

At base level, mimicry relies on reiteration: prior repetition has been established in such a way that elaboration or exaggerated expression serve as a placeholder for an intended idea. The particulars of that which is mimed sublimate into a new body of understanding, which can evolve into an exclusive language in its own right. When the interplay becomes complex enough, involving higher and higher levels of reference, the sign and the signified are freed to trade places—here, one can easily confuse one for the other, and the definitions of transmission and transmutation of the cultural imagination blur. While on the one hand, the dynamics of mimicry afford niches the opportunity to develop specialized interests; on the other hand, the inescapable ambiguity present in human life is further realized. Thus, one faces the obligation of having to accept the responsibility of acting (and interpreting actions) in specific ways for specific reasons, and all the while confront the fact that every action one intends is dependent on the meaning that others give it.

Perhaps mimicry works in two directions. It infinitely expands the possibilities of what can be understood as a unique iteration (in this case works of art) in its own right. But mimicry also severely limits the gate through which the work can be produced and confronted. That is, authorship only matters in a present iteration—the prior generations serve only as the workspace, or necessary conditions, that inform the present. The historical message continues to communicate but it is translated anew through the tradition of repetition. In a sense mimicry is necessarily self-referential and self-destructive it is both its own conqueror and victim. The conqueror: because it becomes, for the moment, the telling of an idea. The victim: because as the telling is communicated, its very existence indicates its subdominant role alongside all previous tellings with regards to the future. This recursive nature suggests that an exhaustive investigation of the origins and ends of an idea is misguided, since the materials—language, experience, repetition, and meaning—are both mutable, and fractal.

So when is a mime's job “complete”? Is there such a status? Or, is the meaning of a placeholder always pending? Answers to such questions must involve reflection on the fact that the completion-status of mimicry and repetition is both context, and time dependent. Grasping the embedded meaning—indeed, the history of meaning—of an action involves an improvisational spiral, wherein it becomes difficult to decipher what counts as repetition and what counts as difference. The difference that makes a difference is the mechanism for understanding; interpretation is the dance between mimicry and improvisation. There is no center when reading a work of art: “knowing” is a barrier to both learning and communication.

- Scott Cowan, 2014