

IN PRAISE OF COPYING

by Marcus Boon. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, U.S.A., 2010. 304 pp. ISBN-10: 0674047834; ISBN-13: 978-0-674-04783-9.

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Anyone who followed Barack Obama's popularity leading up to the 2008 presi-

dential election in the United States no doubt recalls the iconic "Hope" image that seemed to become the unofficial poster of the campaign, because many felt it defined Obama's message so well. The poster itself was so powerful in a symbolic sense that the Smithsonian Museum acquired it when Obama took office, despite their usual policy of collecting official portraits of presidents as they are leaving office. As it turned out, the artist, Shepard Fairey, had used an Associated Press (AP) photograph to achieve the likeness. As a result, a question arose: Did Fairey's use of a photograph, taken in April 2006 by Manny Garcia, require permission or was it covered by fair use? The ensuing legal case, which was settled out of court, has stimulated enormous amounts of discussion because of the many examples of artists who have copied photographs to create their work. (For example, Gerhard Richter has conceived numerous series based on photographs.)

More amusing are the Jeff Koons cases. Koons recently sent a "cease-and-desist" letter to an artist he claimed was copying his balloon dog sculptures. Like Fairey, Koons settled this case out of court. The Koons case received quite a bit of coverage because this artist has been sued several times for copyright infringement. A better-known case is perhaps *Rogers v. Koons* (1992), in which the court agreed with Art Rogers, a photographer, who claimed that Koons had used Rogers's material to model three sculptures he then sold for \$367,000.

These vignettes are among the many that touch upon the variety of questions concerning the nature of copies and originals. While the computer, the Internet and our global society have perhaps heightened awareness of what we gain and lose with copies, as Marcus Boon shows in his book, *In Praise of Copying*, the subject of copying is neither new nor simple. Walking us through an immense volume of information, Boon argues that copying is an essential part of being human and demonstrates the complexity of the subject.

The strength of Boon's book is this author's ability to write easy-to-read text and to simultaneously provide an erudite discussion. In part, this is accomplished by putting many of the nuances into the footnotes. This is an effective approach given the breadth of the presentation. Equally compelling is the volume's originality, particularly in light of a thesis that validates copying. I wondered if he would argue, along the

lines of a Nietzsche quote he includes, that life itself is an appropriation, and thus his work is more a compilation of material than an original perspective. In any case, in my view, the presentation is novel due to Boon's use of Buddhism as a touchstone to the broad sweep of Western ideas.

The author explains that his impetus to write the book grew out of the observation that copying is pervasive in contemporary culture, yet at the same time subject to laws, restrictions and attitudes that suggest "copying" is wrong. Proposing that we need to rethink how we see the tension between copies and originals, Boon suggests that Mahayana Buddhism, in its various historical forms, offers entry into the subject because it provides a way to rethink the common duality of terms that have historically supported Western views. While Buddhism may offer an alternative to dualistic types of ideas such as subject/object, I did not find the dualistic thesis convincing regarding copies. Even before I read the volume, the tensions between originals and copies did not strike me as a dichotomy.

One interesting aspect of the Buddhist perspective is that it allows for a comprehensive overview and does not compel a "new" ethics, so to speak. Rather the effort highlights the role of copies in our culture, largely through a weaving of critical theory, philosophical history and cultural examples. Platonic mimesis is meshed with memes. The history of copyright laws and patent laws is introduced in terms that look at both modern law and at philosophical

perspectives we can trace back to Plato and Aristotle.

Boon has an interest in what words mean and how they affect the discussion. *Copia*, for example (as in *cornucopia*), is the subject of one chapter. Boon claims the nuances of the word, which originally referred to the abundance, multiplicity and variation of copies that were not mere imitations, has been lost due to a variety of reasons. These include the development of the disdain people had for copying as imitation and how the printing press, copyright and other societal values favored individual ownership. On the other hand, before the printing press, "publishing" meant making an original available for scribes and students to copy. By doing so they would glean a deep sense of the material and, in some cases, make the material available to others as well. Indeed, a book that remained uncopied was unlikely to survive.

Although there is much discussion on film, art and literature, it still seemed to me that the book was weighted too heavily toward philosophical ideas and cultural products (e.g. counterfeit Louis Vuitton bags and bootleg Harry Potter products). Academia is woven into the discussion, as is plagiarism, but in a generalized fashion. Boon does mention that copying is a subject he teaches to students at York University. Many of the examples seem targeted to that cohort (e.g. comparing iTunes with tape mixing and Internet downloads). There are also many examples related to education within the university. These range from the fact that student readers are subject to copyright laws (that increase their cost) to the use of services such as Turnitin.com at universities to spot plagiarism.

Given how copious my copy of the volume is, it surprises me that some of my favorite examples of the tension between copies and originals were not mentioned. While art is not neglected—for example, Boon mentions the important role Andy Warhol played in making artistic copying a part of contemporary aesthetics—I would have liked a chapter on art that included both the historical discussion and the trope of copies as art, epitomized in the multiples of Andy Warhol and mass production techniques. Warhol and other artists are discussed (e.g. Mike Kelley, Duchamp, Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine, etc.), but their work is blended in more than looked at in terms of the language of art. Boon does note that Warhol turned the ethos of preciousity

on its head to embrace the multiplicity of copies as an aesthetic in its own right and the use of appropriation as an artistic strategy. What I felt was missing was a section that focused on the tension between the original and the copy in art in a larger sense, in terms of artists, collectors, forgeries, education, etc.

Historically, for example, there were many arguments about what constitutes "great" art. On the whole, artists were trained by copying the work of others. Yet, particularly with the Renaissance, the goal for the artist was to achieve recognition as an innovator, a genius who made original work. This not only created a conflict in the studio/atelier, it also created an academic tension, since good "technique" and the qualities that made works exceptional were not seen as the same thing. Moreover, with the invention of photography in the 19th century we find many fine artists using the ease of the photographic copy to "sketch," which facilitated the production of their work. Nonetheless, as recent research has shown, they often hid their photographs because of the stigma attached to working from copies. Boon's contemporary examples, such as Andy Warhol, seemed to buttress the cultural orientation rather than to look at art per se.

Finally, I also would have liked some integration of how the ideas about originals and copies relate to discoveries by multiple authors. For example, Darwinism is discussed in several places, but the attribution of evolutionary theory is not. It is well known that Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) was thinking about ideas similar to Charles Darwin's before Darwin's publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859 (1809–1882); yet Spencer was accused of copying the idea. Similarly, there has been much research on the 17th-century calculus controversy between Isaac Newton and Gottfried Leibniz. At the time, it was said that Leibniz had copied Newton's work, although later research suggests the two approaches were independently developed.

Despite these minor limitations, *In Praise of Copying* is a splendid book. It will appeal to anyone who wonders about the nuances of how we think about copies and where copies "fit" in our world today. The discussion ranges from what is a copy and copying as deception to montage and the mass production of copies. The text moves quickly and it is only upon closing the book that one realizes how much territory the author covered.

