Introduction

Admit it, you have been there. Watching an episode of your favourite sitcom for the umpteenth time. Singing along to the eternal loop of 1980s music which Spotify keeps pushing to you. Choosing another production of *Les Misérables* for your trip to the theatre over that avant-garde play. Reading a hack work thriller similar to all the others because you are too tired to decode actual literature... I know I have. When was the last time we encountered something new on purpose? Perhaps it is not entirely our fault. Our media channels keep offering us the same content, repeated in endless reinterpretations, rehashes, reboots, sequels, prequels in a cycle of perhaps eternal returns.

Our culture has an uneasy relationship with repetition and sameness. On the one hand, familiarity can be pleasurable and soothing; on the other, we (and the critics) crave novelty and long for a sense of discovery. We put the blame on algorithms, intent on keeping us in a loop of constant consumption of similar products, or on the media industry, too greedy to risk investing in intellectually challenging and, above all, radically new, media products. But what is the nature of these repetitions and what does it mean for us to consume them?

This book scrutinises repetition and sameness in our contemporary media culture, as an overarching category that constitutes a fusion of aesthetic and market strategies. Previous academic attention to repetition and sameness has mostly occurred within the confined area of a single medium (for instance, serial television) or the study of a formal pattern (like a specific kind of verse). Here I undertake a comprehensive approach that both theorises and historically grounds the idea of repetition in relation to media, not exclusively as a product of big data or late capitalism, but as something that has long roots in our cultural tradition.

Take, for instance, storytelling. In an oral tradition, alliteration, repetition and rhythm are essential both formally (to memorise and structure) and thematically, to reinforce a view of the world and connect to the universal topics that the public cares about. In fact, the history of literature and the performing arts can be seen as a long series of variations upon a common repertoire of themes and tropes, recombined and reinterpreted in new ways to cater to shifting popular taste. Myths, epic poems, sagas, legends, folk tales, morality plays, chivalry novels, renaissance theatre, rakugo, romances and sentimental novels are all genres that thrive upon repetition of form and content. With romanticism, our culture

acquired a new aspiration to newness, originality and individual genius. Breaking with tradition became a quality in itself, heightened by modernism and its extraordinary focus on the individual. By contrast, post-modern popular entertainment forms (genre literature, serial television, film sagas, Japanese media mix) have become more and more dependent on formulaic structures, as the media industries look for the perfect recipe that can be repeated and sold endlessly. This has culminated in our present era of on-demand entertainment and an unprecedented explosion of repetitive tendencies (both human and machine made) where the search for sameness has become a taken-for-granted, omnipresent value.

My intention here is twofold: to consider the genuinely joyful aesthetic pleasures offered by repetitive formats, but also to adopt a critical perspective that interrogates sameness-maximising systems of meaning and consumption. For there is a danger of monolithic uniformity, of partisan algorithms hiding divergent voices, anaesthetising us.

The combination of an aesthetic and media perspective is perhaps provocative, both for the humanities and media studies areas. In fact, I commit in this book the sin of mixing high art and popular culture, sometimes even talking about arts like opera or kabuki as *media*, and popular culture products like computer games as *art*. This slippery attitude is of course not *comme il faut*, but I do it on purpose to break the boundaries between high and low, media and the arts, entertainment and fine culture. When the focus is on the platforms and modalities, I use the word *media*, when it is on the aesthetics, I talk about *arts*. The same object can thus be a medium or an art, depending on the discussion.

In this omnivorous endeavour, I would like to enlist the help of art critic Lawrence Alloway, who already back in 1958 coined the term 'mass arts' to contrast them to the 'high arts', in his plea to do justice to popular culture and not judge it by the same upper-class standards as the so-called 'genuine' culture.[1] He argued that mass art should not be seen as kitsch, but on the contrary, 'urban and democratic'. While high art looked back at the past, mass art was the cultural site where things that people cared about were happening. 'Popular art, as a whole, offers imagery and plots to control the changes in the world; everything in our culture that changes is the material of the popular arts'. Even today, some 60 years after the foundation of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, the idea that culture is a continuum of high and popular formats is not taken seriously by academia. We belong to one side or the other, cultivating our own separate sets of concepts and theories. This book shakes both camps together mercilessly, even in the conception of the chapters, which all start with an old myth or story from antiquity and weave it together with contemporary popular media practices, both analogue and digital. Computer games, series, digital narratives, social media, movie franchises and AI-generated art are considered in relation to high art formats such as painting, sculpture, conceptual art, poetry, music or opera.

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[1] Alloway (1958). He is also known for having coined the term 'pop art'.

Even though our Zeitgeist seems to be more repetitive than any previous one, there are many subtle ways in which repetition and sameness have shaped our arts and culture through the ages, from the ancient concept of *mimesis* as the main principle for artistic creation for many centuries, to Walter Benjamin's famous essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. Benjamin hoped in 1935 that the art world was going to be democratised, liberated from its subservience to a ritualistic system of production and access, for 'to reproduce a work of art was (...) a means of renewing it, of making it useful again in the present'.[2] Everybody would have access to everything. Time has proven him right in terms of universal access, even more than he dared dream then, but rituals, boundaries and social fences are still standing.

In the wake of mass media, repetition was seen as a means to lower the access threshold for the enjoyment of popular art forms. Alloway noted how: 'An important factor in communication in the mass arts is high redundancy. TV plays, radio serials, entertainers, tend to resemble each other (though there are important and clearly visible differences for the expert consumer). You can go into the movies at any point, leave your seat, eat an ice-cream, and still follow the action on the screen pretty well. The repetitive and overlapping structure of modern entertainment works in two ways: (1) it permits marginal attention to suffice for those spectators who like to talk, neck, parade; (2) it satisfies, for the absorbed spectator, the desire for intense participation which leads to a careful discrimination of nuances in the action'.[3] In the industry's view, repetition is thus a structural building principle that facilitates casual consumption in any media platform. Alloway does seems to admire good craftsmanship in this respect anyway, pointing out the fact that popular culture can also cater to the kind of discerning participation that would be theorised later by modern aesthetic scholars like Jacques Rancière.[4]

This pragmatic attitude has certainly not been widespread in the field of cultural theory, where the depiction of popular culture as corrupting and false, spearheaded by the Frankfurt school, has held on for many years. I included a quote by Adorno and Horkheimer in the opening of this book, 'Culture today is infecting everything with sameness', which they write at the beginning of their famous 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception'.[5] This is actually also my premise here, but instead of recoiling in horror, I would rather like to see what that sameness actually affords. Even though Adorno and Horkheimer are blind to the aesthetic potential of popular media formats, I think that their insistence on the problematic aspects of popular culture as commodity is as relevant as it was in their time. They write, for example: 'Sharp distinctions like those between A and B films, or between short stories published in magazines in

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[2]Haxthausen (2004, p. 47).
[3]Alloway (1958), without page number as it is an online document.
[4]Rancière (2008). In his book he does a series of close readings of art, photography, literature and video installations. He does not incorporate other digital media, but his argument has resonated strongly with new media theorists.
[5]Adorno and Horkheimer (1944, p. 94).

different price segments, do not so much reflect real differences as assist in the classification, organization, and identification of consumers. Something is provided for everyone so that no one can escape; differences are hammered home and propagated'.[6] One could be forgiven for thinking that they are talking about algorithmic recommendation systems.

Scholars of postmodernism saw in the repetitive strategies of mass media proof of a general decadence, related to a loss of the self, warned of by Fredric Jameson.[7] Pastiches, repetition and copies are for Jameson empty signifiers that can only operate at the surface. For Hiroki Azuma, the consumers of this surface entertainment become animalised, and the eternal permutations facilitated by our current database culture are the perfect expression of postmodernism.[8] Genuine art is still associated with innovation, rupture and originality, or in Umberto Eco's words 'novelty, high information', while the repetition of patterns is seen as something typical of crafts and industry, but not the arts.[9]

Umberto Eco is actually one of the first critics to see value in popular media and appreciate the aesthetic potential of the repetitive mechanisms of contemporary formats. But it is his friend and fellow semiotician, Omar Calabrese, who inaugurates what we could call the field of repetitive studies. Working in the 1990s, he proposes the notion of the *neo-baroque* to understand contemporary culture, challenging outdated conceptions of originality. I would like to quote a long reflection of his that could serve as a manifesto for this project as well:

> This kind of position seems confused, out of date, and inadequate when confronted by the aesthetic objects produced by our culture. Confused, because the attitude, which is not only idealistic but survives in many other philosophical formulations, tends to superimpose upon each other a variety of accepted meanings of repetition without distinguishing between them. Out of date, because an attitude that idealizes the work of art's uniqueness has undoubtedly been swept away by contemporary practices; since the 1960s invented multiples, modern art movements have delivered a death blow to the myth of the original, and the idea of citation and pastiche is now exalted in many so-called postmodernist creations. Finally, inadequate, because the pre conceived notion prevents us from recognizing the birth of a new aesthetic, the aesthetic of repetition.[10]

If this was true in the 1990s, it is even more so now. Neither Eco nor Calabrese considered digital formats in their work for good reasons. It was Angela Ndalianis who updated the idea of the neo-baroque in her *Neo-Baroque aesthetics and*

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[6]Ibid., p. 96.
[7]Jameson (1991).
[8]Azuma (2009).
[9]Eco (1985, p. 161).
[10]Calabrese (1992, p. 28).

contemporary entertainment, where she works intensively with cinema as a paradigmatic Neo-baroque medium, but also incorporates multilinear narratives, games, art and maps. She relates the rise of repetitive formats and intertextuality to wider socioeconomic transformations, globalisation, postmodernism and media convergence. She also notes that audiences have become more media literate, so there is a new intensity to the demand for popular culture that can resonate with their media repertoires.

In the high art camp, not many care for repetition. A notable exception is literary scholar Joseph Hillis Miller, who in *Fiction and Repetition* proposed that repetition (of a motif, a structure, a mood) was the key to interpreting any literary work. For him, repetitions 'make up the structure of the work within itself' and he pays attention to the cognitive, semantic and craftsmanship aspects of repetition.[11] His book has seven chapters, each with the analysis of a novel through a repetitive lens, showing seven complex ways in which repetition creates meaning.[12] Hillis Miller's deconstructive close readings work with the question 'what does repetition do in this case?' without offering definite answers that would close interpretation. Complexity is still possible, and although the role of repetition in constituting human experience and memory are at the centre of his discussion, it is not the ambition of the book to move beyond the literary realm.

I will be drawing on these authors, even as I incorporate other media formats in this book, particularly algorithmic fuelled practices, which the industry uses to produce and to recommend content. From an audience perspective, I will consider the many ways in which social media users engage in repetitive practices, both in regards to imitating formats or schemata, but also in the repetitive nature of the content they produce: like memes, video challenges or *TikTok* dances. Audiences have also begun to play with AI systems to generate texts and images in new ways. So even though this book connects to all the 'old' media and art forms mentioned above, my focus is on contemporary repetitive formats.

This book offers a synthesis of perspectives, from a philosophical understanding of repetition to a cognitive one, to the way that the aesthetics of repetition shapes our conscience and our agency in different ways. I am greatly inspired by the work of Caroline Levine, who in her book *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* wrote 'Forms matter, in these accounts, because they shape what is possible to think, say, and do in a given context.[13]' She is an advocate for the humanities revealing something new about our everyday reality, our institutions and even 'the historical workings of political power', that maybe cannot be seen otherwise.[14] Like the formal patterns she examines in her book, repetition

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[11]Miller (1982, p. 3)

[12]The chapters are:- *Lord Jim*: Repetition as Subversion of Organic Form- *Wuthering Heights*: Repetition and the Uncanny- *Henry Esmond*: Repetition and Irony- *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*: Repetition as Immanent Design- *The Well-Beloved*: The Compulsion to Stop Repeating- *Mrs. Dalloway*. Repetition as the Raising of the Dead- *Between the Acts*: Repetition as Extrapolation.

[13]Levine (2015, p. 5).

[14]Ibid., p. xiii.

affords specific ways of thinking and being in the world. In this optic, the study of formalist patterns is never just an abstract operation disconnected from reality. A formalist pattern acts like a structuring scaffold for a number of actions and thoughts. Making them visible gives us the opportunity to interrogate ourselves: is this the kind of world, of relationships, of society that we want? Her perspective addresses power in a more complex and, according to herself, chaotic understanding that Foucault's.[15]

Levine appropriates Donald Norman's definition of affordances from the field of design 'as potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs. Glass affords transparency and brittleness. Steel affords strength, smoothness, hardness and durability'.[16] Armed with this concept, she examines the aesthetic forms of *whole*, *rhythm*, *hierarchy* and *network*. Her analysis goes well beyond the pages of literary works, asking what actions or thoughts are made possible or impossible due to the forms we use in our society. Levine's interest is in how affordances are both constraints and capabilities, with hidden social and ideological potentialities in the world.

This is also my guiding question in each of the chapters you are about to read: what does repetition do in terms of constraints and capabilities? Or, in other words, what are its affordances? Every chapter will look into a specific kind of repetition and/or sameness, establishing connections between historical media formats and current ones, always interrogating the avenues of thought that are opened (or closed) by that specific use of repetition.

Chapter 1, *Definitions*, frames the concepts of repetition and sameness in relation to the scope of this project, drawing upon a series of philosophers that have dealt with the topic as well as on music research and linguistics. It describes how repetition affects cognition and learning, and how that in turn shapes our media consumption.

Chapter 2, *Learning to Love Your Stone*, focuses on computer games, the most repetitive of all media. Games need to be interacted with by following repetitive patterns, looking for mastery and flow. The chapter examines the pleasures and pains of playing computer games, wondering what the potential of repetition is for the player.

Chapter 3, *Sing, Goddess, of the Anger of Achilles*, looks at the ways in which storytelling structures are repetitive. I focus on form, studying repetition from the smallest to the biggest scopes, from *bits*, to *plots*, to *genre* and finally *archetypes*. The chapter also deals with seriality, variation and other schemes that keep audiences engaged.

Chapter 4, *Many Happy Returns*, is complementary to the previous one, as it focuses on the repetition of specific content in storytelling genres. What exact fragments are repeated and to what effect? I begin with the smallest units, words

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[15]Ibid., p. 8.

[16]Ibid., p. 6. Norman is a designer who adapts the idea of affordance from psychology (Gibson, 1977). In communication studies, a common definition is that of Hutchby (2001, 2006).

and phrases, and move up through hypertexts and branching narratives, adaptations and transmedial worlds.

Chapter 5, *If You Like That, You Will Love This*, considers how algorithmic recommendation systems based on sameness are changing the way we find and enjoy media products, focusing on books as a case. Personalisation strategies challenge the very notion of taste as well as the social and industrial dynamics through which our cultural desire is awakened, structured and commodified.

Chapter 6, *Good Artists Copy, Great Artists Steal*, looks at creativity and originality in a repetitive perspective. It introduces the notions of *mimesis*, *imitatio* and *combinational creativity* and applies them to a series of repetitive user practices mostly looking at the platforms of *YouTube* and *TikTok*, as well as at AI image generators.

In Praise and Criticism of Repetition acts as a brief epilogue to all chapters, pulling the affordances threads together to offer a nuanced view of how repetition is both something we can use and something we can be domesticated by in different ways. It distinguishes between producer and audience perspectives, also considering the machines as agents in this equation.

A final note about language before you move on. Repetition being its subject, this book is written in a somewhat cyclical style, as motifs reappear and threads resurface in different places, sometimes as copies, sometimes in slight variations. Please bear with it, with me. Our beliefs about the inherent goodness of novelty and change are so ingrained that it will take several cycles before I can convince you that there could be another way to look at things. In repetition, meaning gathers.[17]

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[17]Kierkegaard (2009, p. xiii).