

THE MIGRATION OF THE AURA OR HOW TO EXPLORE THE ORIGINAL THROUGH ITS FACSIMILES

A chapter prepared by Bruno Latour & Adam Lowe for Thomas Bartscherer (editor) Switching Codes, University of Chicago Press. Version 3. To Pasquale Gagliardi.

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Something odd has happened to Holbein's Ambassadors at the National Gallery in London. The visitor does not immediately know how to describe her malaise. The painting is completely flat, its colours bright but somewhat garish; the shape of every object is still there but slightly exaggerated; she wonders what has happened to this favourite painting of hers. "That's it", she mutters, "the painting has lost its depth, the fluid dynamics of the paint has gone. It is just a surface now." But what does this surface look like? The visitor looks around, puzzled, and then the answer dawns on her: it resembles almost exactly the poster she has bought several years ago at the Gallery bookshop and that still hangs in her study at home. Only the dimension differs.

Could it be true? She wonders. Could they have replaced the Ambassadors by a facsimile? Maybe it's on loan to some other museums and they did not want to disappoint the visitors, so they put up with this copy. Or maybe they did not want to trick us and it is a projection, it is so flat and bright that it could almost be a slide projected on a screen... Fortunately, she composes herself enough not to ask the stern guard in the room whether this most famous painting is the original or not. What a shock it would have been. Unfortunately, she knows enough about the strange customs of restorers and curators to bow to the fact that this is indeed the original although only in name, that the real original has been irreversibly lost and that it has been substituted by what most people like in a copy: bright colors, shining surface, and above all a perfect resemblance with the slides sold at the bookshop that are shown in art classes all over the world by art teachers most often interested only in the shape and theme of a painting but not by any other marks registered in the thick surface of a work. She leaves the room suppressing a tear: the original has been turned into a copy of itself looking like a cheap copy, and no one seems to complain or even to notice the substitution. They seem happy to have visited in London the original poster of Holbein's Ambassadors!

Something even stranger happened to her, sometime later, in the Salle de la Joconde in Le Louvre. To finally get at this cult icon of the Da Vinci code, hundreds of thousands of visitors have to enter through two doors that are separated by a huge, framed painting, Veronese's Nozze di Cana, a rather dark giant of a piece that directly faces the tiny Mona Lisa barely visible through her thick anti-fanatic glass. Now the visitor is really stunned, because she no longer recognizes in the Hollywood machinery of the miraculous wedding the facsimile that she had the good fortune of seeing when she was invited by the Fondazione Cini to the island of San Giorgio, in Venice, at the end of 2007. There it was, she remembers vividly, a painting on canvas, so thick and deep that you could still see the brush marks of Veronese and feel the sharp cuts that Napoleon's orderlies had to make in order to tear the painting from the wall, strip by strip, before rolling it like a carpet and sending it as a war booty to Paris in 1797 — a cultural rape very much in the mind of all Venetians, up to this day. But there, in Palladio's refectory, the painting (yes, it was a painting even though it

has been produced through the intermediary of digital techniques) had an altogether different meaning: it was at a different height that make sense in a dining room, it was delicately lit by the natural lights of huge East and West windows and at about 5pm on a summer afternoon the light in the room exactly coincides with the light in the painting, it had of course no frame and, more importantly, Palladio's architecture merged with admirable continuity within Veronese's painted architecture giving to the refectory of the Benedictine monks such a *trompe l'oeil* depth of vision that you could not stop yourself from walking slowly back and forth up and down the room to enter deeper and deeper into the mystery of the miracle [see the photo essay].

But here, in the Mona Lisa room, even though every part of the painting looked just the same (as far as she could remember), the meaning of the painting she had seen in Venice seemed entirely lost. Why such a huge gilt frame? Why the doors on both sides? Why was it hanging so low, making a mockery of the balcony on which the guests were crowding in Venice. For instance, the bride and groom, squashed into the left-hand corner, seemed peripheral here while in Venice they were of great importance articulating a scene of sexual intrigue that felt like a still from a film. In Paris the composition made less sense. Why this ugly zenithal light? Why this air-conditioned room with its dung brown polished plaster walls?— in Venice there was no air-conditioning, the painting was allowed to breathe by itself as if Veronese had just left it dry. And, anyway, the visitors could not move in and out of the painting to ponder those questions without bumping on the crowds momentarily glued (queued) to the Joconde turning their back to the Veronese.

A terrible cognitive dissonance. And yet there was no doubt that this one, in Paris, was the original; no substitution had occurred, no cheating of any sort — plenty of restoration and Veronese would certainly be surprised to see the painting looking as it does- but that's different from cheating. She remembered perfectly well that in Venice it was clearly written: "A facsimile". And there even was in San Giorgio a small exhibition to explain in some detail the complex digital processes that Factum Arte, the workshop in Madrid, had used to de- then re-materialized the gigantic Parisian painting; carefully laser scanning it, A4 by A4, then photographing it in similar sized sections, then white light scanning it to record the relief surface, then somehow managing to stitch together the digital files before instructing a purpose-built printer to deposit pigments onto canvas carefully coated with a gesso almost identical to that used by Veronese. Is it possible that the Venice version, although it clearly states that it is a facsimile, is more original than the Paris original, she wonders? She now remembers that on the phone with a French art historian friend she had been castigated for spending so much time in San Giorgio with the copy of the Nozze: "Why waste your time with a fake Veronese, when there are so many true ones in Venice?!" her friend had said; and she had replied, without realizing that she was saying: "But come here to see it for yourself, no description can replace seeing this original... oops, I mean, is this not the very definition of the aura?...". Without question, for her the aura of the original had migrated from Le Louvre to San Giorgio: the best proof is that you had to come to the original and see it. What a dramatic contrast, she thought, between the Veronese and the Ambassadors that claims to be the original in order to hide that it is an expensive copy of one of its cheap copies!

"But it's not the original, it's just a facsimile!". How often have we heard such a retort when confronted with an otherwise perfect reproduction of a painting? No question about it, the obsession of the age is for the original version. Only the original possesses an aura, this mysterious and mystical quality that no second-hand version will ever get. But paradoxically, this obsession for pinpointing originality increases proportionally with the availability and accessibility of more and more copies of better and better quality. If so much energy is devoted to the search for the original — for archeological and marketing reasons— it is because the possibility of making copies has never

been so open-ended. If no copies of the Mona Lisa existed, would we pursue it with such energy — and would we devise so many conspiracy theories to decide whether or not the version held under glass and protected by sophisticated alarms is the original surface painted by Leonardo’s hand or not. In other words, the intensity of the search for the original depends on the amount of passion and the number of interests triggered by its copies. No copies, no original. In order to stamp a piece with the mark of originality you need to apply to its surface the huge pressure that only a great number of reproductions can provide.

So, in spite of the knee-jerk reaction — “But this is just a facsimile” —, we should refuse to decide too quickly when considering the value of either the original or its reproduction. Thus, the real phenomenon to be accounted for, is not the punctual delineation of one version divorced from the rest of its copies, but the whole assemblage made up of one —or several— original(s) together with the retinue of its continually re-written biography. It is not a case of “either or” but of “and, and”. Is it not because the Nile ends up in such a huge delta that the century-old search for its sources had been so thrilling? To pursue the metaphor, we want, in this paper, to behave like hydrographers intent in deploying the whole catchment area of a river -not only focusing on an original spring. A given work of art should be compared not to any isolated locus but to a river’s catchment, complete with its estuaries, its many tributaries, its dramatic rapids, its many meanders and of course also with its several hidden sources.

To give a name to this catchment area, we will use the word trajectory. A work of art —no matter of which material it is made — has a trajectory, or to use another expression popularized by anthropologists, a career*¹. What we want to do in this paper is to specify the trajectory or the career of a work of art and to move from one question that we find moot (“Is it an original or merely a copy?”) to another one that we take to be decisive especially at the time of digital reproduction: “It is well or badly reproduced?”. The reason why we find this second question so important is because the quality, conservation, continuation, sustenance and appropriation of the original depends entirely on the distinction between good and bad reproduction. We want to argue that a badly reproduced original risks disappearing while a well accounted for original may continue to flourish its originality and to trigger new copies. This is why we want to show that facsimiles, and especially those relying on complex (digital) techniques, are the most fruitful way to explore the original and even to help re-define what originality actually is.

To shift the attention of the reader away from the detection of the original to that of the quality of its reproduction, let us remember that the word “copy” does not need to be so derogative, since it comes from the same etymology as “copious”, and thus designates a source of abundance. There is nothing inferior in the notion of a copy, simply a proof of fecundity. Is originality something that is fecund enough to produce an abundance of copies. So much so that, in order to give a first shape to the abstract notion of trajectory, we wish to rely on the antique emblem of a cornucopia: a twisted goat horn with a sharp end —the original— and a wide mouth disgorging at will an endless flow of riches (all thanks to Zeus). Actually, this connection between the idea of copies and that of the original should come as no surprise since for a work of art to be original means nothing but to be the origin of a long descendance. Something which has no progeny, no reproduction, no inheritors, is not called original but rather sterile or barren. To the question: “Is this isolated piece an original

¹ *Appadurai, Arjun, ed. *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986; Tamen, Miguel. *Friends of Interpretable Objects*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001.

or a facsimile?”, it might be more interesting to substitute the other question: “Is this segment in the trajectory of the work of art barren or fertile?”.

To say that a work of art grows in originality thanks to the quality and abundance of its copies, is nothing odd: this is true of the trajectory of any set of interpretations. If the songs of the Iliad had remained stuck in one little village of Asia Minor, Homer will not be considered as a (collective) author of such great an originality. It is because —and not in spite of— the thousands of thousands of repetitions and variations of the songs that, when considering any copy of the Iliad we are moved so much by the unlimited fecundity of the original Aed. We attribute to the author (even though his very existence cannot be specified) the power of each of the successive reinterpretations by saying that “potentially” all of them “were already” there in the Ur-text —which we simultaneously know to be wrong (my reading could not possibly be already there in Greece) and perfectly right since I willingly add my little expansion to the “unlimited” fecundity of this collective phenomenon called “The Iliad”. If it is so unlimited, it is because I push the limit a little bit more. This does mean that there is nothing “inherently great” in the first versions of the great poem, and that to penetrate inside this inherent greatness, you need to bring with you all of the successive versions, adaptations and accommodations. Nothing is more ordinary than this mechanism: Abraham has become the father of a people “as numerous as the grains of sand” only because he had a descendance. Before the birth of Isaac, Abraham was a despised barren old man. That he became “the Father of three religions” depends on what happened to Isaac, and then to what happened to every one of his later sons and daughters. Such is the “awesome responsibility” of the reader, as Charles Péguy so eloquently said, because this process is entirely reversible and if we stop interpreting, if we stop rehearsing, if we stop reproducing, the very existence of the original is at stake. It might stop having abundant copies and slowly disappear².

We have no difficulty raising questions about the quality of the entire trajectory when dealing with the performing arts, such as dance, music and theatre. Why is it so difficult when faced with the act of reproduction of a painting, a piece of furniture, a building or a sculpture? This is the first question we want to clarify.

No one will complain on hearing King Lear: “But this is not the original, it is just a representation!”. Quite right. That’s the whole idea of what it is to play King Lear: it is to replay it. In the case of a performance, everyone is ready to take into account the whole trajectory going from the first presentations through the long successions of its “revivals” all the way to the present. There is nothing extraordinary in considering that “one good representation of King Lear” is a moment, a segment, in the career of the work of art called King Lear, the absolute Platonic ideal of which no one has ever seen and that no one will ever be able to circumscribe. In addition, it requires no great sophistication to be fully prepared for disappointment at not finding “the” first original presentation by Shakespeare “himself”, but several premieres and several dozens of different versions of the written play with endless glosses and variations. We seem perfectly happy to be excited by the anticlimactic discovery of the source of a major river in a humble spring barely visible under the mossy grass. Third, and even more importantly, spectators have no qualm whatsoever at judging the new version under their eyes by applying the shibboleth: “Is it well or badly (re)played?” They can differ wildly in their opinions, some being scandalized by what they take as some revolting novelties (“Why does Lear disappear in a submarine?”) or bored by the repetition of too many

² See the commentaries of Péguy in Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition* (translated by Paul Patton). New York: continuum International Publishing, 2005.

clichés, but they have no difficulty in considering that this moment in the whole career of all the successive King Lears—in the plural—should be judged on its merit and not by its mimetic comparison with the first (entirely inaccessible anyway) presentation of King Lear by the Shakespeare company in such and such a year. It is now, what we see under our eyes on stage, that counts to make up our judgment, and certainly not the degree of resemblance with another Ur-event hidden from view (even though what we take to be the real “King Lear” remains in the background of every one of our judgments). So clearly, in the case of performance art at least, every new version runs the risk of losing the original—or regaining it.

So free are we from the comparison with any “original”, that it is perfectly acceptable to evaluate a replay by saying: “I would never have anticipated this, it is totally different from the way it has been played before, it is utterly distinct from the way Shakespeare played it and yet I now understand what the play has always been about!”. Everything happens as if some of revivals—the good ones—had managed to dig out of the original novel traits, that might have been potentially in the source, but which have remained invisible until now, and that are made vivid again to the mind of the spectators. So, even though it is not evaluated by its mimetic resemblance to an ideal exemplar, yet it is clear, and everyone might agree, that, because of the action of one of its late successors, the genius of Shakespeare has gained a new level of originality because of the amazing feat of this faithful (but not mimetic) reproduction. The origin is there anew, even though it is so different from what it was. And the same phenomenon would occur for any piece of music or for dance. The exclamation: “It’s so original” attributed to a new performance does not describe one section along the trajectory (and especially not the first Ur-version) but the degree of fecundity of the whole cornucopia. In performance art the aura keeps migrating and might very well come back suddenly... or disappear altogether. When so many bad repetitions have so decreased the level of fecundity of the work that the original itself might be abandoned, it will stop being the starting point of any succession. Such a work of art dies out like a family line without any descendance. Like a river deprived, one after one, of all its tributary and that has shrunk to the size of a tiny rivulet, the work has been brought to its “original” size, that is, to very little, since it has never been copiously copied, that is, constantly reinterpreted and recast. The work has lost its aura for good.

Why is it so difficult to say the same thing and use the same type of judgment for a painting or a sculpture or a building? Why not saying, for instance, that the facsimile of Veronese’s “Nozze di Cana” has been replayed, rehearsed, revived thanks to a new interpretation in Venice in 2007 by Factum Arte, much as Hector Berlioz’s *Les Troyens* have been given at last for the first time in London by Colin Davis in 1969 in Covent Garden (a feat that poor Berlioz never managed to witness since it never had the money nor the orchestra to play his original work in full...). And yet what seems so easy for performance art remains far fetched for the visual arts. If we claim that the *Nozze di Cana* have been “given again” in San Giorgio, someone will immediately say: “But the original is in Paris! the one now in San Giorgio is just a facsimile!”. A sense of fakery, of counterfeiting, of betrayal, has been introduced in the discussion in a way that would seem absurd for a piece of performance art (even though it is perfectly possible to say of a very bad company that they made “a sham” at playing Shakespeare). It seems almost impossible to say that the facsimile of Veronese’s *Nozze di Cana* is not about falsification but it is a stage in the verification of Veronese’s achievement, a part of its ongoing biography.

One reason for this unequal treatment has obviously to do with what could be called the differential of resistance among all segments of the trajectory. In his much too famous essay, throughout a deep fog of art historical mystic, it is this gap in technology that Walter Benjamin pointed out under the

name of “mechanical reproduction”³. In the case of performance art, each version is just as difficult to produce and just as costly as the former one (actually more and more expensive as time goes and certainly more than in Shakespeare’s time —just think of the wages for the security guards and all the health and safety standards!). It is not because there has been zillions representations of King Lear that the one you are now going to give will be easier to fund. The marginal cost will be exactly the same —with the only exception that the public will know what “a King Lear” is, coming fully equipped with endless presuppositions and critical tests on how it should be played (a double-edged sword, as any director knows). This is the technical reason why, in the case of performance art, we don’t distinguish between an original and a copy, but rather between successive versions of the same play each designated by the label “version n”, “version n+1”, “version n+2”, etc. It is also why the real play “King Lear” is localized nowhere specifically (and often not at the very beginning) but is rather the name given to the whole cornucopia itself (even though everyone of the spectators cherish those special moments in his or her personal history when, because of an exceptionally good “revival”, the genius of the real King Lear has been “instantiated” more fully than any time before or later). In those cases, the trajectory is composed of segments made, so to speak, of the same stuff or that at least require a roughly similar mobilization of resources.

The situation appears to be entirely different when considering, for instance, a painting. Because it remains in the same frame, encoded in the same pigments, entrusted to the same institution. One cannot help having the impression that every reproduction will be so much easier to do and that there will be no possible comparison of quality between the various segments of the trajectory. This is why the aura seems definitely attached to one version only, the autograph one. And certainly this is superficially true: if you take a picture of the *Nozze di Cana* in Paris with your digital camera, no one in his right mind can render commensurable the pale rendering on the screen of your computer and the 67m² of canvas in le Louvre... If you claimed that your picture was “just as good as the original”, people would raise their shoulders in pity, and rightly so.

And yet, the distance between “version n” called “the original” and “version n+1” called “a mere copy” depends just as much on the differential of efforts, of costs, of techniques as on any substantial distinction between the successive versions of the same painting. In other words, it is not because of some inherent quality of painting that we tend to create such a yawning gap between originals and copies —it is not because they are more “materials” (an opera or a play are just as “material” as pigments on canvas)—, but because of the differences in the techniques used for each segment of the trajectory. While in performance art they are grossly homogeneous (each replay relying on the same gamut of techniques) the career of a painting or a sculpture relies on segments which are vastly heterogeneous and which vary greatly in the intensity of the efforts deployed along its path. It is this asymmetry, we wish to argue, that too often preclude one to say that the *Nozze di Cana* in Paris has been “reprinted” or “given again” in Venice. And it is certainly this presupposition that angered so much the French art historian castigating her friend for wasting her time in San Giorgio instead of visiting the “genuine Veroneses”. Hidden behind the commonsense distinction between original and mere copies, lies a totally different process that has to do with the technical equipment, the amount of care, the intensity of the search for the originality that goes from one version to the next. Before being able to defend itself for re-enacting the original well or badly, a facsimile is discredited

³ Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Illuminations*, 217-51. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.

beforehand because it is associated with a gap in techniques of reproduction. A gap based on a misunderstanding of photography as an index for reality.

The proof of this claim can be obtained by showing what happened to our search for originality when we modify this differential —something that becomes easier and easier in the new digital age. That it is not limited to performance art might be made clear by the comparison with the copying of manuscripts. Before printing, the marginal cost of producing one more copy was exactly identical to that of producing the penultimate —a situation to which we are actually returning now when treating digital copies. Inside the scriptorium of a monastery, all exemplars were similarly copies and no copyist would have said that this one is the original while this one is only a copy —they were all facsimiles— even though great care was of course put into distinguishing a better, earlier, more illuminated version from an inferior one. Here again the aura was able to travel and might very well have migrated to the newest and latest copy excellently done on one of the best parchments and double checked against the best earlier sources. Naturally, once the printing press had started, the marginal cost of one extra copy soon became negligible compared to the time and techniques necessary to write the manuscript: then, but then only, an enormous distance was introduced, and rightly so, between one part of the trajectory —the autograph manuscript now turned into THE ORIGINAL— and another part, the print run —which, from now on, will be made of nothing more than mere copies (until of course the great art of bibliophily reintroduced endless subtle differences between each of the successive prints – and forensic digital analysis allowed us to date and order those copies).

There is no better proof that the ability of the aura to be retrieved from the flows of copies (or to remain stuck in one segment of the trajectory) crucially depends on the heterogeneity of the techniques used in the successive segments, than to consider what happens to THE ORIGINAL book now that we are all sitting inside that worldwide cut and paste scriptorium called the Web. Because there is no longer any huge difference between the techniques used for each successive reinstantiation of the originals of some segment of a hypertext, we accept quite easily not to make that great a distinction between one version, judged before as “the only original”, and later versions which would be said to be “mere copies”. We happily stamp successive renderings of the “same” argument with “version 1”, “version 2”, “version n” while the notion of the author has become just as fuzzy as the aura —not to mention the royalties from copyrights. Hence the popularity of collective scriptoria like Wikipedia. In effect, Benjamin confused the notion of “mechanical reproduction” with the inequality in the techniques employed along a trajectory. No matter how mechanical a reproduction is, once there is no huge gap of process between version n and version n+n, the clearcut distinction between the original and its reproduction becomes less crucial —and the aura begins to hesitate and is uncertain where it should land.

All of that might be very well, but is it possible to imagine the same migration of the aura in the reproduction or the reinterpretation of, say, a painting? After all, it is the contrast between the Nozze and the Ambassadors that triggered our inquiry that would have gone very differently had it be limited to performance art. One cannot help suspecting that there is in painting, in architecture, in sculpture, in objects in general, a sort of stubborn persistence that makes the association of a place, an original and some aura impossible to separate.

Let us first notice, however, that the difference between performance arts and the others is not as radical as it seems: a painting has always to be reproduced, that is, it is always a re-production of itself even when it appears to stay exactly the same in the same place. Or, rather, no painting remains the same in the same place without some reproduction. For paintings too existence

precedes the essence. To have a continuing substance they need to be able to subsist. This requirement is well known by curators all over the world: a painting has to be reframed, dusted, sometimes restored, relit, it has to be represented in different rooms with different accompanying pictures, different walls, inserted in a different narratives, with different catalogues, its price changes over time, its insurance cost also. So, even though a painting might never be loaned and keep surviving inside the same institutional setting without undergoing any heavy restoration, it has a career all the same: to subsist and be visible again it needs to be taken care of. The best proof is that if you don't, it will soon be accumulating dust in a basement, be sold for nothing, or will be cut into pieces and irremediably lost. Such is the justification for all the restorations: if you don't do something, time will eat up that painting as certainly as the building in which it is housed will decay, or as surely as the institutions supposed to take care of it will start decomposing. If in doubt about this, imagine your precious works of art housed in the Kabul National Museum.... For a work of art to survive, it requires an ecology just as complex as to maintain the natural character of a natural park⁴.

If the necessity of reproduction is accepted, then we might be able to convince the reader that the really interesting question is not so much to differentiate the original from the facsimiles, but to be able to tell apart the good from the bad reproduction. If the Ambassadors have been irreversibly erased, it is not out of negligence, but, on the contrary, because of an excessive zeal in “reproducing” it. What the curators did was to confuse the obvious general feature of all works of art —to survive they have to be somehow reproduced— with the narrow notion of reproduction provided by photographic posters while ignoring many other ways for a painting to be reproduced. For instance they could have had a perfect facsimile registering in 3-D all its surface effects and restored the copy instead of the work itself. If they had done this they could have invited several art historians with different views to suggest different ways of restoring the copy and produced an exhibition of the results. Their crime is not to have offered to the visitors of the National Gallery a reproduction of the Holbein instead of the Holbein itself —“the Ambassadors” remains behind all the successive restorations much like King Lear does over each of its replay, granting or withdrawing its auratic dimension at will depending on the merit of each instance— but to have so limited the range of reproduction techniques that they have chosen one of the most barren: the photograph. As if a painting was not a thick material but some ethereal design that could be lifted out of its materiality and downloaded into any reproduction without any loss of substance. Actually, a terribly revealing documentary shows the culprits restoring the Holbein by using as their model photographs of the original and subjectively deciding what is original, what has decayed, what has been added and imagining the painting as a series of discrete layers that can be added or removed at will. A process that resembles plastic surgery more than an open forensic investigation.

Thus, what is so extraordinary in comparing the fate of the Ambassadors with that of the Nozze, is not that they both rely on reproduction —this is a necessity of existence— but that the first relies on a notion of reproduction that makes the original disappears for ever while the second adds originality to the original version by adding to it new dimensions without jeopardizing the penultimate version — without ever touching it thanks to the delicate processes used to record it.

But how could any originality be added, one could ask? One obvious answer is: by bringing the new version to its original location. The cognitive dissonance undergone by the visitor in the Mona Lisa

⁴ *Western, David. In the Dust of Kilimandjaro . New York: Shearwater/Island Press, 1997.*

room comes in part from the fact that in Palladio's refectory every single detail of the Nozze has a meaning entirely lost and wasted in the awkward situation provided for the version n-1 in Paris. In other words, originality does not come to a work of art in bulk, it is rather made of different components, each of which can be inter-related to produce a complex whole. New processes of reproduction allow us to see these elements and their inter-relationship in new ways. To be at the place for which it had been conceived in each and every detail is certainly one aspect —one element — in what we mean by an original. Well, on that ground, there is no question that it is the facsimile of the Nozze that is now original and that it is the version in Le Louvre that has lost at least this comparative advantage.

We should not however be too mystical about the notion of an "original location" in the case of the Veronese since the very refectory in which the facsimile has been housed is itself a reconstruction. If you look at photographs taken in 1950, you will notice that the original floor was gone and another had been installed at the height of the windows – the top was a theatre and the basement a wood workshop, the whole space had been altered. It was rebuilt in the 50's but the plaster and floor were wrong and the boisserie that surrounded the room and added the finishing touches to the proportion of the room was missing. In its stripped-down state it looked more like a high protestant space that almost seemed to laugh at the absence of Veronese's counter-reformation flourish. But now the effect of the facsimile is such that there are rumours that the return of the painting has triggered a plan for a new restoration that will retrospectively return the space to its former glory. A facsimile of a heavily restored original, now in a new location, was causing new elements to be added to an original in its original location that is in part a facsimile of itself. Originality once seemed so simple...

The same is certainly true of availability. What angered the visitor so much in Le Louvre was that she could not actually scan visually the Nozze without bumping into Mona Lisa addicts. The Veronese is so full of incident and detail that it cannot be seen without time to contemplate its meaning, implications and the reasons for its continued importance. What does it mean to enshrine an original, if the contemplation of its auratic quality is impossible? This too is another element that can be prized away and distinguished from all the others. Actually, this component of originality does not need to go with the originality of the location: the best proof of this may lie in the facsimile of the burial chamber from the Tomb of Thutmose III in the Valley of the Kings⁵. It contains the first complete text of the Amduat to be used in a pharaonic tomb. The Amduat is a complex narrative mixing art, poetry, science and religion to provide a coherent account of life in the afterworld. The tomb was never made to be visited and the physical and climatic conditions inside the tomb are incompatible with mass tourism. As a result, the tomb is deteriorating rapidly and glass panels have had to be installed to protect the walls from accidental damage and wear and tear. However the interventions in the tomb change its nature and inhibit both detailed study of the text and an appreciation of the specific character of the place. Exhibitions that presented the facsimile and contextualize the text have now been visited by millions of people in North America and Europe. The delocalized facsimile has established the reasons for its continued importance, turned

⁵ *The facsimile of the tomb (in its current condition but without the elements that turn the environment into a museum) has resulted in detailed publications by the egyptologist Erik Hornung and the psychologist Theodor Abt in both film and book form.*

- Hornung, Erik and Abt, Theodor. *The Dark Hours of the Sun – The Amduat in the tomb of Thutmose III*, DVD, Published by Factum Arte, 2005
- Hornung, Erik and others. *Immortal Pharaoh- the tomb of Thutmose III*. Madrid, Factum Arte, 2006

the visitors into a pro-active force in the conservation of the tomb and could become part of a long term policy that will keep the version n-1 safe but accessible to the small number of specialists who require access for continued study and monitoring. See? Each of the components that together comprise what we mean by a true original begin traveling at different speeds along the trajectory and begin to map out what we have called the catchment area of a work of art.

A third element of originality has to do with the surface features of a work. Too often, restorers make a mockery of the materiality of the original they claim to protect by limiting matter to shape only because they confuse 3D with 2D. If there is one aspect of reproduction that digital techniques have totally modified, it is certainly the ability to register the most minute three-dimensional aspect of a work without putting the work at risk. It is often forgotten that in its early years the British Museum used to take plaster casts of their objects and the first British Museum catalogue contains a list of copies that were available and for sale. It is often forgotten because the plaster cast collection was discarded at the end of the 20th century and valuable information about the surface of works when they entered the museum was lost. Many of the moulds still contained the paint that was removed during the casting process and subsequent restorations of the originals have dramatically altered the surface and appearance of many of the objects. So, even for a work of art to be material is a question of complex trajectories. Many Venetians, when they first heard of the Nozze facsimile immediately conjured up in their mind a glossy flat surface much like that of a poster and they were horrified at the idea of being given this in reparation for Napoleon's cultural rape of San Giorgio. Little could they anticipate that the facsimile was actually in pigment on a canvas coated with gesso, "just like" Veronese had used. When it was unveiled there was a moment of silence, then ecstatic applause and many tears. Large numbers of Venetians had to ask themselves a very difficult question: how is it possible to have an aesthetic and emotional response in front of a copy? This question is followed by another – How do we stop Venice from being flooded with bad copies without the criteria to distinguish between good and bad transformations?

Once again, digital techniques allow us to distinguish features that are being regrouped much too quickly into the generic term "reproduction". As we have seen exactly the same intellectual oversimplifications and category mistakes happened when Benjamin wrote about "mechanical reproduction". Surely the issue is about accuracy, understanding and respect - the absence of which results in "slavish" replication. The same digital techniques may be used either slavishly or originally. It depends again on what features one chooses to bring into focus and which ones are left out. The use of tiny painted dots based on photographs rather than the broader brush marks used to make the original may give the restorer more control and hide the interventions but surely it proves that a manual reproduction might be infinitely more disputable and subjective than any "mechanical" one. The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

No doubt, it is an uphill battle: facsimiles have a bad reputation —people assimilate them with a photographic rendering of the original— and digital is associated with an increase in virtuality. So, when we speak of "digital facsimiles" we are certainly looking for trouble. And yet we claim that, contrary to common presuppositions, digital facsimiles are introducing many new twists in the century-old trajectory of works of art. There is nothing especially "virtual" in digital techniques — and actually, there is nothing entirely digital in digital computer either!⁶ The association of digitality with virtuality is entirely due to the bad habits given by only one of its possible outputs: the pretty

⁶ Lowe, Adam, and Simon Schaffer. *NOISE, 2000. An Exhibition Held Simultaneously at Kettle's Yard, the Whipple Museum of the History of Science, Cambridge, the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge and the Wellcome Institute, London. Cambridge: Kettle's Yard, 2000;*

bad screen of our computers. Things are entirely different when digital techniques are only one moment to move from one material entity —Veronese' Nozze version n-1 in Le Louvre— to another equally material entity —version n +1 in San Giorgio. At the time of mass tourism, increasingly vocal campaigns for the repatriation of spoils of wars or commerce, when so many restorations are akin to iconoclasm, when the sheer number of amateurs threaten to destroy even the sturdier pieces in the best institutions, it does not require excessive foresight to maintain that digital facsimiles offer a remarkable new handle to give to the notion of originality what is required by the new time. Since all originals have to be reproduced anyway, simply to survive, it is crucial to be able to discriminate between good and bad reproductions.

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