

Unpicking Repetition

v12

Good evening. Unfortunately, Mr Matthew Webber cannot be with us this evening. What follows is a repetition of his words, a reconstruction.

So then. Presumably, there was once a reality. It was full of red vans and potatoes, sun and red hair. Or so we are forced to conclude from the material assembled here.

Imagine, if you will, a photograph. It is printed, but with ink quickly disappearing. Each print is further from the original image; contrast increases and colours are intensified. A radioactive sheen develops around faces. Each copy of the photograph is corrected, in an attempt to return to the image reality as it should have been, or perhaps still is. "Now" is scrawled onto some of the prints, as though they still represent the present. Eventually, all that remains are corrections – the original image is obliterated by revision. Then, this warped image is painted, fictionalised further, rendered in watercolours, sharpened and heightened. This painting is then re-painted, a hundred thousand ten million three hundred and four times. Each copy is different. The original photograph is lost, and there remains no way of deciding which of the remaining copies came first.

Yet, each variant copy of the original image claims to distil the inherent, perhaps "true", meaning of the original even as it deviates further and further from it. As reality recedes, myth emerges – a painting of a landscape, though inherently less accurate than a photograph, claims to represent a deeper truth – a truth that is emotional, cultural, personal, mythic.

The task of interpretation, supposedly, is to discover this truth. Our standard method of doing this is to invoke etymology, heredity, origin. We seek the origin of works, or words, or actions, or images in order to explain them – we seek some universal source from which these artworks flow.

Yet here, we are presented not only with many, variant, contradictory myths, but the copying and re-copying and re-copying – the repetitions – that have produced them are also exposed. Further, the original images – let alone the original reality from which they came – is hidden, presumed lost. Thus, interpretation is frustrated. Ancestry, origin, and time all disappear. Ultimately, each image seems to pre-date every other, and therefore to explain every other. Interpretation itself collapses into the work; the artwork and its meaning are inseparable.

And yet, a text is written; a text that tries to relate these images back to the reality they once represented, to reconstruct their origin. It invokes etymology, heredity. It attempts to reconstruct the singular from the many, invariant time from variant times, the first from its innumerable repetitions.

One

The word “repetition” itself stems ultimately from the Proto-Indo-European root *pet, meaning “to rush” or “to fly”.

Thus, in Sanskrit we find Patram, “wing”, “feather” or “leaf”;

in Hittite, Pittar, “wing”;

in Greek Piptein, “to fall”, and Pteryx, “feather”;

in Old English Feðer, “feather”.

Latin is special case. Here we find Penna, “wing”; Petere, “to go at” or “to require”; and Petito, “a request”, literally “to fly at”.

From this comes the Old French Peticiun, “supplication” or “prayer”,

and From this, the Middle English Petition, “petition”,

and From this, the Modern English Petition, “petition”,

and From this, the Modern English Petition, from which “repetition”.

Our art is repetition. Our art is repetition in at least three ways.

Number one. Our art is always a repetition of reality. I repeat; our art is always a reproduction of a particular moment in the past. This moment may be real, or imagined, or postulated; it makes no difference. An image is always second hand, as the processes through which we document things can never capture their full essence – there must always be some detail lost every time we re-present reality.

Such re-presentation – representation – also takes time, be it the impossibly brief moment that a camera shutter is open, or the laborious process of painting holiday photographs. Hence, the reality that our art represents is always receding into in the past, but – conversely - always claims to be present through its representations. There is a paradox here – each painting, or scan, or photograph inherently claims to represent a particular moment, but each took time to produce. Thus, any artwork that claims to be 'now' must forever lie, starting from its belated moment of creation.

Number two. Repetition also occurs in the very act of producing art work. When Helen Schoene was a dancer, she used to repeat herself all the time. In dance, the continual repetition of actions serves to perfect them, to distil their aesthetic and emotional power. Precisely the same process occurs in visual art – the painter no longer thinks of balance, composition, or form – eventually, through continual repetition, these intellectual and visual structures become inherent. In the material presented here, this process is inverted - the ritual scanning of a face, instead of distilling the identity of the actor, culminates in destroying it.

Number three - our art is also a repetition of previous art works. Consciously or otherwise, each photograph, painting or text enters into a dialogue with a corpus of previous representations. That such processes are normally, euphemistically referred to as “inspiration” or “influence” - and not the pejorative “repetition” - is indicative of the uneasy relationship we have with ideas of originality and mechanical reproduction. Whether these earlier works be canonical paintings, preliminary drawings or tourist photographs makes no difference – each re-presentation of an image necessarily

abstracts it from reality. A photograph of a photograph inherently loses some detail, a painting of a photograph even more so.

And yet, and yet. In some sense, each repetition of an image or action distils its meaning. Each time reality or art, a potato or movement, are reproduced, corrections can be made. These corrections, though invariably destroying the fine documentary detail of the original image, bring the image closer to some postulated greater truth. That is, a photograph of a potato merely represents that potato – a fourth-hand copy of this image, carefully corrected and elaborated, transforms this singular potato with some essential, universal potato of myth.

However. There has never been just one myth. This is identical to saying that variant schemes of correction compete, each warping and transforming base objects and actions in different ways. Thus, there is never just one line of descent - as images and actions are repeated, the same singular origin gives rise to a seething multitude of competing myths, a hundred million different corrected versions of reality, every one of which claims to be real; every one of which claims itself to be the original, and not merely some repetition.

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Ursprung

As I have already said, it is commonly expected that writing or speech that seeks to interpret artwork will, itself, seek some underlying source, some universal origin. Here, this is absurd, as you may have noticed. The reason is clear; here, as I have already said, here, such an origin has been lost, or wantonly hidden.

Let me illustrate this point. It will be observed that such an origin is commonly found in three places:

Number one; The artist's biography – especially their childhood or education. When Helen Schoene was a dancer, she used to repeat herself all the time.

Number two: The location – spatial, temporal, historical – in which the work was produced. This work was produced now, here. As in really, now, really here.

Number three; The theoretical framework with which the work interacts, subverts, co=opts, whatever. All the work here stems ultimately from a consideration of the proto-indo-european root “pet”, meaning “to rush” or “to fly”.

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Let us stop here, with the observation that the word repetition, barely a few million repetitions in the past – that is, when the word was spoken in the medieval period – possessed a slightly different meaning from that it carries today. Then, it meant to re-ask, to re-request. Thus, artwork that consciously exposes its own repetitions, makes

obvious its internal borrowings, flagrantly exhibits its re-productions, literally, compulsively “re-asks” the viewer the same question in myriad ways.

The problem here, right here, now, here, now, of course, is that the very question this work asks is complicit, entangled in the concept of repetition itself. We are accustomed to a form of interpretation that is aligned with analysis, splitting, chronological pedantry; interpretation commonly conflates meaning with origin, and takes as its goal the tracing and location of some mythical, primeval *ursprung*. That is, the explanation of art almost invariably invokes some ancient Greek term – *photos, logos, na na ni, na na na* - or some ancient Greek myth – *Oedipus, Prometheus, na na ni, na na na*.

Yet here, we are presented not only with many, variant, contradictory myths, but the copying and re-copying and re-copying – the repetitions – that have produced them are also exposed. Further, the original images – let alone the original reality from which they came – is hidden, presumed lost. Thus, interpretation is frustrated. Ancestry, origin, and time all disappear.

The instant temptation is to explain the 'later', 'children' images as the organic products of 'original', 'parental' forms. The problem here, of course, is that there is no such primacy permitted – the 'levels' of descent are confused, jumbled, flattened, complicated, etc, etc. In short, it is impossible to tell which image came first.

Ultimately, each image seems to pre-date every other, and therefore to explain every other. Interpretation itself collapses into the work; the artwork and its meaning are inseparable.

Thus, each work seems to be an interpretation of every other. And is, in being so, transformed into art itself, requiring - asking for, petitioning for – its own interpretation. And so, it claims explanation by others, in some eternal feedback loop. Descent, hierarchy, primacy, disappear – the image and its interpretation are unified.

What is left is exposed machinery – the guts of the process through which images, actions, thoughts are transformed into myth through repetition. What is left are mythic images of a corrected reality, and the long lines of descent that they have passed through. What is left is an image of the very processes things pass through in their metamorphoses – not a photograph, but the camera; not a movement, but a body; not a photocopy, but a printer.

Matthew Webber, 2012