

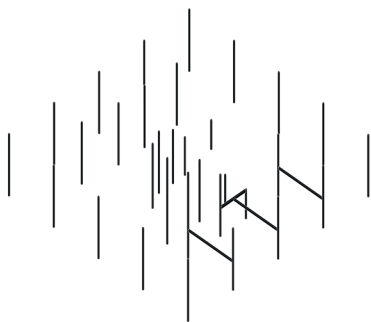


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Imitation Parody Montage



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The Syllabus series presents experiences and research made inside formative courses at different levels: bachelor, master, doctorate. The goal is to offer these results, provisional and incomplete as they can be, to the scientific community, enhancing dialogues and exchanges.

This issue collects the assignments made in the course "Architecture in Transition", held by Alessandro Rocca on February 2023 at the PhD Program of Architectural Urban Interior Design, Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Politecnico di Milano.

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Cover and Frontespice

Yuwei Ren, Contrast between pillars (Villa Savoye, Villa Dall'Ava)

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Imitation, Parody, Montage



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IMITATION

The text explores the possibility of using imitation as a research tool to produce original architecture. Quoting Gianfranco Mormino (2016): "Imitation is the primary explanation for the individual animal's extraordinary ability to adapt to different environmental situations; [...] the way in which an animal stabilises motor acts found accidentally and revealed to be favourable, and I consider its necessary form to be self-imitation, i.e. the ability to replicate motor acts performed by itself."

Down to the ordinary, a few years ago, synthesis of a journey to discover Berlin architecture was the comical remark of one of the travellers, an outsider to architecture, who mistakenly exchanged Mies van der Rohe's Neue National Gallerie for a gas station. Curiously enough, the master designed a service station in 1969 (the year the museum was opened). The two works, on a different scale, are strikingly similar. It could almost seem that, in a parallel universe unaware of the master's works, the 'non-architect' traveller was right. Therefore, how should we define the service station concerning the museum? Is it original? Is it an imitation? Or even a self-imitation?

Raffaella Cavallaro

The Originality of Self-Imitation

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Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's compositions may be considered an imitation of Mozart's, yet they do not adequately sound like the source, just as Virgilio's texts aim to mirror the writings of Omero without losing originality. As Carlos Marti Aris explains, Borges' work is rich in references to the great literary myths of the past. What attracts him is literature and not the individuals who had the privilege of writing it (Marti Aris 2013); this statement is confirmed by another expression, devoutly pronounced by Borges himself: "Literature is written from literature" (Marti Aris 2013). In the same way, Paolo Portoghesi asserts: "The theory is that architecture, all architecture, is born from other architectures, from a non-coincidental convergence between a series of precedents that combine through imagination in a process involving the solitude of thought and the choral of collective memory" (Rossi, Meda & Vitale 1981).

The things we take for granted may be seen again in a new light. It is necessary to begin this discourse from the assumption that imitation is deeply rooted in a precise criterion: the study of the originals. Through a constant investigation of origins, which has ignited debates from different disciplines and cultures since immemorial times, imitation becomes a tool for architectural research and the production of originality. However, the question arises: through what processes is it possible to define a creative dialogue between origin and originals through the 'imitation' tool?

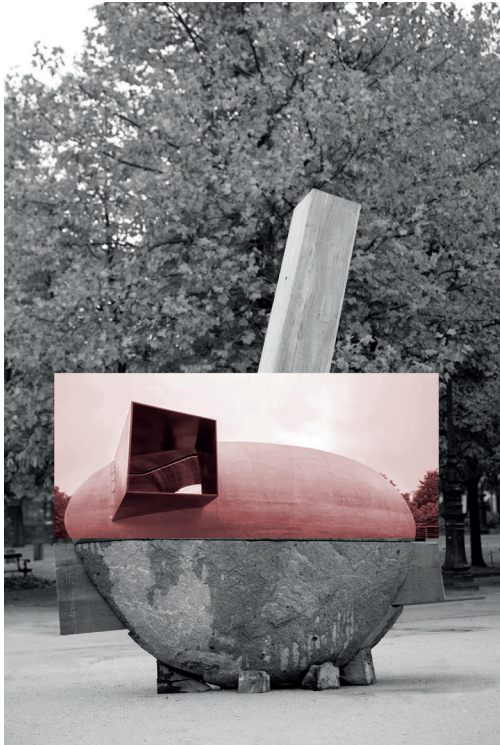
“The first step we have to make is to examine, if we are allowed the term, the genealogy and relation of our ideas, the causes that have given rise to them, and the characteristics that distinguish them: in a word, to return to the origin and generation of our knowledge” (Le Rond d’Alembert 1751).

In this sense, originality can be conceived as a synthesis of tangible and intangible components – the result of an investigation in which certain principles, commonly considered fundamental, are crystallised and, through processes of memory reworking, far from any form of uncritical or nostalgic mimesis – capture the essence of the object examined. The aim of imitation is, in general, to catch the essence through a creative process of selection and synthesis of those aspects of the human condition that possess universal validity. On the other hand, G. Mormino, lecturer in Moral Philosophy at the University of Milan, argues that “even the most elementary behaviours are first found and then repeated, once the experience has shown their usefulness” (Mormino 2016). Through this ‘exploratory motion’, the architect examines his surroundings and uses the imitation tool to create original solutions. Hence, if imitation is part of the architectural invention and the origin is the object of imitation, what is the origin?

Looking at the origin and emphasising its mythical character, Smiljan Radić, for instance, ‘imitates’ the nature of architecture by exploring radical and challenging modes.

The primordial spirit and primitive forms of his architecture blur the physical and temporal boundaries. Moreover, the Dolmen, the ‘natural folly’ of the Jean-Jacques Rousseau Park in Ermenonville, France, and the ‘Folly’ designed by Radić in 2014 for the Serpentine Gallery are two romantic pavilions that descend from the exact genesis. Radić states: “To build a folly is essentially to do something a second time, something at an inopportune moment. That something is always the memory of something forgotten, about which we can paradoxically say: There is it again[...] an abandoned cabin, a cave with some gods living inside, a temple or a pyramid[...] a rock, for example, has for everyone a primitive meaning, and it is in that for everyone where the crude nature of a folly lies[...] in the repetition of a commonplace” (Radić 2019).

The synthetic memory meditated through imitation constitutes, following this approach, the essence of architecture and, consequently, its originality. Not least because, at times, some associations refer to memories so distant in time that they are also reproduced in a manner dissimilar to the original. Although imitation represents the process through which to ‘gain experience’, self-imitation must be how a skill found and then repeated is acquired, becoming the architect’s heritage. Given this, the pavilion designed by Radić for Kensington Gardens could be interpreted as a self-imitation of the sculpture ‘The Boy Hidden in a Fish’.



Montage. Smiljan Radić: Primitive spaceship (graphic re-elaboration by the author).

created by the Chilean architect himself for the 2010 Venice Architecture Biennale.

The alternation of exploration/imitation thus allows the acquisition of new skills. The observation of an 'external model', in fact, never envisages a morphologically mimetic act as the ultimate goal, since the observer, in a critical manner, selects and appropriates what he needs. This appropriation process presupposes a preliminary passage through one's own body, i.e., 'taking possession', an internalisation, which then becomes the actual imitated model, i.e. a self-imitation. "The object requires the spectator to participate with his intelligence, making him a participant in its own game" (Martí Aris 2013). Therefore, self-imitation develops and intensifies through exploration and learning, based on a trace and perfected through personal experience.

Christian Kerez first uses his personal 'exploratory motion' as a tool for knowledge and learning, then as a device for producing originality. In 2009, he worked on the extension project of a favela in Paraisópolis, Brazil (El Croquis - Kerez 2022). Imitating its peculiarities, namely density and promiscuity, he studied its architectural forms and designed a new settlement, similar but original. The aim of the project – developed together with a research project on the change and growth of the morphology and topology of the favela – is to guarantee people who will live in this new settlement the same social life as in a favela. Subsequently, through a

process of self-imitation, such a project formed the starting point for the construction of the Okamura House in Prague (El Croquis - Kerez 2022), another unique project, the almost archaic appearance contrasts with the spatial system, which is radical and new. Aware of the mimetic character of his advantageous action, Kerez develops the idea of the atomised and vertically organised space he postulated. The dialogue between the origin and the original is silent but eloquent, “like the centina that makes the construction of the arch possible” (Marti Aris 2013).

The combination of the two actions, finding and repeating, is by no means to be confused with a superficial attempt to copy; the exemplary case is nothing more than a benchmark for perfecting one’s own idea, a personal point of view. The latter is the reason that stimulates the search for and imitating an external model, whether natural or artificial. What is learnt from the external example, which can establish relations of understanding or conflict, assumes an auxiliary and entirely instrumental role in defining the personal point of view since a filter is placed between the model and one’s way of examining it. As happens during an eclipse, the interposition of the body between the model and the point of observation causes knowledge to arrive indirectly, a reflection that reveals unforeseen and original nuances, which already belonged to the architect but are made more substantial and more evident in this way. The



Montage. Christian Kerez: Learning from favela (graphic re-elaboration by the author).

perspective of the 'one who does' promotes a different look at the work observed because the act of choosing what and, above all, how to look at it stems from wholly personal research.

Consequently, the personal response to an architectural question is indeed critical but also respectful of the things we have seen and experienced, but primarily, it is different; it is other, and in this difference is to be found self-imitation and innovation. Adam Caruso reminds us that "radical developments have never emerged from a tabula rasa condition: innovators like Palladio and Koolhaas have always worked from engagement with architectural culture" (Caruso 2016) and, he adds, "any claim to completely new forms is tautological" (Caruso 2016).

Emphasising differences rather than similarities is crucial in abandoning the notion of copying or even plagiarism and recognising that a work can be original even if it appears to imitate another. The insistence on searching for and repeating the same elements, time after time, "makes the work progress not so much an extension as in depth" (Caruso 2016). Through repetition, Andy Warhol finds inspiration, as he suggested, "Everything repeats itself. Amazingly, everyone is convinced that everything is new when it is nothing but repetition" (Warhol Biography). Although his silkscreens look similar, they are different; it is a form of self-imitation and his own, revealing a constant search for



Montage. Mies van der Rohe: Gas Station National Galerie (graphic re-elaboration by the author).

personal identity. He states, “Isn’t life a series of images that change as they repeat themselves?” (Warhol Biography).

The iteration of this debate and discourse leads us to reflect on how repetition represents a transition from the search for the similar to the discovery of the difference: achieving a difference through similarity is a process that is by no means simple. Mies van der Rohe, through his masterly works, embodied this latter principle that still lives on in his architecture today. His quest for the essential is common to all his works, ‘authentic repositories of knowledge’ (Marti Aris 2013). Indeed, it is unsurprising to find his evident and distinctive traits even in lesser works. The aphorism ‘less is more’ applies as much to the anonymous - in terms of fame - gas station designed by Mies on the peripheries of Nun’s Island, Canada, as it does to the much better-known and celebrated Neue National Gallerie in Berlin. Curiously enough, the master designed the service station in 1969, when the Berlin museum opened. The two works, on a different scale, are strikingly similar. Coincidence? How should the service station be defined concerning the museum? Is it original? Is it an imitation? Or can we call it a self-imitation?

Because, after all, what is the dream of a copy if not that of wanting to be an original? This is one of the questions of the book *Il sogno di una copia. Del doppio, del dubbio, della malinconia* by Alfonso Maurizio Iacono:

“The dream of a copy that wants to replace the original must be accompanied by an awareness of the deviation produced, which signals its diversity. The child who plays astride a broomstick knows it is a wooden stick, not a horse. He is imitating the rider and, by doing so, activating his creativity. He is not copying him. Children who play by turning leaves and shells into boats imitate, do not copy. The dream of a copy is to no longer be a copy but not to annul itself in the original, but to mark a gap and become an imitation, that is, something similar and something different, like a son in relation to his father” (Iacono 2016).

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