

Modernity, Technology, and Copying

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Abstract

The evolution of modernity is closely linked to technological advancements, which encompass the duplication of sounds, the reproduction of images, and the copying of messages. This paper investigates various perspectives on the emergence of modern technologies, particularly focusing on their inherent aspect of “copying.” Here, “copying” is a broad term that includes reproducing disembodied voices and images, as well as duplicating artwork and communication materials. It explores how different writers react to the concept of “copying” within the technological landscape. While some, like Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Rudyard Kipling, celebrate the public excitement and enjoyment associated with new communication technologies, others, including Henry James and Herman Melville, illustrate individuals ensnared in the realm of “copying,” where the pervasive gaze of overseers intrudes into the private realm of message transmission. This paper addresses the question of the relationship between copying and modernity, highlighting how a culture of “copying” enhances human capabilities while simultaneously generating issues such as misinterpretation, commodification, and detachment from natural order, ultimately raising concerns about identity, integrity, and security.

1. INTRODUCTION

The modern era has evolved alongside technological advancements, which are intricately connected to the replication of sounds, images, and messages. The inventions of the gramophone, photography, cinema, telegraph, and typewriter at the end of the nineteenth century revolutionized communication by bridging gaps in time and space, thereby transforming how people interact and reducing physical distances. These technologies have also profoundly influenced artists and writers, leaving a notable imprint on Modernist literature and art.

Tim Armstrong (2005) observes that “for some modernists, technological progress offered a synecdoche for modernity in general, including the arts” (p. 130). Modernist authors exhibit varied reactions to the concept of “copying” within the technological sphere. Here, “copying” is used broadly to encompass the reproduction of voices and images, as well as the duplication of art and correspondence materials. Writers such as Mark Twain and Rudyard Kipling embrace the enthusiasm and joy associated with emerging communication technologies. Conversely, Henry James and Herman Melville highlight the plight of individuals ensnared in

the realm of “copying,” illustrating how this process often involves human oversight in message transmission.

This paper will examine these differing perspectives on the advent of technologies with their inherent nature of “copying,” and the implications of panoptic surveillance on private communications. It will also address the pragmatic question of the relationship between copying and modernity, revealing how this culture of copying enhances human potential while simultaneously introducing issues such as “alienation, instrumentalization, and estrangement from the natural order,” as Armstrong (2005) describes (p. 129).

2. COPYING AND MODERNITY

The emergence of modernity is intricately tied to the advent of electricity, which catalyzed the development of various technologies and, consequently, the practice of copying in the realm of mechanical reproduction. According to Sam Halliday (2007), in the world of modernity, “life” is “aligned with electricity, as are the physiological processes to which life corresponds” (p. 4). Writers like James, Twain, and Kipling examine the connection between electricity and human existence in their works. For example, James’s novella *In the Cage* portrays a psychological profile of a girl confined within a telegraph office, a space defined by its “framed and wired confinement” (p. 119). She yearns for a life beyond her confinement, which is filled with electric devices for message duplication and communication. Similarly, Twain (1963) explores the concept of mental electricity in his essay “Mental Telegraphy,” where he highlights the excitement of perceiving others’ thoughts and engaging in “telepathy”—a term coined by classical scholar Frederick W. Myers in 1882 to describe communication beyond conscious awareness.

Kipling, known for being one of the first English writers to own an automobile and for his fascination with machinery and engineering, exhibits a profound enthusiasm for electricity and movement. In his short story “Wireless,” Kipling (1991) describes the emerging science of wireless technology, which allows for the duplication of voice. The narrative not only conveys the excitement experienced by Mr. Cashell, a young experimenter captivated by the new radio medium, but also delves into the imaginative possibility of Morse code “sprang to life,” enabling a posthumous connection between a dying lover and the Romantic poet John Keats, who had felt similar emotions a century earlier (p. 41). Pamela Thurschwell (2001) observes that Kipling’s work reflects the burgeoning excitement and fascination with new technologies, using “analogies between technological mediums and spiritualist ones” to capture the era’s enthusiasm (p. 90).

Some writers, on the other hand, perceive a detrimental aspect in the era of mechanical reproduction, worried that the pursuit of immortality through extensive reproduction might compromise the essence of art in their creations. Walter Benjamin (1970) notes in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” that mechanical reproduction could radically alter people’s understanding of art and lead to the diminishing of its uniqueness or, as Benjamin describes it, the loss of its “aura” (p. 222). This means that the original authority of a work is undermined. By replicating everything, the risk to uniqueness becomes inevitable. And “an object uncopied” will be under “perpetual siege,” as Hillel Schwartz (1996) aptly observes: “The more adept the West has become at the making of copies, the more we have exalted uniqueness” (p. 212).

In addition to questioning the uniqueness of literary or artistic works, modern technology that duplicates sounds, such as the gramophone, can symbolically represent a kind of death, as Virginia Woolf illustrates in her final novel, *Between the Acts*. Published shortly after her suicide in 1941, Woolf uses the gramophone's repetitive sounds—its “chuff, chuff, chuff” and “tick, tick, tick”—to symbolize the passing of time and the impending Second World War. To Woolf, the war's devastating force signifies a regression to barbarism. In contrast to the modern technology of the gramophone, the characters in the novel frequently discuss antiquated topics such as old sayings like “touch wood” (p. 22), family history, and prehistoric England, which evokes images of “barking monsters; the iguanodon, the mammoth” (p. 9). Woolf appears to lament that humanity has not evolved significantly from the time when “prehistoric man, half-human, half-ape, roused himself from his semi-crouching position and raised great stone” to the present age of advanced technologies (p. 197). Rather than leading to a brighter future, new technologies seem to push humanity back towards a primal state, as they do not diminish the potential for violent conflict but rather amplify the scale and brutality of warfare.

In *Between the Acts*, the opening line reads, “It was a summer's night, and they were talking” (p. 3), while the final paragraph concludes with, “The curtain rose. They spoke” (p. 197). Woolf appears to suggest that as long as English is read, its voice will continue, albeit through various forms of mechanical reproduction. Armstrong (2005) observes that Woolf seems to be unsettled by the technological changes of her time and raises metaphorical questions about whether technology introduces “a set of problems relating to its demands and structural implications” (p. 129). As a Modernist writer, Woolf likely yearned for a genuine, direct connection with her audience, valuing personal engagement over the impersonal nature of technological advancements that distance writers from their readers.

3. COPYING AND COMMUNICATION

A significant challenge technology presents in the modern era revolves around communication issues. According to Halliday (2007), electricity, which is closely linked to communication, becomes intertwined with the concept of “communication” itself (p. 5). Although advancements in communication technologies like the typewriter and telegraph have enhanced the efficiency of information exchange, they also introduce new problems that can create barriers beyond gender and class, potentially leading to miscommunication. As Schwartz (1996) notes that as the practice of copying becomes more widespread, the likelihood of significant errors increases, raising complex issues related to “identity, security, and integrity” (p. 212).

Long before the advent of modern technology, the practice of copying and duplicating information was already a part of human life. Melville's novel *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Tale of Wall Street*, published in 1853, explores this concept through its protagonist, Bartleby, who resists both being copied and the act of copying itself. The story depicts Bartleby's monotonous existence in a dreary office setting and his immersion in the unchanging flow of information. Bartleby, who starts work as a scrivener at a Wall Street law office, initially performs his duties diligently. However, he soon declares that he prefers not to engage in proofreading or copying any longer.

Gillian Brown (1990) observes that Bartleby's refusal to continue working as a scrivener and his resistance to copying on command are key indicators of his effort to preserve his

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personal integrity and maintain a private life untouched by commercial pressures. This reflects “the notion of a personal life impervious to market influences, the model of selfhood in a commercial society” (p. 174). The walls surrounding Bartleby symbolize his desire to protect his inner self and isolate his personal space, as he shuts the door on the lawyer-narrator. The symbolism of walls is further highlighted when Bartleby is moved from the office to the Tombs, the city jail, where he continues to focus on the prison walls, which represent his final attempt to shield himself from society and sustain his selfhood. Ultimately, as Brown (1990) notes, Bartleby finds his ultimate form of self-preservation in death, “he leaves the world in order to keep himself” (p. 193).

Toward the end of the story, the lawyer-narrator attributes Bartleby’s peculiar behavior to a rumor that he once worked as a subordinate clerk in “the Dead Letter Office.” This association of “dead letters” with the concept of the “dead man,” along with the narrator’s realization of Bartleby’s harsh existence, prompts him to exclaim, “Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!” (p. 34). Despite this, the narrator’s self-delusion is evident; he only perceives surface-level details and misinterprets Bartleby’s inner turmoil by referencing these letters. As the owner of the law firm, the narrator treats each employee as a mere copyist, and as he hires more scribes, the likelihood of misunderstanding and misinterpreting his staff increases, reducing each worker to a mere cog in the machinery of his office. Melville appears to criticize the narrator’s smugness and obsession with commercial values, which leads him to overlook the deeper meaning behind Bartleby’s refusal and to interpret Bartleby’s plight as an affirmation of his own sorrow, driving him toward his demise. Consequently, the narrator’s tale of Wall Street becomes a piece of irony.

While Bartleby refuses to accept the apathy and detachment of the business world, the unnamed female protagonist in Henry James’s *In the Cage* does not share Bartleby’s sense of sacrifice but instead tries to find ways to make her role as a telegraph typist more tolerable. Despite this difference in approach, her work bears some resemblance to Bartleby’s position. Like Bartleby, who is confined to a walled office with minimal human interaction, the girl in James’s story operates within the “framed and wired confinement” of the telegraph office and compares her existence to that of “a guinea-pig or a magpie” (p. 119). As Gitelman (1999) observes that the girl “recedes from view,” with a mere tap-tapping sound that permeates her cage-like telegraph office, which is “evidence of work in progress” (p. 210).

Thurschwell (2001) notes that, despite the protagonist in James’s work serving as a tool for recording others’ thoughts and counting words, she still envisions herself as being “in close contact with the people” and is able to “explore the potential pleasures and dangers of carrying the words of others” (p. 87). Through her empathetic imagination, sparked by the snippets of information she picks up from the telegraphs sent and received by one of her main clients, Captain Everard, and his lover, the girl becomes fascinated with Captain Everard, whose messages she relays.

The parallel readings of Melville’s and James’s stories illustrate how technology transits from public office environments into private life. Bartleby’s disregard for the circulation of messages and communication around him starkly contrasts with the telegraph girl’s deep engagement in transmitting messages. Unlike Bartleby, who vehemently rejects the commercial world that infringes on human selfhood and disrupts domestic security, the

unnamed girl is eager to extend her consciousness into a realm beyond herself through the information she gathers and types.

Despite imagining a kind of closeness with her client and entertaining the possibility of bridging the gap between the upper and working classes, the telegraph girl remains acutely aware of her limitations as a typist and the impossibility of truly crossing that divide. As Thurschwell (2001) states, “intimacy is inseparable from information flow which is inseparable from economics;” the unique relationships she observes through her work are commodified and quantified from her confined perspective, revealing that the “intimate relation” she perceives between people ultimately boils down to a financial transaction (p. 96).

In other words, the rise of communication technologies does not liberate the telegraph girl from the complex hierarchical and economic world. Nor does it enhance communication fluidity or bridge the gap between different social classes. James’s protagonist remains trapped “in the cage,” continuing to imagine the outside world beyond her confining circumstances. In addition, Thurschwell (2001) appropriately notes that “the telegraphist in *In the Cage* manufactures a sort of telepathic intimacy from the commercial transaction, in the process of blurring the boundaries between money, mediation and love;” yet, the story “hardly represents a triumph of possibility for the expansive secretarial-class spirit” (p. 99). After all, James’s girl holds no true uniqueness in the eye of people from the upper class, because she is merely a girl that types and copies.

4. CONCLUSION

In summary, modern communication technologies, such as the radio and the gramophone, align with the culture of copying, revolutionizing the way messages are transmitted and allowing for human intervention in these messages. This technological advancement brings about a dichotomy in writers’ perceptions of “copying,” reflecting both a burgeoning fascination with technology and a skeptical attitude toward it. Additionally, the natural order of human communication has undergone a fundamental change, as interpersonal relationships now rely on technological mediation, which serves as a conduit for human communication and interaction.

Nevertheless, modern communication technologies carry inherent risks. For example, the dangers associated with these technologies are evident in James’s *In the Cage*, where the telegraph messages of Victorian London’s upper class are processed by the unnamed telegraph operator, who might see these communications but remain unseen. Thurschwell (2001) notes that the typewriter “may be trapped” in her telegraph office but is also akin to a Foucauldian panopticon surveyor—able to see (at least into minds) without being seen (p. 94). The system of telegraph messages in James’s time bears resemblance to today’s Internet email and other advanced communication methods. Despite being written nearly a century ago, James’s story resonates with contemporary fears about instant communication, where messages might be observed by individuals whom the sender may never meet. Consequently, since the late nineteenth century, Henry James and other writers have anticipated the enduring concern that communication technologies in a copy-based modern world can be fraught with dangers.

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