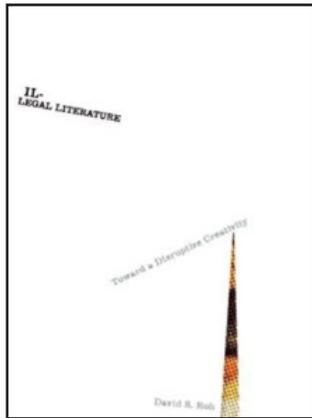


Book Review

Illegal Literature: Toward a Disruptive Creativity by David S. Roh

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The widespread effects of networked communications has in the last decade led the transdisciplinary imagination in the direction of new media theory. Few academic areas have gone untouched by the effects of the internet, but as is often the case with transdisciplinary efforts, the results of this turn have varied - from the genuinely field-shaping, to the regrettably half-baked.

In *Illegal Literature Toward a Disruptive Creativity*, David S. Roh ambitiously threads a tightly focused argument between such seemingly impossible fields as publishing law, cultural and political theory, new media theory and print history. The aim of this book is not to uncover blindspots at the intersection of these discrete discourses. Rather, Roh has a fairly restricted line of inquiry that he pursues with a number of finely tuned methodological propositions. This restrained focus is welcome in the context of digital cultures, where the unwieldy object of study is always difficult to manage. Indeed, among the recent works looking at the radical potential of new media, Roh's text stands out as one of the more methodologically sturdy. However, at the conceptual

level, the author recapitulates certain techno-utopian tenets that sit rather uncomfortably with recent attitudes towards online subcultures.

The primary contention of *Illegal Literature* is that distributed networks provide certain formal affordances to literary cultures that might, if given the right circumstances, radically disrupt the institutional and legal frameworks that currently hold sway in mainstream publishing industries. For Roh, publishers continue to orientate their business models around the ideal of the monolithic author-proprietor. This legal fiction is used by publishers to capture value from the linguistic commons by individuating the literary work. Such a strategy, Roh tells us, in which the work of literature is equated with the individual, hampers the creative dynamic on which literary development depends. In a curious melding of M.M. Bakhtin's literary formalism and the ultra-radical critical theory of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Roh terms this creative force the 'dialogic engine'. Here the idea is that beyond entrenched understandings of the individual author are the ongoing socio-poetic changes that evolve from the practices

of the whole linguistic community. The ‘territorialisation’ of this force, or the commodification of the linguistic commons in the literary work, stymies the ‘acceleration of dialogic activity’ (24). In other words, the literary imagination is stunted by the ideology of intellectual property.

Roh takes as his point of departure the historically disruptive role of parody in fiction. Parody is taken as the illegal literature par excellence. This is to do with the way parody entreats the legal regime surrounding the literary work to expose itself while continuing to spur literary development. What Roh calls the call-and-response quality of the parody—where an author creates a new story in response to the ‘original’—points to the inherently dialogic quality underlying all textual production which intellectual property rights arbitrarily disavow. Roh draws attention to a number of recent high-profile copyright disputes in the American context to demonstrate the enduring rigidity of the publishers in light of the creativity of parody.

As Deleuze and Guattari did some 40 years before him, Roh goes on to hitch his hopes for the future of cultural production to the inherently radical capacities of the network. He rhymes off the qualities of distributed networks which make online spaces ideal for liberating the dialogic engine from its worldly fetters. We are told that ‘[t]he electronic network [...] creates a space for polyvocality in structure and culture’, that it ‘weaken[s] authorial hierarchy [...] invites user participation; and the speed of the network promulgates a perennial gale of creative destruction at odds with the extant support system’ (22).

Putting aside the dubiousness of whether these principals actually align with what takes place on the internet, one of the central conceptual issues with Roh’s rather uncritical enthusiasm for networks is that it revolves around a formalist evaluation of literary production. As such it critically prioritizes the conditions under which literary production occurs over and above what the work itself actually says. Hence if we follow Roh’s argument to its conclusion, no matter the ethical bearing of a specific literary culture, so long as the most favourable conditions are put in place to accelerate the dialogic engine, literary culture in general will be enriched. This seems a

particularly problematic basis to broach the radical potential of internet-based subcultural practices. Not least because links have been drawn between certain online communities and the highly reactionary currents taking root in mainstream politics. Sites such as 4chan, a noted beacon of alt-right ideology, in many ways exemplify the disruptive creativity Roh is championing here. Much of the creative output on this site turns on a call-and-response model, undermines authorial legitimacy and indeed ‘promulgates a perennial gale of creative destruction’. Its dialogic engine is running at full speed and yet its fumes are utterly toxic. And here I think is the principal issue with this accelerationist approach to cultural production; it does not discriminate between groups, it does not query the cultural consistency holding these groups together, and it does not question the kinds of subjectivities that certain communicative environments solicit. Instead, it measures the quality of a literary culture solely on the speed at which its forms are able to flourish while blindly investing in the promises of networked communication without any real sense of how platforms are actually used and by whom.

Had *Illegal Literature* been written a year or two ago, Roh would have probably reconsidered his theoretical biases. As it stands, some of the central conceptual propositions jar quite strikingly with the reality of online cultural production.