Eighteenth-Century Encyclopedism and the Making and Taking of Knowledge: A Web of Borrowed Texts and Images

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This paper is concerned with the practice of making and taking knowledge within the eighteenth-century lexicographic and encyclopedic genre. I will reflect upon the overall strengths in approaching encyclopedism from the concept of practice and discuss how an unrealized dictionary project in mid-eighteenth century Paris can provide new perspectives on the perceived novelties (i.e. the changes in practices) of the Encyclopédie of Diderot and d’Alembert. The last part will be discussed more in detail in the oral presentation, while the written paper forms more of a background.

The Concept of Practice: New Perspectives on Eighteenth-Century Encyclopedism

One of the strengths of the concept of practice is the shift in focus from object to production; from intellectual content to the making of knowledge and texts. The concept of practice thereby provides new opportunities to contextualize the works of ‘intellectual heroes’, such as the French encyclopédistes.

The status of the Encyclopédie as the most important medium of Enlightenment thought has for a long time influenced how modern researchers have used and studied this multivolume reference-work. Since the editors and main contributors were known as philosophes, the Encyclopédie has more often been considered as an innovative philosophical work than as part of a contemporary lexicographic genre. For instance, it is not unusual to find expressions such as that Diderot and d’Alembert ‘chose’ to arrange the contents in alphabetical order¹—even though the work started as a translation of an already existing dictionary: Ephraim Chambers’s Cyclopaedia, or an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences (1728). Likewise, individual articles of the Encyclopédie have often been studied as expressing the personal opinions, philosophical positions, or experiences of the specialized contributors, despite the fact that the literary historian Jacques Proust early remarked that

all the articles of the Encyclopédie, even the most ‘original’ ones, are partly based on borrowed material. Sometimes they consist of nothing more than long citations placed after each other, with or without reference to a source.”

In the last two decades, scholars studying encyclopedic manufacture have concretized the initial observations of Proust.² For instance, the literary historian Tatsuo Hemmi has shown

that Diderot’s supplement to the article ÂME (Soul) – often considered to be one of the earliest expressions of the philosophe’s materialistic thinking – actually consists of borrowed texts from five different works. Some sections have been transcribed word-for-word, others slightly modified or more freely summarized after the originals. The transition from the voices of others to Diderot’s own is normally made without distinction, and the references are not only incomplete but also partly erroneous.⁴

Reproducing and Modifying Knowledge: The Dictionaries of Arts and Sciences

Imitating the texts of famous authors was a fundamental part of Western classic scholarship. As originality became increasingly estimated from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries onwards, accusations of plagiarism gradually increased. Nevertheless, within the domain of sciences and arts, the practice of textual imitation remained common. The authors did not own their words (the texts belonged to the booksellers who obtained the printing licenses) and they were commonly only recognized for their ideas or discoveries.⁵

From the end of the seventeenth century onwards, the universal dictionaries of arts and sciences emerged as a particular lexicographic and semi-encyclopedic genre on the European book market. In contrast to linguistic dictionaries devoted to the common words, the dictionaries of arts and sciences focused on the terminology applied within a wide range of fields of knowledge. They also aspired to provide information about the arts and sciences themselves, and not only to define their words.⁶ These works were thus intended to function as a bridge between the world of the savants and the literate audience. The compilers aspired to summarize and popularize the best knowledge up to date, which entailed keeping up with – and evaluating – new and old discoveries and publications.⁷

The article PLAGIAIRE in the Encyclopédie – illustratively enough copied word-for-word from PLAGIARY in Chambers’s Cyclopaedia⁸ – stated that borrowing texts from others was in the nature of a good dictionary, since its whole raison d’être was to communicate the best of knowledge to a wider audience. The literary scholar Julia C. Hayes has argued that these attitudes towards plagiarism are crucial in understanding the intellectual tradition in which

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Diderot and d’Alembert were working. The proceedings of the *encyclopédistes* must be seen as part of a larger early-modern culture of taking and making, reproducing and modifying, knowledge and text.

Close to every lexicographic work started as a translation or revised edition of an already existing dictionary, which caused endless accusations of plagiarism. Antoine Furetière, the author of the first *Dictionnaire universel* (1690), was early accused of stealing material from the great linguistic dictionary of the French Academy. In 1701, the Huguenot journalist Henri Basnage de Beauval published a revised and augmented edition of Furetière’s dictionary, from which he omitted all remarks regarding the supremacy of the Catholic Church. This immediately enraged the Parisian Jesuits who in 1704 published a Catholic version of Basnage de Beauval’s ‘Protestant’ edition of Furetière’s *Dictionnaire universel*, but presented it as an independent work. This dictionary, popularly known as the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux*, later became an important source for Ephraim Chambers when he compiled the *Cyclopaedia*, which decades later would turn into the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d’Alembert.

The interrelationship of the universal dictionaries implied a reproduction and continuous modification of a certain nomenclature and set of definitions. Many of these definitions also reappeared in the contemporary specialized dictionaries, using the larger universal dictionaries as sources. Together they formed a complex web of borrowed text. The compilers were not only influenced by the ideas expressed in other monographs and dictionaries – they reproduced parts of their contents word-for-word. In this respect, studying intertextuality in eighteenth-century dictionaries does not come down to simply tracing intellectual influences, but also textual origins. The same principle applies to illustrations. Eighteenth-century engravers were trained in imitating the drawings and plates of others, and it was not uncommon that images were reproduced repeatedly over a century or more.

Due to the web of borrowed texts and illustrations, distinguishing the novelty of an eighteenth-century dictionary fundamentally comes down to studying the choices of the compilers: their decisions to include and exclude certain terms, definitions, and fields of knowledge, but also to use certain texts instead of others, or to reproduce or modify certain sentences while leaving others out. With these choices, the *taking* becomes a *making* of something new.

**The Novelties of the ‘Encyclopédie’ Reconsidered: The Maurists’ Unrealized Dictionary**

Compared to the French predecessors, the novelties of the *Encyclopédie* have been considered to be:

1. its use of updated information (the choice of sources)
2. its use of illustrations (modified in an abstract and rational manner in order to draw attention to the functions of technology)

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9 Hayes, p. 129.
10 Leca-Tsiomis, pp. 17–141.
12 Broberg, p. 48.
When it comes to the reproduction and modification of texts and illustrations, the first three categories are of particular interest.

In my dissertation The Forgotten Encyclopedia (2014) I have studied an unrealized encyclopedic project in mid-eighteenth-century Paris, executed concurrently with the Encyclopédie of Diderot and d’Alembert. The compilers were Benedictine monks, also known as the Maurists (as members of the Benedictine Congregation of Saint-Maur).16

The Maurist project and the Encyclopédie both started as augmented translations of foreign illustrated dictionaries that emphasized the physico-mathematical sciences, but each eventually became independent, new works. While the Encyclopédie started as a translation of Chambers’s Cyclopaedia, the Maurist project began as an augmented translation of Christian Wolff’s lexicon of mathematics and the related arts (1734). The monks initiated the preparatory work sometime after 1743 and Diderot and d’Alembert became involved with the Encyclopédie in 1746. The first volume of the Encyclopédie appeared in 1751 and the Maurists abandoned their work three or four years later, in 1754 or 1755 – without publishing anything. At this point, the first four volumes of the Encyclopédie (covering A to D) were available on the book market. This means that the Maurists compiled the majority of their articles before the encyclopédistes published the majority of theirs. Besides, there are no signs that the monks copied any articles (on A to D) from the Encyclopédie. In other words: the two projects took forms simultaneously and independently.

In my study I have devoted particular attention to the Maurists’ choices of sources and modifications of texts and images compared to the Encyclopédie and the preceding French universal dictionaries. A central conclusion is that the Maurists to a large extent relied on the same (or similar) textual and pictorial sources as the encyclopédistes.

For instance, the majority of the Maurists’ articles on military arts were based on the works of Guillaume Le Blond – the main writer on military arts for the Encyclopédie. Interestingly enough, Le Blond largely plagiarized his earlier publications – and so did the Maurists.17

Like the encyclopédistes, the monks would also devote particular attention to the mechanical arts and crafts, which had been treated sparingly in the previous French dictionaries. In this category the Maurists and the encyclopédistes also largely relied on the same type of earlier publications.18 For instance, in AIGUILLER (Needle-Maker), the Maurists...

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15 Leca-Tsiomis, p. 152.
17 Holmberg, pp. 226–228.
18 Holmberg, pp. 198–205.
and the Encyclopédie copied the same article from the Dictionnaire universelle de commerce (1723) by Jacques Savary – each without acknowledging the original source.\textsuperscript{19}

Just like the Encyclopédie, the Maurists also intended to include a large number of illustrations, drawn from a wide range of earlier publications. In some cases, they even plagiarized exactly the same illustrations as the encyclopédistes, such as the musical instruments in the Harmonie Universelle (1638) of Marin Mersenne.\textsuperscript{20} Like the encyclopédistes, the Maurists would also modify the muddled imageries seen in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century works, such as Agricola’s De re metallica, to more abstract and rationalized depictions of technology.\textsuperscript{21}

The Maurists envisioned a dictionary with traits similar to the Encyclopédie before the latter had been realized. Indeed, the Encyclopédie would surpass the Maurists’ efforts in every way, but the manuscripts show that the monks and the philosophes were moving in the same direction, with the same distinct appreciation for the productive and useful activities of society. In this respect, the Maurist enterprise offers a new type of context for understanding the Encyclopédie, because it shows that some of the latter’s novelties were ‘in the air’ rather than being the innovations of the philosophes. Above all, as a contemporary and parallel project, the Maurist manuscripts help exposing the web of borrowed texts and images – the taking and making of knowledge – in the Encyclopédie, in a new and clear way.

\textsuperscript{19} Holmberg, pp. 222–223.
\textsuperscript{20} Holmberg, p. 206.
\textsuperscript{21} Holmberg, p. 188–190.