

01. Strategies of Legitimation, or How to Cope with Imitation

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In the industrial and post-industrial universe, the individual considered to be most creative imposes his model and wins a competition that operates simultaneously at the material, symbolic, and ontological levels. The same applies to corporations and countries. This question of creation and imitation incorporates high-stakes issues on which the power dynamics between people are based. Anyone acknowledged as a creator is in a position of strength; anyone subjected to a model must be dominated. In the arts, this latter type is generally disregarded; in the salaried world, he labors under humdrum conditions and has limited possibilities of development. In both cases, he is economically disadvantaged. However, despite creation's symbolic value, "creators" depend on words and concepts that have been forged by others. Similarly, production practices, whether artistic, artisanal, or industrial, sign up to codified locations, temporalities, and routines. It is also necessary to know what has already been done, if only to differentiate oneself from it, just as it is difficult not to resort to reproduction in order to disseminate and publicize one's work. Not only is creation *ex nihilo* a utopian fantasy, but there is not a single step in the production of a work that can be achieved outside the mimetic economy. The position of creator is thus entirely relative. This reality does not, however, fit with the demand for genius and difference required by modernity, which is why it is necessary for artists and critics to resort to legitimization strategies aimed at obscuring or distracting attention from the role of imitation in art.

The first strategy aimed at asserting one's creativity is both the most crude and the most widely practiced. It consists in concealing in one's own work anything that might stem from imitation all while denying or belittling the creativity of others. From Picasso famously replying to an art critic, "Negro art? Never heard of it!" to Franz Kline always refusing to admit the slightest influence of Far Eastern calligraphy on his work, the examples are endless. And when imitation is not hidden, it is often presented as positive or temporary. Denial is often preferred to an admission of "weakness."

A second and barely more sophisticated method depends on the partitioning of geographies. The French art critic Théodore Duret was among the first to suggest that the avant-garde phenomenon was a spur to cultural development. In an essay on the Salon of 1870, he unequivocally states his selection criterion: "What will be our guiding principle in choosing a limited number of artists from among the vast army that invades the Palais de l'Industrie? It will be the possession of originality. Among beginners and the young, we will single out only those who show boldness in the way they see and feel, and in the way they represent what they have seen and felt, and who produce works imbued with a character distinct from those of earlier painters. We will systematically spurn all artists where we find only the reproduction of known types."¹ He thus prohibits imitation and endorses novelty. It is for this reason that he supports

¹ Théodore Duret, *Critique d'avant-garde* (Paris: Charpentier, 1885), 4.

Monet, Renoir, and the Impressionist school in general.

However, like many artists and intellectuals of his generation, Duret is also very taken by Japanese art and contributes to the phenomenon of Japonisme. Duret, who traveled to Japan from October 1871 to February 1872,² must have been aware however of the paradox inherent in praising, on the one hand, an artist's free creation, and on the other, the beauty of multiples obtained by largely standardized methods. He therefore had to find originality in *ukiyo-e*. The simplest solution was to consider the painters as the sole creators of the prints. He therefore ignores what editors generally asked for in their commissions, i.e. that works draw on a known model, and relegates engravers and printers to a marginal role. As for the role of writers in the production of illustrated books, it is quite simply ignored. For Duret, an *ukiyo-e* print is the product of an artist obeying only his "imagination" (*fantaisie*), a word that recurs repeatedly in all the literature of Japonisme.³ In his writing, Hokusai and Hiroshige are first and foremost masters of freedom, "applying directly and by themselves the forms hatched in their imaginations."⁴ Duret idealizes Japanese artists in accordance with his own values, such that their works can qualify as *avant-garde*, like those of the Impressionists.

Duret does not, however, put *ukiyo-e* and Impressionism at the same level. He acknowledges that Japanese art "strongly influenced the Impressionists,"⁵ and clearly articulates a parent-child relationship between the two. However, to resolve the paradox in which Impressionism is fundamentally original while simultaneously having Japanese art as a model, he takes care to disconnect the geographies—Japanese art may well be "original" and "imaginative," but it does not belong to the same universe as Impressionism: "The appearance *in our midst* of Japanese albums and images completed the transformation by introducing us to an absolutely new coloration system," he writes tellingly.⁶ The Japanese works ultimately remain non-native references, which is why they can still serve as models. In fact, for Duret, such models are the path to the "new." Recourse to models is allowed if they are outside the usual references, in other words, if, *in a purely empirical way*, they give a greater impression of novelty than those already known.

The third method used to transform imitation into something acceptable is passing the model through a filter of reasoned thought or a rational technical process designed to transform the mimesis into a *cosa mentale* that elevates it. This solution works as an extension of Classicism, for which imitation had a preliminary function and corresponded to childhood, apprenticeship, and the first stage of all production, whereas genius, i.e. the affirmation of difference, was perceived to be the privilege of maturity.

Aimé Humbert's famous travelogue, *Le Japon illustré*, was published in *Le Tour du monde* magazine between July 1866 and the end of 1869.⁷ There is a particularly large number of

² On Duret's trip to Japan, see: Inaga Shigemi, "Théodore Duret et Henri Cernuschi: Journalisme politique, voyage en Asie et collection japonaise," *Ebisu* 19 (1998): 79–94.

³ Théodore Duret, *Critique d'avant-garde*, 139, 207, 217.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 98. Emphasis added.

⁷ Humbert's *Le Japon illustré* was republished in 1870 by Hachette in two quarto volumes.

illustrations in this work, which have two particularly striking traits: they appear quite un-Japanese, or as un-Japanese as possible, and are relatively lacking in signature distinctiveness—it is difficult to work out whom each is by. Although often privileging subjects that might appear strange and mysterious to its readers,⁸ the magazine's illustrators peddle a vision, in the very construction of their images, of a world unified by technique. Regardless of the geographic or temporal distance—whether the scene shown represents Europe or Japan, the middle ages or the contemporary era—everything is seen from the same *perspective*, from the same and single frontal point of view: the level of an easel or camera. However, despite the graphic and conceptual homogeneity of *Le Tour du monde* in general and Humbert's narrative in particular, the designers have almost always followed models that were necessarily heterogeneous. In this case, of the 475 illustrations that accompanied *Le Japon illustré*, only half a dozen have captions that do not mention an iconic source. All the rest are explicitly said to be “based on” documents brought back from Japan. But in the resulting picture, the model has all but vanished. Technique has swept away all difference; the strangeness has been domesticated. As Gustave Le Bon writes at the end of the nineteenth century on drawings that reproduce Asian art, “It makes you wonder whether the artist, rather than see things as they are, perceives them through a specific idea that has been fixed both in his mind and especially in the movements of his hand by his classical education.”⁹ The artist does not so much seem to be imitating the model as overlaying it with a system of representation stemming whose foundations are “scientific.”

Rationalization untaints imitation and renders it acceptable, even transparent. The whole nineteenth century is marked by a desire to domesticate mimesis using reason. Several of the era's ideas, like that of an Aryan race or an Indo-European language, not to mention the grammar of styles in art history, depend on homologous analyses. Caught in the mesh of the attempt at logical reorganization, similarity, and imitation, everything connected with them lose their negative connotations and become the theories' helpful allies.¹⁰

These three discursive devices, aimed at enabling the use of imitation within a system founded on the primacy of creation, appeared and then spread during the nineteenth century. But they continue to be used and are by no means mutually exclusive. One of the reasons why this process of legitimization is so important stems from the fact that artists have never ceased exploring the perilous realm of imitation. All major modern works can be traced to the question of imitation, a phenomenon that is not limited to fine arts but can also be found in both literature and music, not to mention industrial production, for which it is an essential characteristic. Such productions are creative insofar as they reformulate the relationship with the real and thus the way in which it can be understood.

⁸ See Solange Vernois, “L’ambiguïté de l’image: les illustrations du *Tour du Monde* et du *Journal des voyages*,” *Histoire de l’art* 60 (2007): 69–80.

⁹ Gustave Le Bon, *Les Levers photographiques et la photographie en voyage* (Paris: Gauthier-Villars et fils, 1889), 3.

¹⁰ For a complete discussion, see Michael Lucken, *Imitation and Creativity in Japanese Arts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 29–42.