

THE ART OF INFLUENCEOLOGY



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In the infamous year of 1948, on a wave of combating formalism and cosmopolitanism in culture, the Soviet magazine *Sovetskaya Muzyka* published a caricature. It shows the outside of the conservatoire in Leningrad, from which emerges its Moscow counterpart, from which in turn springs a row of mechanically marching miniature clones of Shostakovich, complete with a malicious poem under the drawing. This was the totalitarian government promoting socialist realism, by condemning a great artist and outstanding teacher for allegedly harming Soviet music by refusing to compose appropriate symphonies and cantatas, as well as for demoralizing an entire generation and spreading his evil influences from the banks of Neva all the way to the Kremlin.

Three centuries earlier, in 1633, the Spanish painter and art theorist Vicencio Carducho had condemned the harmful influence then being exerted on young painters by another genius, known more widely as Caravaggio: "I heard a devoted follower of our profession say that the very birth of this man foretold the ruin and demise of painting, and he compared it to how at the end of this world the Anti-Christ, with his false miracles and fantastic deeds, will lead many people to perdition, who will be moved by his seemingly admirable but in reality deceptive, false and transient works, and they will say he is the true Christ."

"Right" and "wrong" models

It is important to note that both the academic tradition to which Carducho belonged, and the movement of socialist realism (which in many aspects was a distorted continuation of academicism), assumed that the essence of creativity was to emulate the examples of others, often in an eclectic mix of desired properties. But these models to follow had to be the right ones, and the chosen influences had to be good. The small size of this article will only allow us to dip our toes into the endless ocean of problems related to different kinds of influences in culture and related comparative

methods, but we must nevertheless remember that valuation and evaluation were indeed often important aspects here. Any recognized "influence" is almost never neutral, it is just simply not a stated fact or a constant, like in science. It is not only artists and theorists, but first and foremost historians of various disciplines, who usually treat each case of influence and borrowing, depending on their world view, as having a favorable or unfavorable impact on someone else's work, as casting either a glow or a shadow on the creator himself. Although a positivist, evolutionist approach to studying the links between artists and their works has already been developed a century ago, creating the ironic term "influenceology", that does not mean that this approach is not still widely present, both in



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research and in the general perception of art by its layman enthusiasts. Recently, after a concert of works by Mieczysław Karłowicz, a passionate discussion took place among music-lovers debating which elements he had borrowed from Richard Strauss, which from Pyotr Tchaikovsky, and whether the part that resembled Scriabin was the result of direct influence, or perhaps had its roots in similar inspirations.

Evolving since at least the dawn of the modern age, the model of a great artist envisioned within a linear understanding of art as a historical process based on

development and progress, culminating in the Romantic era in the idealistic model of the genius-demiurge, imparted a certain momentum to the process of describing influences and the kind of language used for that purpose. Each successive artistic giant manifested himself to the world precisely by shedding, like a snake sheds its skin, the layer of influence imparted to him in his youth by his master and other authorities, thereby becoming able to speak with his own, new and original voice.

Geniuses and followers

Even Dante in his *Divine Comedy* wrote of a student who had eclipsed the fame (thus overcoming the influence) of his teacher: “Cimabue believed that he held the field in painting, / And now Giotto has the cry, / So the fame of the former is obscure.” Thus, when writers described how great artists emerged, they usually wrote about the latter actively, con-

in: we submit to influences, which is an act of life-long capitulation to the demands of originality and independence, becoming stuck in the “dead zone” of epigonism.

Of course, this process of absorbing other people’s ideas and style may be conscious and intentional, or it may be unconscious. The first can involve a wide range of phenomena, from inspiration to plagiarism and forgery. Inspiration is of course the noblest of these. It is even permitted for geniuses who, when arriving on Mount Parnassus, acquire the powers of Midas turning any object to gold with their touch. One genius can inspire another, both directly and through a distance of decades or centuries. When working on his self-portrait, the 34-year-old Rembrandt borrowed the composition from a painting by Titian, but that didn’t harm his fame, just like those who consciously refer back to the great Venetian Rubens, or Velasquez. Being influenced or even borrowing from geniuses can be a positive thing, but below the line set by greatness, they can turn into a negative case of epigonism. At the same time, if it is determined that something was in some sense new but imperfect, but yet had an impact on the great artist, it is only thanks to this that it avoided the fate of *damnatio memoriae* – being erased from memory (like some organic form, although imperfect, but constituting the necessary link in the chain of evolution). This was the case with John Field’s piano nocturnes, which for decades were performed from time to time only because they were considered to have inspired Chopin’s nocturnes.

A genius drawing on average works ennobles them, yet an average author imitating the work of a genius is accused of epigonism. Interestingly, the closer we get to our own times and the more demanding we have become of artists to be original and independent, the denser the clouds of imitators and epigons looming over the landscape of creativity become. Some may say that things have always been this way, that each era had its Caravaggios, and they are right, but never was the scale of succumbing to the influence of leaders so massive. All one has to do is go to a twentieth-century painting exhibition at any of the European national museums to see practically identical copies of local *ecole-de-Paris* works. Or listen to the works of some of the less-independent students of Nadia Boulanger. Another thing is that many of those who had to paint like Picasso, compose like Stravinsky, and design houses like Corbussier, today are often subjects of intense research. This typicality, however, gives them a special appeal. I myself collect monographs on European architects from the interwar period and I see designs that on one hand are monotonously similar, yet differ in terms of fascinating details. I buy recordings of works by forgotten composers (although these days they are getting recorded and performed increasingly more often) and I’m pleased to recognize

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sciously stripping themselves of influences, rejecting or overcoming them until they were free. In the case of great artists, imitation, or being influenced by masters, was treated as an ailment of youth. In popular writings about great masters, such as the “geniuses of the Renaissance” (originating in Vasari’s *Lives*), Verrocchio in relation to da Vinci, or Ghirlandaio compared to Michelangelo, become some sort of extras, background characters in myths or hagiographic legends, destined to fail from the start, but still necessary to use for validating the emerging genius. Michelangelo corrects his master’s drawing, in essence ridiculing him, and Verrocchio, seeing the perfection of an angel painted by da Vinci in one of his masterpieces, is so embarrassed by his own inabilities that he gives up painting forever. And so the genius stands there, shinings with the splendor of his own originality, cut off from all that came before him. But in a paradoxical reversal, his blinding glow falling on the legions of his disciples and followers casts a certain shadow on them. This is where the somewhat offensive word “submission” comes

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the influence of first-class masters in their works. This makes it more pleasurable and has a lot to do with a particular type of collecting, where the focus is on typicality and situating a given object's characteristics on a certain spectrum of typicality.

Who was first

In any case, to a large extent it is these secondary and tertiary artists, the epigones and belated emulators, who today are the *raison d'être* for many scholarly investigations, as a source for the still popular comparative studies. After all, how much longer could the growing number of art historians, musicologists or literary scholars deal solely with the original works of the greatest artists? Of course these detective-style inquiries can become quite clichéd. Often, the influences they investigate are simply imaginary or result from a combination of various factors, including random ones. Similarities between two works of different artists does not necessarily entail that author B when creating work Y had to be familiar with work X of artist A. If both artists lived and worked in the same era, in the same style and within a similar convention, they could have created similar works by chance.

On the other hand, if these styles appeared almost simultaneously, it triggers first-hood disputes similar to the ones fought over geographical or scientific discoveries. The well-known "theme of destiny" in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and the theme of the finale of the Fifth Symphony by Etienne-Nicolas, Mehul known only to connoisseurs, are almost identical, as Schumann noted in 1838. However, both works were created practically at the same time and it is hard to suspect that one of the composers "copied" from the other. However, some researchers still refuse to believe in such coincidences. I remember tirades presented with fervent certainty by a certain eminent art historian that painter X simply had to have seen this or that work, which means that he must have travelled to Rome, for example, even though there was not a shred of evidence in support of this. Of course, these similarities may be due to many factors, not only cultural ones. The fact that gigantic pyramids appeared in both ancient Egypt and pre-Columbian America does not mean that the two ancient civilizations were linked by the mythical Atlantis, or even aliens, as Erich von Daniken claimed in his popular books.

Global design networks

The application of common sense, avoiding tunnel vision in adamantly seeking to uncover influences and correlations, can also be encountered in credible research. An example can be found in the study of the broader impact of graphic art starting from the fifteenth century. The recently published excellent

work by Zbigniew Michalczyk entitled *W lustrzanym odbiciu: Grafika europejska a malarstwo Rzeczypospolitej w czasach nowożytnych ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem późnego baroku* [Mirror Image: European Graphic Art versus Painting in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in Modern Times, with Particular Emphasis on the Late Baroque] (Warsaw 2016) brilliantly depicts the complicated, complex and powerful aspect of the global network of creating and distributing graphic designs. Through this "matrix of influences" the inventions created in the minds of master artists would end up, sometimes after a number of transformative phases, as works of "hack" artists on the very fringes of civilization. We can assume that in the former Commonwealth, painters more often than not may have been unaware not only of Rubens's existence, but perhaps even of Antwerp itself, and yet they produced images that were quite faithful reproductions of the Flemish master's known works.

Finally, let me expand on the topic of Nadia Boulanger, who I mentioned earlier. This French coryphaeus of music, though she was a fairly good composer, conductor and pianist, did not in fact become famous in any of these areas. She did, however, help educate over a thousand musicians, especially composers, conductors and pianists from around the world, including numerous Poles, many of whom are still alive and active. The scale of her influence on the music of our times is unimaginable, her list of pupils reading almost like a list of entries in an encyclopedia of 20th century music. Although Boulanger's somewhat mediocre pieces are still performed from time to time, her influence on music was certainly not smaller than that of Stravinsky or Schoenberg.

It is impossible to find another person who had so much influence in any other artistic discipline, such as painting, for example. This shows, however, that when it comes to music the ever-important notion of craftsmanship, technique, and admitting to being influenced by the great artists of the past is not looked down on, on the contrary – it is a source of pride. This becomes even more important when it comes to performance. This is one of the last forms of art where the idea of schools, such as the Russian, Polish or French schools of violin or piano training, is still spoken of seriously, although with increasing globalization these lines are quickly becoming blurred. To this day, however, experts in piano or violin music like to create and publish genealogical trees, where individual lines go from Beethoven, through Carl Czerny, Franz Liszt and his pupils, all the way through to present times. Though this type of far-reaching influence through generations has more to do with magic or marketing, it undoubtedly makes the performer, and often also listeners, feel better.

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