

Chapter 1

Definitions: Repetition, Sameness, Cognition and Learning

There is not a single original thought in the book that you are about to read. There, I said it, so it is out of the way. You must admit that you now feel a little bit less like reading it. Of course, it depends on what ‘original’ means for you. I am counting on you identifying originality with absolute newness, shot down from the heavens, directly from the muses. *That* originality you will not find here, for this book is about repetition and sameness, those suspect terms that awaken so much fear in our cultural life.¹ This was not always so, as Rita Felski wisely observes, ‘for most of human history, activities have gained value precisely because they repeat what has gone before’.² Repetition is the realm of ritual, tradition and imagined community, but it is of course also the realm of the static, the lazy, the conservative. ‘This disdain for repetition fuels existentialism’s critique of the unthinking routines of everyday life, its insistence on the importance of creating oneself anew at each moment’.³ And yet here I am, proposing that a repetitive lens can have some value when looking at contemporary media phenomena, that it can reveal unexpected connections.

Repetition is such an enormous topic that I am going to need this entire chapter to build some fences, so that we can agree on what is inside and what must remain outside. During my initial research for this book, it became clear that the problem was not going to be lack of sources, but rather the opposite. Even when focusing on contemporary media, there are many ways of explaining the role of repetition in processes of perception, cognition, enunciation, production, reception and even automation. All these activities can be scrutinised from different disciplines that do not always align epistemologically, and they have all developed concepts and theories that are not equivalent or even combinable.

¹Nor anywhere else, for that matter, as I will argue in Chapter 6, which discusses originality and creativity in relation to repetition.

²Felski (2000, p. 83).

³Ibid.

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Nevertheless, I have attempted a synthesis of the most relevant perspectives in relation to the media phenomena that this book examines. This chapter starts by looking at the definition of the two words in the book title: *repetition* and *sameness*, arguing for the need of distinguishing between them and trying to disentangle their many nuances. After that, a section on *perceiving repetition* will relate those everyday meanings to the philosophical underpinnings of the word. Following on from there, I will cover *deliberate repetition*, where the connection to learning and cognitive framing is introduced. The next section will consider the kind of units that can be repeated, and the final part of the chapter will answer the question: what does repetition do? There are examples from several domains, but this chapter is particularly focused on language and music.

Repetition and *sameness* are regular words that make sense in our everyday life and at the same time, specific concepts, theoretically loaded, used by philosophers and cultural critics alike. The mundane and the academic use are entangled in some revealing ways, which I will trace in this chapter to bring their many nuances to the forefront.

In the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the entry for *repetition* is divided into three main areas related to different domains: language, restitution (mostly financial) and actions. The second is not relevant for us here, but the other two cover quite a bit of useful ground. In the language domain, repetition has two different senses relating to speech: the first as ‘the action of repeating or saying over again something which one has already said’ and a rhetoric one: ‘the use of repeated words or phrases, the effect of this’. This distinction, between a ‘neutral’ repetition and a ‘charged’ one, will become significant later, although I am mostly interested in the second, both from a perspective of making/intentionality and of receiving. The two remaining linguistic senses are also performative: repetition in relation to narration, where it can simply mean to tell a story (an archaic use), and a fourth acceptance that involves the deliberate effort to fix something in memory, like when we practice recitation by saying the lines of a poem aloud over and over again.⁴

In the action domain, there are a lot of related senses of repetition: the ‘renewal or recurrence of an action or event; repeated use, application or appearance’, the musical repeating of passages, training exercises in sports, an aftertaste of food already swallowed (in belching or indigestion) and finally, ‘a copy or replica of an image; a reproduction of a painting’.

With the exception of indigestion, which is most definitely involuntary, all these nuances refer to deliberate action, where someone says or does *the same thing again* in order to obtain an effect like learning to play a song or making their biceps stronger. The repeated ‘thing’ can be very diverse in nature (a melody, a muscular motion, a painted motif. . .) and in scope. It can consist of very small units that can be repeated in a short time (a musical note) or elaborate ones that stretch for long periods in time, like the liturgic calendar that guides the content of Christian mass over a whole year. The repeated unit can be something easily perceived by the senses, like a word we hear or the shape of an object we touch; or

⁴Although as we will see later in the book, telling a story is often a retelling.

something abstract, like a literary trope. We will return to these distinctions in relation to contemporary media later, since the nature of the repeated units is relevant to distinguish between artistic modes and cultural genres.

For now, it is important to have established that in both the linguistic and the action domain, repetition is aimed at achieving a sought-after effect, and not just the automatic recourse of a bored mind. These definitions encompass the nuances of underlining the importance of something, of training and of making connections between elements, which are crucial when considering phenomena such as redundancy, citation or intertextuality.

The title of this book also contains the word *sameness*, which is closely related to repetition. So much so that one can wonder why I needed to showcase both. The answer is again in the dictionary. The OED offers this time two main meanings for 'sameness': 'The quality of being the same' and 'Absence of variety, uniformity, monotony'. While the first meaning is neutral and points to a complete identification (I am wearing the same dress as yesterday), the second refers to the most common understanding of same as rather similar but not identical and contains a seed of negative judgement in the choice of terms. Sameness is described in the negative, as the absence of something else (variety) which we must understand is obviously desirable, in contrast to the inferior quality of monotony. The OED's choice of example sentences reinforces this impression: 'We are in such a state of sameness that I shall begin to wonder at the change of seasons and talk of the spring as a strange accident' or 'I shall endeavour to enliven a little the sameness of my author'. In both cases, a change would be welcome. In everyday language, a sentence like 'same old same old' dwells on the negative characteristics of the situation (politics, a stressful job, a problematic marriage), something that does not change, but should. In the context of the arts, the criticism refers more to someone not making an effort and falling back on to the tried and tested, or cliché. A review concluding that a famous artist's new album sounds 'the same' as their previous one is rather demolishing news.

It is this pejorative use of the word that I am interested in here, as sameness points to a familiarity that is somehow excessive, self-indulgent. It is pertinent to note, however, that we do not really mean that the new album is *literally* the same album, that the artist tricked us into buying exactly the same thing twice. We rather mean that it has similar rhythms, use of choirs or themes. We expect artists to evolve and change, to strive for something new every time. In fact, this might be the most important difference in our expectations about so-called high art and mass produced culture (although I will problematise this later). For it is sameness that allows us to group objects into recognisable categories that we can use as cognitive frames and guides for consumption. Sameness points to meta-structures such as types, tropes or genres, where separate works share a series of traits that allow audiences to recognise them as related or even similar. An aspiration to sameness can thus fuel producers of cultural works, who might deliberately try to create something similar to something else, either because they admire it aesthetically, or just in order to share its commercial success. An example is the flood of fantasy novels following Tolkien's success with *Lord of the Rings*, a fecundity that ended up giving birth to an entire new genre. Fantasy is the true heir of fairy tales and has expanded from the written page to become mainstream

across all media platforms (television, film, games). Despite the enormous variety of stories and themes, all fantasy works engage in alternative world building to explore different realities than our own.

Sameness covers all kinds of resemblances, such as variation, adaptation, pastiche or parody, where the intention is to produce a work that is recognisable as related to a previous one in various ways, but which incorporates new elements, often critical or comical, as we will see. Importantly for our digital times, recommendation algorithms run on sameness, on suggesting something so close to a product that the user already has consumed that they are almost guaranteed to accept it. If you liked that, you will love this.

I admit that this division is somehow arbitrary, since both in everyday speech and most of the literature, repetition, similarity, sameness and redundancy are used nearly interchangeably. However, the two keywords of *repetition* and *sameness* allow me to put emphasis on slightly different things as I develop the argument in this book. Paying attention to repetition makes me aware of actions and behaviours, of why we choose to do something *again*, as producers, as designers, as audiences. It makes me wonder about effects, consequences and pleasure. Looking at sameness makes me aware of the nature of what is repeated: chunks, formats, abstract ideas, cognitive frameworks, a whole range of resemblances that are much more than literal, engaging ideas of quality, taste and the specific affordances of different media practices. Sameness makes sense in relation to production, consumption and algorithmic curation.

The distinction will allow me to appraise contemporary media phenomena where repetition and sameness unfold in very different ways. My intention is also to counteract the exclusive understanding of repetition as exact reproduction, which has been dominant in relation to digital media. There are two reasons for this. The first one is that the discussion continues to be stuck on the problematic dichotomy of the original versus the copy that is at the heart of our copyright laws. While few would dispute that it is a good idea to make sure that creators can get paid for their work by forbidding third parties to make copies of cultural products without authorisation, this same logic has less desirable consequences in relation to creativity. Cultural products are material goods, but they are also meaning machines, and as such can inspire creative processes where another creator builds upon, transforms or modifies the original. What comes out is not a total copy, but a derivative product that also creates its own symbolic value (Fig. 1). There have been many discussions, some in court, as to how to determine when a derivative work becomes a work in its own right, and I admit that the line can be difficult to draw in some cases.⁵ However, the entire legal system is built around the prohibition of repeating *anything*, including identifiable very short fragments, as some famous music lawsuits can attest. Derivative works are in this optic not just lazy or subpar, but they also become ethically tainted, forfeiting any chance to be considered art. Even similarity is suspect in this framework, which

⁵Li (2020).



Fig. 1. Remix of the Kierkegaard Portrait, Andy Warhol Style, by *Midjourney* and me.

goes nicely in hand with the romantic ideals of originality and the sublime being our measure for artistic value.

The second reason for a narrow understanding of repetition in relation to contemporary media is related to the cultural concepts that have been deployed to make sense of their newness, both in academia and the public discourse. Many a critic has turned to Walter Benjamin's famous text 'the Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', where the German author explains how photography (and film) essentially changed the cultural world by making it possible for the uneducated masses to access what before was only available to the elite.⁶ Art becomes democratic when cheap prints of the Mona Lisa can be sold by nearly nothing and owned by anyone. A consequence of this is what Benjamin describes as the loss of the aura of the traditionally valued artwork, whose 'unique existence at the place where it happens to be' provides a superior aesthetic experience.⁷ Nevertheless, the copy gives access to another kind of aesthetic experience, which is preferable to no experience at all and gives rise to educational, even revolutionary, potential:

⁶Benjamin (1935).

⁷Ibid., p. 3.

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This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. Both processes are intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements. Their most powerful agent is the film. Its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage.⁸

As it becomes obvious in this text, Benjamin thinks positively of this process, precisely because it has consequences ‘beyond the realm of art’. For truly what is at a stake is by no means just aesthetic, there is an unfair system that can now be challenged. Nevertheless, leaning on Benjamin to conceptualise the digital medium means that most critics have been hung up on the fact that any digital product is by definition ‘aura-less’, which is even more true now than in the 1930s. Digital information is ultimately reducible to the binary logic of 0s and 1s, so all modalities lose their specificity and become packages of data to be combined and recombined in different, infinitely repeatable ways. This turns out to be a problem if we still expect that all art needs to be associated with the traditional notion of aura. I think that Benjamin would be puzzled that his essay, which is so perceptive about the aesthetic possibilities of the new media of photography and film, provides sceptics and nostalgics with conceptual fuel to resist the fact that ‘mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual’.⁹ *Aura* becomes a reminder of what we have lost, and a natural enemy of any kind of copy. Consider statements like:

Digital art cannot compare to real art.

A recording can never beat a live concert.

Films that use too much CGI are lazy.

It is a problem that AI-generated pictures do not have a human author

Do you agree with any of them? With all? Traditional notions of art, originality and the sublime are extremely persistent, hardwired into our cultural brain and reinforced by the copyright legal system. The aura-less, infinite reproducibility and malleability of digital media continues to be suspect, even terrifying. Repetition is a threat, even though there is certainly also a lot of enthusiastic

⁸Ibid., p. 4.

⁹Ibid., p. 6.

writing about the potentials of derivative creativity like remix or multimodal art, as we will see in Chapter 6. Digital Media Theory as a field has explored the aesthetic potential of combinations and repetitions, ever since Lev Manovich remarked that the fact that all existing media are translated into numerical data allows for modularity and automation, variability and ultimately cultural transcoding.¹⁰ Behind all of these principles, repetition is a driving force.

Perceiving Repetition

If everything was always new, we would not be able to process any of our experiences; our brain would be too busy trying to make sense of unknown inputs, with nothing to connect them to. Perceiving repetition is about recognising things as similar or the same, and from that experience being able to deduce, generalise, synthesise and a few other higher level cognitive operations that are the basis for knowledge production. Looking for repetition is the basis of the essential cognitive mission of letting us identify patterns.

Let us do an experiment. Pick up a book in a language you do not know, if you have one at hand. If not, try the Internet, by, for example, switching languages in Wikipedia. Read a few sentences, if possible aloud, listening to the sounds of the unknown words. Most likely, nothing will make sense. And yet, if you read long enough, you might begin to notice certain patterns, a couple of words that turn up all the time (could they be pronouns or conjunctions?) or a similar ending in different words (are they verbal tenses? cases?). Immediately, your brain begins to scan the text for patterns, trying to understand. Not surprisingly, searching for repetition is the way that linguists work when deciphering manuscripts written in unknown languages. The yet undeciphered Voynich manuscript is a good example of these methods, as many linguists and cryptologists have attempted to find regularity and meaning in its repetitions (of characters, sequences of characters, words, chains of words). Nothing seems to make sense, and in fact there is a possibility that it is no language at all, but an elaborate puzzle, since there is too much randomness in its apparent regularity.¹¹

Language is in fact an excellent arena to reflect over the connection between cognition and repetition. Giles Deleuze, who is often invoked as one of the prominent philosophers to have dealt with repetition, is influenced by Saussure's structuralism and its key departure from essentialist ideas about the connection of language with the world. In structuralism, any single word gets its meaning because of its systemic relation to other words, and not because it intrinsically represents the object. *Sparrow* is an arbitrary word for an animal, no more connected to reality than *gorrión*, or *moineau*.¹² So we understand sparrows in relation to eagles, owls, pigeons... and we generalise a series of characteristics,

¹⁰Manovich (2002).

¹¹That is, repetition without any context whatsoever is not enough either, as Schinner (2007, p. 106) has shown.

¹²Respectively, in Spanish and French.

looking for resemblance (perhaps having a beak, wings), to understand the overarching category of *bird* that covers them all.

For Deleuze, this generalising is a movement that forms the basis of thought, very simply put, looking for repetition and finding difference. In an oft-quoted passage, he writes: ‘no two grains of dust are absolutely identical, no two hands have the same distinctive points, no two typewriters have the same strike, no two revolvers score their bullets in the same manner.’¹³ He is not interested in singularity as a final product to be found, but rather as striving, an ideal that is never realised. Repetition is impossible as a thing in itself, for there cannot be identical occurrences. However, it is interesting as a process since it will help us generalise and perceive difference. In this, as in much of his argument in *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze leans on Hume, who famously wrote ‘repetition changes nothing in the object repeated, but does change something in the mind which contemplates it’.¹⁴ Repetition in itself cannot give way to original objects, but to perceive the repetition of a phenomenon can make us learn something new.

To be honest, Deleuze’s approach to repetition is not aligned with everything that I write in this chapter. He distances himself from the usual understanding of repetition in the prologue to *Difference and Repetition*, when he writes that repetition ‘is thought in terms of the identical, the similar, the equal or the opposed. In this case, we treat it as a difference without concept: two things repeat one another when they are different even while they have exactly the same concept’.¹⁵ Nonetheless, his proposition is important for me in two ways. First, it highlights the action of looking for repetition as crucial, instead of just thinking about a finished product: the copy which is identical to another thing. His focus on process has animated the conception of this project, as the following chapters will make obvious in relation to storytelling or computer games. Second, the attention to difference makes a bridge to aesthetic theory in general, which often has had the focus on ‘how art objects and their experiences differ from other objects and experiences’ in everyday life.¹⁶ While intuitively repetition would seem to be the opposite of contrast, it turns out that it is essential to perceive it. This will help me to challenge the theories that consider originality and the sublime as the only measure for successful art.

In order to think of repetition as a process, time is of the essence, that is, repetition is dependent on time to be perceived. First we become aware of one thing, say, a short melody within a longer composition. Later in the piece, we hear it again, and realise it is a repetition. Of course, if we were not attentive or did not identify it as a unit the first time around, we might not be able to realise that it is being repeated. But truly, repetition is both about remembering the past (I have heard that before) and projecting towards the future (the chorus will likely come back). So even if the nature of the entity was not totally grasped in the first encounter, the second encounter will make things clearer to us. Thus, repetition is

¹³Deleuze (1994, p. 31).

¹⁴Ibid., p. 93.

¹⁵Ibid., p. xiii.

¹⁶Saito (2007, p. 15).

our way of figuring out the underlying structure of things, as various elements become visible, so that we can make sense of experiences. We build upon our familiarity with the same art form, for instance rock music, in order to make sense of the unknown specimen: a new song. No matter the art form, I would argue that there is a cognitive pleasure in identifying a returning unit. We feel that we have ‘gotten’ the song, the speech or the strange camera angle. Through repetition, we learn.

This simple explanation contains a few complex propositions. Firstly, perceiving repetitions is dependent upon recognising units/entities, whose nature varies wildly across art forms. Also, the same work can even contain repetitions at different levels, and of varying scope. Secondly, diverse art forms lean on repetition differently. For instance, it is much better tolerated in music than in literature, both at a compositional level, but also in relation to consumption. Thirdly, perceiving repetition is a subjective process that depends on how familiar a person is with a specific art form. It will, for instance, always be easier for me to grasp the structure of an English pop hit than that of a traditional Korean folk song. Through repeated exposure to a particular art form, we build aesthetic repertoires that allow us to efficiently identify patterns and codify each new encounter, as well as to gain pleasure from it. This is also why first-time exposure to an unknown genre is always disconcerting, even if it also can be exhilarating and pleasurable for the senses, since we do not have a cultural framework to either understand or enjoy it in context.

We can unpack some of these assumptions with the help of Elizabeth Margulis and her many years’ work on music and repetition, collected in the book, *On Repeat. How music plays the mind*.¹⁷ She combines an aesthetic perspective with cognitive/experimental science to show how repetition is the basic stepping stone to understanding music. While many of her insights are of course indelibly linked to sound as the relevant modality for music, her careful exposition of the way we cognitively grasp repetition is extremely helpful for this discussion.

Music is the art form where repetition is more easily accepted, and even enjoyed. We revisit our favourite songs obsessively, with a frequency that would be untenable in any other modality. This is partly because in a way, music *is* repetition. As Margulis notes, ‘almost anything producible on the matrix sounds credibly musical after a few loops’.¹⁸ In a series of experiments where subjects were exposed by music composed by a computer and modern compositions, they identified the most repetitive sequences as more enjoyable, and more likely to have been composed by a human, even if they were not.¹⁹ Even scientists studying animal vocalisation identify it as music when there is heightened repetition.²⁰

This points to the first element of interest for me here: pattern recognition. In music, a recognisable small unit is the individual note, but there are other levels such as a single pitch, themes, sequences or even entire pieces. ‘To hear something

¹⁷Margulis (2014).

¹⁸Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 15.

²⁰Ibid., p. 19.

as a repetition, a listener must first hear it as something. In this way, repetition detection can be a useful methodology to investigate perceptual units; the segments of music that listeners treat as individual entities' This extrapolates better to the art forms that have a temporal dimension, like poetry or dance, that both unfold in time and allow us to recognise a returning rhyme or sequence of movement.²¹ In other kinds of art, such as painting or sculpture, the pattern recognition activity might not be necessary to appreciating a single piece as a whole, although close scrutiny might allow us to distinguish a repeated technique, say a visual pattern or a brush stroke. In these arts, pattern recognition mostly occurs at a higher level, for example when a piece is compared to previous work by the same artist, or by others, for instance in relation to specific genres. I will deal with this meta level in Chapter 3.

Let us now return to the repetition of concrete elements as an essential cognitive activity. A casual listener who is not well versed in musical terminology might be unable to explain what it is exactly that makes a song recognisable. And yet, it is not necessary to be able to analyse a song in order to identify it when it plays again, or indeed to enjoy it. Anyone can recognise a returning chorus or a sample from another well-known song integrated in the new one. In this way, music has a lower entry bar than other arts. We also consider a song more positively upon several repeats. The pop hit that sounded absurd the first time it blasted from the speakers at the local swimming pool will end up making its way into our brain as an ear worm that will last all summer (and possibly several years).

In this section, we have been looking at repetition as a formal property of different art forms, but Margulis points out that it is also important to consider it in relation to reception behaviours, like hitting the repeat button again and again to hear our favourite song, or engaging in different forms of ritualistic action in our everyday life. This distinction mirrors the one I started this chapter with, *repetition/sameness* and is important in relation to cognition because deliberately engaging in repetitive acts is key to basic survival mechanisms both at the individual (forming habits) and the collective (participating in rituals) level. Habits are sequences of behaviour that we repeat without thinking about them, in autopilot, as it were. Think of the time where you learnt to ride a bike. You might still recall how hard it was to keep the pedals turning. You trod too hard or too ineffectively, causing a change of rhythm that could throw you completely out of balance. I still remember how my father held me steady by running alongside with a broom shaft stuck into the back seat. I remember looking back to make sure he was still holding it, and later the exhilaration of realising he was not any more, as I sped forward on my own leaving him far behind. At the beginning, all my attention was concentrated on the pedals, the handles, how to balance my body most effectively. It is only later, when the basic movements had turned into an automatic habit, that I could look at the trees along the gravel path, enjoy the wind in my face or take care not to run insects over with my thick wheel. Learning

²¹Ibid., p. 39.

to ride a bike is a process where a conscious effort becomes an automatic non-conscious operation, freeing our mental resources. Automatism is not only important in relation to physical actions, where we need to train our body and senses to do something without coping all our attention. It can also refer to the establishment of habits as sequences of everyday behaviour. Most of us have formed a number of these sequences that unfold along a normal day. Think, for instance, of bedtime routines: Do you brush your teeth or your hair first?, Do you use skin care products?, Do you drink a glass of milk? Do you read a book? Do you send a goodnight SMS to a loved person? In which order? Chances are that once you decide you are going to bed, you start going through the same familiar steps without stopping at every turn to decide which moisturiser to apply or even which side of the bed you will use to step up and tuck yourself under the covers. These chains of habitual actions free us from excessive mental work in our everyday life, and most likely from crippling indecision. When engaged in routines, our mind is free to wander elsewhere as we brush our teeth for the prescribed 2 minutes. More than once I have needed to rush to my desk with toothpaste in my mouth to note down a research idea or, less glamorously, a reminder to buy milk or send a birthday greeting the next day.

Having a number of established daily routines is not the same as if all the events of our everyday lives were scheduled to always unfold in the same manner. We are not like Phil, the protagonist of the film *Groundhog Day*, who is forced to live the same day over and over again, an iconic time loop narrative to which I will return to in Chapter 4.

Deliberate Repetition

Like with our first bicycle, we need to repeat the things we want to learn, also when they exclusively involve mental skills. Learning aids like flash cards are based on the idea of spaced repetition as an effective way of committing content to memory. With flash cards, we encounter the same materials (like the words of a foreign language) at strategic intervals as a way to recall, activate and ultimately memorise them. Margulis' example is that of baby talk, with its exaggerated prosody and repetition, similar across cultures even though no parents have been specifically told to talk to babies in any particular way.²² Maybe we remember how our own parents did with us, even if it is not at a conscious level. We have a tendency to tell babies everything we are doing, as if we were a radio reporter of banality, 'now the porridge is on the spoon, and it is about to enter your mouth', repeating the names of important objects and actions over and over. This repetition is both soothing and very useful, as babies will with time learn to identify sequences (grasping the overarching sense of what is being said), segment individual units in the speech stream (isolating individual words that they will be able to use in other contexts) and predict developments (developing higher-level expectations about language patterns).

²²Ibid., p. 21.

This rather complex process implies a movement from a whole to a part to an even bigger whole: the stream of words, the individual words, the expansion into another context, back and forth like a tide. It happens naturally when learning our mother tongue, and it is very hard to mimic again when trying to learn a new language as an adult. Repeated exposure to the foreign tongue is our best recipe for success. It is a fantastic feeling when we get to the point where listening to the stream of foreign words ceases to feel like an excruciating effort. When we finally understand enough without having to think very hard about words and grammar, we are finally at the stage where we can concentrate on the overarching meaning. We are only liberated from the tedious grinding when we finally master it, when we do not need to repeat anymore to retain.

But let us turn away from suffering and back to the delights offered by the arts and music. For what is hard in a learning process can be pleasurable when dealing with a code we are already familiar with. Margulis distinguishes between two kinds of cognitive pleasures related to repetition: '*Process pleasure*, then, can be located in the repetitive unfolding of the musical surface, but it is precisely and paradoxically this repetitiveness that affords a separate *creation pleasure* in the mind of the listener, who can now inventively connect different time points within the stimulus to generate novel, changing experiences'.²³ I would add that these two kinds of pleasure are related to the movement between the concrete and the abstract, the part and the whole, that is so crucial to repetition. Music illustrates how this flows in a nearly seamless manner, maybe because it is a modality that we all have access to and experience with.

Perhaps we can imagine similar processes in relation to other art forms. Not literally, since exact repetition of concrete units in other modalities is more difficult to bear, but in relation to a movement from the concrete to the abstract, the meta. We will explore this movement in Chapter 3 in relation to storytelling. Building upon studies about learning and children, fairy tales readings, television viewing and other activities, Margulis explains how repetition actually leads to greater understanding, opening up for meta-cognition that makes creativity possible:

repetition in general allows for the freeing up of attentional resources, such that attention can rove to different levels of the stimulus – up to higher-level, structural features (such as plot and character, in the case of the repeated TV show), or down to lower-level, detailed features (such as novel words, in the case of the repeated tellings of a story). Since so much remains for small children to learn, repetition provides an opportunity for them to master aspects of their environment they are typically too attentionally taxed to grasp. This view represents a subtle recasting of the typical account of the childhood appetite for repetition, which centers on the pleasure that can be drawn from

²³Ibid., p. 50.

familiarity and expertise – the pleasure of being able to predict things about an environment and feel safe. By way of contrast, the account I'm presenting here suggests that the pleasure derives not from familiarity and safety of the old, but rather from the excitement of learning and the new: namely the new elements that become available to perception and cognition when attentional resources are freed from merely tracking entirely new events. Children experience the joy of engagement with richer and more interconnected aspects of the stimulus – a type of play that often gets relegated in adulthood to the domain of the aesthetic.²⁴

This perspective goes well with current research on the different ways that children make sense of texts. Modern definitions of literacy go beyond a binary understanding of the concept, where you either can read or not. Based on her empirical work researching how children make sense of fantasy literature, Nina Mikkelsen proposes that literacy is a multidimensional concept that covers much more ground than the merely diegetic/interpretive. These dimensions require that the child is competent in moving between the concrete and the abstract, the low level to the high level: 'use literature to help children make meaning generally (generative literacy); make discriminations about their own feelings (personal/empathetic literacy); make connections between life and literature (sociocultural literacy); become lost in a book (aesthetic literacy); walk around the story as insiders, telling their own stories about the story (narrative literacy); resist the text for any number of reasons (critical literacy); or uncover narrative patterns and details for greater meaning-making (literary literacy) (. . .) reading skills and print literacy'.²⁵

If we read and reread the same story with a child many times without zoning out as one might be tempted to, we will be able to follow this particular learning process: how familiarity engenders a sense of wonder that prompts curiosity and elaboration. Sometimes, repetition can even lead to an epiphany, as something implicit becomes suddenly clear to the mind. The child asking for the same story over and over enacts Deleuze's idea that the most mechanical repetitions can lead us to 'endlessly extract from them little differences, variations and modifications. Conversely, secret, disguised and hidden repetitions, animated by the perpetual displacement of a difference, restore bare, mechanical and stereotypical repetitions, within and without us'.²⁶ And this is the core of the Mikkelsen literacy perspective as well: change is perceived outside but enacted also inside.

²⁴Ibid., p. 71.

²⁵Mikkelsen (2005, p. 107).

²⁶Deleuze (1994, p. xvi).

What Is Repeated

The simple answer would be: everything. All contemporary media forms use repetitive strategies, regardless of their status as popular culture or high art, mass media or indie production. Media works quote and comment upon each other, integrate elements from previous periods, mix genres or deploy interactive mechanics. Painting, music, film... everybody is referencing, alluding, parodying, mixing, sampling, commenting upon, improving, contesting... All these verbs presuppose a relation of old and new works, a tension based on the repetition of *something*, but what?

It would be quite unproductive to try to dissect this at the overarching level of all media phenomena in general, since the platforms, modalities and interaction possibilities are multiple and diverse. We will not be able to precisely specify the kinds of units that get repeated: sounds, words, genre traits, so I will defer specific case analyses to later chapters.²⁷ However, we can still consider the question of the whole versus the part, which has been at the centre of discussions about repetition, under various guises.

For Umberto Eco, it is a matter of dialectics. Our postmodern time sees the circulation of so many stories that everything seems to be already told, a picture of excess that has only gotten more intense since the 1980s, where he wrote that we can only hope ‘to relish repetition and its own microscopic variations’.²⁸ I detect a certain regret in the way he writes about renouncing absolute newness, and settling for the pleasures of recognising scheme-variation combinations. Eco proposes that this dialectic experience of reception, with a heightened awareness of structure and repertoires connects contemporary media with cultural forms like abstract art or baroque music, where the focus is not on locating specific meanings but ‘the pleasure of the reiteration of a single and constant truth’.²⁹ That is, it is not a semiotic catharsis but an experiential one.³⁰ This realisation will be important in my consideration of interactive art forms as we move along in the book.

This dialectic relation is more fully articulated by scholars of the neo-baroque Omar Calabrese and Angela Ndalians in different ways, even though both operate from a premise that the whole and the part are inextricably linked: one

²⁷This is not to say that the book covers all media forms and modalities. It is very much focused on the workings of digital media, narratives and computer games.

²⁸Eco (1985, p. 181).

²⁹Ibid., p. 182.

³⁰This is my own interpretation. Eco does not talk about experience although he does connect catharsis in repetitive art forms to works of art pointing to a ‘pure and simple myth’.

cannot be perceived or explained without the other.³¹ The hermeneutic movement to comprehend and consider part and whole at the same time is based on repetition. Consider the etymology of the word, *repetere*, which means to return to, to get back, in Latin. Perceiving a part that reminds us of a previous one sends us back mentally, allowing us to appraise and consider it to understand the workings of the whole. Calabrese makes a case to nuance our understanding of parts and the cognitive process that they set in motion. He proposes to differentiate between *detail* and *fragment*, which he considers different kinds of parts, using the metaphor of the operations of an *assassin* versus a *detective*.

An assassin cuts. Detail is ‘something cut from the existing whole’³² that allows us to discover ‘laws and particular aspects that were previously regarded as irrelevant to a description of the work’.³³ We focus on a detail to explain the system in a new way, that is, the detail gives a key to the whole, but it is us who decide what to cut out, so to speak. Calabrese does not illustrate this with an example but let’s consider an obvious one, like the sequence that shows Deckard sleeping and dreaming of a unicorn running through a forest inserted into *Blade Runner*’s Director Cut version.³⁴ It is a very short scene, a few seconds, that critics have interpreted as a crucial detail to fuel the theory that Deckard is actually a replicant. By the end of the movie, Deckard finds an origami unicorn left by an ex-colleague who has been at his apartment but has apparently decided to spare Deckard’s and Rachel’s lives. The only reason why the other policeman would know about the unicorn is if Deckard was a replicant whose intimate dreams are actually a standard feature implanted by designers.

A detective, on the other hand, finds. A fragment is a fractured part, not purposely selected but happened upon. It does not need the whole to be defined, but is explained according to the absent system, like a fossil.³⁵ Calabrese’s example is the way in which micro historians analyse found fragments of documents and artefacts to reconstruct a lost past, like in the famous work *The Cheese and the Worms* by Carlo Ginzburg, which recreates the period of the Venetian

³¹The concept of the neo-baroque has been used to characterise certain aesthetic strategies of the twentieth century as they are similar to the seventeenth-century baroque movement. Omar Calabrese defines the neo-baroque as ‘a search for, and valorization of, forms that display a loss of entirety, totality, and system in favor of instability, polydimensionality, and change’ (1992, p. xii). Angela Ndalians suggests that the characteristics of the neo-baroque include: a focus on sensorial spectacle, playfulness and entertainment that engulfs the spectator, the use of multimedia, a multiplicity of stories, an intensity of intertextual references, performativity, parody, carnival and usually the attachment to a certain stigma of decay (Ndalians, 2004, pp. 3–5).

³²Calabrese (1992, p. 70).

³³Ibid., p. 72.

³⁴This version of the movie, released in theatres in 1992, makes a few changes upon the original one. The most notable ones are the removal of Deckard’s monologues, so that the spectator is left to interpret the detective’s state of mind by themselves, and the elimination of a happy ending that Ridley Scott had been forced to add to the movie upon its first release.

³⁵Calabrese (1992, pp. 72–74).

sixteenth century through the reconstruction of an individual miller's life, based on the inquisitional record of his trial and execution as a heretic.³⁶

Ndalianis brings new nuances to the discussion by incorporating Benjamin's idea of the fragment as a ruin, something found that can point to the absent whole but remains behind as a valuable allegory. Ruins and fragments evoke 'the existence of a past in the present while simultaneously transforming the ruin into a restored, majestic structure that operates like a richly layered palimpsest'.³⁷ She is inspired by Deleuze, Leibniz and the concept of the monad to insist on the relational aspect of repetition. A monad is the simplest of units that relies on the other units/monads to connect and become something. The nature of these units will be different according to platform and modality.³⁸ This way of thinking is the basis of my method of identifying different levels of units in Chapters 2, 3 and even 4, although I would add to this that often, the smallest units are contained in the biggest ones, spawning strange rhizomatic processes of meaning making.

For Ndalianis, the creator's preference for processes of copy and seriality are essential dimensions of the neo-baroque. Repetition, however, is not neutral, in the sense that 'While emphasising elements of repetition, the authors of each variation may also be intent on outperforming and developing preceding works: refashioning the past. New story fragments introduced therefore dynamically interact with other story fragments, uniting to create multiple, yet unified, story formations'.³⁹ Her discussion is especially useful when looking beyond repetition of motifs within individual works, because she considers the movement between fragments and whole at a higher level. A whole work can become a fragment inside another work, incorporated through citation. One of her examples of these complex referential movements is the film *Evil Dead II*, which recreates the events of the first movie within its first 7 minutes (with the same male actor but a different female actor). This way, the second film departs seamlessly from the final scene of the first film (the demon running towards Ash in the forest). Ndalianis wonders about the nature of the 7-minute recreation. Is it a summary? A movie within the movie? There is not an easy answer, for referentiality in contemporary media is a multidirectional labyrinth that weaves textual connections as a complex net of references.⁴⁰ An important point, from Ndalianis' perspective, is that neo-baroque repetition always contains a seed of virtuosity, the will to improve, an idea that will play a role in my discussion of imitation and parody later.

To finish this section on the nature of the repeated units, I would like to borrow another one of Calabrese's points, who proposes that there are three areas to be considered when thinking about mediatic repetition⁴¹:

³⁶Ginzburg (1980).

³⁷Ibid., p. 73.

³⁸Ndalianis (2004, p. 27).

³⁹Ibid., p. 61.

⁴⁰Ibid. The discussion of this film example is on pages 77–79. The elaboration of the idea of multidirectional labyrinth is on page 123.

⁴¹In his work illustrated mainly through the analysis of television series (Calabrese, 1992, p. 28) and following pages.

- (1) *Production*. What is repeated here are the industry strategies to produce repetitive content, for instance through the establishment of models and standards of production.
- (2) *Text*. We can also look at content, how repetition works across texts at several levels like typical scenarios, motifs and genres. Focusing on the repeated content lets us see what is identical (the building scaffold) and what is different (the variation).
- (3) *Consumption*. Like Margulis pointed out, reception can also be in focus. What is repeated at the level of consumption are behaviours, guided by expectations and motivated by personal goals, like what Calabrese calls ‘consolatory behaviour’, where repetition of well-known elements provides comfort to the viewer.

Calabrese wonders if these three optics can be correlated, which is one of the ambitions of this book. For they are, of course, absolutely intertwined. The astute reader will also have realised that the three dimensions correspond to the simplest of communication models. They identify the different actors participating in a complex exchange, each with a series of attached motivations like increasing sales, implementing an aesthetic strategy or regulating one’s mood. For repetition always has an effect, of one kind or another.

What Does Repetition Do?

In this introductory first chapter, preoccupied with defining, framing and limiting, I have adopted a very broad approach to repetition, bringing together a multiplicity of perspectives, academic domains and media. This makes for a very wide palette of repetition affordances that could be commented upon here. I will nevertheless concentrate exclusively on the overarching level that can be applied to every kind of media repetition, by now disconnected from specific contexts of use.⁴² This means focusing on the effects that repetition can have and the emotions that it can produce *in general*. The following chapters will look at specific instances. I have already considered a few of the ways in which repetition is connected to learning in the first section of the chapter, so I will here concentrate on the sought-after effects of using repetition as a mode of expression, engendering different kinds of pleasure. The problematic side of these pleasures will show itself later in the book.

Repeating a Unit Calls Attention to It

The dictionary definition pointed already to the rhetorical force of repetition. Although the repeating units could be anything (words, images, sounds...), at several levels, I will use language as a case to illustrate this point. There is quite a

⁴²I am aware of the paradox of this last statement, since affordance is essentially a situated concept.

wide consensus on the importance of repetition as a rhetoric device, ever since Aristotle described the four structural types of repetition (phonetic, morphological, lexical and syntactic) in language in his *Art of Rhetoric*.⁴³ There are, however, few single works devoted to the subject, probably because repetition can be too many things in relation to language, so making a synthesis of all this work in a meaningful way is rather difficult.⁴⁴ Aitchison lists phenomena as diverse as imitation, echolalia, stuttering, cohesion, reduplication, reiteration, alliteration, assonance, iteration, parallelism, epizeuxis, rhyme and shadowing, among others.⁴⁵ The academic treatment of these concepts agrees on the basic idea that repetition adds an emphasis that needs to be decoded for extra significance.⁴⁶ To understand this, we can turn to a classic within communication theory.

In the mathematical theory of communication, which has been adopted by linguists and communication scholars alike, redundancy is related to entropy as a measure of the efficiency of the system.⁴⁷ That is, when speaking, we repeat parts of the message only to reduce uncertainty. For instance, if an alarm goes off while I am talking to someone, I might repeat the sentence louder just to check if the message came through the noise. From this, the Gricean maxim follows that redundancy in speech must add something relevant to the message, for it otherwise would be unnecessary noise. For instance, a language where the expression of a subject is not mandatory, like Spanish or Italian, only uses 'yo/io' explicitly to emphasise something extraordinary about the agency or presence of the speaker.⁴⁸ Normally in Spanish I would say 'hago la comida' (I cook) without the pronoun, but if my husband had asked me who was cooking as we are dividing the weekend chores, I could have answered 'yo hago la comida', and then it would be equivalent to a more emphatic expression like, 'I will be the one cooking'. Carla Bazzanella notes that 'redundancy appears to be one of these transparent, though, essential features of language; it is pervasive, both on a language and on a parole level'.⁴⁹ She has found that there are three kinds of linguistic repetition:

- (1) Monological. The same formal element reappears in a unit of speech by a single speaker (like Martin Luther King's famous 'I have a dream' speech).
- (2) Dialogical. In a conversation, one speaker repeats what the other says. 'If I am happy?' What is repeated becomes foregrounded, creating union.

⁴³I have used the 2019 edition by the University of Chicago Press (Aristotle, 2019).

⁴⁴Or at least there weren't in 2016 when Jackson wrote her dissertation (Jackson, 2016, p. 4). However, Mammadov and Rasulova published their monograph in 2019.

⁴⁵Aitchison (1994, p. 16).

⁴⁶This is a basic principle of Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory, even though a lot of these works do not operate from their premise, and rather adopt more classical rhetorical approaches, where there is 'straightforward' language and then figures of speech as stylistic deviation. In relevance theory, there is no such thing as straightforward language.

⁴⁷Shannon (1948).

⁴⁸Because it is already contained in the declination of the verb, which in Spanish changes the ending according to the subject. This is Carla Bazzanella's example (Bazzanella, 2011).

⁴⁹Bazzanella (2011, p. 251).

- (3) Polyphonic. A text repeats fragments from other texts, so different voices are active at the same time, in Bakhtinian manner. It is another word for intertextuality.

Bazzanella's categories might give the impression that repetition is mostly occurring in elaborated pieces of discourse, but unscripted spoken language actually contains even more repetitions.⁵⁰ Deborah Tanner has studied recorded everyday speech and found that repetition has a function of helping us follow arguments, since we cannot go back and refer to the previous as with written text. She calls this phenomenon 'spontaneous formulaicity', where speech sometimes gets close to the form of proverbs.⁵¹ Perhaps paradoxically, this formulaic character has a veneer of authenticity that newspapers headlines also try to attain. According to Tanner, this prepatterned way of communicating provokes positive emotion instead of boredom.⁵²

Some languages seem to lean more heavily on repetition than others, creating a sort of formulaic linguistic cohesion. For instance, Barbara Johnstone has studied repetition in Arabic discourse and found that this language works more actively with persuasion in everyday speech than, for example, English. Apart from other cultural reasons, there seems to be a relation between increased repetition and the prominence of orality within a specific language. In the West, we are embarrassed by obviously persuasive forms⁵³, so flowery elegance and repetition are seen as too artificial. Arabic leans on this more explicitly, and I can say the same of my mother tongue, Spanish.⁵⁴ In another work, Johnstone demonstrates how repetition can introduce subversion in everyday exchanges, in alignment with the pragmatic approaches above.⁵⁵ Ordinary things suddenly become strange because 'the act of repetition itself moves the statement's significance away from its literal meaning and into some more dynamic, relational realm'.⁵⁶ This richness is lost if we accept the premise that any effort at working stylistically with the surface of the language is suspect. Johnstone brilliantly suggests that in the West, we drive deep clefts 'between form and function, rhetoric and poetics, surface manifestations and underlying structure; clefts which make us devalue, and thus fail to appreciate, the repetitive cadences of actual discourse in our search for the "real" structure which lies behind it'.⁵⁷ Here she points to a crucial problem typical of our culture: the idea that excessive attention to form unavoidably sacrifices depth (my words). As she states a bit further down the same page, we Westerners seem to think that the main idea is not really in the words. It is elsewhere, behind, *deeper*, maybe still in the Platonic cavern, I would add. She wants to rehabilitate

⁵⁰Johnstone (1991, p. 113).

⁵¹Tannen (1987).

⁵²These results are confirmed by Mammadov and Rasulova (2019, p. 80).

⁵³Johnstone (1991, p. 118).

⁵⁴Long flowery sentences need to be edited out of all my English language manuscripts.

⁵⁵Johnstone (1994).

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁵⁷Johnstone (1991, p. 120).

style, to make us conscious that repetition is part of a linguistic and rhetorical sensitivity that can bear a deeper meaning so that we would truly ‘refuse to separate the form of a discourse from its substance’.⁵⁸ Her wish could not be more aligned with this book project.

Repeating Is Also Appropriating

When we reproduce someone else’s work, in any format, it is always inserted into a new context that changes the original meaning ever so slightly. That is, repeating is never just a neutral copying, unless we are thinking of a literal copy machine sprouting copies of exactly the same picture, as in Walter Benjamin’s revolutionary realisation. From a mediatic perspective, we cannot talk about mere reproduction, there is always appropriation. Calabrese goes as far as saying that repetition ‘is an instrument for rewriting the past’, what he calls a kind of ‘shifting’.⁵⁹ This realisation will be especially important later on as we tackle the issues of intertextuality, adaptation and transmediality in Chapter 4. The repeated element can be given a new, more modern meaning, but it can also be questioned and even made fun of. Likewise, the incorporation of an element from the past can legitimise our work in the present, connecting it to tradition and meaning. Our time of media multiplicity is specially prone to all sorts of appropriations, since there are so many texts available at the same time, as I will touch upon in Chapter 6. In Calabrese’s words, ‘everything is absolutely synchronous’.⁶⁰

Repetition Is Pleasurable in Various Ways

We have already introduced above the cognitive pleasures of recognition and variation in relation to learning, music listening and storytelling. We generally like to encounter something which we know.⁶¹ This pleasure has a double dimension, since it points inwards: ‘I get it/I recognise it’, and to the repeated thing, which we can develop a nostalgic attachment to. It is a positive reinforcement of our own abilities and a pleasant reactivation of the past. There is quite a body of work studying the nostalgic pleasures of media consumption, centring around the comfort of turning back to one’s favourite music, series or other material, which people use to call forth positive moods.⁶²

In psychology and the humanities, many authors have been influenced by Freud’s controversial work *The Pleasure Principle*, which considers repetition as one of the important mechanisms that explain the movement towards pleasure and away from pain.⁶³ This text is contradictory in that, even though there are a

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Calabrese (1992, p. 179).

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 181.

⁶¹This is known in psychology as the ‘exposure effect’, proposed by Zajonc (1968), and well documented across different media.

⁶²See books by Lizardi (2014), Niemeyer (2014), and Wesseling (2018).

⁶³Freud (1920).

few mentions of the positive side of repetition, ‘repetition, the re-experiencing of something identical, is clearly in itself a source of pleasure’, Freud’s main point is that repetition is a damaging impulse that makes people want to relive their traumas.⁶⁴ He talks of the ‘repetition compulsion’ inspired by his grandson playing a game where he throws a reel and pulls it back (the ‘fort/da’ game). I am not adopting a psychoanalytical perspective in this text. Nonetheless, the manic involvement of the body in the fort/da game can be useful to discuss our embodied interaction with computer games and contemporary social media. I am also interested in Freud’s proposition that repetition actively creates memory, that is, memory is not a fixed file stored away to be retrieved, but something always incomplete and in-the-making, reconstructed by a repetitive operation where the person calls forth the fragments they remember and piece them together anew.

Repetition Has a Social Dimension

Using repetition as a stylistic resource and recognising different kinds of sameness does not occur in a social vacuum.

From the producer position, repeating something might be a way to connect to canonical works that can provide the new work with an aura of legitimacy and quality. For instance, we tend to think of heavy intertextuality as a characteristic of popular texts, but it is also very intensely present in postmodern literature⁶⁵ and contemporary art.⁶⁶ The opposite impulse can be just as strong, as Harold Bloom famously proposed in *The Anxiety of Influence*, whose central principle is that poets misread their predecessors in their struggle for originality and meaning. Texts relate to previous texts, creating a whole system of connections of agonistic proportions: ‘The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main traditions of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist’.⁶⁷

From an audience perspective, there is also a social dimension to repetition, which is about recognising things together or sharing with others. There is often a playful joy for those ‘in the know’. This can be as simple as getting the same joke about a text that is alluded to in a parodic way. In a previous project, Lisbeth Klastrop and I have traced the collective joys of sharing memes related to fictional universes, where iconic sentences are repeated in new contexts that offer effectual contrast.⁶⁸ New media fuel all sorts of participative repetitive practices, like meme making and sharing, reaction videos, fan fiction writing, cosplay or even the Duet feature on *TikTok*, where people sing or dance following one another, which will be the object of Chapter 6.

⁶⁴Freud (1920, p. 36).

⁶⁵Hock (2005).

⁶⁶See, for instance, Shore (2017), for an accessible introduction to the issue of originality, copying and imitation in painting.

⁶⁷Bloom (1997, p. 30).

⁶⁸Tosca and Klastrop (2019).

Lastly, there is also the perspective of the acquisition of repetitive art or media products as commodities, which involves circulation of economic, social and cultural capital in Bourdieu's sense. People buy and collect specific material copies (unique art, merchandise) for various reasons that are related to collective symbolic meaning-making processes and individual interests and intentions. An interesting (and old) case to illustrate this comes from antiquity. Jennifer Trimble has studied two female statue 'types' that were replicated again and again in the Roman Empire and 'have long been the object of scholarly dismissal, condemned as imitative', mass produced copies, representing Demeter or Kore.⁶⁹ Trimble has found that they actually are honorific portraits of specific noble women, where the likeness to the goddesses is a way to insert themselves into a power elite by connoting 'wealth, civic status and participation in empire-wide forms'.⁷⁰ This kind of coveted repetition creates a positive belonging effect, akin to acquiring status-signalling goods to display on our public appearances or even taking and sharing competent selfies, aligned with current canons of social media beauty, with excellent lighting and effects, so that all our followers can appreciate our flawless image.

Repetition Creates a Tension Between Engagement and Boredom

I have already suggested that time is an important factor when considering repetition, both in terms of frequency (how often do things appear) and in terms of subjectivity (just how much can I bear). Excessive returns might spoil the experience, turning it into something boring or downright unbearable. There seems to be an ideal balance between novelty and recognition which is not easy to hit.

New Media theory (specially in relation to computer games) has often turned to the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and his theory of flow to explain the necessary balance between anxiety and boredom that ensures that any experience falls within the spectrum of the optimal: not too difficult, not too easy. People engaged in flow attain a deep state of concentration and satisfaction.⁷¹ In his framework, boredom emerges when something is too easy, and repetition is certainly key to this: too many repetitions of the same simple interaction after we have mastered it will make it boring.

There is another concept that can complement flow by describing how repetition changes the way we feel about a media product a long time. That is, the first time we are confronted with something, it is new. With each repetition, it becomes more and more familiar until it is boring. The Wundt curve (Fig. 2) is a bell-shaped curve proposed by Wilhelm Wundt in 1874 to describe the subjective effect of stimulus intensity: low to moderate levels are pleasant, but high levels

⁶⁹The Large Herculaneum Woman and the Small Herculaneum Woman (Trimble, 1999, p. 1).

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 102.

⁷¹Csikszentmihalyi (1990, pp. 46–67).

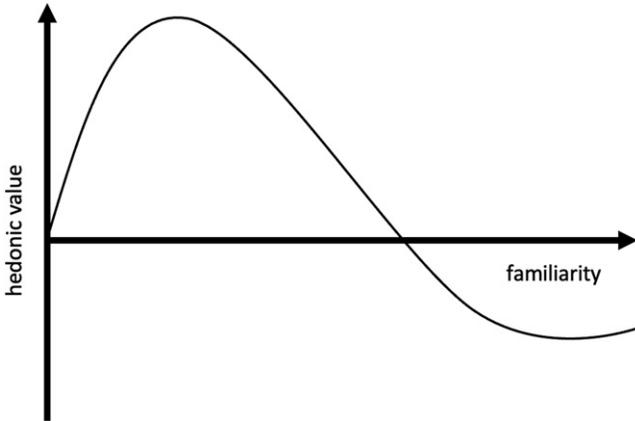


Fig. 2. Wundt Curve.⁷³

become unpleasant. It has been used in psychology and cultural studies to explain motivation, novelty seeking behaviours, marketing of products and many other things. Daniel Berlyne has adapted it to investigate aesthetic enjoyment with great success.⁷² He uses the concept of ‘hedonic value’ to refer to how a stimulus arousal potential will affect people differently.

According to the literature in the field of experiential aesthetics, this curve seems to work across media and modalities. Novelty is pleasurable (as long as we have enough context to understand and enjoy the new), and the hedonic value of the media experience can be sustained until familiarity grows excessive. I will consider the risk of boredom as a factor when discussing algorithmic recommendation systems in Chapter 5. There is also a subjective factor at play here, for research shows that not everybody is equally motivated by curiosity. ‘Nevertheless, curiosity does seem to be an important mechanism in the development of knowledge and competence, so it’s reassuring that something is coming out of the hours people spend scrambling around playgrounds, reading low-brow books, and street tuning old Honda Civics’. This kind of everyday creativity will be at the centre of Chapter 6.⁷⁴

Repetition Can Provide Transcendence

To finish this definitions chapter, it is perhaps appropriate to introduce a normative stand that allows me to close two loops: the cognitive perspective loop and the Kierkegaard loop, initiated by a mysterious quote at the very beginning of the book:

⁷²It is quoted in practically every paper about experimental aesthetics since the time of its first mention in a publication (Berlyne, 1960). He has developed and refined it since.

⁷⁴Silvia (2012, p. 163).

Repetition's love is in truth the only happy love. Like recollection, it is not disturbed by hope nor by the marvellous anxiety of discovery, neither, however, does it have the sorrow of recollection.⁷⁵

In his *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*, Søren Kierkegaard explains that the realisation of something being repeated provokes in us a sort of cognitive epiphany that imbues the world with extra meaning, giving us access to 'new and vivid registers of perception'.⁷⁶ In fact, 'he who does not grasp that life is repetition and that this is the beauty of life, has condemned himself and deserves nothing better than what will happen to him – death'.⁷⁷ However, this is not as straightforward as it seems, for even though repetition can fuel our thinking beyond what Kierkegaard calls empty meaningless noise, this is not a process we can control. It happens 'unexpectedly, as a gift from the unknown'.⁷⁸

The philosopher goes on to demonstrate the futility of attempting to force the positive effects of repetition by sharing with us the increasingly desperate story of a trip to Berlin. Motivated by the desire to repeat the success of a previous visit, he sets out to retrace his past steps, but is disappointed by his lodgings, a visit to the theatre and the depressing sensations that this new trip provokes in him. Horrified by the realisation that controlling the effect of repetition is impossible, he rushes back home to Copenhagen only to find that his servant has turned the house upside down in a hectic season-cleaning enterprise, so Kierkegaard cannot find the much longed-for peace and quiet. I must admit that I smiled picturing his dismay and anxiety as the servant hurries to finish cleaning. The philosopher will only be able to rest when everything is exactly as it always has been. Here, repetition becomes a resolution, a catharsis with a stronger effect than mere comfort and habit. Repetition seems to be the only way to transcendence.⁷⁹

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 50.

⁷⁵Kierkegaard (2009, p. 3)

⁷⁶Kierkegaard (2009, p. xvi).

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 4.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. viii.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 50.