

Sameness and Repetition in Contemporary Media Culture

What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 1:9

Modern life is such that, confronted with the most mechanical, the most stereotypical repetitions, inside and outside ourselves, we 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. In simulacra, repetition already plays upon repetitions, and difference already plays upon differences.

Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*.

Repetition's love is in truth the only happy love. Like recollection's love, it does not have the restlessness of hope, the uneasy adventurousness of discovery, but neither does it have the sadness of recollection – it has the blissful security of the moment. Hope is a new garment, stiff and starched and lustrous, but it has never been tried on, and therefore one does not know how becoming it will be or how it will fit. Recollection is a discarded garment that does not fit, however beautiful it is, for one has outgrown it. Repetition is an indestructible garment that fits closely and tenderly, neither binds nor sags.

Kierkegaard, *Repetition*.

Culture today is infecting everything with sameness.

Adorno & Horkheimer, *The Culture Industry*.

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BY

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Acknowledgements

It is perhaps a very fitting coincidence that I embarked on this project in the autumn of 2020, the year of the pandemic, the lockouts and the crushing routines. No other year has my life been so repetitive, so limited, so monotonous. All research trips were cancelled, physical presence on campus greatly reduced and for many months, the only variation came from looking at the sky and hoping for better weather, as we were in lockdown together with the rest of the world. Those should have been good conditions for writing about precisely repetition, but the various preoccupations, the home-schooling of three children and the need to move all sociality online made for bad writing companions. The project was stalled, restarted, stalled. . . again and again, so it ended up stretching through the whole pandemic, and a bit beyond.

This book has been underway for much longer than that, though, as it pulls together a lot of the threads that I had loosely spun in my previous research about digital narratives, computer games, transmediality and online cultures. Moreover, I have sneaked in a lot of the readings and aesthetic experiences which have formed me since my childhood, so the book is also a cultural biography of sorts. Like the final scene of a good old murder mystery, where the detective has gathered everybody in the library for the final reveal, the plot finally makes sense: everything is connected by repetition.

At the same time, repetition is a dangerous topic. On the one hand, everybody can see the point of such a project, there is repetition everywhere! When I told people about the project, all would eagerly suggest examples of repetitive experiences and practices from their own media consumption, pointing to the many ways in which repetition made aesthetic sense in their favourite art forms: painting, music, literature. . . . There was certainly no shortage of cases and approaches. On the other hand, if repetition and sameness are everywhere, it is very hard to set a reasonable scope for the book. Repetition is a feature of life itself, where organisms reproduce and develop similar traits; a part of culture, as objects are formed according to the patterns and rules established through the centuries; an aesthetic issue, as formal repetition exists across all modalities and media platforms; a key to understanding algorithms and computers. . . . Actually, it is also at the core of our idea of how human thought and understanding work, so it can hardly get more fundamental. With so many dimensions to it, the discussion can quickly become too abstract, too disperse, too metaphoric and superficial to be of any use, and yet, someone believed in this idea.

I thank the Carlsberg Foundation in Denmark for the generous monograph fellowship which allowed me to immerse myself in the necessary study that such a writing project requires. In the 20 odd years that have passed since I obtained my doctoral degree, this has been the first chance I have had to fully dedicate myself to scholarship. I had all but forgotten the joys of sitting long hours at libraries (even if mostly electronic this time), finding treasures in the writings of others and building up a long argument of my own. The profession of academic has become a quantified individual sport where we are measured and weighed constantly: the credits we teach, the number of students we supervise, the grant money we bring in, the publications we produce and how high our citation index is. Grants like this cannot be praised enough, for they give us time to stop, to think, to produce slow knowledge and to involve a community of peers. Without it, I would not have had the space and energy to embark on such an exploratory study, where I propose that paying attention to the aesthetics of repetition and sameness can show us something valuable about our world. I am of course not the first to do something like this. Others before me have proposed similarly open, associative approaches, writing about topics such as lines, clouds or stuff, among other risky subjects, revealing unexpected connections and insight.¹ But these are the kind of projects that do not fit peer-reviewed journals or narrow discipline boundaries.

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¹I'm referring to the wonderful books: *Lines* (Ingold 2007), *Marvelous Clouds* (Peters 2015) and *Stuff* (Miller 2010). If this book could be half as inspiring as theirs, I would be very satisfied.

article-writing style and helping make my points clearer. Maria Grajdian, for the good discussions and sharp academic eye. Victor Navarro Remesal, for his generous brain that can always spot fruitful connections and for reminding me of all the obscure games that repeat, loop and time-jump. Joleen Bloom, for her inspiring assertiveness, her gentle criticism and assistance with all things Japanese. Philip Prager, for all the playful connections to creativity research and for introducing me to Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. Liz Evans, for illuminating my text with her clarity and helping me never to forget the link between producers and audience, our business is not only about meanings. Rasmus Rex Pedersen, for sharing his knowledge so generously and making my ideas better than they were to begin with. Connie Svabo, for showing me the way in the academic career and a sharp structural eye that can bring the best out in any text. Beatriz Pérez Zapata, for a clear editing mind and always finding the best way to say things without them hurting at all.

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