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21W.730 Essay 1/Draft 3
November 2, 2004

Influence and Creativity

I have a habit of noticing redundancies in other people. Their personalities and their thoughts just seem so similar: daughters trying to be like mothers, or sons trying to be like fathers, or friends trying to be like each other. In my mind the sense of “self” that we as human beings have is more of a delusion than a reality, where we are nothing but the products of a multitude of influences throughout our lives. Did I ever have an original thought in my life? Or is it always someone else’s idea that I am only repeating? What does it mean to be a human being without original thought and creativity? I talk like my friends do. I learned body language from my parents, stories from movies and books, perspectives on life from parents or philosophers or friends or teachers. Despite the myriad of thoughts that make up my personality, I feel as if I only absorbed my surroundings with no real personal creation. My parents keep asking me: “Who have you been hanging out with? Why do you act like this?” as if they already know that the comments I make, or the movies I enjoy or any of my other sudden preferences and mannerisms are not my own. When we are young, the adults tell us that “everyone is ‘special,’” but how could I believe in this idea of personal creativity and uniqueness when there are so many influences that I copy in my life?

Of course, the term “creativity” is almost inherently ambiguous. What do I hope to achieve, or more specifically, what do I feel that I lack because of this supposed lack of personal creativity? When I think of creative minds, I imagine Pablo Picasso or Thomas Edison and the contributions they have made to society or the impact on our emotions. But fame or critical acclaim are not measures of creativity. However, I do want to say that I have contributed, even if it is only a small portion, toward something new or original that I can claim as my own, and not

taint that accomplishment with the various personal or cultural biases that I am exposed to and inadvertently take as my own.

Among these cultural influences are the commercial superpowers that affect us every day, and the cynical view is that we are all alike as a result. Mass media conglomerates provide the vast majority of content on our television stations, while the Clear Channel Incorporated dominates 100 of the 112 radio station markets. You can hardly walk down the street without being bombarded with image and advertisements to the point where you can recognize brands and products before you can even distinguish the letters, simply from the colors and shapes. We all grew up with the Disney white castle and the characters of their films. We dine under the glow of the golden arches. We “Just Be” with Calvin Klein, whatever that means. The Pavlovian excitement associated with “You Got Mail!” is so strong that internet-addiction websites suggest that we turn off sound effects in many of our favorite programs. With so much content and imagery from the consumerist culture assaulting our senses, how are we supposed to distinguish influence from creativity? Why am I so worried that all the children I know only seem to draw pictures of Spongebob Squarepants or Pokemon characters?

Furthermore, there seems to be a movement toward categorization that is all the more disturbing because people seem to actually want to be classified into a neat category. Do commercial demographics consider me the “eighteen to thirty-five male”? The “college student”? The “slightly-left-leaning-yet-can-be-fiscally-conservative-but-likes-to-consider-themselves-independent” demographic? Almost everyone with access to the Internet has taken a personality quiz, or a “which kind of car are you?” quiz, or a “what color are you?” quiz or a “which religion are you?” quiz, or any of the myriad “authorities” that aid in classifying individuals into six or seven easily describable chunks. And worse, we are tricked into believing that this obsessive categorization describes independence, as if determining whether you were an “American Eagle” kind of guy, or an “Abercrombie and Fitch” kind of a guy, or an “Express Men” kind of guy was a sign of rabid teenage individualism.

It seems that there is so much pressure to conform to force-fed notions of a societal ideal that it is easy to wonder: are we influenced to the point of banality? Consumerism and classification have become such dominant forces in our society that, for a time, it was hard for me to view influence as anything but an obstacle to the creative process. Don't these billboard ads or television commercials or fashion statements serve only as pillars of conformism? Yet at the same time I wonder: these cultural influences may encourage a subconscious conformism, but they still had to originate from somewhere, so doesn't that indicate some level of creation and creativity? Even billboard artists at one time had no billboards to influence them, so perhaps at the core of all of those advertisements or fads or slogans is some true creative spark that we continue to perpetuate along with any kind of interpersonal, commercial, or cultural influence. Perhaps this very redundancy of influence is a strength instead of an obstacle, serving as a verification of what may or may not be beneficial to society as a whole. We pass along the same jokes because it is a confirmation of their humor. We utilize certain jargon or ideas because they speak to us at a personal level, not necessarily because they are "new" or "creative." We appreciate certain books because we believe that these stories must be passed on to future generations.

I believe people can take their individual experiences and synthesize it with an idea introduced by someone else to form something new and unexpected. In her book *The Creative Mind*, Margaret Boden describes how even our most creative minds liberally adapted the ideas and work of others into their own work: "Darwin's own grandfather, among others, had the idea of evolution long before he did... Shakespeare borrowed plots from Plutarch,... Bach used themes from Vivaldi,... Picasso adapted pictures by Velasquez." Whether I am applying my personal experiences and transforming a thought someone shared with me, or whether I express an idea that someone else shapes into something else, I still feel that I am involved in the creative process, even if I cannot isolate an idea as wholly mine. I don't see creativity as being some sort of individual contest that must be won as an indication of my uniqueness and verification of my or anyone's human value. And although I don't think I fully understand the greater picture

regarding the role of influence of creativity in my life and society, maybe the answer is not nearly as complex as it seems. Maybe creativity is a societal, collective process in which everyone has a role. I like to think that the point of creativity and the creative process is not to individually labor over the seminal work of the century, or to painstakingly differentiate one's self from others. Creativity should be about the pure enjoyment of having been involved, influencing others and being influenced, combining ideas and preserving those that speak to us, discovering and appreciating all that which is greater than ourselves.