





COPIES WITHOUT  
ORIGINALS THE  
WORK OF LOVE IN THE  
AGE OF MECHANICAL  
REPRODUCTION

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If copies were classified according to the conventions of film genres, they would fall either under horror or love stories. Let me begin with two tales of the copy that fits respectively into these genres. Borges narrates the story of a passionate village librarian who, not having the resources to buy new books and yet wanting to complete his library, would, whenever he came across a favourable review in a journal, write the book himself on the basis of its title and description.<sup>1</sup> William Gass adds a frightening conclusion to the story: the books written by the unknown provincial librarian ultimately replace the originals, which are declared to be fakes. Gass's dystopic addition to the story speaks to a recurring cultural anxiety that has persisted from Plato till today – the copy eventually overwhelming the original – a fear that has intensified with the advent of technologies of mass reproduction.<sup>2</sup>

Hillel Schwartz, in his eclectic history of the culture of copy, takes us through its journey in the west from twins and doppelgangers to puppets and parrots, to examine the simultaneous fascination and horror the copy induces in us. Schwartz says, 'the most perplexing moral dilemmas of this era are dilemmas posed by our skill as creating likeness of ourselves, our world, our times? The more adroit we are at carbon copies, the more confused we are about the unique.'<sup>3</sup> He sees this duality as an inevitable aspect of modern life, where on the one hand, we have a constant striving for reproduction of our likeness through portraits, miniatures, sculpture, photography, etc., while simultaneously struggling for authenticity amidst these copies. For Schwartz, it is only within an exuberant world of copies that we arrive at our experience of originality, and it is only in a pervasive culture of the copy that we assign a militant value to the original. In a culture of the copy, anything unique is at the risk of vanishing – we make notarized copies of everything and an uncopied object is under perpetual seize. Playing on our ambivalence towards the copy and the double, Schwartz argues that the act of self-representation is itself doubled where our quest for authenticity inevitably involves a doubling back to our self. Gently disagreeing with the famous Benjaminian thesis on the loss of aura, he says the crisis brought about by mechanical reproduction is not just about the loss of aura or the happenstance of a work, but the assurance of our own liveness. Nietzsche once argued that to be done away with morality is not to do away with the question of ethics. For Schwartz, to be done away with originality is not to abandon the ideal of authenticity in our lives, but no matter what we come up with, authenticity cannot be grounded in singularity.

In contrast to the horror of copy, here is a romantic modification of Benjamin's work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction.<sup>4</sup> An English professor and Saul Bellow enthusiast in Bangalore was delighted to find a copy of a Bellow novel that he did not earlier possess, in a library in Chennai. Unfortunately for him, the library policy did not allow for either borrowing the book or photocopying it. The professor sat pencil in hand for a week – invoking the ghosts of a scribal past – and copied down the entire novel. On returning to Bangalore, he typed out the handwritten novel and then photocopied it to distribute to his students. The dedicated act of sitting for weeks on end copying out passages, typing and reproducing them, only to be able to distribute them, is what I would term as the work of love in the age of mechanical reproduction. This labour of love stands as a corrective to the extreme idea of the grotesque multiplying copy, and I would like to believe that like Pierre Menard's copy of Don Quixote, the Bellow novel transformed with each copy as it moved from the labour



1 Quoted in William Gass, 'Imaginary Borges', New York Review of Books, 20 November 1969.

2 Ibid.

3 Hillel Schwartz, *The Culture of the Copy: Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimiles*, New York: Zone Books, 1998.

4 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Essays and Reflections*, New York: Schocken, 1969.



of the eye and hand to that of the hand and machine, and finally to the machine alone. It is no coincidence that the idea of 'mechanical reproduction' invokes not just the creation of endless copies, but also bad sex. Copulation and copy both share a common etymological root in the Latin word *copia*, which refers to an abundance (copious), and the story of the movement from abundance to an emphasis on the scarcity and rarity of originals is perhaps the story of technology and mass reproduction.<sup>5</sup> I will attempt to show that the excess of the copy does not really disappear with the emergence of the story of scarcity, and that in fact the copy always embodies an 'ontological surplus' awaiting activation.

The story immediately complicates any simple assumption we may have of 'original' and 'copy', and destabilizes the idea that the 'copy' in the library was the original from which other copies were made. As a noun, copy could refer to all four copies: that which was lying in the library, the handwritten facsimile, the typed sheets and the photocopied pages. As a verb, it could refer to the actual act – whether of writing, typing or photocopying. Is it the case that the legal meaning of copy, coming as it does with the weight of sovereignty, has flattened out all other dimensions of the copy? It may be time for us to clear some of the semantic mess that underlies the legal distinction between the copy and the original.

## THE ORIGINAL/COPY CONUNDRUM

One of the most lasting and limiting definitions of the copy comes, not surprisingly, from the law. Judge Bailey, in 1822, in *West v. Francis*, 5 B. & A. 743, defined the copy as 'that which comes so near to the original as to give every person seeing it the idea created by the original'. This test, which is valid till date, came before the invention of photography, cinema and most technologies of mass reproduction. There are two aspects to the definition that are of immediate interest: it is both object-centric and dependent on a phenomenological account of perception, and it is in the gap and interstices between the object and the senses that a considerable amount of confusion accrues.

Copyright has always been a response – starting from the print revolution – to the question of technologies of mass reproduction. Its doctrinal foundations are grounded in a particular technology, namely that of paper, but have attempted to extend themselves to other technologies. This is evidenced in the historical paradox that for the first 150 years of its existence (*Statute of Anne*, 1706), copyright does not even have a category for art as a subject matter of protection. As long as the copying was by hand it really did not matter; and it is only with the advent of lithographic printing and subsequently photography, that art becomes a problem for copyright. The divergence between artistic practices and intellectual property could be seen as the difference between copy rites and copyright.

The idea of the original and the copy runs through debates in law, aesthetics and philosophy, and at the heart of these debates is the question of value. In what manner does value accrue to an original that is withheld from a copy, and what ideas of value may we speak about? Can the distinction between an original and a copy be deployed in the same manner across different classes of works, from literary works to software and painting to video? One could, for instance, speak of the original Mona

<sup>5</sup> Tony Bennett, *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2011: 58–59.

Lisa and its various reproductions, but is that the same as an original software versus a pirated one? A plagiarized work is the passing off of someone else's work as your own, whereas a forged work is the passing off of your work as someone else's. These are differences that make a world of difference.

Let us begin with the identity of an original work (for convenience, its numerical identity). For us to state with certainty that object X is the same as its copy Y, we would have to assume that there is a numeric equivalence that allows us to see it as an exact replica. Thus a DVD that is copied could be said to be an exact copy of the original. But this sense of exact replication of numerical identity is rare, and often gets complicated by the fact that what gives specificity to an original is often a question of its origin in time. Thus an object X can be said to be original because of its origin in the hands of a particular author or creator at a particular time. The value that accrues to an original, then, is a value in time; but the problem of the copy or the fake is that even if exists subsequent in time, it attains for itself a value over time as an independent object in relation to historical time. Michelangelo's famous fake sculpture, *The Sleeping Cupid*, begins its life as a fake but ends up as an original Michelangelo over time; or, in the case of the most famous forgery of the twentieth century, Van Meegeren's fake Vermeers acquire value as genuine Meegerens. Most accounts of reproduction assume that the numeric identity of an object is stable even when it is reproduced in time. In other words, the act of reproduction becomes an act of repetition against difference. We shall examine if this is indeed the case.

From the perspective of the person who sees or experiences an original work, if the value of the original accrues from its intrinsic aesthetic value, then the reference is to a sensory encounter with its form. This argument, which is dependent on the 'appearance theory' of the original, is contested by Jack Meiland, who argues that what is at play is not so much the intrinsic value of the original, as what we know and what we value of the idea of the original.<sup>6</sup> What we know necessarily influences our sensations, feelings, perceptions and responses to a work. So, when we know a work to be a copy or a forgery, our whole set of attitudes and resulting responses are profoundly and necessarily altered, but if we move away from the appearance of the object to our sensorial response to the work – the question of what it is in the work of art that creates a phenomenological relationship to the world, or opens us to a hitherto unexperienced aspect of the world – it would seem that its status as original or copy has less resonance.<sup>7</sup>

If a copy is indistinguishable in form from the original, then, would its aesthetic value be the same as that of the original? This dilemma in particular runs through digital versions of music and film. Assuming that we are not speaking about inferior versions of the prints of a film, is there any difference between an 'original' and a 'copy'?

Take, for instance, an advertisement that distinguishes between an original and a pirated CD. The differences that are pointed out only refer to differences on the surface or on the CD label, rather than in the underlying content. The pirated CD has 'spelling errors', does not have a listing of the songs, does not have the name of the company and, most tellingly, does not have 'copyright' details. The crisis of the copy in this case has less to do with its aesthetic value than its monetary value. That a film of 20 million dollars can be reproduced without loss of quality on a 20-rupee disc poses

<sup>6</sup> Jack Meiland, in Peter Lamarque, ed., *Aesthetics and the philosophy of art: the analytic tradition*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*: 375.

a challenge to the media industry, but is this the same as the original–copy distinction that runs through much of the history of art and copyright? The copy interrupts the flow of the commodity and its assured value chain by bringing into being objects which exceed either use or exchange value.

## ONCE MORE WITH FEELING

Perhaps the upper echelons of copyright and art are the wrong places to look, to understand this interruption of the circuit of value, and maybe it is time to move to the bazaar – that irreverent space where traditional carriers of symbol and value meet their limit. Kajri Jain, in her work on the circulation of bazaar images and the embodiment of value, uses the phrase ‘frames of value’ to look at the different registers of value which govern calendar art in India. First, there is the aesthetic frame – between fine art and commercial art; then there is the monetary frame – low-cost and expensive; and finally there is the ethical frame – the affective register where cheap copies of pictures of gods take on religious, cult and ritual value. The ethical frame interrupts known circuits of high and low, original and copy, cheap and expensive, and introduces a libidinal excess that cannot be contained by known frames of reference which tend to treat the object as static. Instead, by focusing on the question of circulation, Kajri Jain invites us to think of these cheap reproductions as modes of value that form ‘themselves as fleeting constellations between the image, other bodies or objects, and the quality, rhythm and intensity of time at a given moment’.<sup>8</sup>

One reason that this flexibility exists in bazaar art has to do with the fact that the classical containers of value authorship and originality are themselves flexible practices. Kajri Jain demonstrates, for instance, that an artist may use several signatures for different kinds of works, a work may be signed by more than one artist or recreated by other artist/s under their own signature, or the signature of an artist may persist in a work that has been modified by someone else. Similarly, Partha Mitter, in his study of Raja Ravi Varma, points to the paradox of authorship in the case of that artist. On the one hand, he was acutely aware of the monetary value of the original masterpiece which expressed his individual authorship; yet, at the same time, given that he was spurred on by the commercial benefits of transforming his work into mass-reproduced commodities, he effaced the aura of his own authorship. Mitter demonstrates that Varma’s own authorship was reduced to anonymity as a result of widespread copying of his prints, and ultimately the prints attained the status of reproductions without originals.<sup>9</sup> By moving away from the calendar as an iconic sign and focusing instead on the ‘quality, rhythm and intensity of time at a given moment’, Kajri Jain invites us to rethink the life of the copy – not as endless repetition, but as embodiments of varying values and intensities across time.

Bertrand Russell was once interrupted during a public lecture on astronomy by an old lady who challenged his theory of the world. She looked at him indignantly and said: ‘What you have told us is rubbish! The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise.’ Unfazed, Russell replied: ‘But what is the tortoise standing on?’ To which the old lady said, ‘You’re very clever, young man, very clever, but it’s turtles all the way down.’ What if it is copies all the way down? Rather than endlessly recycling the original–copy distinction, what if we were to reframe what we know of

<sup>8</sup> Kajri Jain, ‘More than meets the eye’, in Sumathi Ramaswamy, ed., *Beyond Appearances?: Visual Practices and Ideologies in Modern India*, New Delhi/Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: Indian Artists and the Avante-garde, 1922–1947*, London: Reaktion, 2007.

the copy? The first step would perhaps be to suspend what we think we know of the copy, and it would be useful to say, following Deleuze, that we do not even know what a copy is until we know what a copy does.

One of the ways the quotidian pirate copy of a film is characterized is as a slavish copy with no creative or transformative potential. After all it is the machine, instead of human hands, which does the copying. What are the ways in which we may interrupt this argument of repetition? Does this product of digital reproduction still allow for differences to be produced? What if each reproduction carries with it the possibility of being an event in time that has the unpredictable potential of difference? Laikwan Pang examines a very interesting aspect of the pirated DVD to raise a set of interesting questions and concerns about political economy and cultural politics around our contemporary culture of the digital copy.<sup>10</sup> One of the strange things that people who have watched films on pirated DVDs will find is the phenomenon of the sub-titles being different from the actual words being spoken on the screen. The reason for this is that the pirates usually get an early copy of the film, either a screening copy or a camera print, which does not yet have all the frills and extras that the 'original' DVD will eventually have. So a number of features, including the dubbing or the sub-titling, have to be done by the pirates themselves.

Pang provides us with an example of a pirated DVD of *Kill Bill* in which the politics of translation acquires very interesting results. The scene is the conversation in the kitchen of Vernita Green (Copper Head), when the two fighting women are taking a break after Green's daughter comes home from school. The dialogue is as follows:

Green: 'You bitch, I need to know if you will gonna starting [sic.] more shit around my baby girl.'

The Bride: 'You can relax for now, I'm not going to murder you in front of your child, okay?'

Green: 'I guess you are more rational than Bill let me to believe you are capable of.'

The Bride: 'It's mercy, compassion and forgiveness that I lack, not rationality.'

The sub-titles of the pirated version translate this as:

Green: 'You bitch, never want to hurt my daughter.'

The Bride: 'Can we have a chat? I won't hurt your child.'

Green: 'I can't believe you have such a temper.'

The Bride: 'That's my way, passion; not nationality.'

One can imagine a modern-day Pierre Menard struggling to reproduce *Kill Bill* in its exact, wanting to reproduce the digital aura and authenticity that subsist in the original – and yet submitting to destiny produces something else altogether. We can similarly imagine a Chinese worker sitting in a small shop watching *Kill Bill* paper and pencil in hand, trying to make sense of the long American drawls, listening to a 'rationality' that sounds strangely like 'nationality'. *Kill Bill* itself positioned the self not as an original film but as an assemblage of movie quotations. One way of thinking of this copy – with its multiple layers that incorporate not just the digital compression of data, but also the history of labour, language and movement – is in terms of 'incorporeal materialism'. Brian Massumi uses this phrase to signify the constant movement of bodies which are corporeal, but which, in their movement, have an incorporeal aspect to them.<sup>11</sup> The converse of this seems to hold true for the way we think of digital copies, which are often assumed to be disembodied data, but in whose movement we discern material histories of another kind.







One way, then, of moving away from the flattening-out of the copy is to bring the copy back into conversation with the senses and to pay closer attention to the potential of the copy in what it does – and I would suggest that there is no better site than cinema to think about this. Cinema, I would argue, teaches us to inhabit a world of the copy without originals. But let me clarify first that when I speak of cinema here, I am referring both to the actual institutional and technological history of cinema, and also to the diverse realms where the cinema-effect is felt and the role of cinema as a copy machine.

In her delightful history of copying in early cinema, Jane Gaines traces the multiple copies of the iconic film *Arroseur et arrosé* ('The waterer watered', Lumière, 1895).<sup>12</sup> She demonstrates how despite copying being central to the practice of the industry, and while, between 1895 and 1909, there were rhetorical complaints about copying going out of control, all the major players in both the US and Europe were involved in a variety of copying practices, in an effort to profit quickly. The history of early competition in this period was marked by a frantic race by the companies to replicate each other. Copying was a calculated strategy for maintaining market control as well as a means for getting a start in the new industrial field. Georges Méliès's very first film, *The Card Players* (1896), was a copy of the Lumière company's *The Card Game* (1896). Six years later, with the tables turned after his *Voyage dans la Lune* ('A Trip to the Moon', 1902) was so extensively duplicated in the US, Méliès attempted to check clandestine printing of his titles by establishing a branch of Star Films, where the most damage to the company was occurring. Méliès's brother Gaston, in the catalogue issued at the 1902 opening of Star's offices in New York, announced: '... we are prepared and determined energetically to pursue all counterfeiters and pirates'. While *Arroseur et arrosé* is generally seen as a Lumière film, the Lumière company copied many ideas from the Edison Company. And the Edison Company itself was copying Lubin Company films before Lubin, a Philadelphia upstart, retaliated against the more powerful Edison by copying its titles. Vitagraph did Edison's dirty work, buying and duping the Lubin films that found their way into the Edison list of titles in circulation.

Gaines charts the careers of at least ten different versions of *Arroseur et arrosé*. The basic premise of the film has a gardener who is unaware that a prankster is stepping on his watering hose, although the viewer does. When the gardener examines the nozzle to see why the water has stopped, the boy takes his foot off the hose, releasing a spray of water into the gardener's face. The remakes, copies and prints started expanding on the theme, including within them retaliation by the gardener. Gaines says:

In the short heyday, however, copying, the production of a print double by reprinting or retelling, would have been economical because it was easy and, as in the case of the many waterer watereds, as yet unopposed. If you could not buy the desired film because the producer was unwilling to sell it, you stole it and duped it. If you couldn't steal a print, you reshot it yourself.<sup>13</sup>

Diverging slightly from Derrida's argument that all origins are similarly unoriginal, Gaines quotes a film archivist, de Klerk, who says of archival prints that it is possible 'there never was an original in the first place'. Moving away from the hierarchical relation of the original to the copy, Gaines says it might be more useful to think of cinema and the copies it produces in terms of the phenomenon of 'multiple singularity'.

10 Laikwan Pang, 'Copying Kill Bill', in *Cultural Control and Globalization in Asia: Copyright, Piracy, and Cinema*, London: Routledge, 2006.

11 Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.

12 Jane Gaines, 'Early Cinema's Heyday of Copying: The too many copies of *L'Arroseur arrosé* (The Waterer Watered)', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 20, issues 2–3, 2006.

13 *Ibid.*

How may we make sense of this idea of multiple singularity in relation to cinema? What are the copies that cinema produces beyond the object as a copy? Deleuze, in *Cinema 1*, offers us an intriguing reading of Bergson when he says: 'Whether we would think becoming, or express it, or even perceive it, we hardly do anything else than set going a kind of cinematograph inside us ...as though we always had cinema without realizing it?'<sup>14</sup>

## 'THE INVENTION OF MOREL'

Adolfo Bioy Casares' *Invention of Morel* (1940) tells a tale of love, loss and the setting off of cinematographic copies without originals.<sup>15</sup> The anonymous protagonist, a fugitive hiding on an island, begins to suspect that there are other people on the island. After his initial tentative explorations, he notices strange happenings including the presence of two suns and two moons. He eventually sees a man and woman speaking almost every day. He is fascinated by the woman, Faustine; he falls in love with her and is obsessed by her as 'a dead man suffering from insomnia'.

He devises all kinds of paranoid theories to explain what may be happening, but eventually discovers that one of the inhabitants, Morel, has invented a machine capable of reproducing reality – a soul-capturing machine that allows them to repeat their experiences endlessly in time. The only catch is that all those who have been recorded die. The fugitive explores the invention further, and begins to understand the reasons behind the twin suns and moons: they are caused by the overlap between the recording and reality – one is the real sun and the other represents the sun's position at the time of recording. Morel's invention creates perfect copies: exact replicas of these images are shown; and the eventual aim is to copy all existing objects, fusing the originals with the copies, thereby giving them perpetual reality.

Despite his initial repulsion, the fugitive gradually accepts the possibility of the machine offering him another life, and of that existence as something better than his own. He learns how to operate the machine, and inserts himself into the recording so that it looks like he and Faustine are in love. He concludes by saying:

My soul has not yet passed to the image; if it had, I would have died, I [perhaps] would no longer see Faustine, and would be with her in a vision that no one can ever destroy. To the person who nails this diary and then invents a machine that can assemble disjointed presences, I make this request: Find Faustine and me, let me enter the heaven of her consciousness. It will be an act of piety.

It is unclear whether *The Invention of Morel* is a horror story pretending to be a love story, or a love story masquerading as a horror story. I would like to think of it as the latter.

What is the exact nature of his realization if not that perhaps we have always had cinema without realizing it, and his activation of the machine as the activation of the cinematograph within us? If the goal of mechanical reproduction has been total fidelity to the original, but in destroying the aura of the original it potentially destroys what it conserves, then it also becomes something else than a flattened, two-dimensional representation. In this lies the ontological surplus of the copy. What is as haunting as the story of Morel is the motivation behind its writing.

The *Invention of Morel* was written by Casares in part as a response to the untimely

<sup>14</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, 1, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

<sup>15</sup> Adolfo Bioy Casares, *The Invention of Morel*, translated by Ruth L.C. Simms, New York: New York Review of Books, 2003.

death of Louise Brooks, an actress he was obsessed with. Untimely – what a glorious word to conjure what Nietzsche describes as a specific mode of inhabiting time – a habitation of an event, not through the lens of the retrospective linearity of history but as an event in becoming – the prospective possibilities of an undetermined future.

These possible worlds that exist within the realm of the imagination should not be confused either with their presence as indexical reality, or with their alleged counterpart as fictive. These are virtual worlds which can appear in an untimely manner, much as Bobby hair combs appear and disappear, a Supremo eagle perched on his shoulder ignites a fantasy of our own superman. Once we do away with the constraints of original and copy, the real and the fictive, we learn to love the copies and doubles who share our worlds – not as our lost doubles but as our authentic copies.

Casares is perhaps better known for his appearance as a character in his friend Borges' story, 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' (1940), than as the author of *Morel*.<sup>16</sup> This story about possible worlds begins with a conjunction of mirrors and encyclopedias – the one reflects the appearance of the image, the other its disappearance. The story works with the logic of mirrors and copies, but also with the idea of mechanical reproduction as a sexual metaphor ('mirrors and copulation are abominable, since they both multiply the numbers of man'). Published in the same year, both 'Tlön, Uqbar' and *The Invention of Morel* coincided with the suicide of Walter Benjamin, precipitating a story and an aesthetic of disappearance that, paradoxically, has its origin in the multiplication of copies, in copious technical reproduction.<sup>17</sup>

Lisa Behar, reflecting on the existence/non-existence of Uqbar in the slippery encyclopedia, says that her copy of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* at home has entries for Europe, Africa, Asia and Oceania, but no entry for 'America', and wonders whether for the authors of the *Britannica*, America is still a utopia, a 'no place', an imaginary continent without end like Kafka's *Amerika*, a continent still to be made? When *Morel* sets out to find out about the others on the island, he does not know in advance that they are copies; what he does know is that his first sighting of Faustine – as if she were posing for an invisible photographer – made her surpass the calm of the sunset, and he did not wish to interrupt that. Would it matter that afterwards two suns would appear that he would not be able to distinguish?

Might this be the labour of love needed to retain our authenticity in an age of copies, where we invest our affective phillias – biblio or cine – in an attempt at harnessing the kernel of truth lying in the ontological excess of the object? Marcel Proust says that it is only through art that we leave ourselves, know what the other knows of this universe that is not the same as ours, and whose landscapes are as unknown to us as those that might be on the moon. 'Thanks to art,' Proust writes, 'instead of seeing only one world, ours, we see it multiplied, and insofar as there are original artists, insofar as we have worlds at our disposition, they will differ more from one another than all those that wheel about in the infinite.'

<sup>16</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius', in *Collected fictions*, translated by Andrew Hurley, New York: Viking, 1998.

<sup>17</sup> Lisa Block de Behar, *Borges, the Passion of an Endless Quotation*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003.