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## The Hegemony of the Copy

### The Manuscript, the Book and the Electronic Text in the Age of Limitless Digital Storage

Graulund, Rune

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Rune Graulund

# The Hegemony of the Copy: The Manuscript, the Book, and the Electronic Text in the Age of Limitless Digital Storage

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**Abstract** This essay questions when the creative process leading to the original can be said to be complete. When does the series of a pupil's botched attempts at perfection leading to "the" singular and unique object, text, tool, or artwork we recognise as the original expression of the master craftsman stop? Where is the cut-off point between the different versions (copies) of earlier inferior iterations in the gestation process that lead to the original, and final, superior original? This essay chiefly examines the manner in which text has been copied and stored in one particular type of object, namely that of the book, in order to provide some fairly well-known arguments regarding pre-mechanical as well as mechanical reproduction. In particular, it examines the differences between manuscript culture and print culture as we see them expressed in the production (and reproduction) of master copies and subsequent copies, of handwritten manuscripts, and mechanically printed books. Finally, it asks what the impact of digital memory and digital copying has had in terms of our current conception of copy and original and, in particular, examines the manner in which an increase in memory storage capacity can be seen to go hand in hand with digitisation's increased role in diluting the differences between original and copy—not only in the excessive copying of the original, but in the creative process itself. For in a world in which objects, information, and text can be copied cheaply in vast quantities, and to a degree of verisimilitude that even the creator of such may no longer know the difference, does it make sense to speak of a distinction between the two any longer? Has the copy turned original, and the original turned copy? How do we discern between the two in a world in which all "copies," the master copy as well as copies of the master copy, are indiscernible?

**Keywords** Artefact, aura, authenticity, book, copy, deletion, forgetting, frailty, manuscript, memory, mimesis, original, replica, safekeeping, text

In his seminal study “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin begins by the admission that “in principle, a work of art has always been reproducible.”<sup>1</sup> As long as there have been art and craft, Benjamin explains, there have been attempts at trying to capture the essence of the original, of replicating the outstanding quality of the work of a master craftsman or a genius artist. Indeed, in the very pursuit of the eventual perfection of skill required to create a master artefact worthy to be copied by others, all master craftsmen and genius artists will themselves have had to go through endless repetitive acts of copying in order to attain the experience necessary for the production of the master copy that others would then themselves desire to imitate and replicate.

In this, in the arduous process leading to the supposed perfection and completion of an original master artefact, the superior original from which all subsequent, and subsequently inferior, copies are to compare themselves, we see the root question of the argument which is to follow. I will in general terms be working towards an examination of some fundamental questions pertaining to the relationship between copy and original, as to the creative act leading up to the supposedly complete unique object we term “original.” The questions to be asked, and hopefully answered, are therefore as follows: When can the process leading to the original be said to be complete? Where is the cut-off point between different versions (copies) of earlier, inferior iterations in the gestation process leading to the original, and final, superior original?

Obviously, any attempt at answering such questions fully would constitute a Herculean task. Consequently, what I intend to do in the following is to pose some broad questions regarding the tangled and often highly confusing relationship of copy with original, but to do so through an analysis of a selective range of material. In this, I intend to give an overview of at least some (but by no means all) of the general challenges posed by pre-mechanical as well as mechanical reproduction. The main thrust of the argument, however, points towards a discussion of the digital techniques of reproduction, the introduction of which have led to a revolution not only in the price and accuracy of copying, but to a questioning of some of the basic questions regarding the relationship between copy and original. Nevertheless, while I am admittedly interested in querying these questions in fairly broad terms, I have picked most of my examples from one particular medium, namely text. Furthermore, I will be looking chiefly at the manner in which text has been copied and stored in one particular type of object, namely that of the book, in order to provide some fairly well-known arguments regarding pre-mechanical as well as mechanical reproduction. In particular, I will be looking at the differences between manuscript culture and print culture as we see it expressed in the production, and reproduction, of master copies, and subsequent copies, of handwritten manuscripts and mechanically printed books.

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1 Benjamin (1936) 1999, 212.

In the final section, as we move up to present day, I will however once more move away from the question of text and the object of the book in order to query the questions of digital memory and digital copying in terms broader than those of text and the book. In particular, I want to examine the impact this relatively new technology has had on our current conception of copy and original, as well as the relationship between them. Returning to the initial question posed above regarding the process leading up to the supposed complete and final state of the authentic original, I will be looking at the manner in which an increase in memory storage capacity can be seen to go hand in hand with digitisation's increased role in diluting the differences between original and copy, not only in the excessive copying of the original, but in the creative process itself. For in a world in which objects, information, and text can be copied cheaply, in vast quantities, and to such a degree of verisimilitude that even the creator may no longer know the difference, does it make sense to speak of a distinction between the two any longer? Has the copy turned original, and the original turned copy? How do we discern between the two in a world in which all "copies," master copy as well as copies of the master copy, are indiscernible?

## Mimesis, copy, text, and book

In literary studies, the conundrum of original and copy are as old as the discipline itself. Indeed, language, the base subject matter from which literature, oral as well as written, originates, is to some extent defined by this troubled relationship between original and copy through concerns regarding the notion of "mimesis." The question of mimesis, of putting a mirror to nature, is of great importance to all forms of art and not just of language and literature. As Plato argued in *The Republic* (ca. 380 BC), all art rests upon the ability to imitate, to act "as a representation of something else."<sup>2</sup> As Matthew Potolsky argues in *Mimesis*, Plato's notion of art as copy "is so fundamental to the way we understand art that it is no exaggeration to claim that art itself, as a distinct human product, is a Platonic invention."<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, as Potolsky also makes clear, the very idea of "art" as being somehow at a remove from the natural, of art being somehow "artificial" in that it is of a second order to nature, is a problem that becomes compounded several times over once we move from visual artistic representations on to language and literature: "The movement from visual to linguistic imitation is problematic. Language does not imitate in the same ways that images do."<sup>4</sup>

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2 Potolsky 2006, 15.

3 Potolsky 2006, 16.

4 Potolsky 2006, 26.

Even in this seemingly simple distinction between visual representation and textual representation, we begin to encounter a host of problems. First of all, before we even begin to discuss the differences between visual and textual representation, there is the question of exactly what one means by “mimesis.” As anthropologist Michael Taussig puts it in *Mimesis and Alterity*, mimesis is a concept that is not easy to pin down and define in that it is a process and “a relationship, not a thing in itself.”<sup>5</sup> The title of Taussig’s study implies as much, for in his claim that “the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other,”<sup>6</sup> we see the constant flux mimesis instigates between sameness (copy) and alterity (originality). “Pulling you this way and that, mimesis plays this trick of dancing between the very same and the very different. An impossible but necessary, indeed an everyday affair, mimesis registers both sameness and difference, of being like, and of being Other.”<sup>7</sup> As Gunther Gebauer and Christoph Wulf conclude in *Mimesis: Culture, Art, Society*,<sup>8</sup> to ask the question “what is mimesis?” is therefore asking the wrong question. Such a question, they propose, inevitably “leads to error [in that it] presupposes that mimesis is a largely homogenous concept that undergoes continuous development in a historical space.” Rather, they suggest, we should consider mimesis “a highly complex structure in which an entire range of conditions coincide.”<sup>9</sup>

Taking up Gebauer and Wulf’s admonition, I too will refrain from any attempt to pin down an exact definition of what mimesis may or may not be. What I do intend to do in the following, however, is to take a closer look at the manner in which one specific process of mimetic behaviour, namely that of copying, has been theorised in one specific discipline, namely that of literary studies. In particular, I will be looking at the manner in which the vehicle through which literary meaning was, at least until fairly recently, usually carried. I am referring, of course, to the book.

In a discussion regarding the relationship between original and copy, the book has certain advantages over “language” or “text.” Unlike a letter, a word, a sentence, or a paragraph, the book is, or at least it was until fairly recently, a tangible object. While we may arguably also encounter words and sentence written down on a page, which is to say on physical matter, and while we may indeed also discuss the book in abstract terms (the *idea* of the book), at least the first couple of thousand years of the history of the book largely focussed on tangible physical objects consisting of paper, glue, cardboard, leather, ink, and so on. Accordingly, at least for our introductory argument, it is simpler to view the book in terms of a physical entity that can undergo various stages of copying and reproduction.

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5 Taussig 1993, 130.

6 Taussig 1993, xiii.

7 Taussig 1993, 129.

8 Gebauer and Wulf (1992) 1995.

9 Gebauer and Wulf (1992) 1995, 309.

## Pre-mechanical reproduction: Manuscript, frailty, and safekeeping

The history of the book is long, complex, and contested. From Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin's *The Coming of the Book* to Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy* on to Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, a range of influential thinkers have attempted to chart the history and influence of the book from its early origins and up until present day.<sup>10</sup> The impact of the book is momentous, book historians agree. Yet they do not always see eye to eye as to what the exact impact of the book may have been. Similarly, there is some confusion as to what exactly we may usefully term a "book" in the first place, a distinction that has not exactly been made easier by the fact that we are now seemingly living in "the late age of print."<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, whereas book historians could formerly at least agree on the fact that the book was a physical object, even this quality is now rapidly fading with the introduction of various forms of e-books, novel digital text formats, and so on.

While there is some uncertainty as to how far we need to go back in history in order to encounter the first book,<sup>12</sup> most book historians tend to agree that the book underwent a major change once print and print technologies were introduced. Obviously, this is a distinction of some importance when we have Benjamin's concept of mechanical reproduction in mind. Indeed, the difference between manuscript culture and print culture is one of Benjamin's first examples of the transformation brought about by mechanical reproduction.

Written and illustrated by hand, manuscripts differ significantly from printed books in that a considerable amount of time and energy must be invested in their production, as well as in their re-production. The original manuscript of a given text, the very first version penned by one or several authors, would have taken a long time to produce, not only in terms of the creative process, but in the actual process of producing the first physical manuscript. Similarly, the subsequent reproductions of those original manuscripts required a great deal of expenditure. As Febvre and Martin point out in *The Coming of the Book*, the claim that "the production of a single book involved a colossal amount of work" may at times have been stressed too strongly,<sup>13</sup> but there can be no doubt that there was a world of difference between the world of manuscripts produced by hand and the world of print. Indeed, if "the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition [and that by] making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique

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10 Febvre and Martin (1958) 1998; McLuhan (1962) 1997; Ong (1982) 2000.

11 Striphos (2009) 2011.

12 E.g. whether scrolls, papyrus, clay tablets, runestones, and so on should be included in the history of the book or relegated to an earlier period.

13 Febvre and Martin (1958) 1998, 27.

existence,"<sup>14</sup> it should be obvious that the ability of print to reproduce the written word over and over again, and at a massive reduction in energy and cost, puts the printed book at a "colossal" remove from the handwritten manuscript.<sup>15</sup>

Now Benjamin famously bemoaned the arrival of mechanical reproduction due to the fact that it helped undermine the "aura" of a work of art and lead to "a tremendous shattering of tradition."<sup>16</sup> As Benjamin argues, the "authenticity" of the original is therefore eventually eroded, to the point where there is hardly any trace left of the original in the mechanically reproduced copy. Mechanical reproduction technologies like printing may therefore have enacted an erasure of "all that is transmissible from [the original's] beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced," hence diluting the "essence" of the original.<sup>17</sup> We will return to this dilution of aura below, when we engage with the question of digitization. For now, though, the lack of easily reproduced copies eventually enabled by mechanical reproduction poses another question regarding the question of original and copy, and that is the questions posed by frailty and safekeeping. Ironically, the very rarity that Benjamin and others would bemoan the loss of in the age of mechanical reproduction is precisely also the Achilles heel of what Benjamin terms "artifacts."<sup>18</sup> Namely, that they are unique and therefore do not, by definition, exist in any great numbers (indeed that they do not exist in numbers, plural, at all); hence they are highly likely to perish.

The Italian semiotician, philosopher, literary scholar, and novelist Umberto Eco has written widely on original and copy, manuscript and print culture, and language and mimesis. One text in particular stands out in regard to the discussion presented here, though, and that is his novel *Il nome della rosa*. Subsequently translated into English as *The Name of The Rose*, the novel remains Eco's most well-known work, not least due to the fact that the book was later, in 1986, adapted into a highly popular film of the same name.<sup>19</sup> Novel as well as film revolve around a deceptively straightforward murder mystery in a fourteenth century monastery. It soon evolves beyond this fairly simple premise, though, to take on a wide range of philosophical, theological, textual, and cultural conundrums.

While many of Eco's themes in *The Name of The Rose* touch on questions of copy and original, one plot point in particular is of relevance for our discussion of copy, manuscript culture, frailty, and safekeeping. For, as it turns out, the murders committed at the monastery can all in some way or

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14 Benjamin (1936) 1999, 215.

15 Febvre and Martin (1958) 1998.

16 Benjamin (1936) 1999, 215.

17 Benjamin (1936) 1999, 215.

18 Benjamin (1936) 1999, 212.

19 Used for citations in this paper is an edition published in 1986 (Eco [1980] 1986). The original Italian version of the novel was published in 1980. The first English edition was published in 1983.

other be traced back to the resurfacing of a copy of a book the world has for centuries presumed lost. The second part of Aristotle's *Poetics* (ca. 335 BCE), *The Book of Comedy*, previously believed to have been lost to humanity, is discovered to still exist, a single copy of the book having somehow been safely kept in the labyrinthine library of the monastery. Indeed, as the two protagonists of the book, Adso and William, eventually discover, the murders in the monastery can all be attributed to the existence of this one copy of a text that had supposedly perished.

The central plot around which the book revolves thus turns out to be a question of copy and original, original idea, and subsequent dissemination of such through the physical copy of a handwritten manuscript. Specifically, the murders in the monastery have all—in some way or another—been orchestrated by the blind head librarian Jorge, a man who will go to any length to prevent what he considers to be a dangerous text falling into the wrong hands. Indeed, so bent is Jorge on barring access to Aristotle's text that he has, at the end of the novel, managed not only to destroy the copy of the book itself, but also the entire library in which it was stored. As a librarian, then, which is to say as a custodian (safe-keeper) of books, Jorge fails miserably, a fact that is mirrored in terms of plot by his own demise as he perishes alongside his library as it all goes up in flames. At the end of *The Name of The Rose*, the one extant copy of Aristotle's *The Book of Comedy*, presumed to have been lost for centuries only to have been temporarily rediscovered, has once again been wiped from the face of the earth.

Through Eco's swashbuckling tale of detective monks, burning libraries, and grisly murder, we are offered a telling parable on the frailty of the copy in the age of non-mechanical reproduction. Before the age of mechanical reproduction, manuscripts existed in one copy only, or at most in a couple handfuls of copies. Accordingly, as was the case with Aristotle's *The Book of Comedy*, many texts have been lost forever because the only copy in existence at one point or other disappeared, or was, as it is the case in *The Name of the Rose*, wilfully destroyed.<sup>20</sup> In addition to being a murder mystery, a meditation on religion, and a philosophical musing on the state of literature, language, and laughter, Eco's novel is therefore also a piece of alternative history, albeit one that ultimately leads to a state of affairs resembling the history we are already familiar with. How different the world would have looked, Eco suggest, and how different Christianity, had the world possessed a copy of Aristotle's controversial *The Book of Comedy*. His two monks-cum-detectives work tirelessly to solve the crime and gain possession of the book in order for the truth to come out so as to challenge the hegemony of church dogma. Yet

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20 The writings of Plato, for instance—documents that would prove so vital to Western civilization—were for a time believed to have been lost, until it was discovered that copies of his writings had in fact survived, safely tucked away in Constantinople. Without such extra copies, Western philosophy would have looked very different today. One could have wished, too, that more copies of Aristotle's works had been made.



in the end, with the library and the book gone up in flames, they end up, towards the close of the novel, without proof. Without actual copies of Aristotle's work, they are helpless to effect change. All they have left is "a library made up of fragments, quotations, unfinished sentences, amputated stumps of books."<sup>21</sup>

We do not, of course, have access to any copy of Aristotle's work on comedy. Indeed, like Eco's protagonists, we possess only fragments. We know of Aristotle's second book from mention of it in other sources, of short passages that have survived more or less intact in other texts, of summaries of what the book was supposed to have been about, and so on and so forth; as for any actual copies, though, original or otherwise, they have long ago been lost. Eco's novel therefore reminds us of the importance of preserving the original as best we can: to copy it as widely and as flawlessly as we possibly can so as to preserve it for future generations. Because the copy, of course, is to some extent intended as a means of safekeeping. A reading of *The Name of the Rose* could therefore be that hegemonies will prefer to destroy dangerous information, or dangerous copies, rather than let it fall into the wrong hands and let their authority be challenged. Another important lesson to be learned here, though, is that copies are an excellent means of safeguarding the original, and also that, prior to the age of mechanical reproduction, copies were frail things simply because they were so difficult to produce in great numbers.

## Mechanical reproduction: Print, numbers, and aura

The problem facing Eco's protagonists in *The Name of the Rose* is of course an obsolete problem. No longer do we need to worry about the disappearance of all single copies of a given text, or at least not of the very important ones. It is rare in the age of mechanical reproduction that books disappear altogether. Various repressive political systems have tried, as did Jorge (a representative of Church dogma) in *The Name of the Rose*, to repress particular books. Since the introduction and dissemination of mechanical reproduction of text via the printing press, however, such attempts of silencing dissenting voices have, generally speaking, met with limited success. Accordingly, while we may to some extent have lost the Benjaminian "aura" and the "authenticity" of uniquely handcrafted artefacts like the manuscript, at least we now possess the major works of literature in seemingly indestructible numbers. Barring some sort of earth shattering cataclysmic event, it is highly unlikely that each and every copy of, say, Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* (ca. 1308–1321) or William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (ca. 1599–1602) would be lost forever. Accordingly, while the shift from manuscript culture to print culture may be said to have eroded tradition and the particularity of craftsmanship, at least it has given us safety in

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21 Eco (1980) 1986, 291.

numbers. Never again will a central document like *The Book of Comedy* be lost forever to flames, floods, or censorship.

The problem I want to address in the following, however, is one of *numbers* as much as of *fidelity*. After all, how many copies does one need? What is the point at which copying the original for safekeeping tips and becomes overwhelming? Is there a finely balanced point between safeguarding the essence of the original so that future generations too may gain access to it, and that of a countless repetition of the original that somehow corrupts and diminishes it? Also, does a copy need to be an exact copy of the original or can it be something in-between? What is the difference between an imperfect imitation of the original, as indeed all acts of craftsmanship must ultimately be, and that of the perfect copy one cannot distinguish from the original? Finally, and this is of course vital for Benjamin's argument, what is the point at which increasing orders of copying, as of the increasingly accurate degrees of fidelity to the original, will impact the value—and the meaning—not only of the copy, but of the original itself? Once again, the object of the book, the original and its copy, may help us consider such questions in further detail.

The quality of the copy in the age of the manuscript was never perfect. As Ong points out in *Orality and Literacy*, "manuscripts, with their glosses or marginal comments (which often got worked into the text in subsequent copies)" were a constant process, a "dialogue" with the original rather than an exact and definite copy of it.<sup>22</sup> With the age of print, however, the relationship between original and copy changed. For while it will arguably always be possible to detect some sort of anomaly in a given print copy of a book, to anyone but the expert, copies of the same edition will in practice seem interchangeable. The print version of the first 1983 English translation of Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, for instance, will seem to be indistinguishable from the first, the fifth, or the fiftieth copy to any standard reader. While, in the time of the manuscript, various techniques and regulations were already in place in order for copies to be "scrupulously checked for textual correctness so that no errors may slip in, distorting the sense," there were nevertheless much greater risk of a "corruption of the text" prior to the invention of mechanical reproduction of text.<sup>23</sup> The further we move into the age of mechanical reproduction, though, and the more the techniques of reproduction perfect the process of producing the perfect copy, we see an increasing concern that the ability to produce ever better, and ever more copies, may in fact itself act as a source of corruption.

The second parable from the world of literature illustrates this conundrum pointedly. Published the year after Eco's *Il nome della rosa* had been translated into English in 1983, American novelist Don DeLillo's *White Noise* addressed similar questions of copy and original, the fake and the

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22 Ong (1982) 2000, 130.

23 Febvre and Martin (1958) 1998, 21.

authentic, and appearance and aura.<sup>24</sup> Like Eco's protagonists, DeLillo's Jack Gladney, a college professor in a nondescript college town somewhere in a nondescript part of North America, is concerned about authenticity and originality. Unlike Eco's monks, however, Jack is not on a quest to expose deceit and fallacy. On the contrary, Jack is himself somewhat of a poser. Which is to say a person posing as something he is not, hence a person terrified of being *ex-posed*. As director of Hitler Studies at College-on-the-Hill, Jack is arguably in a position of power that legitimises him as an authentic Hitler scholar. What is more, as the man who in fact invented the discipline of Hitler Studies in the first place, he is also, as the wellspring and original creative source of the discipline itself, the originator of all other Hitler scholars. Compared to other Hitler scholars, Jack can therefore be said to be the real deal, the original, the authentic and unique superior ideal to which all inferior Hitler scholars must compare themselves unfavourably.

Yet Jack suffers from a major defect as a Hitler scholar: he does not know German. As the novel progresses, Jack desperately tries to remedy this imperfection by taking German lessons, but he never quite manages to get it right. "I had long tried to conceal the fact that I did not know German," Jack remarks to the reader, which has been troublesome enough due to the stipulation (presumably Jack's own) that "no one could major in Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill without a minimum of one year of German."<sup>25</sup> Ironically, and somewhat absurdly, the director and inventor of Hitler Studies, the man who requires that his students learn German so as to be properly versed in their subject, is himself ignorant of the language he is supposed to be an expert in. At the beginning of the novel, while living precariously "on the edge of a landscape of vast shame," Jack has still successfully managed to hide this deficiency, and this despite the fact that "I could not speak or read it, could not understand the spoken word or begin to put the simplest sentence on paper."<sup>26</sup> Yet Jack is a haunted man, well aware of the eventual end of his masquerade as he is about to host a Hitler conference: "Three days of lectures, workshops and panels. Hitler scholars from seventeen states and nine foreign countries. Actual Germans would be in attendance."<sup>27</sup> Jack the poser, the man always afraid of being *ex-posed*, is about to have the rug pulled out from under him by the real deal, actual Germans who can speak actual German, and who threaten to prove the originator of Hitler Studies the fraud he really is.

*White Noise* is brimming over with juxtapositions of deceptive surfaces and inner truths, copy and original, authenticity and fakery. One scene in particular, however, is of particular importance to the questions posed here. Murray Jay Siskind, a colleague of Jack's, invites Jack to accompany

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24 The 1999 edition was used for the citations in this essay (DeLillo [1984] 1999). The book was originally published in 1984.

25 DeLillo (1984) 1999, 31.

26 DeLillo (1984) 1999, 31.

27 DeLillo (1984) 1999, 33.

him to the tourist attraction "The most photographed barn in America."<sup>28</sup> In one sense, the barn is a standard tourist attraction in that it has achieved the status of being a tourist attraction through the process all other tourist attractions undergo.<sup>29</sup> Yet it is different from older, more traditional types of tourist attractions like the Eiffel Tower, The Empire State Building, or the pyramids in that it possesses no immediate quality that differentiates it from other examples (copies) of its general type. Indeed, the barn is exactly like all other barns but for the fact that it is "the most photographed." The barn itself, then, the particular object, is not particular at all. It is only through its mediation, through the mechanically reproduced photographs of the barn, that it gains meaning as a tourist destination.

Unremarkable as it may seem, the barn is however the ultimate manifestation of touristic logic, which is at heart all about copy and reproduction. For unlike the Eiffel Tower, The Empire State Building, or the pyramids, all of which have become tourist attractions due the fact that they are architectural and engineering wonders as well as being extremely large, the barn possess no unique qualities whatsoever, but for the fact that other tourists have verified its existence by mediating it via photographs. The barn is neither the largest nor the smallest barn, the most peculiar, or the greenest or reddest or bluest of barns. Its quality as a tourist attraction relies solely on the fact that other tourists have been here to verify its existence via that most Benjaminian of mechanical reproductive techniques, the camera. Consequently, Murray argues, it has become impossible to see the barn itself any longer:

"No one sees the barn," he said finally.

A long silence followed.

"Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn."

He fell silent once more. People with cameras left the elevated site, replaced by others.

"We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura. Can you feel it, Jack? An accumulation of nameless energies."

There was an extended silence. The man in the booth sold postcards and slides.

"Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We've agreed to be part of a collective perception. It literally colors our vision. A religious experience in a way, like all tourism."

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28 DeLillo (1984) 1999, 12. Tellingly, Murray befriends Jack because he wishes to copy Jack's supposed (yet hollow) success by establishing his own original field of study by becoming an expert on Elvis.

29 For more on this, see Dean MacCannell's *The Tourist* ([1976] 1999) or John Urry's *The Tourist Gaze* ([1990] 1998).

Another silence ensued.

"They are taking pictures of taking pictures," he said.

He did not speak for a while. We listened to the incessant clicking of shutter release buttons, the rustling crank of levers that advanced the film.

"What was the barn like before it was photographed?" he said.

"What did it look like, how was it different from the other barns, how was it similar to other barns?"<sup>30</sup>

Significantly, Murray argues the very opposite of Benjamin here. "Every photograph reinforces the aura," Murray remarks, in effect claiming that, rather than detracting from aura, rather than to "wither" it down,<sup>31</sup> photographing the barn over and over again "reinforces" its aura. Arguably, Murray and Benjamin likely do not mean quite the same thing when they speak of "aura." Yet the paradoxical chicken and egg conundrum posed by Murray (Why was the barn first photographed? When did it change from being simply a barn to being the most photographed barn? What was the barn like before it became known for being the most photographed barn in America?) leads him to some interesting observations regarding copy and original that Benjamin's essay tends to elide. As Murray points out, the problem is that the "authenticity," the "uniqueness," and the "aura" of the original barn no longer exists since the quality of "The most photographed barn in America" identifying it as such relies solely on its relation to all other copies like it, to all other barns, and to the reproductions of such barns through the technology of photography. Not only is the barn a tourist destination precisely because it is *not* original, in that it is a standard and utterly typical manifestation (copy) of a certain type of building, a barn that is "in itself," as a type, as unremarkable and typical as buildings go. It is also a tourist destination because this very unremarkable type has been copied over and over and over again in reproductions that look exactly, or at least almost exactly, alike.

It is telling that, unlike Benjamin, Murray sees nothing in this to be worried about. For if Benjamin's 1936 essay points to some of the basic problems facing modernity, and in particular modernism, in the face of an almost perfect reproduction that can be reproduced many times over, DeLillo's 1984 text exemplifies the postmodern conundrum of entering a world in which there is no recourse to the original left, not even as Benjaminian nostalgia. As such, the problem confronting Jack and Murray is, in a sense, the problem facing Benjamin squared. How was it different from the other barns, how was it similar to other barns" is no longer the question, really. The real, and only question, is now that of the copy itself. A copy that has been repeated so many times there is nothing left but the copy itself. The original, if there ever were one, has long since been forgotten.

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30 DeLillo (1984) 1999, 12-13.

31 Benjamin (1936) 1999, 215.

## Digitisation I: Copy and cost, memory and deletion

As we have entered the digital age, the question of craftsmanship as well as of mechanical reproduction seems to have retreated further and further into history. Here, then, we are about to complete the journey that has taken us from the techniques of pre-mechanical reproduction, to mechanical reproduction, and all the way up to post-mechanical techniques. The latter, as we saw it hinted at in DeLillo's *White Noise*, may perhaps be said not to be "reproductive" at all, simply because the very notion of an authentic original disappears somewhere in the process of copies being taken of copies of other copies. Hence, as we shall see in the following, the ability to produce almost perfect copies, and in seemingly infinite numbers, can blur the distinction between original and copy to such an extent that we can no longer tell the two apart.

If the late age of mechanical reproduction as it is parodied in novels like DeLillo's *White Noise* seemed about to effect this transition, we would have to wait for the age of digitisation, I would argue, before we would truly see this come into effect. As I will demonstrate in the following, digital (re)production is radically different from both pre-mechanical and mechanical reproduction in that it has provided us with the capability to document every single stage of the creative process that leads to whatever it is we consider to be the unique (singular, authentic, or auratic) master copy we classify as being "the original." Digital (re)production is also different from all former reproductive techniques, as will become clear, in that it is the first reproductive technique that can produce one hundred per cent exact copies of the original.

As a technique, there can be little question that digital reproduction is, in and of itself, radically different from mechanical and non-mechanical reproductive techniques. The question in this and the following section, however, is whether this revolutionary technology has introduced a new state of affairs in terms of the manner in which original relates to copy and vice versa. Or whether, as may also be the case, that digital (re)production has simply made clear what should perhaps have been obvious all along; namely, that we may in fact never been able to tell the two, copy and original, clearly apart.

Viktor Mayer-Schönberger, whose book *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age* presents us with some useful observations on this conundrum.<sup>32</sup> As I will attempt to show in the following, the core argument put forth by Mayer-Schönberger regarding copy, memory, and forgetting has significant importance for both abstract and specific claims made in the above regarding both physical and philosophical aspects of the book as copy as well as original.

The prime object of *Delete*, as stated on the book's cover, is to provide an analysis and a survey of the "phenomenon of perfect remembering in

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32 Mayer-Schönberger 2009.

the digital age." What happens, Mayer-Schönberger asks, once "forgetting has become the exception, and remembering the default?"<sup>33</sup> In this, he argues, we are witnessing a revolution in the manner in which we deal with information, such that we are entering an age in which, for the first time in human history, forgetting has required greater expenditure than remembering.

In the past, Mayer-Schönberger claims, memory was special. In oral societies, those who were especially good at remembering were considered to possess exceptional gifts. Later, as script was invented, an invention that "fundamentally changed our human capacity to preserve information and enhance our recollection,"<sup>34</sup> the wonder at superior individual memory subsided somewhat. Nevertheless, the "admiration for superior human memory continued into the Middle Ages and persists in modern times."<sup>35</sup> We are still be awed by individuals who can remember, say, the sequence of an entire deck of cards after just a few minutes, or the first thousand digits of pi. The difference between now and then, however, is that such memory has little practical application. There is no real need, after all, to remember a thousand, one hundred, or even ten digits of pi when the cheapest of calculators can do it for us at the single push of a button.

As the technologies of script developed further, information could be stored in greater and greater amounts, and at increasingly lower costs. In the time that manuscript culture had developed into the sort of assembly lines one sees in, for instance, the medieval monasteries in which the plot of Eco's *The Name of the Rose* unfolds, the cost of storing information dropped markedly. Nevertheless, even as we move past early organised pre-mechanical reproductive processes of the kind seen in medieval monasteries, up to and beyond the introduction of print technologies, and all the way to the invention of a whole new range of media and reproductive techniques in the age of Benjamin, "fundamentally remembering remained expensive."<sup>36</sup> Compared to the painstaking time and costs of producing a manuscript, when it could take a scribe several years to produce a single copy, it may have been one hundred, a thousand, perhaps even ten-thousand times cheaper to produce a paperback book by the time Benjamin published his essay. And yet for all their apparent differences in expenditure, both these objects, both these types of *copies*, share with one another the fact that it cost more to remember than it did to forget. It may have been cheap to produce copies in the early twentieth century, but it was never free. "Until recently, [...] remembering has always been a little bit harder than forgetting."<sup>37</sup>

In this, we are today are faced with an unprecedented revolution in information technology, Mayer-Schönberger claims, so that it is only

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33 Mayer-Schönberger 2009, 2.

34 Mayer-Schönberger 2009, 34.

35 Mayer-Schönberger 2009, 28.

36 Mayer-Schönberger 2009, 39.

37 Mayer-Schönberger 2009, 49.

recently that “remembering has become the norm, and forgetting the exception.”<sup>38</sup> As we see it exemplified via the concerns expressed by Benjamin, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw a rapid increase in the ability to provide ever more and ever cheaper copies. The further we move through the twentieth century, as exemplified by the parody provided by DeLillo’s characters, this tendency only increased as mechanical reproduction became ever more refined and optimised and new—and even cheaper—technologies became available. Yet even so, as Mayer-Schönberger makes clear, the ability to store information, to produce, store and distribute copies, was fundamentally different than it is today:

There is no question that the amount of information people captured and committed to various types of external memory drastically increased over the last quarter century, but in the analog age, effective remembering was still complex and time-consuming, and thus costly. Remembering still remained quite a bit harder than forgetting.<sup>39</sup>

In the digital age, this is however no longer the case, a fact that Mayer-Schönberger argues through what he terms “the economics of storage.” Tellingly, as was the case with Benjamin and DeLillo, Mayer-Schönberger likewise decides to illustrate this shift with an example chosen from photography:

The truth is that the economics of storage have made forgetting brutally expensive. Consider digital cameras: When you connect your camera to your computer to upload the images you took into your hard disk, you are usually given a choice. You can either select which images to upload, or have your computer copy automatically all images from your cameras. Reassured perhaps by the soothing idea that one can always go through them later and delete the images one does not like, invariably most people choose the latter option.<sup>40</sup>

There is a significant difference, here, though, between the photography of Benjamin’s early twentieth century photography, as well as DeLillo late twentieth century phenomenon of tourists snapping away, reproducing, and reifying “The most photographed barn in America” over and over again.

The difference between the mechanical reproductive techniques discussed by Benjamin and employed by DeLillo’s characters on the one hand, and that of Mayer-Schönberger’s digital reproductive technique on the other, is that nothing is lost in the former. For while mechanically reproduced photographs would become better and better in the period

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38 Mayer-Schönberger 2009, 52.

39 Mayer-Schönberger 2009, 48.

40 Mayer-Schönberger 2009, 68.



between Benjamin's essay and DeLillo's novel, the digitally reproduced photographs referred to by Mayer-Schönberger are fundamentally different in that they cost us nothing, or almost nothing, and that we have the storage capacity to keep an almost infinite amount of them. A photograph, once a costly commodity that would take time and money to develop, and usually only available in quantities of 24 or 36 per roll of film, now takes up just a couple of megabytes of storage, with standard memory cards able to stock a thousand or more and at negligible cost (and with standard hard drives able to easily store hundreds of thousands of such images). Memory, and therefore also copying, have become cheap. So cheap, in fact, that forgetting has grown costlier than remembering.

## Digitisation II: Perfect replicas and total recall

"Four main technological drivers have facilitated this shift: digitization, cheap storage, easy retrieval, and global reach," says Mayer-Schönberger.<sup>41</sup> Of these, the first two have substantial impact on the manner in which we view the relationship between original and copy, especially in regards of quality and quantity. Accordingly, I will deal here only with the first two, digitisation and cheap storage.

First of all, we need to take a closer look at digitisation and the question of quality, similarity, and exactitude. Whether in text, image, or sound, digitisation is different from analogue copying, Mayer-Schönberger claims, because we can now, for the first time ever, make an "exact replica; every bit is the exact copy of the original. Hundreds of generations of copies of copies of the digital original later, the resulting copy is still as perfect as the original. Quality does not diminish, and copying carries no penalty."<sup>42</sup>

Accordingly, unlike the scribes in Umberto Eco's scriptorium, copyists who copied original works in order to safeguard them, adding in their copying—whether intentionally or unintentionally—little variations or imperfections to these copies, digital copies are exact copies of the original. When faced with the original and its copy, it is therefore no longer possible to tell the difference between the two.

Arguably, as mechanical reproduction became ever more refined, and as we saw it exemplified with DeLillo's barn, it would become increasingly difficult to tell original master copy and copy apart. Yet no matter the medium, close scrutiny will always reveal tiny differences between master and copy. Or even for that matter between copy and copy. Two analogue copies that have been mechanically reproduced from the same master, whether that would happen to be a book, a photograph, or a record, are never exactly alike. They may be highly similar, which is to say analogous, to one another, as they are to the master. But all three objects, Copy 1,

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41 Mayer-Schönberger 2009, 52.

42 Mayer-Schönberger 2009, 56.

Copy 2, and Master Copy are really, when scrutinised in detail, slightly different from one another. There never was an exact copy made, either in the days of pre-mechanical reproduction, or in the age of mechanical reproduction.

With digitisation, however, we have now entered the age of the exact copy. Accordingly, in the digital age it is no longer a case of diminishing returns on the original's aura. Rather, it is a question of there being no diminishment whatsoever, no discernible difference, between original and copy in that they are one and the same. Ultimately, then, "the notion of originals and copies is rapidly becoming an outdated concept. All digital copies are indistinguishable from the original."<sup>43</sup>

Secondly, Mayer-Schönberger makes us reconsider the concept of original and copy in terms of the question of the process leading to the supposedly final, unique, and authentic state of "the original" itself. While the argument I present in the following is not something that Mayer-Schönberger's own argument about memory and data dwell on directly, his analysis of the influx of cheap storage is rather telling concerning the creative process that leads to the production of an "artefact" that we tend to view as the unique and final form of "the" original. For just as we are now getting used to keeping every single photograph we take rather than deleting the ones we do not like, something similar can be said to be the case regarding the creative process leading to the formation of "the original."

Again, however, rather than ushering in a brand new relationship between original and copy, digitisation has perhaps helped us see what has perhaps always been the case, rather than introduced something which is truly novel. Or that is to say, the technologies of digitisation have no doubt, as Mayer-Schönberger convincingly argues, fundamentally changed the manner in which we copy and store information. Yet in terms of the central question of this paper—and indeed of this entire volume, namely of the transformative power of the copy—digitisation has cleared the way for some basic truths about the relationship between original and copy, as well as what these terms mean in isolation. These truths, as I argue in the following concluding section, were as valid in the days of Benjamin and the photograph as they were in the age of the medieval scriptorium. That is to say these are perhaps truths that may have always been valid, but perhaps not always so evident.

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43 Mayer-Schönberger 2009, 60.

## The original and the copy: First, last, and always transformative

Allow me one final analogy from the world of literature and (print) books before I conclude. I wish here to revisit a famous literary case of the original and the copy, namely that of Franz Kafka and his authorship, surely one of the most important of the twentieth century.

Famous as he was to become, Kafka enjoyed only a modicum of success as a writer in his lifetime. While he managed to get some of his short stories published, none of his longer works, like the novels *Der Prozess* (1925), *Das Schloss* (1926) and *Amerika* (1927), were published while he was still alive. Indeed, but for the obstinacy of his close friend Max Brod, they very well never would have been, seeing as Kafka had informed Brod that all of his unpublished works were to be incinerated. Fortunately, Brod decided to ignore this request, subsequently publishing as much as he could make sense of from Kafka's sprawling notes and notebooks. With this example, we return to the question posed at the beginning of this paper, namely the question of safekeeping and frailty discussed in the section on manuscript culture and of the works of Aristotle (partially recovered) and Plato (initially thought lost but eventually recovered). To the initial question of somehow safeguarding the surviving original copy, we may now add the question of the different iterations (plural) leading to the single authentic copy that we, at some point, somewhat arbitrarily decide is the authentic and therefore unique (singular) copy that constitutes the artefact, or the master copy, from which all subsequent copies are made.

Now when Kafka died, all Brod had to rely on for publication were Kafka's notes, which is to say handwritten copies of his as yet unpublished works. While some of these, especially the shorter works, were more or less ready for publication, many of the longer texts remained in a state of incompleteness. Consequently, it would be up to Brod to decide what to leave out and what to leave in as he took it upon himself to arrange for publication such literary classics as *Der Prozess* and *Das Schloss*, texts which have proven of almost incomparable significance to twentieth-century literature. The irony here, though, is of course that these classics, these truly *original* pieces of literature, the likes of which had never been since before or since, only exist in a state of undeniable incompleteness. Accordingly, this state of incompleteness is the only form in which we, the readers, have ever known them. Indeed, it is the only state in which they ever have existed. Unlike the works of Aristotle or Plato, it is not a case of originals that have been lost, but of *originals that were never complete*. Texts like these therefore cannot be said to be authentically original in the usual sense of the word, because we have no authority, no author, to sanction them as authentic originals. Texts like *Der Prozess* and *Das Schloss* therefore exist only—and always—as copies *and* as originals (plural), simply because we have no way of verifying what the final version of “the” original, singular, was supposed to look like.

This is where we can tie up the questions put forth at the beginning of our argument to the arguments in *Delete* in terms of the question of digital text and digital storage. For what Kafka's surviving texts and his literary and editorial heritage tell us about original and copy, and especially about the process leading to the supposed authentic finality of "the original" (singular), is not dissimilar to the problematizing posed by the breakdown of the barrier between original and copy introduced by digitisation as described by Mayer-Schönberger. Namely that the distinctions between original and copy were never entirely clear; hence we have in fact always needed to see the two as being engaged in an interlinked and always transformative process that is never quite at rest. Consequently, there never was such a thing as "the" original, but only varying versions of a constantly-evolving process.

What a case like Kafka's proves is the concept that the original, too, is a copy: one copy out of many, of the many stages of the creative process. For imagine that every single iteration of Kafka's creative process had been available to us, as indeed it would have been had Kafka used a modern laptop to type up his novels, stored various backups on the cloud, occasionally transferred parts of it to an external hard drive or to Dropbox, logged them on Google's servers as he sent drafts via email for his friends to read, and so on. If every randomly-jotted note, every daily—nay, hourly—correction to his manuscripts was available to us, what would we do? Figuring out the original intent and meaning of a work like *Das Schloss* has already proven difficult enough, even without the interfering white noise of digitisation. Imagine if we had almost infinite amounts of information available on Kafka, almost infinite copies of the various stages of his texts, his thoughts, his everyday concerns and problems. Where to begin? Where to quit?

Due to the proliferation of digital memory now available, and the incessant hoarding of information, it would at least in theory be possible to do just that. In and of itself, this is nothing new. Published texts, in digital or in printed format, have always existed in different draft versions and different copies, before they have been released to the world as the final, original edition. At this basic level, there is little or no difference between pre-mechanical, mechanical, and digital techniques of producing an original. Indeed, the very sense of the revolution in information technology that we are now experiencing may not be that revolutionary when viewed in light of history. The shift from manuscript culture to print culture that Gutenberg ushered in by the fifteenth century, or for that matter the "mid-twelfth century [which] was probably the most important watershed in medieval European book production" and with "some parallels with the information explosion of the twenty-first century,"<sup>44</sup> have likely felt as new, fresh, and potentially intimidating as digitisation does today.<sup>45</sup> Again, when

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44 Hamel 2013, 64.

45 Indeed, as Umberto Eco remarks it in *This is Not the End of the Book*: "This is not a new debate. The invention of printing created the possibility of storing all the cultural information one does not wish to be burdened with "in the fridge"—that is to say in books—whilst knowing that the information could be found

viewed on a very basic level, the creative process itself has not at heart changed, nor has the relationship changed between original and copy—regardless of what sort of reproductive technique we have happen to have available. What *has* changed, however, and indisputably so, is the sheer amount of information, the amount of copies, available—and the speed at which these copies proliferate.

The final lesson taught, then, by this immense proliferation of copies into every nook and cranny of our everyday lives, is that *the original has never been anything but a copy*; a copy from one of the many stages of a creative process that has no natural, authentic conclusion. The original is not the original. The original is a process: a process that, like the copy, is transformative. Whether mechanical or digital reproductions, a handful of crafted copies or endlessly-reproducible digital duplicates, whether copies patiently constructed by hand or speedily stamped out by a machine, the conclusion must inevitably remain the same: Original as well as copy cannot exist in isolation. Original as well as copy are never complete, and never final. Original as well as copy are always in process; indeed they *are* a process.

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whenever it was needed. Aspects of memory can be delegated to books, and to machines, but we still have to know how to use these tools to their maximum effect" (Eco and Carrière [2009] 2012, 73).

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