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From Copyright to Copia:
Marcus Boon's Buddhist Ontology of Copying

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Marcus Boon, *In Praise of Copying*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2010.

Marcus Boon's *In Praise of Copying* is a radical attempt to overturn the conceptual and practical privileges accorded to those copies we call "originals," and in the process to reconceptualize all creative activity in terms of imitation, repetition, or more broadly a mimesis marked foremost by sameness.

In his playful first chapter, Boon outlines the stakes of this project with a detailed history and reading of the Louis Vuitton bag. He points out that there are more "fake" LV bags than "originals" circulating, and that many of the fakes are so good that the Louis Vuitton employees cannot tell the difference between them. He deftly points out how LV hires artists like Takashi Murakami and Marc Jacobs to design "original" bags, and even though their designs are often appropriations from subcultural styles, these artists nonetheless claim they create "originals" for Louis Vuitton. At the same time, it can paradoxically be more chic to carry a "fake" bag. Boon asks, "when original and copy are produced together in the same factory, at different moments; when a copy is actually self-consciously preferred to the original, we must ask again: What do we mean when we say 'copy'?" (18). To answer this question, Boon suggests that the traditions of Western philosophy, even at their most nominalist and anti-identical, are mired in a metaphysics of idealism that fails to undo the conceptual knots that, since Plato, seduce us into positing a valuable, authentic original and distinguishing it from a series of degraded copies. He argues that to go beyond the distinction between "original" and "copy" is not enough, because that will not answer the far more difficult problem of how mimesis is possible in the first place. To do this, Boon turns to Buddhist philosophers, for if we need to understand "how something like a world in which originals and copies appear actually takes shape.... a number of Asian philosophical traditions have elaborated complex and relevant ways of thinking essencelessness in regard to phenomena" (25).

Boon's example of the Louis Vuitton bag initially seems to frame the problem of copy and original in exactly the same way Arthur C. Danto thought about Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*. Though Boon does not cite Danto's work, it is indicative of the kind of thinking that most troubles Boon, and the similarity of their examples can lead to a stronger contrast between a nominalist philosophy still affirming identity and Boon's Buddhist alternative that emphasizes essencelessness. In his recent contribution on Andy

Warhol to the *Icons of America* series, Danto writes: "There is a photograph taken by Fred MacDarragh of Andy standing between some stacks of his *Brillo Boxes*, but anyone unfamiliar with cutting edge art in 1964 would have seen it as a photograph of a pasty-faced stock boy standing amid the boxes it was his job to open and unpack" (*Andy Warhol* 61). Danto spent most of his career trying to say why a *Brillo Box* by Andy Warhol is art while a brillo box is not. Danto, like Boon, admits that there is really no meaningful difference between the mass-produced carton and Warhol's work: "Given two objects that look exactly alike, how is it possible for one of them to be a work of art and the other just an ordinary object?" (*Andy Warhol* 62).

Danto's attempt to answer this came in part with his 1981 book *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, and there he argues that art is essentially a matter of history, of a set of desires and concepts unfolding and coming to consciousness, and thus there really is an identity to art, though one that is developed provisionally, historically. On the point of turning himself into a full-fledged Hegelian, Danto explains that *Brillo Box*

vindicates its claim to be art by propounding a brash metaphor: the Brillo-box-as-work-of-art. And in the end this transfiguration of the commonplace object transforms nothing in the art world. It only brings to consciousness the structures of art which, to be sure, required a certain historical development before that metaphor was possible. (*Transfiguration* 208)

Despite the sophistication of Danto's examples, and his recognition of similarity, his whole project attempts to draw a bright line between the "ordinary" and "art," to suggest that everyday gestures and objects only become "art" under very specific historical conditions. Thus, while Danto is no Platonist insisting on an unchanging and pure ideal of art, he nonetheless is always at pains to nail down the identity of art, to say that while one thing is art another identical thing is not, and the art is more valuable because it is up to something no ordinary brillo box could dream of: Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* do "what works of art have always done—externalizing a way of viewing the world, expressing the interior of a cultural period, offering itself as a mirror to catch the conscience of our kings" (*Transfiguration* 208). Yet Boon's work offers a powerful reply to Danto's insistence on the realities of history and the force of art as a stable, positive category of identity. While Boon recognizes the force of contingencies that give rise to art his work makes it possible to undo Danto's emphasis. Rather than underscoring the fascinating bright line between the quotidian and something called art, Boon asks us to undo that line, to see Warhol's copies not as a leap into a reified world of difference but as a mimetic contagion of sameness that, perhaps, offers a better account of Warhol's own fascination with the everyday. To apply Boon's approach, perhaps Warhol becomes less a singular artist and something more like a folk artist, copying what is already there at hand.

Danto's argument is animated by a commitment to identity that not only can separate art and non-art, but could equally support the kinds of conceptual distinctions between an "original" and a "copy" that, as Boon points out, underwrite a sacrificial economy "in which certain people are scapegoated and punished for making and exchanging the same

copies that everyone else is making and exchanging" (46). Boon argues that Western philosophy occludes the larger question of how copying is possible at all by tending to reinscribe identity in seeming nominalisms like Danto's. He claims the work of Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean Baudrillard helps destabilize the identity of the original, but they nonetheless remain too enmeshed in a metaphysics that cannot express or gesture at anything beyond identity, despite their affirmation of *différance*, which Boon reads as a key to understanding the sameness and resemblance of copies: "But this sameness was not pursued in poststructuralist thought, and '*différance*' slipped back into a mere, reified 'difference' purged of the nondifference with which, according to the most basic deconstructive practice, it must be coextensive" (29-30). Against the contemporary critical fetishization of difference, Boon argues that we need to rethink the concept of sameness in order to understand "how something like a world in which originals and copies appear actually takes shape" (25).

Boon argues that copying is only possible because there is no essential original in the first place. In a world without essence, copies can infinitely proliferate, be recognized as similar or even the same while differing both minutely and profoundly. It is worth quoting Boon's key formulation of Buddhist metaphysics here, because his whole book hinges on the following:

Thus, difference and sameness are neither different nor the same; and what is—i.e., what has the ontological status of truly existing—is emptiness itself. Emptiness, then, has a double status of relative and absolute truth. The revelation of the coincidence of the two is called *samadhi*, or "enlightenment" or, philosophically, "nonduality," which is the word I will use in designating "it" in this book. Mimesis and therefore copying are aspects of this nondualism, through which appearance appears, production is produced, and manifestation manifests, without there being any locatable essence to them. (32-33)

Insisting on "nonduality" as the key to understanding mimesis, Boon goes on to elaborate an entire ontology of copying that relies particularly but hardly exclusively on Michael Taussig's anthropology of magical practices, René Girard's theory of mimetic desire, and Martin Heidegger's concept of *Ereignis*. Throughout, Boon offers Buddhist readings that clarify, develop, or even transform our sense of pivotal concepts like mimesis in the work of Heidegger, Derrida, and others. Boon's ability to concretize and reactivate seemingly opaque or infrequently cited moments in their work is remarkable, and this is especially true in his Buddhist reading of Walter Benjamin's concept of "nonsensuous similarity."

Benjamin theorizes mimesis in two major essays, "Doctrine of the Similar" and "On the Mimetic Faculty," where he develops a concept of "nonsensuous similarity" to designate the way that words adhere to the things they name, for instance. Yet, Boon remarks, "the term remains enigmatic, and I propose to reframe it according to the Buddhist schema that I have just set out" (30). Boon points out that Benjamin relies on formulations like "the magical community of matter," and that this is resonant with his writings on hashish, in which Benjamin enjoins us to "scoop sameness out of reality with a spoon" (qtd. in Boon 31). Boon suggests that "what Benjamin means by 'sameness' is precisely non-

sensuous, nonconceptual, nonsemiotic similarity" (31). Carefully distinguishing this sameness from any kind of essential or universal monism, he redeploys Benjamin's concept as the Buddhist "suchness" that sometimes overcomes us, taking us beyond semiotics and into something like Benjamin's hashish-induced confrontation with a sameness that underlies an essenceless reality: "it is this particular sameness that in Benjamin's terms 'flashes up' throughout the 'semiotic element' or, in Buddhist terminology, appears in/as relative, interdependent cognitive and phenomenological structures" (31).

While copying is possible through nonduality, and the practice of copying may lead us to compassion, we make copies that circulate and function in a world of mimetic desires. They seem to promise and often create magical transformations and participate in movements of appropriation and deappropriation, but they also partake in profound violences. Boon deftly connects the contagion, multiplication, and violence of the copy to the work of Michael Taussig, but he also uses his Buddhist perspective to offer a reevaluation of the role of Eastern philosophy in the work of Martin Heidegger and the fraught concept of *Ereignis*, which could be translated as event, appropriation, or being on the way. Without dismissing the violence lurking behind the potential horrors of appropriation and deappropriation, Boon writes that from a Buddhist perspective, understanding and working through these phenomena might best be grasped as renouncing "not the object but attachment to and fear of the object, and the acts of labeling that these relations to the object involve" (224).

Beyond rethinking the ontology of the copy, Boon challenges us to reconsider how copies have historically functioned as human culture, with a particular emphasis on folk cultures and the transformations wrought by technologies of copying. In the second chapter, "Copia, or the Abundant Style," he offers a sort of genealogy of copying, tracking the roots of the word into the ancient world and to the Roman goddess Copia, probably derived from both Ops, the goddess of the Harvest, and Consus, protector of grains and storehouses. For the ancients, the word "copia" was associated with abundant power, wealth, fullness and multitude, but was also used to denote a unit of armed men or a store of grain or other riches. Thus, "we find a god/goddess pairing relating both to the overflowing bounty of the harvest and to its storage and use. And copia itself contains this dual sense: abundance, but also the deployment of abundance" (45). Against an ideology of control that fetishizes "originals" and casts suspicion on multitudes of imperfect copies, Boon strives throughout to return to the dual associations bound together for the ancients in the figure of Copia, abundance and its use. Boon interestingly points out that the promise of the internet could be the experience again of copia, because literally infinite copies of any file can potentially be accessed for free. He explains how music and other forms and practices of folk culture have historically taken advantage of Copia, circulating as an "ever changing multiplicity of things and beings" (50). Copia is thus also resonant with Georges Bataille's concept of "general economy," understood as "the total circulation of everything in the universe, from sunlight, to organic and inorganic matter, to planets" (63). It is here, however, that the promise of copia intersects with the relations of production in capitalism: "It is difficult for us to imagine copia today outside the laws of the marketplace, which label, measure, and define copia and

abundance so that they become almost unthinkable outside the monetary system and legally or scientifically defined entities" (51). Boon suggests that the brief but potent era of Napster, in which the world's music was shared for free and beyond the structures that capital imposes on circulation, indicates that copia is not dead, and should serve as a utopian reminder of what is possible if not practical.

Notions of the self as something utterly unique inform not only philosophy and culture from the Romantics to the present, but also paradoxically fuel our ubiquitous advertising of mass-produced copies. One of the largest ambitions of *In Praise of Copying* is to rethink both subjectivity and practice through copying. Boon articulates this in different ways throughout the book. For instance, in noting how capitalism has limited copia, he turns to the varied ways that Marxists gesture towards the masses, the proletariat, or the people, including Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's concept of the multitude. Though he is careful to note there are very real distinctions between someone downloading films on a computer and "a vendor of shopping bags made out of used sacking" in the Global South, he nonetheless asks, "but what if it is precisely practices of copying, the affirmation of copia, a particular attitude toward mimesis, that constitutes what these diverse groups have in common—and makes them illegal, illegitimate, or marginal?" (53). Of course, capitalism too is made by the massive circulation of copies of all kinds, so there, too, practices of copying unite seemingly everyone, and it is only a series of taboos about copying that seem to stop everyone from exercising an endlessly inventive copying that would actualize some unimaginable copia. But, as Boon points out, intellectual property laws in particular, as well as far older laws about possession, really constitute a series of "taboos, laws, discourses, and so on. Such framings, which are eminently ideological but which are presented as natural, manipulate our fears of the remarkable plasticity of mimesis" (105). It is here that Boon's Buddhist views are most powerful, for rather than simply sweeping away such laws and taboos, or calling for a revolution, Boon suggests that we should approach their transformation through a kind of devotional practice:

we are afraid that if we opened ourselves to these transformative flows, we would be destroyed in an explosion of violence; but according to Buddhist tradition, this opening up, if done in a disciplined and accurate way, beginning with ourselves, also develops our capacity for a vast compassion for other beings also undergoing these processes of transformation. (105)

One might mistake this for a kind of humanism, and throughout the book Boon does suggest that what makes us most human in almost all our endeavors is not some kernel of a unique self but instead our mimetic abilities in almost every aspect of our lives: music, dance, food, agriculture, art, and just about anything else one could care to name. But this is hardly a human phenomenon. As Boon argues, copying is everywhere in nature, and especially in mass production and reproduction both human and beyond: "Reproduction, in the visible world of insects, mammals, and plants, as well as in the invisible-to-the-naked-eye world of microorganisms, occurs mostly through a proliferation of apparently identical organisms, seeds, and spores" (179). Rather than affirming anything uniquely human, *In Praise of Copying* argues that our mimetic capacities to copy, to proliferate,

and to transform through copying make us much more like than unlike the rest of the universe.

Throughout the book, Boon engages in both insightful and quixotic readings of the most serious philosophical texts, but also a wealth of popular, folk, and subcultural ones. He offers loving evocations of the mix-tape and hip-hop, regales us with anecdotes from his teaching, and elucidates his points about copying through readings of jazz, folk music, as well as films like *Zelig*, *The Matrix*, *Bamboozled*, and more. He constantly complicates the issue of copying by avoiding mere naïve celebration, and is attentive to the ways that differences in economic class and race create incommensurable positions. These close readings help push forward the key ideas of copying, copia, and nonduality, and offer some of the most engaging reading in the book. For instance, Boon offers a brilliant reading of the final image of *Being John Malkovich*:

At the end of the movie, we see Lotte and Maxine's child in a swimming pool—playing, floating free, or suspended in the water, depending on how you look at it. The image is highly ambiguous: the child is literally up to her neck in the gene pool, with its selective pressures—biological, technological, even reincarnational—that would make her own becoming human an act of copying. Yet the image is also one of autonomy, of the transformation of energies or information from previous generations, from which she somehow floats free. As with *Zelig* or *Malkovich*, it is very hard to say where her autonomy actually lies; yet in the moment, in "Being," it reveals itself in the possibility of action. (87)

Throughout, Boon plays with the title of his book. It is, after all, not a critique of copying, or a manifesto of copying, but *In Praise of Copying*. Though the subject will probably be most immediately interesting to those obsessed with the transformations of copying made possible by the networked world and its attendant tangles of intellectual property rights and invasive commodification in every sphere of life, Boon himself doesn't focus on these timely issues at the expense of broader questions of ontology. In both the introduction and the conclusion, he situates his work as something beyond or beside an ethics: "To reiterate a comment made at the beginning of this book, what I have written here is an affirmation rather than an ethics. Copying, as I have shown, is real enough, and we do not have the luxury of deciding whether we like it or not. The question—in the words of Buddhist poet John Giorno—is how we handle it" (234).

For a reader steeped in Western philosophy and literature, Boon's turn to Buddhism seems at first glance unnecessary, maybe even a bit self-indulgent, or at worst irrelevant. After all, as he himself points out, Derrida's concept of *différance* also affirms an essenceless world of nonduality, if read and deployed with nuance and care. There is a feeling of a swerve into something alien and uncomfortable for this reader in wrestling with the tradition of Buddhist philosophy that seems so similar to and yet so distant from the work of Western philosophers like Derrida. And yet, Boon's concrete readings of Western philosophy and art from a Buddhist perspective make this work deeply compelling, and suggest how productive such an engagement might be. Throughout the book, he is at pains to remind his readers that Buddhist thought is an often

unacknowledged influence on the work of twentieth-century philosophers in particular, but moreover "there is evidence of the passage and transmission of philosophical thought between Europe and Asia as far back as 500 B.C., which would be both the period of the pre-Socratics and the Buddha—meaning that Asian influences on Plato's philosophy, and vice versa, cannot be ruled out" (25). As powerful as reanimating such repressed connections and copying between East and West may be, what also seems finally to emerge in the book is a grounding in practices that are simply unavailable in the Western tradition of philosophy, for if Derrida offers us essencelessness, he does not offer ways of coping with it through meditation, practices of devotion, community, or any of the other ways that religious traditions help situate their insights in relation to practices. Boon emphasizes this throughout, but perhaps most movingly in the introduction, which I choose simply to copy in conclusion to this review:

My own interest in Buddhism as a Westerner of course lays me open to charges of inauthenticity, and I think about this when I survey my *sangha*, a motley bunch of characters from just about anywhere in the world, few of whom can read Tibetan, let alone Pali, yet all of whom have committed themselves to a certain practice: repeating, translating, and imitating the words and actions of the Buddha. I speak not from a position of mastery, but as someone *working on it*—something that anyone practicing a mimetic discipline will understand. (7)

In Praise of Copying can be copied for free at the Harvard University Press Website: <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/features/boon/>

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