

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.²

In the last two decades, scholars studying *encyclopedic manufacture* have concretized the initial observations of Proust.³ For instance, the literary historian Tatsuo Hemmi has shown

¹ Aude Doody, *Pliny’s Encyclopaedia: The Reception of the ‘Natural History’* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 75.

² Jacques Proust, ‘Questions sur l’*Encyclopédie*’, in *Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France*, 72 (1972), 36–52 (p. 40): ‘Tous les articles de l’*Encyclopédie*, même les plus ‘originaux’, sont faits de matériaux en partie empruntés. Ce ne sont même parfois que de longues citations mises bout à bout, avec ou sans indication de source’.

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 *Cyclopaedia*⁸ – 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

³ At the seminar series 'La manufacture encyclopédique' at the Université Pierre-et-Marie-Curie (UPMC), Paris, scholars have discussed these questions since the autumn of 2011. Similar subjects have been treated by the researchers involved in the ARTFL project (University of Chicago), and the Atelier Panckoucke (Université Paris-Sorbonne, Paris). See Marie Leca-Tsiomis, *Écrire l'Encyclopédie: Diderot, de l'usage des dictionnaires à la grammaire philosophique*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2007); Martine Groult, 'Comment commencer une construction? Exemple avec Chambers et Panckoucke dans leur rapport à l'Encyclopédie', in *Les encyclopédies: construction et circulation du savoir de l'Antiquité à Wikipedia*, ed. by Martine Groult (Paris: Harmattan, 2011), pp. 139–152; Timothy Allen and others, 'Plundering Philosophers: Identifying Sources of the Encyclopédie', *Journal of the Association for History and Computing*, 13:1 (2010).

⁴ Tatsuo Hemmi, 'Les références implicites dans le supplément éditorial de l'article AME de Diderot', *Recueil d'études sur l'Encyclopédie et les Lumières*, 1 (Mars 2012), 41–61 (pp. 42–43).

⁵ Julie C. Hayes, 'Plagiarism and Legitimation in Eighteenth-Century France', in *The Eighteenth-Century*, 34:2 (1993), pp. 115–131.

⁶ Bernard Quemada, *Les dictionnaires du français moderne 1539–1863: étude sur leur histoire, leurs types et leurs méthodes* (Paris: Didier, 1967), pp. 20–22, 75–78, 157–166, 172–173; Richard Yeo, *Encyclopaedic Visions: Scientific Dictionaries and Enlightenment Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 12–22; Richard Yeo, 'Classifying the Sciences', in *The Cambridge History of Science: Eighteenth-Century Sciences*, ed. by Roy Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 241–266 (p. 252).

⁷ Groult, p. 139; Gunnar Broberg, 'The Broken Circle', in *The Quantifying Spirit in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Tore Frängsmyr, J. L. Heilbron and Robert E. Rider (Oxford: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 45–71 (p. 50).

⁸ Lael Ely Bradshaw, 'Ephraim Chambers' *Cyclopaedia*', in *Notable Encyclopedias of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: Nine Predecessors of the Encyclopédie*, ed. by Frank A. Kafker (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1981), pp. 123–139 (p. 136).

Diderot and d’Alembert were working.⁹ 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.¹⁰

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.¹¹

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)¹²
- 2) its use of illustrations (modified in an abstract and rational manner in order to draw attention to the functions of technology)¹³

⁹ Hayes, p. 129.

¹⁰ Leca-Tsiomis, pp. 17–141.

¹¹ Anthony Griffiths, *Prints and Printmaking: An Introduction to the History and Techniques*, rev. edn (London: The British Museum Press, 2010), pp. 51–52.

¹² Broberg, p. 48.

¹³ Charles Kostelnick, ‘Visualizing Technology and Practical Knowledge in the *Encyclopédie*’s Plates: Rhetoric, Drawing Conventions, and Enlightenment Values’, *History and Technology: An International Journal*, 28:4 (2012), 443–454 (p. 446); William H. Sewell, ‘Visions of Labor: Illustrations of the Mechanical Arts before, in, and after Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*’, in

- 3) its descriptions of the mechanical arts and crafts¹⁴
- 4) The creation of an order of things besides the alphabetical order of words.¹⁵
- 5) The critical and philosophical approach to knowledge

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 form 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 AIGILLER (Needle-Maker), the Maurists

Work in France: Representations, Meaning, Organization, and Practice, ed. by. Stephen Laurence Kaplan and Cynthia J. Koepp (London: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 268–276.

¹⁴ Cynthia J. Koepp, ‘Making Money: Artisans and Entrepreneurs in Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*’, in *Using the ‘Encyclopédie’: Ways of Knowing, Ways of Reading*, ed. by Daniel Brewer and Julie C. Hayes (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2002), pp. 119–141 (p. 119); Robert Darnton, ‘The Philosophers Trim the Tree of Knowledge: The Epistemological Strategy of the *Encyclopédie*’, in R. Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), pp. 191–213 (p. 198).

¹⁵ Leca-Tsiomis, p. 152.

¹⁶ Linn Holmberg, *The Forgotten Encyclopedia: The Maurists’ Dictionary of Arts, Crafts, and Sciences, the Unrealized Rival of the Encyclopédie of Diderot and d’Alembert* (Umeå: Umeå University, 2014).

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.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.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.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.

¹⁹ Holmberg, pp. 222–223.

²⁰ Holmberg, p. 206.

²¹ Holmberg, p. 188–190.