

In Praise Of Copying

Marcus Boon

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"Are these Authentic Louis Vuitton hand bags? No, we do not sell trademark Louis Vuitton registered trademark bags. The real Louis Vuitton bags can only be bought from authorized dealers. Our bags are replicas. They have all the proper labelling in the correct places, lining, locks and keys, are of the highest quality you should expect, and look authentic." Marcus Boon quotes this disclaimer from the website of Basicreplica.com during the fascinating discussion of 'fake' Louis Vuitton bags that begins *In Praise Of Copying*. The Basicreplica bags illustrate very well one of Boon's central claims here: that the distinction between original and copy is far more elusive than it might appear to be at first glance.

He is at pains to point out that he is not very interested in the legal debates around copyright and its infringement – in fact, he argues, such debates necessarily miss the point. Disputes about who has the right to replicate become provincial from the perspective which Boon adopts here, where copying – far from being some aberrant practice which can be distinguished from 'proper' creativity – becomes a cosmic principle, something without which not only creativity, but life as such, would not be possible. This sense of exorbitance, of proliferation, is suggested by the etymological roots of the word 'copy', which comes from the name for the Roman goddess of abundance, Copia.

Boon so deconstructs the concept of copying – or in the proper deconstructive way, he demonstrates that the concept is itself always-already deconstructed – that he ends up seeming to argue two apparently contradictory things: first, that copying is ubiquitous; second, that it is impossible. It is impossible because nothing can be a perfect copy of anything else; all copies involve – perhaps only minimal – modifications of some kind. But the contradiction belongs to the account of copying which Boon wants to destabilise, with its idea that we can definitively distinguish authentic originals from the hordes of inauthentic doppelgangers, and, once this notion of copying is abandoned, we have to acknowledge that copying necessarily involves transformation.

Boon draws on a range of sources to make his case – Buddhist philosophers, theorists such as Baudrillard and Deleuze, and musicians from Kool Herc to John

Cage. It's no surprise that music would keep coming up as an example here, since, by its very nature, recorded music is only possible because of copying technologies. Boon cites Glenn Gould's well known dictum that "the role of the forger, of the unknown maker of the unauthenticated goods, is emblematic of electronic culture", and Gould, evidently, was only one example of the way in which 20th century experimental music culture depended on an embrace of the transformational capacities of recording equipment. Not that copying entered into music with the invention of the phonograph; it was intrinsic to music from the start. Folk traditions were woven through practices of copying and reappropriation, Boon argues, pointing to the way that Bert Jansch introduces the songs he plays, situating them within a tradition and describing how he first encountered them. "Thus, although the object being copied is generic, the moment and circumstances of Jansch's encounter with it is unique." For Boon, this is an example of the way in which reappropriation can also be an act of giving, something which is also exemplified by iTunes playlists and their antecedents, mixtapes. He contrasts the handcrafted, tactile appeal of mixtapes with the impersonality of mix CDs, but an anecdote from his students is telling. When he asked them if they would rather receive a mixtape or a mix CD, all of them preferred the CD because of its better sound quality, even though they acknowledged the handcrafted quality of the mixtape.

In Praise Of Copying's ambition is admirable, but the task it has set itself is a vast one. Any comprehensive account of cultures of copying has to deal with the likes of Burroughs's cut-ups, Duchamp's readymades and the Situationists' détournement, but Boon adds little to the already existing (well-established) discussion of these developments. On the other hand, some references to less well known figures felt too glancing. For example, Boon brings in philosopher Alain Badiou on a few occasions, but someone unfamiliar with Badiou's work is unlikely to be enlightened by these cameos, while those who know it better will be frustrated by the brevity of the encounter. There was sometimes a feeling that Boon was exhausted by, well, the copiousness of his topic, and his prose occasionally has a strangely diffident quality.

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