

# THE PIRACY PROJECT

In November 2011, Quentin Rowan (alias Q.R. Markham) published his crime novel *Assassin of Secrets*, which was quickly celebrated in the blogosphere as “very Bondian.” Shortly after its release, however, the publisher, Little, Brown, recalled 6,500 print copies after a blogger on commanderbond.net blog found instances of plagiarism. Little, Brown launched a campaign to find all plagiarized passages, turning up, among numerous instances, a six-page stretch taken from John Gardner’s *Licence Renewed*. As more people got involved in hunting down the thefts, they found in the first thirty-five pages thirty-four verbatim copied passages from other books. Eventually, it became clear the novel was constructed almost entirely from other peoples’ words and sentences. Thomas Mallo, the author of *Stolen Words* was quoted in *The New Yorker*: “It almost seems to be a kind of wiki-novel, with so many other writers unwittingly forced to be contributors.”

Little, Brown declared they could no longer stand behind the book. Rowan had to pay back his advance and reimburse them for production costs. But how had he thought he could get away with it? In the interview with *The New Yorker*, he said that for the past fifteen years he had dreaded being discovered as a plagiarist.

For me, the real question is why he tried to hide his compulsion instead of proudly acknowledging it. Jonathan Lethem’s *The Ecstasy of Influence – A Plagiarism*, one of the most stunning



pieces of writing I came across last year, shows the way. Over many pages, Lethem runs through surprising examples of plagiarism in literary history only to meticulously reveal at the end all the passages he himself has borrowed. In stark contrast to Rowan, Lethem openly and ingeniously celebrated the fact that, as he puts it, “all art exists on a continuum of borrowing.”

### **The Piracy Project**

The Piracy Project, run by me and Andrea Francke as part of AND Publishing’s research program is an ever-growing collection of pirated books built through an international call for submissions. The call is for books that explore the copying, re-editing, translation, paraphrasing, imitation, reorganization, and manipulation of existing works. Here, creativity and originality are not in the borrowed material itself, but in the way it is handled.

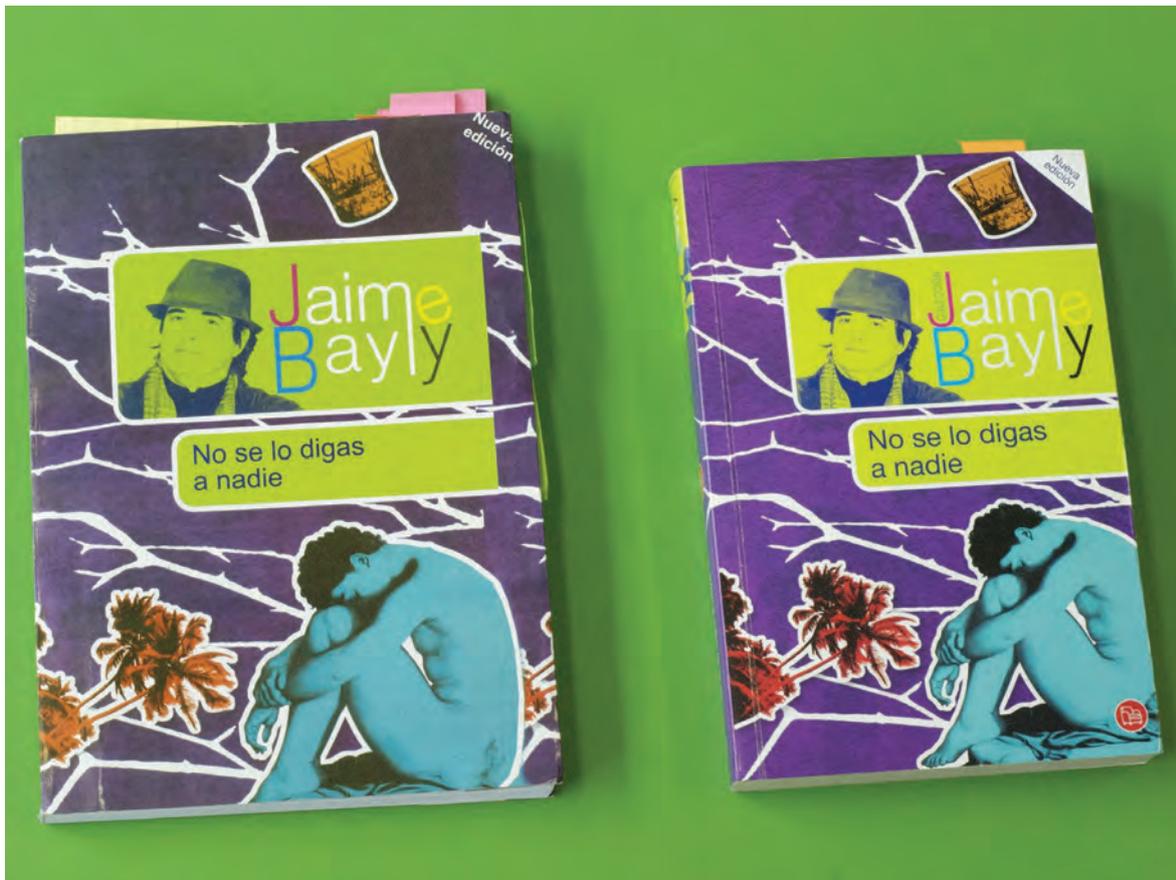
The project’s initial trigger was the plan at Central Saint Martins University of the Arts, strongly opposed by students and staff on site, to close its art library. The opposition to this plan of closing the Byam Shaw Library resulted in running the newly established Reading Room as a self-organized space, open for a variety of experiments—social, artistic, and pedagogical. The Piracy Project is just one of these. It creates a different level of engagement with the resources and books in the Reading Room. A playful and subversive tension is created between the new entries, copies, and hybrids challenging common

understandings of authorship and the original books on the shelves. Within months after publishing an open call for submissions, we received an unpredictable variety of book projects taking wild and surprising approaches to piracy and un-authorized copying.

### **Active Reading – the reader as rewriter**

One of the books in the collection is Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Tree of Codes*, published by Visual Editions, London. It is an appropriation of Bruno Schulz’s collection of short stories *Street of Crocodiles* written in 1934. “Some things you love passively, some you love actively,” Foer told *Vanity Fair*, “In this case, I felt the compulsion to do something with it.” To this extent, Foer intervened physically in the original novel, slicing out many of Schulz’s words to carve out a new story.

Such an impulse could also characterize another book in *The Piracy Collection*: a pirate copy of a Jaime Bayly novel, *No se lo digas a nadie*, which we bought on the streets of Lima, Peru in 2010 and in which the pirates had added two extra chapters, well written enough to be indistinguishable from the rest. Of course, where Safran Foer puts his own name on the book – claiming authorship – the pirates in Lima remain anonymous. They infiltrate another author’s pages as a playground for their own imagination and “borrow” the name of the celebrated author to make their own points.



What is the motivation behind this? Pirated books are widely available in Peru. They cost a tenth of the official version's price. Readers and academics in Lima who we talked to were rather shocked about our discovery. How many secretly modified books are being read unwittingly?

Many of the works in *The Piracy Collection* deliberately and freely borrow from other authors to make their own points.

London based artist Kaisa Lassinaro, for instance, "silenced" the 1975 screenplay for *Shampoo*, written by Robert Towne and Warren Beatty, by taking out all the dialogue lines. What is left is only the characters' presences and their actions, creating a mysterious and unsettling work of minimalist drama:

JILL

GEORGE

Jill doesn't answer

JILL

GEORGE

JILL

GEORGE

JILL

GEORGE

JILL

GEORGE

JILL

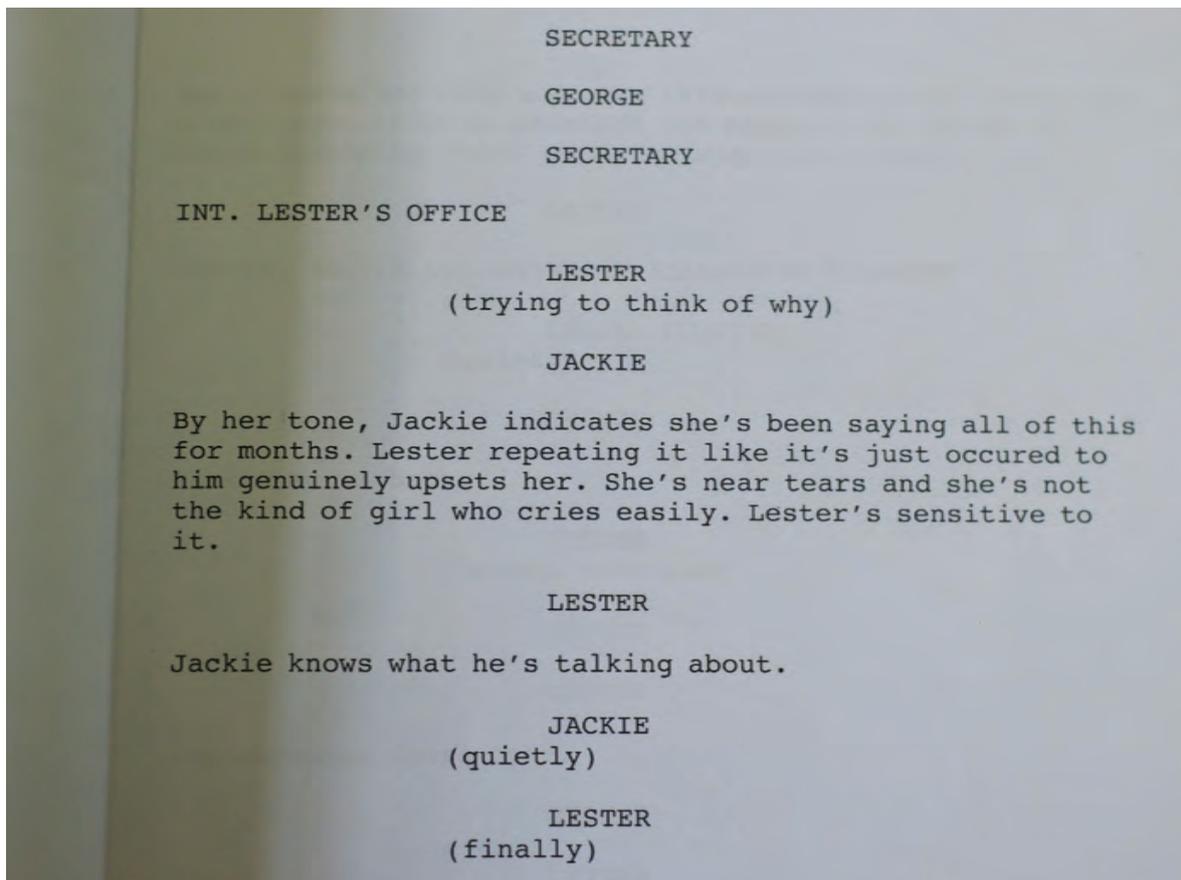
She starts to cry again. Georges smiles.

GERORGE

George turns and walks up the stairs and out the door.

The Canadian artist Hester Barnard altered a photography catalogue, *Flash Forward – Emerging Photographers from Canada 2010*, by taking out all the images and replacing them with short textual descriptions, turning the reader into a sort of mental photographer as she or he fills in the gaps with his or her own imagination.

When we took the collection to New York to install a Reading Room at the New York Art Book Fair in 2011, a librarian from the Pratt Institute spent a lot of time browsing the books and confronting all the questions they pose. Fascinated by the



richness of strategies and approaches to unauthorized copying, she wondered how this collection could be documented and catalogued from a librarian's point of view. What are the criteria for authorship? How can the category be defined? How do you deal with the awkward relationship between the original (the reference) and the pirate copy? In this respect the books in the piracy collection live in a limbo, a grey area asking for inventive responses.

### **Characters developing a life of their own**

Throughout the project we traveled to Shanghai and Beijing to research cultural piracy in different settings and discovered various innovative approaches to the re-contextualization of creative works. In China, about twelve fake Harry Potter novels were printed and distributed. They use very different approaches, placing Harry Potter in well-known kung-fu epics or introducing characters from Chinese literary classics. One of the unauthorized Harry Potter novels, "Harry Potter and the Showdown," was written by a father, who wrote the book for his son: "I bought Harry Potter one through six for my son a couple of years ago, and when he finished reading them, he kept asking me to tell him what happens next. We couldn't wait, so I began making up my own story and in May last year I typed it up on my computer." After logging 150,000 readers online, the novel was quickly pirated and sold as a print version on the streets of Beijing. What does J.K. Rowling think of the twelve new Harry Potter stories invented by other writers? Is she proud? Is

she curious about how other cultures continue "her" character? Will she pick these strands up, get inspired by these cultural translations and come up with a new sequel?

*The Piracy Project* aims to reveal the underlying principles of creativity and cultural production. It opposes the idea of a creation *ex nihilo* and acknowledges the fact that we all borrow from each other and the beauty of variation, recombination, and transformation. It looks at creation as a process rather than a product. It challenges the romantic cliché of the inspired genius, who needs no previous learning. It also makes us question our understanding of uniqueness and originality. Who is shaping our notions of originality and for what reasons?

"We tend to mix authorship with ownership," argues Lewis Hyde in his recently published book: *Common as Air*. He explains how the scope for the creative individual is curtailed by restrictive intellectual property jurisdiction, in the (commercial) interest of only a few monopolies. Of course many models of non-monetary cultural exchange have operated for a long time, for instance in the realm of academic publishing. Here the primary motive for sharing information is not its monetary value but the recognition it brings – "a recognition, that is at least partially dependent on the idea of contributing something to humanity or truth," says Brian Holmes, Professor of Philosophy at the European Graduate School and author of the blog *Continental Drift, the other side of neoliberal globalization*.



Appropriation as an artistic strategy, while its history is clearly almost as long as that of art itself, became formalized in the 1980s and 90s. Elaine Sturtevant borrowed silk-screens from Andy Warhol, made new prints of his images and signed and sold them under her own name. Sherrie Levine, similarly, published Flaubert's novel *A Coeur Simple* with her own name in place of the author's on the front cover.

These strategies, which at the time were often about drawing attention obliquely to the significant gender imbalance in the art market, were also the beginnings of a debate that now seems increasingly politically urgent for all of us. The commercial market, increasingly dominated by monopolies, constantly threatens to diminish and hinder a productive and freely operating public domain. The internet, sometimes praised as the democratization of knowledge, faces the danger of monopolies restricting access to cultural goods. The challenge we face in the coming decade is to oppose the growing commodification of cultural production and restrictive copyright politics, which produces a climate where the sharing of a film or music file is criminalized by being compared to the theft of a handbag or car. Did you ever imagine you were a criminal when lending your friend a book or selling it second-hand?

It might seem simple to be against piracy, but there are all sorts of ambiguities and questions about how much culture can be owned. Is *Shampoo – Silenced*, for example, infringing

intellectual property? Is the transformative part substantial enough to call it a new work? We don't know. It's a grey area. A friend was telling me the other day that Beatty and Towne, in writing *Shampoo*, themselves borrowed from an already existing work, *The Country Wife*, a restoration comedy by William Wycherley from 1675.

During my research residency at SALT in Istanbul, I came across a striking example of how a specific approach to authorship develops social agency: in an authorial version of the "I'm Spartacus" strategy, a book had been published claiming authorship by more than 120 individuals. After the release of a manuscript, independent journalist Ahmet Sik was imprisoned before his book, *000Kitap, Dokunan Yanar*, was even published. While he was kept in jail for a whole year without charges being brought, a printed copy of the book circulated—this time authored by so many people that it would be impossible to imprison everyone claiming to be the author. In this instance, the dispersal of authorship became a tool for free speech.

Our platform is constantly evolving.

## YAZARLAR

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