1983:115).

Today, the Web, as a vast repository of digital information, alive with infinite possibilities of access, storage, reproduction and alteration, can be implicated in Jameson's concept of 'pastiche'. The Web becomes a digital 'museum', an easily accessible resource for designers to draw from in absence of a conception of 'originality'. The difference perhaps from then to now, is that the focus of appropriation is not so much in a historical sense, as even the boundaries between old and new are starting to

dissolve and contemporary visual 'styles' are being extensively re-contextualised and here again 'origin' becomes a non-issue. Allied to this, but in a different way, Saffo (1997:190) highlights "infinite recall" as an important feature of the information age and explains how it affects ideas of creativity and originality in design and explains "Memory gives us context while forgetfulness provides an opening for invention and originality". With infinite recollection of all the visual solutions produced the conventional cycle of stylistic evolution is obstructed and it becomes increasingly difficult to generate anything 'new' or different in design. In the absence of digital infinite recall, graphic designers have the ability to draw from imprecise memories and reconstitute and 'invent' different visual solutions to what is already evident and 'known', in contrast to contemporary digital practices of replication and sampling. In the multiplicitous digital space of the Web, the maze-like connections between 'original' and infinite 'perfect' digital replications and permutations, it is easy to see how the notion of originality can be undermined. Jameson concept of pastiche and Saffo's infinite recall raises questions regarding the viability of originality as a concept. Although, for students the question may not be always be academic or theoretical in nature, in the everyday regenerative pluralistic environment of infinite digital remembering, 'creativity' may be conceived of as merely an act of assembling and reassembling what has gone before in 'new' ways, rather than intending to be 'original'.

Terms relating to Plagiarism and Appropriation in Graphic Design

Design is also usually about clear communication and thus it dwells primarily in the realm of the cultural norm. Every metaphor, cliché, and standard phrase had an original author. At some point each becomes "part of the language" and the original author need not be acknowledged. How do you sort out what is quotation and what is just plain talking? (Swanson, 2003:153)

Appropriation featured in many well-known and professional designers work, particularly during the 1980s and as a result much debate has ensued regarding whether these approaches constitute plagiarism or legitimate creative practice. A particularly well-known example is a Swatch watch poster (1986) designed by Paula Scher that appropriated a Swiss travel poster (1934) by Herbert Matter. Here we can see that although there are differences in the two posters, there are too many similarities for it to be coincidental. This example has been used in many discussions regarding plagiarism, however Scher did have permission from Matter's widow to use the image, paid royalty for the use of the form and credited the poster as "Koppel & Scher with Herbert Matter" (Scher 2002:97). Scher's design had an explicit link with the original, she comments that she admired Matters work and had his Swiss travel posters hanging on the walls of the office, and she terms the work as a "parody campaign" (Scher 2002:97).

With this example in mind, parody can be described as mimicking or borrowing closely from a source where the link to the source is overt and the intent is to reveal the source. Following Poynor (2003:71), parody can reveal the source either in comical and disparaging way or be sincere and respectful. Accordingly, two categories of parody can be distinguished, namely satire and homage. In light of this, Scher's design for Swatch can be considered as a form of homage. Contrastingly, an example of satirical parody can be found in the imitation of South African Breweries' (SAB) Carling Black Label beer brand by Justin Nurse from Laugh it Off. Here Laugh it Off mimics the Black Label logo mark and places it on a T-shirt design, however the text 'Black Label' is replaced by 'Black Labour' and 'Carling Beer' by 'White Guilt' as a way of commenting on contemporary cultural issues in South Africa. Interestingly, SAB sued Laugh it off "on the basis of trademark dilution by tarnishment" but lost the case (Rengecas 2005). The design relies on the link to be made back to the original to have its desired effect and intent to mock is patent, accordingly this can be considered as satirical parody.

An example of pastiche can be found in the cover design by designer Barney Bubbles (Colin Fulcher) for the album Armed Forces by Elvis Costello and the Attractions. The design, comprising of multiple flaps that can be reconfigured by the viewer in various ways, is described as "a riotous mélange of art historical allusions to Mondrian, Abstract Expressionism, Op Art and Pop, fronted by a painting of a herd of elephants in a kitsch popular style" (Poynor 2003:73). This designer's work does not rely on the viewer recognising the sources it was appropriated from for it to have its desired effect. Neither does the designer set out to conceal the link by reconfiguring or transforming the source material into something completely 'new' and 'original' necessarily. The design functions as the sum of its parts. Accordingly, the design is an example of pastiche – it does not rely on a connection with the source material for the viewer to appreciate it and essentially there is no intention to comment negatively or positively on the source material that is mimicked or copied. This category is contentious due to the fact that intent to comment on the source does not assert itself in a clear way and the link to the

source material is 'broken' which can be (mis)interpreted as an intent to conceal the link (cheat). The creative integrity of this approach then often relies on how similar the final design is to its source and/or the integrity and professional standing of the designer (Swanson 2003:152).

The term plagiarism can be distinguished from the terms that have been discussed so far, in that plagiarism's intention is to conceal its source material. This is in contrast to pastiche, where there is no intent evident, neither to conceal or to reveal, and to parody, where there is a definite intent to reveal the source material. Designers who plagiarise deliberately set out to copy other solutions and ideas as a shortcut approach, hoping that no one will ever know that the idea or visual was not theirs. An important further differentiation can be made where plagiarism occurs as a result of inexperience. In the case of an inexperienced student designer the source may be inadvertently concealed in the final product, but may be evident in the process work. Designers use source material as inspiration and it is possible for a 'new' designer who is not yet capable of engaging with the creative design process adequately, nor able to necessarily use the conceptual and theoretical techniques of appropriation successfully, to inappropriately copy the source material closely in the final solution. Although this type of plagiarism cannot be condoned, it should perhaps be dealt with in a pre-emptive or remedial rather than punitive manner. Finally, still under the banner of plagiarism, 'accident' and 'coincidence' can be differentiated. Accidental Plagiarism (or Cryptoamnesia) occurs as a hidden, unacknowledged memory that emerges as inspiration without any conscious knowledge of the original. Bierut (2006) in an Internet article entitled 'I Am a Plagiarist' describes this experience:

Did I think of it consciously when I designed my poster?... I saw something, stored it in my memory, forgot where it came from, and pulled it out later — much later — when I needed it. Unlike some plagiarists, I didn't make changes to cover my tracks.

Here Bierut clearly acknowledges his intent as not to conceal the source, as he had no conscious knowledge of it. Similarly, coincidental plagiarism can occur when a design piece seems as if it was plagiarised due to the fact that it is exceptionally similar to another work. It is possible that different people can come up with similar design solutions and in true postmodern fashion it can be asserted that nothing is new. Blythman (in Grace 2007) comments: "there's little, if anything, that can be genuinely said to be new" and "[a]ny time I do something original, I understand I just haven't found the person who did it first". Accidental and coincidental plagiarism becomes highly problematic, as these are 'easy' defences for any accused plagiarist and very difficult to prove or disprove, as mentioned earlier.

Conclusion

As part of an ongoing discussion, some closing recommendations can be made, certainly none cast in stone or coming from a position of authority:

- Policy documents for art and design disciplines are necessary to cater for the specific needs of the different visual disciplines.
- Lectures on visual plagiarism and appropriation theory are important to provide a framework for students to contextualize their own practice.
- Visual referencing systems should be introduced in studio practice in order to provide methods for students to indicate source material in process work and final submissions.
- As part of assessment practices, process work should be emphasized as a way of highlighting the student designer's role in developing visual solutions.

The concept of plagiarism in the creative arts is complex and although one can attempt to differentiate between what is 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' there are still many grey areas and much to debate. It is apparent that the digital information age, where the concept and technical facilities of reproduction is deeply embedded, together with postmodernist theoretical conceptions of appropriation, have significantly altered creative and cultural perceptions and approaches with regards to what constitutes legitimate and illegitimate copying of information, including visual information. Inspiration and source material are undoubtedly part of the design process and "ideas come from many sources: they recur, regenerate, take new forms, and mutate into alternative forms" (Drenttel 2005). Similarly, it is important for design students to be able to assimilate source material as part of their learning process, and to appreciate the interconnected context within which they operate visually. However, when source material becomes the solution and the design process is sidestepped, the integrity of creative practice and with it, objectives of imagination, innovation and originality, are put into question. As has been discussed in this paper, the differences between what constitutes plagiarism and legitimate

appropriation can take on many different forms – pastiche, parody, homage, satirical parody, plagiarism, accidental plagiarism and coincidental plagiarism. Within these copy practices, it seems that there are many instances where it may become problematic to determine whether the designer's intent is to conceal the source material (cheat) or, in a postmodern way where the idea of an original is being put into question, to not comment on the source material whatsoever (pastiche). In addition where there are unconscious copy processes or where similarities are simply happenstance, intent cannot even be factored into the equation. Moreover, even though it may be possible to 'classify' visual plagiarism and provide terms and descriptions for various approaches in theory, it becomes significantly more difficult to ascertain intent in a practical sense and thus apply this theory in reality. So, while in practice generalisations are problematic and decisions can perhaps only be made on a case-by-case basis, there is much value in gaining a better theoretical understanding of how culture and theory affects appropriation and plagiarism in the graphic design education setting. Here, considerable research is still required to contextualize the subject of visual plagiarism in order that comprehensive and appropriate policy documents can be developed and perhaps more importantly, the concept can be appropriately managed for students as part of teaching and learning processes.

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Short Biography

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