**Appropriation in the ages of the classics**

“In any case, always remember what Jean-Luc Goddard said: ‘It’s not where you take things from, it’s where you take them to.’”– Jim Jarmusch

Before the twentieth century the serious artist tended to think of himself as a tiny figure alive between the golden age of **the classics** of the past and the monumental future of **posterity**.

There were four common ways of appropriating the greatness of the past:

* emulation
* allusion
* adaptation
* editing

Before recording and photography, it was difficult to use *exactly* someone else’s material in your art. You could copy their painting or sculpture or tune, but you couldn’t literally lift their creation and drop it into your own. Literature was an exception, where it would be possible to quote/plagiarize verbatim a previous artist’s words.

In general, high literary culture in the period before 1900 frowned on the direct use of other people’s material in your own creation. The accepted methods by which you might re-use or place your own stamp on the creation of someone else were emulation, allusion, adaptation, and emendation.

**Emulation** involved imitating the *style* or *approach* of a precursor (an artist who came before you). When Vergil wanted to write the great epic of the the Romans, he emulated Homer, who had written the great epics of the Greek people. He borrowed ideas, motifs, and some stylistic effects from Homer. When John Milton, in the period around the English Restoration, wanted to outdo both Vergil and Homer by making *Paradise Lost* the epic of the whole human race, he copied aspects of the approach and style of Vergil, writing in blank verse, for example. On the whole, he did not actually *quote* or *rework* the words of Vergil, but the emulation was recognizable, and sometimes meaningful.

**Allusion** was about *mentioning* the creative work of the precursor. At times you would actually quote from the creative work, but this was intended as a shorthand way of invoking some of the context (and cultural force) of the previous work. Allusion was often not explicitly indicated, but was an effect which the knowledgeable reader would recognize. A modern example of allusion would be the Tupac chorus “Something wicked this way comes,” which is a quotation from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, and was also used as the title of a novel by Ray Bradbury (and an album by The Herbalizer).

**Adaptation** is moving material from its original genre into a new one, for example turning an epic poem into a play, or – as we still do today – basing a film on a novel, a comic book, a stage show, etc. In some cases, not just plots and characters but also words and motifs will be appropriated for the new genre.

**Edition** can sometimes be a form of appropriation. In the guise of establishing an accurate text, the editor can impose his or her own interpretation on texts that have come down to us in various manuscripts or early editions. For instance, the English poet Alexander Pope edited Shakespeare’s plays in the 1700s and made numerous “corrections” to the wording in the earliest editions, assuming mistakes had been made and that he understood what Shakespeare must actually have written. Many of these were considered acceptable – or indeed superior to what the early editions had – and some have fallen into such common use that they are still in modern editions of Shakespeare today.

**The Renaissance and the Enlightenment** (1400-1800)

Greatness lay in the past and one should emulate it, creating new, though potentially lesser greatness. We should acknowledge and allude to the greatness of the past.

Later, we may be able to improve on some past greatness slightly, through *editing* it.

**The Romantic period** (1800-1900)

Greatness lay in the past; one must overcome that greatness and create new greatness – the best way is to try to ignore the greatness of the past and break away from traditions. Concentrate on what makes you great now – or if not great, at least – as Rousseau said – different.

**The Modernist period** (1900-1950)

Greatness lay in the past ; that’s all over. Our task is to make the last great statement of greatness, or to remind ourselves how greatness is lost forever – then it will be the rabble (or perhaps ours will be the beginning of a new tradition?)

**The Postmodernist Period** (1950 – )

Greatness is a silly idea. The idea of “high” culture is silly (but recognizing this lets one remain “high”). The past is over; anyway there is too much of  it. Forget it or recycle it at will. You’ve got enough to worry about trying to cope with what’s happened since the 60s – do that.

Around 1800 there was a breaking away from the past; a new belief that one should not try to copy the past but follow one’s own inner genius. Partly, this may have been the result of the *increasing amount* of past greatness one had to contend with. Now one not only had Homer and Vergil and all the Romans behind one, but also Shakespeare and Milton and other English and European “classics.”

**The anxiety of influence**

Literary critic **Harold Bloom**’s theory that great poets define themselves in an Oedipal conflict with their strong precursors, and that in the Romantic period many great poems can be read as the expression of the anxiety felt by the poet as he tries to distinguish himself as unique from and superior to his precursor.

See remixculture.ca for more discussion of this and other concepts.

**The avant-garde**

Wikipedia (January 2015), summarizing Clement Greenberg:

The concept of avant-garde refers primarily to artists, writers, composers and thinkers whose work is opposed to mainstream cultural values and often has a trenchant social or political edge. Many writers, critics and theorists made assertions about vanguard culture during the formative years of modernism [first half of 20th century] …

Vanguard culture has historically been opposed to “high” or “mainstream” culture, and that it has also rejected the artificially synthesized mass culture that has been produced by industrialization. Each of these media is a direct product of Capitalism—they are all now substantial industries—and as such they are driven by the same profit-fixated motives of other sectors of manufacturing, not the ideals of true art.

[mainstream and mass culture] were therefore kitsch: phony, faked or mechanical culture, which often pretended to be more than they were by using formal devices stolen from vanguard culture. For instance, during the 1930s the advertising industry was quick to take visual mannerisms from surrealism, but this does not mean that 1930s advertising photographs are truly surreal; rather they express style without substance.

Clement Greenberg carefully distinguished true avant-garde creativity from the market-driven fashion change and superficial stylistic innovation that are sometimes used to claim privileged status for these manufactured forms of the new consumer culture.

**The avant-garde and appropriation**

In the 20th century, three things can be seen taking place in the evolution of art:

* Art as a practice becomes very self-conscious (questions of “what is art?” and what isn’t become central.
* Increasingly mechanical reproduction becomes an important aspect of art (photography, sound recording, film, cheap reproductions and prints, etc), a threat to it, and a subject of it
* Forms and practices of mass culture begin to compete with, enter into, merge with, and supersede high culture.

Along with these concerns many avant-garde artists practiced appropriation and what today we would call remix. They are especially prone to repurposing the mass-produced works of mainstream culture: photographs, magazines, ads, and so forth. The Dadaists practiced collage and photomontage partly to represent and critique the mechanically reproduced mainstream culture; meanwhile the idea of high culture was thrown into question by appropriations like Duchamp’s “readymades,” often seen as a forerunner of the anti-art side of postmodernism.

In the Pop Art of the 1950s and 60s, artists like Lichtenstein and Warh0l repainted and recreated images from mass-produced pop culture (Lichtenstein’s giant paintings of comic book frames, Warhol’s posterized versions of Elvis and Marilyn).

Finally, in a movement specifically called “Appropriation Art” from the 1980s, artists like Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine would make copies of pieces by other artists and designers and present them as their own work, drawing attention to how the changed context in time, space, and “creator” changed the meaning of the works. A famous is example was Levine’s “After Walker Evans” show, in which she re-photographed famous photos by early 20th century photographer Walker Evans and presented them as her own, thus drawing attention to Evans’s own appropriation of the depression era poor people whose images he had appropriated for the purpose of making aesthetic and valuable art objects out of them. Levine’s act of re-appropriation is seen by some as powerful critique of the art world and gallery culture in which she is operating, and in the case of portraits of women by Evans re-appropriated by Levine may have a feminist angle to them as well.

**Appropriation in 20th Century Avant-Garde Art**

See the [pdf](02%20art_slides.pdf) for images.

**Retromania**

“Retromania” is a shorthand term in this class only for a phenomenon to which attention is drawn in Simon Reynolds’s book of the same name. This is the tendency of post-World War 2 mass culture to recycle itself and ignore the majority of pre-20th century or even pre-World War 2 culture, especially high culture.

The phenomenon is presumably partly owing to the triumph of broadcast and recording technology during this era. This means there is a rich record of the popular mass culture since 1950 available for sampling and reinterpreting, and that this mass culture continues to inform contemporary culture today, potentially dumbing it down to the standards of a consumer-oriented, lowest common denominator kind of culture that is still largely based in the American attitudes of the 1950s and 60s. The culture that is most “popular” is still that produced by the mass media, with commercial considerations propelling it. The mass culture of today recycles the mass culture of the previous five decades, but often ignores the potential of human culture produced further back in history. Thus mass culture remains both strangely fixated on the past (its own past) and also indifferent to the past beyond when it existed. In this it is also like many young people today, who divide time into “now” and “back in the day” (before I was born), a time which includes all the various centuries before “now.”

Retromania is often an aspect of postmodernism as an art form. Postmodernism recognizes the emptiness of the past and past authority, but can’t help being enamoured of the mass culture that pervades cultural life today and has triumphed over both the high culture and much of the folk culture of the past. The recorded culture of these decades – tv shows, comic books, pop albums, films, radio broadcasts and so forth – bring alive (or ghoulishly reanimate) the culture of the recent past, above all America’s.

Thus, much mainstream culture today is both blissfully ignorant of history before television and at the same time obsessed with the culture that has been created since. Retro involves appropriations like “the 70s are back” and suggests that the sum of human culture worth discussing, studying, or appropriating can be found in the widely shared – but manufactured and not really very representative – products of the post-ww2 commercial era.