

Reproducing Images and Texts / La Reproduction des images et des textes

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Uncertified Copy

The Semiotic Ideologies of Reproduction

Massimo Leone

A picture of a complete apple tree, however accurate, is in a certain sense much less like the tree itself than is a little daisy.

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN, *Culture and Value*, 1980: 20/17



Abstract

Discussion on concepts such as originality, authenticity, and uniqueness, as well as fake, copy, and reproduction often tend to ignore the fact that the status of an original, the procedure of copying, and the evaluation of the reproduction vary across historical epochs and semiotic ideologies. The topic is fraught with cross-cultural, post-colonial, and orientalist complexity: when another civilization is accused of “lacking in originality” or of being “prone to copying,” is there perhaps a bias in such a judgment? The aesthetic value and social role of copying also changes in time and space. A fruitful approach to this subject consists in taking into account the semiotic specificities of originality and reproduction as they are embodied in different media, styles, and expressions. Furthermore, isn’t it possible to innovate through repetition, as Umberto Eco already pointed out in a seminal essay (1985) and, conversely, to be repetitive in innovation? A comparative look at the way in which texts and images are deemed as “authentic” or “copies” across different times and spaces allows for a more nuanced articulation of the topic.

1 Reproduction as Triadic Relation

According to common sense, the idea of a “copy” usually implies the concept of a dyadic relation between an original entity and its more or less faithful reproduction. Several important aesthetic aspects of the copy, however, cannot

be fully grasped unless its semiotic functioning is described through a triadic model, including the two elements above plus a third conceptual device of mediation that, in the terms of Charles S. Peirce's semiotics (see for example his *Collected Papers*, 1931–35), can be identified as an interpretant. In this model, the interpretant is the semiotic dynamic that, given a certain entity, singles out some aspects of it which, if included in the copy itself, will allow it to be identified as reproduction of the original.¹

The triadic, rather than dyadic, semiotic nature of the copy becomes evident in the metaphysical question of the perfect reproduction, or replica: indeed, it is impossible to produce an impeccable copy of something, for the original and the reproduction will always differ at least as regards their position in space and time. Mystical discourse may well dream of a copy that is identical to the original, yet every empirical instance of reproduction will face the same metaphysical difficulties narratively evoked by Borges's famous tale of the emperor cultivating the utopia of a faithful map of its territory:² the mere ontological distinction between the territory and the map will jeopardize any possibility of a perfect replica.³

Such impossibility is patent not only in the metaphysical realm—or in its narrative evocations—but also in the sphere of empirical aesthetics. Many languages intrinsically deem it necessary to distinguish among different sorts of copy by qualifying them through the usage of a particular adjective: the good copy of a painting; the perfect copy of a signature; a “*copie conforme*,” in French, or “certified copy,” in English, etc. Both lexicons and common sense, then, hint at the fact that there is not one single notion of copy but rather a semantic field, within which several slightly divergent semiotic procedures and products might fall.

The topological theory of catastrophes might be invoked in order to explain the complex dynamic according to which something might or might not be called a reproduction of something else (Thom; Petitot-Cocorda). Such determination is often a matter of nuanced thresholds rather than one of sharp

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- 1 Semiotic literature on copies, reproductions, replicas, and fakes is vast; one could even argue that the entire discipline is nothing but a reflection on the fake. Umberto Eco wrote extensively on the subject: (“La falsificazione”; “Fakes”; “Event,” just to mention the most famous contributions; as regards the specific topic of the fake in arts and crafts, see Eco, “Fakes”).
 - 2 Borges took inspiration from an idea in *Sylvie and Bruno*, a novel by Lewis Carroll, first published in 1889.
 - 3 An obvious reference in this regard is Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976), in particular paragraphs 3.4.6 (on “replicability”), 3.4.7 (on “doubles”), and 3.4.8 (on “replicas”). See also paragraphs 3.6.4 (on “replicas of combinatorial units”) and 3.6.5 (on “replicas of stylizations and vectors”).

frontiers. In Abbas Kiarostami's subtle 2010 film *Copie conforme*, for instance, an art theoretician, author of a new book on the relation between original and copy in art (Jeremy Irons), and an antiques dealer (Juliette Binoche) are mistaken in Lucignano for a married couple and agree to play along with this misunderstanding for a whole day. In the end, nevertheless, the film's narrative makes the differences between a real marriage and the simulation of it reappear. The Iranian director—who in *Close Up* (1990) had already sought to reproduce a trial by having its protagonists impersonate themselves in its cinematic version (Leone)—is characteristically obsessed with the problem of the relation between original life and the filmic reproduction of it. His films point at an aesthetic phenomenon that art connoisseurs know quite well:⁴ identifying a copy depends not only on the relation between the original and the reproduction but also on the gaze of the observer, which is nothing but the scopical counterpart of that which has been evoked above as the “interpretant” of a copy.

2 Nature and Culture in the Semiotic Ideologies of Reproduction

Abstractly conceived, this interpretant contains a series of semiotic mechanisms as a result of which an item might start being considered by a community of interpreters as a copy of something else or might, conversely, cease being considered as such and lose, as a consequence, its status of reproduction. The work of semioticians consists precisely in describing this abstract dynamic in detail, pinpointing the interaction of cognitive nature and social culture in determining crucial thresholds in the apperception of a copy. Such interaction of neurophysiology and semiotics of perception might be quite hard to disentangle in most cases.

As a visiting professor at the University of Kyoto, I would often take a break in a local café that was close to the copy center of the University. Once, as I was returning to my office, a worried clerk from the center ran after me with an ID card, claiming that I had lost it. I looked at the picture on the card, and it was that of a very blond Norwegian biologist. I was, of course, puzzled, but the humorous incident revealed something that face perception students are perfectly familiar with: human beings tend to be more skillful at recognizing a relation between a face and a visual reproduction of it when this face belongs

4 Kiarostami's art project *Doors without Keys* also plays with the idea of copies, albeit in a different way. <https://www.agakhanmuseum.org/exhibitions/abbas-kiarostami-doors-without-keys> [accessed 16 June 2020]

to their own macro-ethnic group. We seem to be hardwired to discriminate among face reproductions especially if these resemble our own face (for an introduction on the topic, see Young).

Yet, that which makes a copy a copy is neither the ontology of the relation between the original and the reproduction alone, nor the physiology of the eye that spontaneously grasps it. What makes a copy a copy is also the series of cultural determinations that push the senses of a beholder to establish a relation between two items, either *in praesentia* or *in absentia*, and to conclude that 1) the former is a reproduction of the latter and that 2) the former is a *certain kind* of reproduction of the latter. An untrained eye, for instance, might well not even recognize that a painting by Caravaggio is not actually such but rather a copy of it. Assiduous exposure to images, a certain natural predisposition, and often also the acquisition of a method, at least from Giovanni Morelli on,⁵ allow a connoisseur to see a copy where others see an original. It would be imprecise, however, to consider that, in this case, the interpretant emerging from the interaction among an object, its copy, and an eye, is a mere cultural entity. Its origin is, indeed, cultural, but it results in a second nature: given appropriate training, it would be impossible for a connoisseur to force her- or himself *not* to see the reproduction of an original, and, moreover, not to see a good or bad reproduction of it. In other words, the cultural training in linking originals and copies has an impact even on the deep physiology of such apperception.

The cultural predisposition to recognizing and evaluating reproductions, moreover, becomes second nature not only for individuals but also for “communities of beholders,” as it was suggested earlier, that is, it becomes a trait or behavior that is so long held as to seem innate. Indeed, determining that something is a reproduction of something else is not simply a quantitative process of perceptual matching but crucially involves a complex qualitative dynamic in which the interpretant of a reproduction emerges. It is not easy to pinpoint the socio-cognitive processes that such qualitative dynamic involves, yet this dynamic certainly relies on a certain sociocultural idea of reproduction. In

5 Giovanni Morelli (1816–91) invented a method to identify fakes of famous painters. The method was based on the observation that forgers often neglect or are unable to reproduce some minute anatomical details, for instance earlobes, with a style that closely resembles that of famous painters. As a consequence, concentrating on such details often reveals the inauthentic nature of fakes in painting. Carlo Ginzburg, in a famous study, read the invention of this method as a milestone in the emergence of an investigative episteme, based on the abductive interpretation of signs. As far as Morelli is concerned, it should be noted that connoisseurship in his case was not meant to be stylistic but semiotic and, as pointed out earlier, attached to anatomical details; see Ginzburg.

other words, whenever we judge something as the reproduction of something else, and inevitably attribute an aesthetic value (positive or negative) to it, we are unintentionally guided by our implicit belonging to an aesthetic community, and to the sociocultural topology that, in its semiosphere, pushes members either to see or not see a copy, to value or disvalue it. Such a qualitative dynamic, however, is so engrained in the native members of the community (that is, in members of a community that have been exposed to its meta-semiotic common sense long and intensely enough as to absorb it as an automatic matrix of cognitive responses) that we tend to take it for granted. It is only in both spatial and temporal contrasts with other “ideologies of the copy,” then, that our aesthetic nature reveals itself as a deeply seated bundle of sociocultural determinations.

3 A Different Sense of Reproduction

Traveling far in space and time exposes one to particularly striking defamiliarization effects as regards the notion and the value of reproduction in the fine arts. The Kennin-ji Temple in Kyoto contains a pair of two-panel folding screens (ink, color, and gold on paper, 154,5 x 169,8 cm each) representing the Shinto Gods Wind and Thunder; it is an Edo period masterpiece (seventeenth century CE) by Tawaraya Sōtatsu (active early seventeenth century) (Figure 13.1).

In the Tokyo National Museum, one can admire a slightly bigger pair of folding screens (166 x 183 cm each), dating from the first quarter of the eighteenth century, by Ogata Kōrin (1658–1716). It represents the same subject (Figure 13.2).

A third pair of folding panels, the biggest of the three works (170,7 x 170,2 cm each), currently at the Idemitsu Museum of Arts, Tokyo, also depicts the same topic; it dates from the first half of the nineteenth century; the work was painted by Sakai Hōitsu (1761–1828) (Figure 13.3).

At first sight, the second pair of folding panels looks like a copy of the first, whilst the third appears as a copy of both the first and the second. Upon closer examination, though, each of the two subsequent copies reveals subtle, almost impalpable differences from the previous ones: the inclination of a line, the hue of a background, the shape of a drapery, etc. To an untrained gaze, they might seem just random imperfections; to the expert observer, however, they are essential signs of the complex inter-textual relations between the three works. Indeed, Kōrin and Hōitsu do not limit themselves to copying Sōtatsu’s masterpiece. They actually reproduce it. But here “reproduction” must be understood according to the full semantic range of its etymology: every subsequent screen re-produces the aesthetics of the previous one(s), meaning

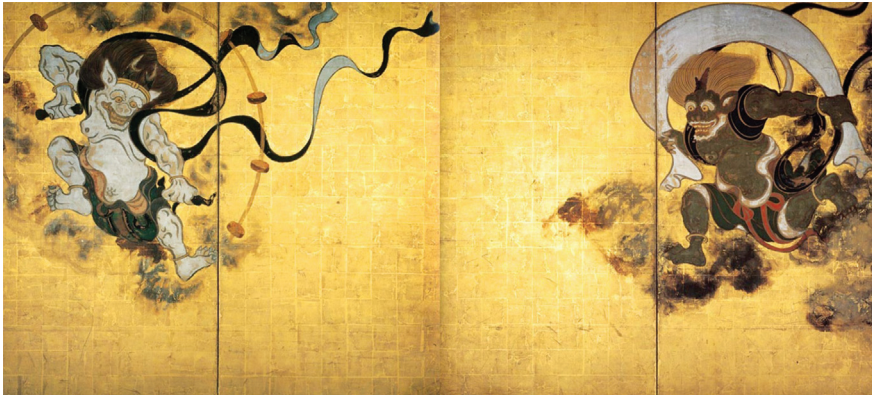


FIGURE 13.1 Tawaraya Sôtatsu (1570–1643). *Gods of Wind and Thunder*, 17th century. Ink, color, and gold on paper. 154,5 × 169,8 cm each. Kyoto: Kennin-ji Temple



FIGURE 13.2 Ogata Kōrin (1658–1716). *Gods of Wind and Thunder*, first quarter of the 18th century. Ink, color, and gold on paper. 166 × 183 cm each. Tokyo: National Museum

that 1) it pays homage to an aesthetic tradition; 2) it proves its technical competence in that tradition; 3) it nevertheless affirms a personality not through iconoclastic invention, but through discreet, almost imperceptible differentiation. The personality of the new artist, indeed, must not shine autonomously, and in radical rupture with the past, but within the sphere of sensibility, technique, and appreciation handed down by tradition.

The contemporary western beholder of this series of Japanese masterpieces might simply consider them as belonging to only one of the semantic lines that determine the interpretant of a reproduction in the present-day occidental aesthetic sphere, that is, reproduction as copy rather than as regeneration. Western academic doctrine stresses that reproduction is transformation and emulation. This is not quite incompatible with Japanese aesthetics, but it certainly not

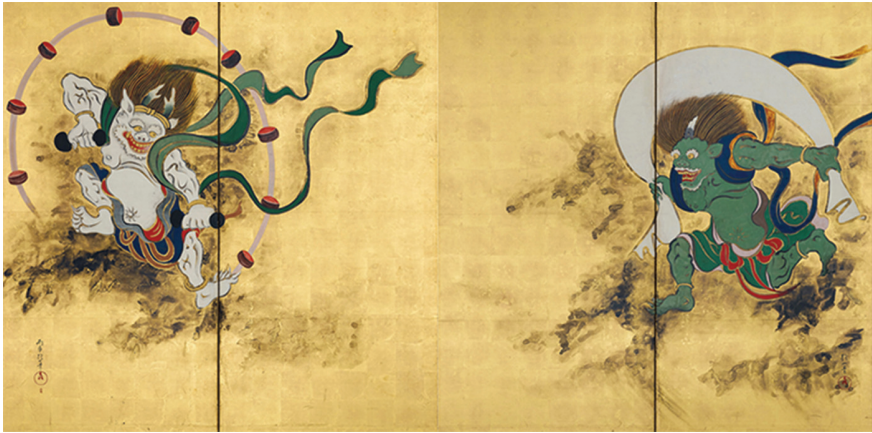


FIGURE 13.3 Sakai Hōitsu (1761–1828). *Gods of Wind and Thunder*, first half of the 19th century. Ink, color, and gold on paper. 170,7 × 170,2 cm each. Idemitsu: Museum of Arts

a primary angle in the way the present-day western common sense currently conceives of a copy. Missing the possibility of an alternative reading, however, would be tantamount to misinterpreting, from an aesthetically ethnocentric point of view, the semiotic nature of these artifacts, which, on the contrary, forcefully shows itself if one considers the works within the long period of the Japanese ideology of repetition. As is well known, one of the most fundamental rituals of Japanese culture consists in the periodical rebuilding of the Shinto shrine at Ise, where every twenty years the same wooden structure is destroyed and replicated with meticulous precision, its displacement in time and space (respectively, twenty years apart, between adjacent areas) being the only phenomenon that signals the distinction between replica and identity. Were one to interpret this almost exact reproduction,—that is, this replication,—according to the present-day western ideology of the copy, though, one could not understand that this copy is such not only according to a semantics of mechanical reproduction, but also according to a semantics of ritual regeneration.

The Hungarian writer László Krasznahorkai subtly detects this ritual dimension and narratively evokes it in the fifteenth chapter of *Seibo járt odalent* (2008), translated in English as *Seiobo There Below* (2013), in which he masterfully captures some instances of the sublime across epochs and cultures by enshrining them in labyrinthine, witty short stories. In “Rebuilding of the Ise Shrine,” Krasznahorkai dwells at length, through characteristically lengthy sentences, on the obsessive precision with which three workers cut a tree that will then be transformed into timber for the reconstruction of the shrine. To the two external observers, from whose point of view the rebuilding is narrated, it becomes progressively manifest,

[...] as the two of them watched in the great silence, in which the only sound was the melody of the echoing axe blows [...] that these workers were undertaking the work they learned to do with hairsbreadth precision, but they did not know, they had not the slightest idea, why what they were doing was exactly the way it was, and mainly they did not know that with every movement as they raised the axe, as it fell backward and then struck down, as they accordingly deepened the three holes until they met and became adjacent with each other at one point in the trunk's inner part, namely that they were repeating—and with hairsbreadth precision—the momentum, the direction, the strength of the movements of their ancestors, in a word, the order, just as those ancestors had only just repeated the movements of their own predecessors, so that now [...] that is to say every movement of each worker, and every component of every movement—its momentum, its arc, its striking down—is one thousand and three hundred years old, they are artists [...]. (Krasznahorkai 396–97)

4 Paradoxes of the Copy

Can someone who reproduces something without even knowing the reasons for this reproduction be considered an artist? For instance, is the African artisan who, in J.M. Coetzee's fictionalized series of essays *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), robotically reproduces wooden crucifixes for a mission, without being aware of the ultimate purpose of his work, an artist? The answer is probably negative if it is given from the point of view of the contemporary ideology of the copy, one that stresses the importance of originality and novelty as supreme values in the recognition of creativity (on "originality" see Heinich and Shapiro, *Les valeurs de l'art*). The answer, however, is probably affirmative if it is given from the perspective of a ritual community in which repetition has been adopted as the most secure way to guarantee not creativity but creation, or rather recreation through reproduction. The two ideologies of the copy, strikingly at odds with each other, give rise to opposite interpretants and sociocultural valorizations. On the one hand, significantly diverging from a past model is the only way to affirm the identity of an artistic subjectivity; this must even deny or desecrate an ideal artifact in order to extol the human capacity for infinite creativity; on the other hand, strictly adhering to a preexistent routine is the only conceivable way to reinvigorate the identity of a ritual collectivity, which must continuously reproduce and venerate an ideal artifact so as to allow the human capacity for *communitas* to triumph.

The purpose of reading this opposition in the framework of cultural semiotics is neither to caricaturize it, nor to choose between the two ideologies, but to describe and analyze their inner mechanisms, their aesthetic results, and also the paradoxes to which they give rise. Creating something through copying something else is one of the oldest anthropological gestures, and it may even connect us with the non-human semiotic world. The meaning of this gesture, however, varies dramatically across epochs and cultures, and being aware of it is the only way to assess the aesthetic value or disvalue of copies in their specific sociocultural context.

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