

Accident and Artifact: Originals and Simulacra in the New Humanities Library

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I want to begin by expressing my gratitude to Klaus Kempf and the organizing committee for their gracious and patient attention to the needs of speakers and participants, including myself. Like Ann, I, too, am returning to my roots. I lived in Munich for many years, am a graduate of the local university, and have been pleasantly spending my days these past few days in a hotel symbolically located between the two poles of my student years, Kitzinger and Atzinger, the antiquarian bookseller and the student tavern.

A fact perhaps not known to everyone in this room is that 2003 marks the 200th anniversary of the beginning of what is called the “Secularization” in Bavaria, a period of about 12 years in the course of which over 200 monastic and other ecclesiastical libraries were closed, their often extraordinary Baroque interiors repurposed as storerooms or army field hospitals, and their equally extraordinary contents confiscated and then hastily sorted through by a bibliographical SWAT team under the direction of the court librarian, Baron von Aretin [1; 2; 3; 4; 5]. Only the best of the booty was boxed up and sent to the court library in Munich, to the university library in Landshut, or to provincial libraries in Augsburg, Amberg, Passau, and elsewhere. Although the secularization was responsible for much of the wealth of Bavaria’s research libraries today, without question tens or even hundreds of thousands of books were also destroyed or lost, many of them sold to paper manufacturers to be, as we might say today, recycled. And yet from the standpoint of conservation of printed information, it is probably safe to say that very little was lost. In light of the tons of monastic books converted back into wood pulp in the vats of the paper makers, how can we possibly make such a monstrous claim? In part, the claim is valid because the highly redundant

nature of monastic collections at the time represented an early implementation of the LOCKSS principle, which stands for: “Lots of Copies Keeps Stuff Safe.” It can even be argued that by pulling the remaining monastery books together in just a few locations, the Bavarian information infrastructure was actually improved. In any case, the answer to the question of the gain or loss through the Secularization in Bavaria requires that we consider the complex dialectics of artifact and content. What is lost when the printed book disappears—if the *content* of that book is somehow preserved and even made more accessible? And isn’t this the very same question that we must answer today when we ask: *Is digital different?*

This is an old discussion, actually much older than yesterday’s library conference or even the 200 years that separate us from the Bavarian secularizations. It is in fact a two-thousand-year-old discussion surrounding the Aristotelian distinction between *substantia* and *accidentia*, between what is essential on the one hand and, on the other, what is a property without which the essence, the substance, can still exist [6, p. 4]. Is the physicality of the artifact “book” an essential property, or is it only accidental to what is essential to the scholarly process, that which we refer to as “the content” and equate with “the text”? If that content is available in one readable and, if necessary, reproducible exemplar, or more securely, as in Bavaria in 1803, in a hundred or (as is often the case today) thousands or even millions of copies, what value still can be said to accrue to the original? And what *is* an original of a book? Doesn’t the original cease to exist the moment the type is redistributed? And today, isn’t the original of most books actually a computer file, and the paper book only its accident?

In the digital world, the question of what constitutes an original is even more problematic. If I may borrow from Ann Okerson’s tool chest—the movie *The Matrix Reloaded*: The one hundred Agent Smiths that Neo must battle are not clones of an original. There is no original. They are all equally originals or equally copies. If copies, copies of what? Can we call a visible rendering of an invisible abstraction, namely computer code, either a “copy” or an “original”? The books we deal with today, like the hundreds of Agent Smiths, are neither. They are, in an Aristotelian sense, strictly accidents—or, as Jean Baudrillard calls symbolic constructions that are no longer or were

ever rooted in an original reference, such as a spoken conversation or a written letter, they are *simulacra* [7; 8].¹

We resist intuitively the idea of a printed book as an accident or a simulacrum, yet why a printed book should be any closer to being an original than the same output seen as a pdf file on a computer screen is a mystery indeed. If Uwe Jochum of the University of Konstanz is correct, that “books” are what they are only through their relationships with other books [10], then a fully word-searchable, hyperlinked electronic book, where every citation links directly to its source, actually has a greater right to be called “a book” than the same content realized as a quiescent wood pulp product. At my library, Northwestern University near Chicago, we recently subscribed to a service called ebrary: for the next three years we will be leasing access to about 13,000 contemporary academic monographs. The page on the screen is in pdf, identical to the appearance of the printed book on my physical desktop, but with extraordinary advantages. I can search the entire book—indeed, simultaneously, all 13,000 books in this library—for occurrences of whatever words I want. If my eyes grow tired, I can double the size of the page, in fact magnify it up to 6400% if necessary, making me no larger than a gnat on the screen in comparison to a virtual page that extends from my computer screen dozens of feet in every direction. This electronic book is delivered to me in seconds wherever I am from a server in Palo Alto, California, and I don’t even need to go downstairs to my mailbox to retrieve it. And I can return it just as easily, by simply closing a window with a mouse click. I prepare excerpts of whatever I am reading without retyping them or writing them out longhand, and therefore they have absolutely no mistakes. I then store them in the same infinitely malleable, instantaneously portable format in a personal digital library managed by EndNote, my preferred bibliographic software.

What a paradise for a humanist or indeed for any scholar this is! How far have we already come from the printed book, which one would think we should be eager to forget and discard, giving us space in our libraries to create new coffee shops, humanities centers, and computing laboratories! And in a world in which copies are so easily obtained, why should we care what is on our physical

¹ The Wachowski Brothers, who directed *Reloaded*, actually assigned Keanu Reeves to read Baudrillard’s “Simulacra and Simulation.” [9]

library shelves, if we can obtain access to any text anywhere in a matter of seconds, minutes, or at most hours?

Enter Nicholson Baker, the author of *Double Fold*, often decried as a cranky Luddite. He is really not. He rejoices unabashedly in the availability today of electronic text. In his 1995 essay, “Lumber,” Baker writes: “. . . nothing can remotely compare, in range and depth and tantric power, with [the] English Poetry Database . . . “ It may be, he continues, “the most significant development in literary scholarship since xerography.” [11, pp. 220, 227] Yet while praising this particular database as a “mind-manuring marvel,” he also warns libraries not [and I quote] to be “tempted by its aura of comprehensiveness to ‘withdraw’—which is to say, get rid of—the unelectrified source books themselves.” Baker’s reasoning here is that having everything uniformly and easily accessible might interfere with what Housman once called the “hide-and-seek” of learning, the thrill, one might say, of the chase. This is actually one of Baker’s weaker arguments, reminiscent of the claim that surviving the ordeal of finding information undaunted is what distinguishes the true scholar, when in fact it’s what happens *then* that should make all the difference. But the deeper point that Baker is making here is not one on behalf of a cult of scholarly masochism, but instead a reminder that scholarship in the humanities cannot be meaningfully pursued without intense scrutiny of the text and without a regard for the semiotics of the vessel in which that text is—or was originally—contained, those elements that constitute, in Gérard Genette’s terminology, *les seuils*, the doorways or the thresholds to the content of the book: the “paratexts” [12; 13].

So, for the humanities scholar, and increasingly for historians and other social scientists, artifact is not necessarily accident, but can be, and according to Baker very frequently is, substance. It is part of the content. This is, of course, especially true with creative use of language, image, and sound, where the vehicle is carefully chosen to amplify, undermine, but in any case to do something to the content it is ostensibly separate from. As MIT’s Jerome Friedman put it at a meeting of the American Council of Learned Societies in 1999, “in art the manner of expression and content cannot be separated. In scientific creativity, these are separable. Only content is important scientifically; and although an insight into a law of nature can produce feelings and emotions, such as the joy of insight and a sense of awe, they are not part of the message.” [14, p. 11]

For this and other reasons, Baker has championed the integrity of the print artifact for humanities and social science scholarship and drawn attention to the potentially ruinous consequences of what he calls “artifactual scarcity” in American libraries [15, p. 22]. For those of you unfamiliar with his line of argument—and his eloquence—in defense of the artifact, here is how Baker describes the importance of the physical form of the newspaper, a medium far more humble and expendable, of far less substance, one might think, than the printed book:

The size of newspapers [Baker writes] is indispensable to our experience of their content. The newspaper reader proceeds nonlinearly, not as he would holding a typical book, but circling around the opened double-page spread, perhaps clockwise, or counterclockwise, moving his whole head as well as his eyes, guided by island landmarks like photos and ads. Even the papers that have no pictures at all have a visual exorbitance, a horizon-usurping presence that microfilm’s image . . . subverts and trivializes. [15, pp. 24-25]

Baker is really picking up the standard that German cultural critic Walter Benjamin held high 70 years ago in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”: “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art,” Benjamin writes, “is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.” [16] The pricelessness of the non-electronic source in a world of surrogates derives from the many meanings that accrue to it in its materiality. And these are substantial qualities, not accidental ones, at least in the context of humanities research. Tracking down the *hic et nunc* of a text or of its often tangled parts may be more difficult today, but it is no less important than it ever was.

Yet another reason for the “format conservatism” of the humanities, why the humanities are more digitally resistant than the sciences, is that the monograph, the brochure, the medium as such, are not only a packaging and delivery formats, they can also be *intellectual* formats. A book contains—or can contain—a book-length idea. Even a collection of essays by different authors can bear the unifying signature and convey the unifying vision of a single editor. A private library can also represent one single very large idea. In this age of “swift intrusive consultation,” as Paul Saenger of Chicago’s Newberry Library has called it [17, p. 11], the subtlest, most profound, and most far-

reaching types of content can be lost if extended format types such as the monograph, the anthology, the “special issue” of a journal—not to mention the novel—are dissolved or otherwise violated, broken up, made interactively malleable.

I may have skimmed over too quickly and dismissively Nicholson Baker’s point earlier that suffering for our art, work on the text, *obsessing* over the text, are activities inherent to humanities scholarship in a way that they are not in the sciences. In fact, speed and ease of access have never been cardinal virtues in a humanities environment, for reasons comparable to the need for slow and painstaking execution of experiments in the laboratory of the sciences. Saenger again, in his brilliant 1997 work on reading in the classical and medieval worlds entitled *Space Between Words*, recounts the ancient roots of the humanistic virtue of making haste slowly, *festina lente*. “The ancient world,” he writes, “did not possess the desire, characteristic of the modern age, to make reading easier and swifter because the advantages that modern readers perceive as accruing from ease of reading were seldom viewed as advantages by the ancients. . . . We know that the reading habits of the ancient world . . . were focused on a limited and intensely scrutinized canon of literature.” [17, p. 11] In most humanities disciplines, there is still truth to this today. And although nothing about the electronic text forces a reader to read fast or superficially or to jump about from text to text, the lack of totemic fixity that characterizes text today and its far too easy extraction from the larger contexts which form its organic home contribute to a climate of distractedness, a climate of the toggle, if you will, that students and young scholars—and not only they—may find difficult not to succumb to.

This fluidity casts into starker relief the vastly enhanced importance in the new humanities library—while not disavowing all the manifold advantages of technology—of also preserving the artifact and a sense for the original, or at least an appreciation for the circumstances that brought about the text that we hold in our hands.

Is this, then, a Nicholson Baker-like appeal, in the digital age, for the retention of all paper and the accumulation of more? Decidedly not. Human beings have the remarkable capacity to synthesize information from disparate sources into a single mental whole. We do not need—and this is where Nicholson Baker is mistaken—to physically read all newspaper text in the format that a

contemporary would have read it to fully reconstruct the original experience. It's ironic, by the way, that handling the originals of historical newspapers, now brittle and crumbling and yellow with age, actually falsifies the original reading experience, since the original readers would have been looking at fresh, pliable newsprint and, unlike us today in our white gloves, would have had no compunction about throwing the paper away after a single cursory reading. If it's the authentic experience of the original that we want, then a cheap, clean, crumplable facsimile is better than the now decrepit original. It's like insisting that we can only experience the music of the 60s by watching the pathetically gyrating, now 60-year-old Mick Jagger perform as a shadow of his former self.

What then is our obligation as humanities librarians? We need to have adequate holdings to convey what historical newspapers look like and how the size and the strange composition of the newspaper page, as Baker so eloquently describes, structures the reader's reception of the information it contains. Ditto cuneiform tablets, medieval manuscripts, Books of Hours, and Victorian double and triple-deckers. I recall reading the comments of a British medievalist once, that no one in his profession should practice or research without having seen close-up at least once the manuscript of *Beowulf* housed in the British Library, but (he continues) this does not mean that the manuscript itself must be constantly at hand thereafter. So libraries need to retain rich collections of artifacts in all media and from all different ages of culture to allow students and scholars the opportunity to consider knowledgeably the influence of the medium on the meaning of texts—even those in electronic form—they actually work with.

What I have said so far presumes that we keep representative artifacts on hand of materials that are already digitized and are therefore available ubiquitously. And yet we are still very far away from the level of coverage that we are now creating with, say, Early English Books Online, for which we have both page images and expertly prepared electronic text accessible via the Web—for a steep price, I might add (an issue to which we will have to return in a few moments). Humanities collection building in the future must also involve the identification, protection, and digital presentation, for a broader public, of unique content. For this reason, as Michael Knoche of the Herzogin Anna Amalia Library in Wolfenbüttel put it in an article last year for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, “as surprising as this may seem in the futuristic scenario of a digital world, the future of

the old libraries is more promising than that of other libraries. They supply the originals that research needs and at the same time provide the basis for electronic duplicates. They preserve cultural monuments and play the role of content provider.” [18] Even libraries with far poorer collections than Wolfenbüttel—and that would mean the collections watched over by most everyone in this room, apart perhaps from our hosts and visitors from Göttingen, Heidelberg, Harvard, and Yale—have unique and near-unique content. We are charged with the preservation of the originals—actually usually the oldest extant or otherwise rare copies—of this unique content. We can be grateful to online utilities such as OCLC and RLIN that allow us to have a sense for this uniqueness, guiding us as we channel our limited preservation resources and make our decisions on behalf of homegrown or consortial digital projects.

So let us stop and recapitulate for a moment. On the one hand, the Internet and the revolution of computer technology have breathtakingly realized the promise of the copy, that remarkable human invention that dates to the origins of scribal culture, but also transcended it, for today copies exist without there being an original: these are Baudrillard’s simulacra. Today, information and ideas become available simultaneously in two or hundreds or, now, infinitely many mutually distant places. Both time and space have been conquered by the perfection of this technology—and by the library as the aggregation point of thousands and millions of original-less copies. Computer technology is now completing a complementary heuristic revolution: we can increasingly locate what we need based on a minimum of locating information—this is the principle of Google, the user-centric searching tool gradually also finding acceptance in a library environment. These two technological revolutions conjoined mean both that everything is at hand and that we can find everything we can describe. Google *can* locate the needle in the haystack, provided we input either the words “needle” conjoined with “haystack,” or at the very least the anded words “metal” and “sharp.” Google is the ultimate application of Martin Schrettinger’s belief that catalog conquers glut. And so we can have it all, both the universe—the glut—and pinpointed document retrieval.

What are the practical consequences of what I have described so far for collection development in the humanities? Returning back to the question that has been posed, unserer Ausgangsfrage: *Is digital different?* Our selection principles—are they indeed gone with the wind?

I have three answers to these questions—and then, to close, perhaps a fourth:

1.) Our Archival Duty

What about the library's obligation to keep what it has for future generations? In the case of almost all scientific information out there, this obligation no longer devolves upon individual institutions. It is based on a now disappearing library landscape in which individual libraries once had to be prepared to sustain themselves. Although this can still be done today, probably at great cost, we are increasingly realizing that we will all sink or swim together. At the same time, as Michael Knoche has argued, our archival duty vis-à-vis the rare or unique artifact is greater than ever, because of the much greater potential for distribution that resides in every rare or unique artifact today and its consequent far greater value. So yes, digital is different. Digital changes everything, and changes it in surprising ways.

2.) Autarky

This is actually a Greek word that German has retained, but it is rarely used in English. It means self-sufficiency. The presumed good of autarky informs profoundly many of our selection principles even today. Many of our selection principles are still based on the insular or autarkic library scenario. But today—and for many years already—the total bibliographic transparency that we enjoy to the collections of our neighbors has made it far less important to anticipate every user need on our own library shelves, real or virtual. It makes less of a difference today, at least beyond that core collection of books that we must have on hand, what we have on our shelves and what we lack. Item-by-item selection is, for most purposes, a waste of valuable time. We can almost always get what we need quickly from somewhere else. This means that we can outsource selection increasingly to approval plan vendors, or rely on expert selection at specially identified institutions, such as in Germany the so-called *Sondersammelgebietsbibliotheken* supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. Digital improves bibliographic access in addition to document delivery.

3.) Freedom of Access

The principal downside of the digital turn is that there is a huge price tag for ubiquity—which is to say: ubiquity is yours if you can afford it. Most libraries represented here will likely be among the “haves” in the new information economy, but at least in the United States, the number of have-not institutions is growing. At Northwestern, we recently interviewed for a new literature bibliographer, and two of our most promising candidates came from large state universities who did not have Early English Books Online and definitely could not afford membership in the Text Creation Partnership, led by the universities of Michigan and Oxford, which is creating expertly tagged text accessible only to members, each of whom has had to ante up \$30,000 or more for the privilege of membership. And with EEBO and many other huge packages, access is either to all or to nothing. And so while with print media, interlibrary loan is working miracles of democratization, in the digital medium, a highly stratified culture of information rich and information poor may be in our future. Rumor has it that in the case of the latest huge digital project, Gale’s Eighteenth Century Online, three-and-a-half times larger than EEBO, the vendor may recoup his entire investment by selling to less than ten customers, leaving almost all other institutions, even relatively prosperous ones such as mine, to eat their digital dust. Is digital different? Yes, I’m afraid it is, in this case scarily so.

Yet by and large, there are so many advantages that accrue to humanists through the digital turn that it would be unfair of me to end on a pessimistic, Bakeresque note. We should honor the artifact, recognize and exploit its potential, and share the rare artifact with others through digital library projects. At the same time, we should devote our resources to acquiring digital surrogates and electronic text, making sure that we also provide access to this digital text at the item level wherever possible via the OPAC or some other unifying federated search tool such as ENCompass or ExLibris. And finally, we should band together in confronting digital publishers to maintain broadly based and affordable access to the patrimony of our civilization.

As we develop ever better search interfaces, ever better “front doors” to our collections, we can take pride in turning our humanities scholars loose on a library that twenty years ago they could have only imagined in their dreams, like the glorious heavenly library in the movie *What Dreams*

May Come [19].² Indeed, library home pages and digital library sites have more and more exciting properties in common with the glorious Baroque wall-system libraries of 17th and 18th century Europe, the ones that the secularizations described at the beginning of this paper largely brought to an end 200 years ago. Like their Baroque antecedents, contemporary library websites exploit the moment of entrance and the experience of the threshold to create and sustain the illusion of a “three-dimensional world enclosed by a frame” [20, p. 95]. This other world is crafted to be an aesthetically inviting representation of the vast, complex—and otherwise potentially intimidating—abstraction which is library space. But better than Baroque libraries, which were static simulations, computer-mediated interactivity allows the modern electronic library to “morph” based on user input, opening the door to new methods for matching user needs with library resources. The new visual culture of the electronic library combines the universal, panoptical view afforded by the Baroque library with synoptic views upon library collections derived from real-time user-computer interaction. [Cf. 21] So a fourth answer to the question regarding the impact of the digital medium on our selection principles is this:

4.) Remember the Baroque Library!

The old panopticism of the Baroque wall-system library and the synopticism of the modern computer screen have two important qualities in common. First, they both, ideally, show everything. In the former case, the “everything” is everything there is; in the latter, everything there is in response to a user query. The second similarity actually flows logically from the first, namely that what the user does not see is presumed not to belong there. This is why in the new culture of visibility it is so important to represent all of a library’s holdings in a way that is integrated into the synoptic displays of computer screens. Users have become accustomed to WYSIWYG—What You See Is What You Get—but they now also believe in WYDSDE (“wids-dee”): What You Don’t See Doesn’t Exist. This is not sloppiness on the part of the user; it is instead the natural corollary of the aesthetic experience of the screen, which bundles the relevant in the field of view and fences out the extraneous. Library patrons today are doing nothing other than drawing the conclusions that

² For a brief segment from this movie showing the library, open the following URL using QuickTime Player, version 6: <http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/garrett/kloster/whatdreamfirst.mov>.

librarians wish them to, conclusions that can, however, have negative side-effects, among them the neglect of collections accessible only through print bibliographies and finding aids or at mentally distant websites. So, collection managers in the humanities and probably in all disciplines need to make sure that the purchase of expensive digital resources is accompanied by the acquisition of bibliographic records that are integrated into our OPACs or other standard federated search tools. If this process is successful, then our users will not get lost in the new library we are creating, they will not experience the new library as intimidating, but rather it will be revealed to them as a glorious “aggregation of ideas,” a place of “wonderful treasures”—and how can this not be a good thing?

One final historical note before closing. In the night of March 9, 1943, an incendiary bomb fell through the glass ceiling of the reading room of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, incinerating 500,000 volumes, among those the largest Bible collection in the world [22, p. 175]. The collections that survived had been distributed in many cases back to the monasteries for safekeeping, recreating, if but for a second in time, the decentralized system that had antedated the secularizations. So history holds for us this warning against putting all our eggs in one technological basket.

I appreciate very much the invitation to speak to you today. Many thanks for your attention.

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