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review

The Culture of the Copy: Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimiles

Hillel Schwartz

Zone Books, New York, 1996, 565 pp

HILLEL SCHWARTZ must be impossible to live with. In *The Culture of the Copy*, he manages to crowd over five hundred pages with enough facts to found a new planet. The sheer energy of the text is exhausting, the number of examples and anecdotes cumulatively overwhelming.

The book opens with a chapter on the Real McCoy and Schwartz treats us to a thumbnail biography of one Elijah McCoy:

"...born 1843 into a community of African-Americans who had escaped from slavery in the South. Taking ship to Scotland, McCoy apprenticed to a mechanical engineer. Upon his return across the Atlantic, the job he found with the Michigan Central Railroad was a fireman, stoking the engine, but between 1872 and 1900 he was awarded patents on automatic engine-lubricating devices of such reliability that they were known to the industry as 'The Real McCoy'. He became a patent consultant to the railroads and moved to the Detroit area, where after a long life he died alone in an infirmary in 1929."

This seems totally convincing until Schwartz introduces his next contender for the title—Bill McCoy, who is quickly followed by Kid McCoy aka Charles McCoy aka Norman Selby. The Kid, married ten times (four times to the same woman), was successively a boxer, an actor, a bankrupt, a diamond dealer, a superintendent of the National Detective Agency, a car salesman, a racing driver, a boxer, a bankrupt, a smuggler, a car salesman, a soldier, a film maker, a three-time jealous murderer, a model prisoner (pardoned) and a suicide.

So much for the preface. This vertigo-inducing prose never lets up and the characters Schwartz describes in passing only get stranger. As the book progresses, however, it becomes clear just how important the author's style is to the subject matter. The very idea of a copy, replica or duplicate seems to spark deep anxieties in our society while, at the same time, we breed reproductions on a dizzying scale. Schwartz points to the inherent paradox of our culture in which: "The more adept the West has become at the making of copies, the more we have exalted uniqueness. It is within an exuberant world of copies that we arrive at our experience of originality." The amphetamine rush of his text parallels this "exuberant world of copies" and simulates the mental upheaval we experience when confronted with an exact copy of an 'essentially' unique object.

One of the great shocks of the book is the extent to which the copy and the technology of copying has permeated our culture. Schwartz touches on the obvious landmarks, such as identical twins, photocopiers, mass productions, forgeries, photography, plagiarism, virtual reality, recording, self-portraits, doppelgängers, decoys, models and carbon copies. Beyond this, however, he multiplies the everyday acts of copying we perform—memorising faces, events or telephone numbers, pressing the save key on a computer keyboard, wearing spectacles to standardise our vision.

The ubiquity of the copy is humbling and in danger of disheartening the reader. To counteract this possibility, Schwartz peppers the text with a series of beautifully researched biographies of the key players in the

culture of the copy. Whether it is the skewed imagination of the book's author or sheer luck, many of these characters led lives Fellini must have scripted.

Take Chester Carlson, for example, a bumbling lab worker, crippled by spinal arthritis. One of his early diary entries reads "Pa gone crazy 1924-26". Later in life he contemplated writing an *American Dictionary of Quacks and Fakes* and eventually he invented the Xerox out of his frustration with the need to copy specifications for patents of his other inventions.

Other, better known, characters also appear in Schwartz's story but in new, unexpected guises. L. Frank Baum, writer of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, surfaces in a chapter on shop dummies where he is revealed as editor of *The Show Window* and author of *The Art Of Decorating Dry Goods Windows*. Schwartz then interprets the Emerald city as a large show window, creating a sudden and plausible source for the Tin Man and the Scarecrow as fantastic mannequins. Deeper in the text we come across Martin Luther King Jr. carefully 'integrating' passages verbatim from the theologian Paul Tillich into his thesis after his academic adviser explains that "all modern theology which is competent is essentially derivative."

These biographical snapshots are deliberately quirky, emphasising the finicky, irreproducible eccentricities of a multitude of individuals. Each bizarre detail of their lives is quietly celebrated by Schwartz as another example of a world untouched by the copy. In his use of biography he is consciously arguing for the value of the individual voice and the positive rewards of tolerating difference. Coming to the heart of his argument he states that:

"Telling true spirit from false has never been simple. Our culture of the copy further discourages discernment, unless it be a kind of doubling back. The more we attempt to tell things apart, the more we end up defending our skills at replication. The more intrepid our assertions of individual presence, the more makeshift seem our identities, the less retrievable our origins. There may come a point of no return."

To illustrate just how makeshift our identities can be, Schwartz cites Kid McCoy's accidental meeting with Charlie Chaplin in a courthouse. While McCoy was there on a count of murder, Chaplin was suing an impersonator who had imitated his character and costume. While Chaplin could defend the creation of his costume, the creation of his character was a different matter and he testified that "I'm unconscious while I'm acting. I live the role and I am not myself."

The difficulty in pinning down any 'essential' personality runs as an undercurrent throughout the book. In a fascinating discussion of artists using photocopiers to produce work, Schwartz describes male artists approaching the machine as an instrument of salvation only to confront existential crises, as in George Mühleck's black works *Copy of the Moon* and *Copy of the Stars* - made by leaving the copier glass open to

the night skies. In contrast, he points to women artists' use of the copier to celebrate multiple identities or to question imposed identity as in the work of Pati Hill who praises the copier because: "It is the side of your subject that you do not see that is reproduced..."

Schwartz obviously takes Hill's comments to heart in the construction of his own book. After 382 non-stop, fact-filled pages the main text finally rolls to a halt. Flip the page and you are then faced with 'The Parallel Universe'—a further 150 pages of endnotes, a glittering display of reference and arcane comment that provides almost as much enjoyment as the earlier prose.

Philosophically, the endnotes also question the originality and 'essence' of the main text, acting as a critique of Western Scholarship while encouraging the reader to delve further into a plethora of detail beyond the book's own framework.

In the end, perhaps, the book itself serves the reader best as a reference tool. Taken as a series of micro-essays on a wide array of subjects each meditation can stimulate a whole field of work. Taken as a whole, in one sitting, the reader's head may explode.

Francis McKee

