

On Being Derivative

In the last forty or fifty years we have all become accustomed to seeing bizarre buildings that seem to graft ancient styles of architecture to pseudo-modernist glass and steel boxes, or Roman porticos to hotels that look like giant grain silos. For people like me who were taught in the sixties' art schools to admire the classic simplicity of a Mies van der Rohe or a Philip Johnson, Postmodernist architecture seems grossly decadent.

This late 20th century movement in architecture was itself inspired by the works of visual artists of the 1950's and 60's, such as Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, who produced works in multiple media which seemed to ridicule the gravitas of all earlier artwork. However, these so-called innovators were themselves **derivative** of earlier Dadaists such as Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray.

To quote Muffet Jones –Coordinator for the Foundational Art 100 program at B.S.U.– “Postmodernism rejects Modernism's grand narratives of artistic direction, eradicates the boundaries between high and low forms of art, disrupts the genre and its conventions with collision, collage, pastiche, and fragmentation. Postmodern art comes from the viewpoint that all stances are unstable and insincere, and therefore irony, parody, and humor are the only positions which cannot be overturned by critique or later events.” *

And according to California artist and critic Eric Wayne: “One of the tenets of Postmodernism states that **originality is no longer possible as all art is derivative** [my emphasis]. It is accepted wisdom in the art world today that our species is no longer capable of originality. We're washed up and have been for about a century. You'd think artists would rebel, like scientists who were told there's nothing left to discover, and try to prove it wrong. However, to do so would be to condemn yourself as hopelessly antiquated and irrelevant.” **

Since the start of the Millennium, and having assimilated some of the prejudices of the Postmodernist canon, I confess that I have created many pieces, both visual and literary, which are frankly derivative –if not outright plagiaristic. (Visit my website “www.Proto-Barbarism.ca”). As a sort of *mea culpa*, I herein attempt to analyze the negative bias attached to the term “derivative.” I hypothesize that said bias originates in the linguistic morphological difference between the Germanic and the Romance languages, and in the historical rivalries of nations speaking the former and those who spoke the latter. Some examples of this negative bias are: the disparagement of Spain by the British Crown after the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, and the denigration of Hispanics at the hands of American settlers of the West starting in the 1840's.

Hear me out:

All Romance languages (Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Ladino, etc.) **derive** from Latin in the logic of their grammar. For instance, a Spanish stem word such as “arte”

can produce many conjugations or derivations through the use of prefixes and suffixes –such as “artista”, “artefacto”, “artero”, “artesana” and “artificial.” The fact that these words **derive** from one root does not diminish their importance in the language.

Now, as a member of the Germanic family of languages, English is a **compositional** language. In linguistics, a **compound** is a lexeme (i.e., a word or sign) that consists of more than one stem. Compounding, composition or nominal composition is the process of word-formation that creates compound lexemes. Compounding occurs when two or more words or signs are joined to make a longer word or sign. ***

For example: an English word stem such as “smith” can be welded to others to make “blacksmith” and “wordsmith.” Or a word like “copy” can be combined with others to make “copyright,” “photocopy” or “copycat.”

Of course, this analysis is outrageously simplistic, as all European languages –and especially English– have borrowed from both the Romance, the Germanic and other languages; (which is patently obvious, as a lot of the words I’ve used in this essay, were clearly **derived** from Romance languages.) This is the result of the many and varied invasions of the British Isles by nations speaking Romance languages over the centuries, starting with the Roman conquest of Britain in 43 A.D. under Emperor Claudius, which left a plethora of Latin words to borrow from, followed by the Norman conquest in 1066. Similarly, in the United States, owing to the conquest of the Mexican territories, as well as repeated waves of Hispanic immigrants since the 19th century. These constant and multiple borrowings have made English one of the richest lexicons in the world.

So, in the end, being **derivative** is not so bad; and the Postmodernists are right that all art is to some extent derivative. The Romans copied the Greeks who copied the Minoans and the Egyptians; and Shakespeare borrowed from Suetonius to write Julius Caesar; etc., etc.

And any new and original essay cannot help borrowing from many earlier sources –such as the footnotes below indicate.

* <https://boisestate.pressbooks.pub/arhistory/chapter/modern-to-postmodern/>

** <https://artofericwayne.com/2017/05/08/inextinguishable-originality-refuting-rosalind-krauss/>

*** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Compound_\(linguistics\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Compound_(linguistics))

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