

# CITATION, TRIBUTE, REMAKE, PLAGIARISM OVERLAPS AND BORDERS IN MOVIES

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## ESSAY 70/04

CINEMA

CITATION

TRIBUTE

REMAKE

PLAGIARISM

*Mimesis* is the basic principle of all arts. Visual arts, in particular, alternate between imitation of reality and attempt to represent in a symbolic or allusive way. In both cases, the theme of mimesis remains central, and the concepts of inspiration, model, copy, and plagiarism evolve in parallel with the history of art. In cinematography, the theme of imitation is one of the most debated. The chances of copy are innumerable in movies industry, both in sincere admiration of a young author for the works of a great master and in desire to exploit commercially an

intuition of others; but we must also admit that the nuances between inspiration and plunder are numerous. This essay analyses overlaps and boundaries between four variations on the theme of copying in the cinematography: citation, tribute, remake, plagiarism. These four key concepts are analysed by relating them and at the same time trying to highlight differences and common elements. The analysis is carried out from a conceptual point of view and through the comparison of films in which the theme of imitation is particularly evident.

## INTRODUCTION

The method used for the analysis and comparison between the mentioned films is based exclusively on the visual elements of the shots that will subsequently be edited, thus neglecting the information relating to *diegesis*, the psychology of the characters, dialogues, sound effects, etc.

We have divided all the visual qualities into three categories, referring both to single frames and to frame sequences (movie shooting portions):

- staging, relative to the elements that characterize the physical space subject of the shot (for ex. lights, furnishings, costumes, landscapes, etc.): 12 visual qualities;
- shooting, including the choices related to the capture of the images (for ex. type of film used, depth of field, shot, movements of the camera, changes of optics, etc.): 28 visual qualities;
- editing, referred to the operations performed in post-production (for ex. fades, cut-in and cut-away, overlay, reverse shot, etc.): 17 visual qualities.

The overall visual qualities identified are therefore 57. For each shot we checked for the presence of elements corresponding to each of the 57 visual qualities. For each significant shot we have drawn up an analysis sheet that allows you to critically compare scenes belonging to different films and, therefore, compare the way in which the director interprets (or re-interprets) the narration.

## IMITATION IN CINEMATOGRAPHY: VISUAL AND NARRATIVE ARTS

*Mimesis* is the underlying principle of every artistic expression. Art is always imitation, regardless of the technique used, the language of communication, the means of transmission and the context. Even in the most abstract, intangible, and experimental forms, an artwork always refers

to an 'elsewhere' of which it constitutes the 'copy'. As early as the fourth century BC, Aristotle points out the fact that each poetic genre is based on imitation and differs from other genres in relation to the 'means' used, the 'object' of imitation and the 'way' in which imitation is carried out (Aristotele, 1999, p. 5). Considering these three variables, mimesis can be defined as "a relationship that establishes a correspondence between different and non-homogeneous classes of elements" (Ugo 1994, p. 17). This correspondence can be achieved in two ways: by simply reproducing the external appearance in a mechanistic way or, more appropriately, by making sure that the similarity is evoked through a process of critical, imaginative, poetic elaboration. In both cases, the problem of mimesis remains central.

The history of cinema is short but very intense: the theme of imitation is crucial for it. Each film has a mimetic relationship not only with reality (phenomenological or imagined), but also with all the other films that preceded it, as well as with other forms of art. As Abel Gance asserts, in the future "Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven will make films" (Gance, 1927, p. 94). We will not deal here with the concept of intermediality, or rather the relationship of cinema with other media; from the very beginning, cinematography has drawn from other forms of expression (first narrative), so the enterprise would be endless. We will try to focus on the theme of imitation within the cinema itself, which is already a very extensive issue. From the sincere admiration of a young director for a great master, to the pleasure of quoting (or citing oneself), from the thrill of engaging in a sequence that constitutes a milestone to the desire to commercially exploit the success of others, opportunities to repeat—more or not consciously—something already done are innumerable, as are the nuances between inspiration and plunder.

Early cinema immediately needed to refer to the figurative arts. It consists of an evolution of photography, which in turn derives from painting. And it is precisely from painting that many feature films of the early 20th century production draw clearly,

such as *La Vie et la Passion de Jésus-Christ* (Zecca & Nonguet, 1903) or *Christus* (Antamoro, 1916). It is an attempt to connect with the great figurative tradition of Western painting; cinema is also a figurative art, but still young and lacking in cultural authoritativeness. Cinema draws on other arts to affirm its legitimacy and to overcome that playful dimension that assimilates it to a 'funfair' attraction. The references and imitations made by the pioneers of cinema are not only visual. They also draw from the theatre (the stage terminologies are identical), and obviously from literature, systematically transposed into almost all the films of the first two decades of the twentieth century.

All references to existing figurations in early cinema cannot be systematized or referable to the four categories that represent the topics of this essay. The expressive language of the first films is still not structured, the excessive experimentation of the productions does not allow for a systematic comparison between different works.

We will see below how the theme of the 'copy' has four main variations in cinematography: citation, tribute, remake, plagiarism. For the sake of brevity, we will not deal with parody (Jameson, 1991, p. 65), which is a particular type of quotation based on the repetition of an existing fragment but in a totally different context and aims to create a comic contrast through one or more elements of incongruity. We will not examine the theme of allusive inspiration, which occurs every time an author is influenced by a previous work, without this involving a real imitation. We will not address the theme of the forgery, as it is an act deliberately declared by the director and therefore does not consist in an imitative action but in a more radical 'transplant' of a fragment *tout-court* into another work.

#### THE ACT OF COPYING IN CINEMATOGRAPHY: MAIN VARIATIONS

Let us start with the director's awareness. If the copy is made unconsciously by the author, who spontaneously draws

from his own references and from his masters, it is defined as allusive inspiration. If copying is a conscious choice and is made explicit, it can be configured as a citation, tribute, or remake. If the copy is aware but is presented in such a way that the viewer does not notice, it comes down to plagiarism.

The citation consists in fully recovering a structural, figurative, and narrative cell; its debt to the original is clearly recognizable. Often it is used in an ironic, irreverent, or transgressive way; in this case, as already mentioned, the more correct term is parody. Citation contains the concept of copy and states it explicitly. Since the 1980s, cinema has come closer and closer to postmodern language (Jameson, 1991, p. 56), rejecting the rigor and commitment of the previous two decades and re-proposing ideas and elements already seen, often stereotyped, freely drawing on a repertoire focused on *déjà-vu* and adapted to the changed sensibility of the public and to the new communication needs. It is the cinema that Hitchcock defines as “pieces of cake” (Truffaut, 2014, p. 84).

The citation is both the instrument and the characteristic note of the society of replacement: in an era where everything has already been said and seen, we just have to proceed with the combination of new figures, assembling fragments of sentences and sequences. (Grasso, 2010)

Post-modern cinema is a path between the citations. “It loves the pastiche form, weaving itself with continuous references and quotations, often ironic, to the cinema of the past and dialogues with all contemporary media and forms of communication, to which the public is increasingly accustomed.” (Rondolino & Tomasi, 2011, p. XIII). In pastiche (Jameson, 1991, p. 65; Hoesterey, 2001, p. 1, Dyer, 2006), the citation is therefore an explicit imitative process, based on the concept of copying, in which there are elements that differentiate it from the original: it is precisely these elements that give the citation its quality and expressive value.

Let us see some of the countless examples of citation in cinema. The famous *Battleship Potemkin* (Ejzenštejn, 1925) is probably the most cited film in the history of cinema, in par-



**Fig. 1** Sergej Michajlovič Ėjzenštejn, *Battleship Potemkin*, 1925.

**Fig. 2** Alfred Hitchcock, *Foreign Correspondent*, 1940 (left, centre); Francis Ford Coppola, *The Godfather*, 1972 (right).

ticular the shot of the Odessa staircase with the Cossacks advancing in line, the glasses of the fatally shot woman and the wheelchair that slips down the steps (Figure 1).

In *Foreign Correspondent* (Hitchcock, 1940) Albert Bassermann is hit in the face by a photographer and rolls down the steps, just like the woman in the original by Ejzenštejn. The same scene is re-proposed, in two different shots, in *The Godfather* (Coppola, 1972). Woody Allen turned it into a parody in *Bananas* (1971) and in *Love and Death* (1975) (Figure 2).

In Brian De Palma's *The Untouchables* (1987), the sequence at Chicago's Union Station clearly quotes the wheelchair scene, but re-proposing it in a different context: expanding time and space, lingering for a long time with the tension linked to the danger that threatens the newborn and the reckless attempt to save him by the gangster who, at the same time, brutally takes the life of his antagonists. This is probably the most effective quote from the original, but Bernardo Bertolucci in *Partner* (1968) had already used the wheelchair in a scene in which Pierre Clementi and one of his students in a theatre course, wearing a gas mask, throw a bomb inside, before it rolls down a long staircase at the EUR in Rome and finally flips. In *C'eravamo tanto amati* (Scola, 1974), the pram is

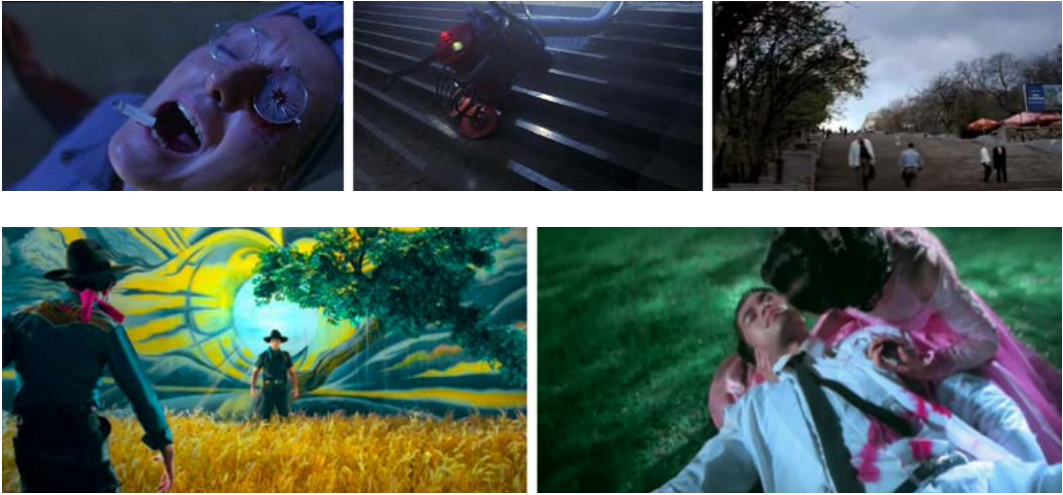
**Fig. 3** Brian De Palma, *The Untouchables*, 1987 (above); Bernardo Bertolucci, *Partner*, 1968 (in the middle); Ettore Scola, *C'eravamo tanto amati*, 1974 (below).



the pretext for a multiple quotation in which a frenetic Stefano Satta Flores reconstructs the sequence of Ejzenštejn's film to Stefania Sandrelli using a wooden cart that risks hitting the unsuspecting Nino Manfredi sitting on the steps of Trinità dei Monti in Rome (Figure 3).

In *Brazil* (1985), Terry Gilliam mentions both the blow to the face and the wheelchair scene (replacing it with a compressor); in Peter Segal's *Naked Gun 33 1/4* (1994) we have the parodistic citation of the citation, as the reference is precisely *The Untouchables*. In *Joshua* (Ratliff, 2007), the theme of the wheelchair and the staircase returns, with a level of psychological tension similar to that of De Palma's masterpiece, but in the context of the family psychological drama caused by a child with unusual behaviour. The real Odessa staircase as a





**Fig. 4** Terry Gilliam, *Brazil*, 1985 (left, centre); Liev Screiber, *Everything is illuminated*, 2005 (right).

**Fig. 5** Wisit Sartsantieng, *Tears of the Black Tiger*, 2001.

'cult' place also appears in many other films, including *Everything is illuminated* (Screiber, 2005) and *Star Wars – Revenge of the Sith* (Lucas, 2005) (Figure 4).

The *mimesis* relationship that links all the citations we referred to the original is purely visual and, even if decontextualized, remains evident. It is a narrative tool used in an episodic way; however, there are films built entirely on quotation, such as *Tears of the Black Tiger* (Sasanatieng, 2001). Conceived as a tribute-quotation from Hollywood westerns, but full of clichés and references to Southeast Asian culture, it achieved great success in the West precisely due to the exasperation of a quotation narrative that often crosses the border with trash (Figure 5).

The quote is a central element in all the works of Quentin Tarantino; he is considered the main representative of postmodern cinema. Its sources are innumerable and heterogeneous (exploitation, spaghetti-western, horror splatter and Italian detective stories, Japanese historical genre, oriental action cinema, classic noir, Nouvelle Vague, British cinema, New Hollywood), intertwined and superimposed in a mix of irreverent and surreal dialogues, time leaps, black humour, and violence (Figure 6).

The tribute consists in the recall of a visual imagery borrowed from an existing work. In this way, the author declares his gratitude and admiration, revealing the con-



**Fig. 6** Ringo Lam, *City on Fire*, 1987 (top left); Federico Fellini, *8 ½*, 1963 (top center); Hiroiyuki Nakano, *Samurai Fiction*, 1998 (top right). Quentin Tarantino, *Reservoir Dogs*, 1992 (bottom left), *Pulp Fiction*, 1994 (bottom centre), *Kill Bill*, 2003 (bottom right).

nections through a gradual and veiled similarity (referring to the viewer's imagination and memory). As in the case of the citation, it is necessary for the director to make the reference explicit, so that the viewer can recognise and appreciate it. Woody Allen, for example, often uses this form of gratitude towards his mentors. A well-known example of tribute is the opening sequence of *Stardust Memories* (Allen, 1980), an evident homage to the beginning of *8 ½* (Fellini, 1963) (Figure 7). What do the two scenes have in common? The crowded bus, the laboured breathing, and the spasmodic agitation in wanting to get out of the car / train of Mastroianni / Allen, the dazed and indifferent looks of the people who watch the scene, the touch of eroticism assured by Sandra Milo and by Sharon Stone (in her debut), but above all the dreamlike and estranging component that binds the two sequences. Obviously, there are expressive differences, indeed even inversions: the smoke is inside the machine in *8 ½*, outside in *Stardust Memories*; Sandra Milo's sensuality is decadent lascivious, Sharon Stone's is sparkling and joyful; the bus passengers watch the story in *8 ½*, they are completely indifferent in *Stardust Memories*.

In *Love and Death* (1975), Allen performs a tribute to Ingmar Bergman using a completely different logic, no longer based on the atmosphere and the presence of characterizing details, but on an unequivocal technical expedient. He repeats the same shot used by the Swedish director in *Persona* (1966), in which Liv Ullmann is in profile, Bibi Andersson in front and their faces overlap in a sort of graphic match. In the final se-



**Fig. 7** Federico Fellini, *8 ½*, 1963 (above); Woody Allen, *Stardust Memories*, 1980 (below).

quence of *Love and Death*, Allen uses the same shot with Jessica Harper in profile and Diane Keaton in front (Figure 8).

These two examples certainly do not exhaust the numerous variations of the tribute in the history of cinema, but they allow us to propose a definition: it consists in a clear reference to a work already performed, using the reproduction of a situation, an atmosphere, an element, a gesture, a technical expedient in shooting or editing. Unlike the citation, in the tribute the mimesis between the original and the copy is not formal but deeper: relies on analogy and is aimed at an audience that is able to understand the reference through a process of intuition, analysis and recognition. The concept of copy is obvious but is declined in a positive meaning, as the tribute recognizes the value of the original work and tends to evoke its aura (Dika, 2003, p. 10).

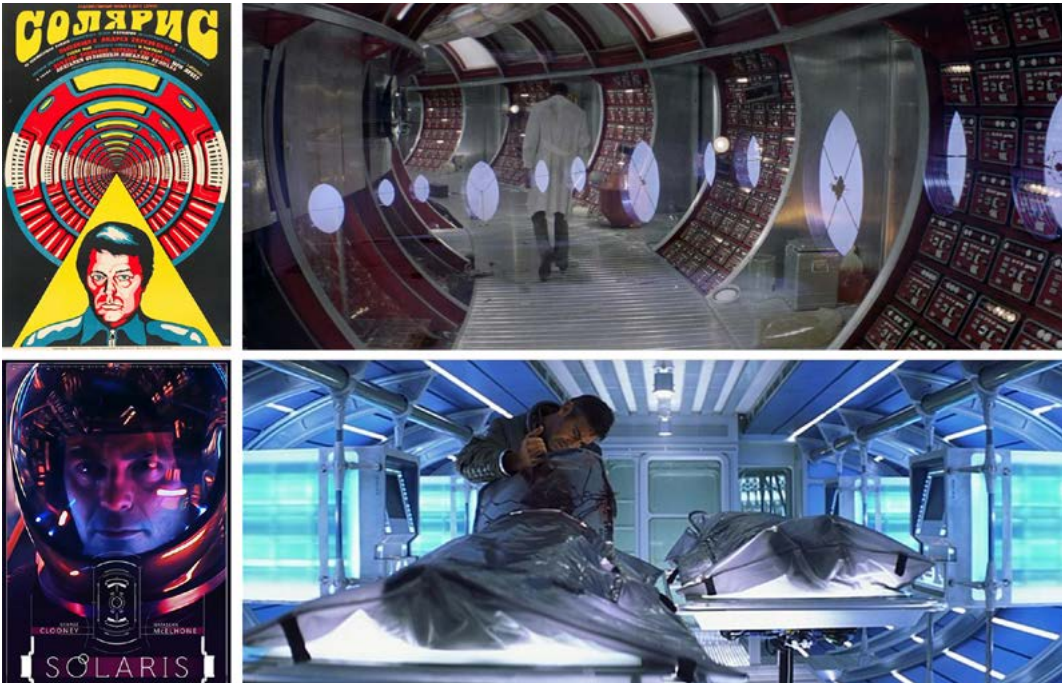
The remake (Mazdon, 2019) reproduces the entire narrative structure of an already existing film. Usually, a remake introduces significant changes in the plot, the characters, the setting or even the genre, focusing on new techniques, on popular actors, on updated dialogues, to obtain a new social setting and to use a language closer to the audience. In some cases, the remake develops the original idea further as a sequel. Or, as in *The Prisoner of Zenda* (Thorpe, 1952), a colour version of John Cromwell's 1932 film of the same name, the remake is carried out to exploit the expressive possibilities of the recently introduced films. There are



**Fig. 8** Ingmar Bergman, *Persona*, 1966 (left); Woody Allen, *Love and Death*, 1975 (right).

countless examples of remakes in the history of cinema, and many films rework novels or plays (in these cases it is more correct to use the term 'adaptation'). For example, *Solaris* (Soderbergh, 2002), is a remake of the homonymous film by Andrej Tarkovskij (1972), which in turn is an adaptation of the 1961 novel by Stanisław Lem. Soderbergh's *Solaris* was conceived as an adaptation of the novel rather than as a remake of Tarkovsky's film, even if numerous visual and narrative choices of the original movie are evidently re-proposed. Both films, in the opinion of Stanisław Lem, are very far from the idea that animated the novel; he recognizes a greater value in the Soviet version and an excessive trivialization in the American one. In fact, the 1972 film was based on the destabilizing force of nostalgia and the past, while that of 2002 relies on the uncanny force of a present characterized by hypertrophy of images (Figure 9).

By definition, a remake should stay as faithful to the prototype as possible. Sometimes the remake is made shot-for-shot. Such as *Psycho*, whose 1998 version by Gus Van Sant is a faithful reproduction of the 1960 original by Alfred Hitchcock. A comparison of the two films reveals that settings and camera angles, in most cases, are the same. In this instance, the remake consists of a real exercise in style, in which the shots and the same editing cuts of the original are reproduced as well as the dialogues and the entire plot. The differences concern some temporal shifts, the use



**Fig. 9** Andrej Tarkovskij, *Solaris*, 1972 (above); Steven Soderbergh, *Solaris*, 2002 (below).

of colour, the presence of more explicit sexual references, greater violence, and some 'hidden' frames within the key scenes of the two murders (Figure 10).

The remake explicitly declares its debt to the original and therefore remains distant from the negative meaning of copying; sometimes it keeps the same title. The issue of *mimesis* concerns aspects that go beyond the visual appearance; often the director tries to go beyond the existing version by improving its weaknesses, enhancing elements that are not sufficiently emphasized, or bringing out points of view in which he is particularly interested.

The word 'remake' is, however, anachronistic to the degree to which our awareness of the pre-existence of other versions, previous films of the novel as well as the novel itself, is now a constitutive and essential part of the film's structure: we are now, in other words, in 'intertextuality' as a deliberate, built-in feature of the aesthetic effect, and as the operator of a new connotation of 'pastness' and



**Fig. 10** Alfred Hitchcock, *Psycho*, 1960 (above); Gus Van Sant, *Psycho*, 1998 (below).

pseudo-historical depth, in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces 'real' history. (Jameson, 1991, p. 67)

Plagiarism consists in the misappropriation of someone else's idea. Plagiarism can be intentional, or the consequence of careless conduct. In cinematography it is very difficult to define its boundaries because contamination and inspiration from previous creations are the basic premise of any work. Plagiarism is unethical, but not always illegal. There are two main characteristics of plagiarism:

- the differences compared to the original work are limited to the details and are not the result of a creative contribution;
- the reproduction is camouflaged in such a way as not to make the original work recognizable.

The accusations and lawsuit of plagiarism in the cinema are very frequent (also considering the economic interests at stake), but they are difficult to resolve with a sentence certifying the infraction. Convictions for plagiarism in cinema are very rare, because each film is influenced by all the others and the reference to previous creations is the prerequisite for any work. One of the most famous cases of plagiarism charges is *A Fistful of Dollars* (Leone, 1964), which blatantly copies *Yojimbo's* situations, shots, and dialogues (Kurosawa, 1961). Leone has never denied that he has taken over the structure of *Yojimbo* and admitted to having read the entire script of Kurosawa's film to avoid using the same dialogues, also ad-



**Fig. 11** Akira Kurosawa, *Yojimbo*, 1961 (above); Sergio Leone, *A Fistful of Dollars*, 1964 (below).

vising his producer (Jolly Film) to pay Toho Film the royalties (about ten thousand dollars). But the Jolly did not pay: “no one had worried about the royalties because the film was not expected to be successful” (Mininni, 1995, p. 62). The Japanese master wrote a telegram with these words: “Mr. Leone. I just had the opportunity to see his film. It’s a great movie, but it’s my movie. Since Japan is a signatory to the Bern convention on international copyright, you must pay me. Akira Kurosawa” (Pescatore, 2006, p. 119). But the trial for plagiarism did not take place, and a compromise was reached: Kurosawa obtained the royalties of *A Fistful of Dollars* in the Far East plus fifteen percent of the total proceeds derived from the commercial exploitation of the film in the world (one and a half million dollars). Instead, there was the trial that saw Leone and the Jolly film in opposition, which went on for ten years and ended in a stalemate. From that day on, Leone produced his own films (Figure 11).

The plagiarism can also be limited to sequences. This is the case of one of the highlights of *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980), clearly taken from *The Phantom Carriage* (Sjöström, 1921) (Figure 12). Why in this case are we talking about plagiarism rather than quotation? Because the sequence essentially reproduces the original work, with minimal differences that are not the result of a creative contribution, but above all because the reference model is not an iconic film, universally known and present in the collective imagination. Tarantino too, as we have seen, draws heavily on the



**Fig. 12** Victor Sjöström, *The Phantom Carriage*, 1921 (above); Stanley Kubrick, *The Shining*, 1980 (below).

boundless archives of cinema, but his poetry is encyclopaedic and his style is openly based on quotations and on the imitative act; unlike Kubrick who, instead, he quotes extensively referring to painting, architecture, and photography. Tarantino probably would not mind being accused of theft. He, paraphrasing Picasso, claimed: “Great artist steal. They don’t do homages”.

#### DIFFERENCES, BORDERS, OVERLAPS

The variations of the concept of copying in cinema, which we tried to define in the previous paragraph, have uncertain boundaries and evident overlaps. In general, the originality of a work must be accepted when a creative principle of any kind can be found in it; there are often films with many elements in common, but none of them were made with the intention of stealing the idea from others. Western culture tends to identify the value of a creative product with absolute originality; however, re-proposing and revisiting, with or without variations, is a characteristic of the human nature, and imitative pro-



cesses have always been a prerogative of art. “Imitation is not necessarily recognition of subordination; it can be the area in which the reworking and creative remaking takes place” (Tinazzi, 1983, p. 68). Furthermore, an author can make a ‘copy’ or an alleged ‘plagiarism’ in perfect good faith, even ignoring the existence of the other similar work. In this case we speak of ‘accidental creative coincidence’, as both works are the result of independent and distinct creative processes. When the copy “is subtle and produced unconsciously by the author, it is normal artistic creation, in which echoes of the teachings of the masters return. When the author acts consciously, making the citation elusive, we speak of a trivial plagiarism” (Piemontese, 2003, p. 123). On the contrary, we speak of tribute when the teachings of the masters are consciously recalled in the psychological characterization, in the atmosphere, in the shooting and in editing techniques; compared to it, the citation appears more like an insertion within a narrative. Finally, the remake is often considered an effect of the creative crisis of contemporary cinema, but many remakes can have a much higher value than the older versions, as in the case of *True Grit* by Joel and Ethan Coen (2010). In cinematography, which is not a conceptual art, the result is more important than the idea; and even in cases of obvious remakes, the copy may have a higher value than the original.

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**Article available at**

DOI: 10.6092/issn.2724-2463/12662

**How to cite**

**as article**

Colistra, D. (2021). Citation, Tribute, Remake, Plagiarism. Overlaps and borders in movies. *img journal*, 4, 96-115.

**as contribution in book**

Colistra, D. (2021). Citation, Tribute, Remake, Plagiarism. Overlaps and borders in movies. In Ghizzoni, M. & Musiani, E. (Eds.), *img journal 04/2021 Copy / False / Fake* (pp. 96-115). Alghero, IT: Publica. ISBN 9788899586195



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