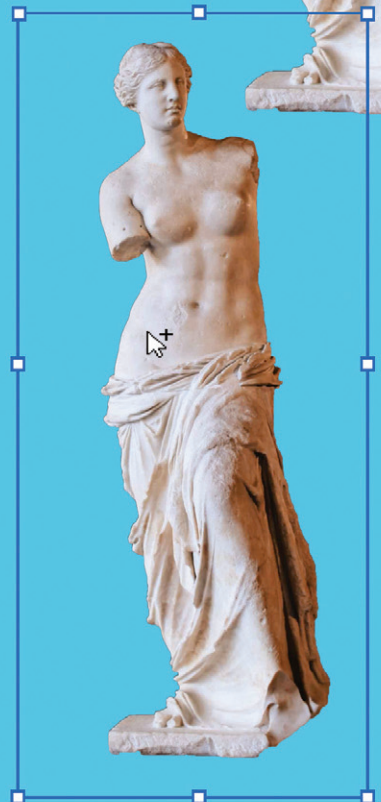


Sameness and Repetition in Contemporary Media Culture

SUSANA
TOSCA



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BOOK

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*.

Sameness and Repetition in Contemporary Media Culture

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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.

A lot of people have helped me along the way, knowingly and unknowingly. I would like to thank my former colleagues at the Department of Communication and Arts at Roskilde University, specially my research group, *Audiences and Mediated Life* for constructive dialogue, challenging discussions and open doors and hearts during my 5 years in their company: David Mathieu, Kim Schrøder, Lene Bull Christiansen, Jannie Møller Hartley, Fabian Holt, Chris Peters, Josephine Lehaff, Anja Mølle Lindelof, Troels Fibæk Bertel, Rasmus Rex Pedersen, Sander Schwartz, Martina Skrubbeltrang Mahnke, Kristian Møller, Louise Yung Nielsen, Leif Hemming Pedersen, Daniel Bach, Lotte Bornemann Petersen, Tobias Raun, Niklas Alexander Chimirri, Morten Sivertsen, Julie Vulpus and Norbert Wildermuth. But also Rikke Andreassen, Louise Philips, Lisbeth Frølund, Eva Mayerhöffer and Sanne Knudsen, among many others.

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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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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

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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.

¹Alloway (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 seem 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

²Haxthausen (2004, p. 47).

³Alloway (1958), without page number as it is an online document.

⁴Rancière (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.

⁵Adorno and Horkheimer (1944, p. 94).

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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 Pastiche, 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 Ndaianis who updated the idea of the neo-baroque in her *Neo-Baroque aesthetics and*

⁶Ibid., p. 96.

⁷Jameson (1991).

⁸Azuma (2009).

⁹Eco (1985, p. 161).

¹⁰Calabrese (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

¹¹Miller (1982, p. 3)

¹²The 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.

¹³Levine (2015, p. 5).

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. xiii.

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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

¹⁵Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁶Ibid., 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

¹⁷Kierkegaard (2009, p. xiii).

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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.

14 *Sameness and Repetition in Contemporary Media Culture*

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 Ndaliansis 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 agonic 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 Klastrup 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 Klastrup (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).

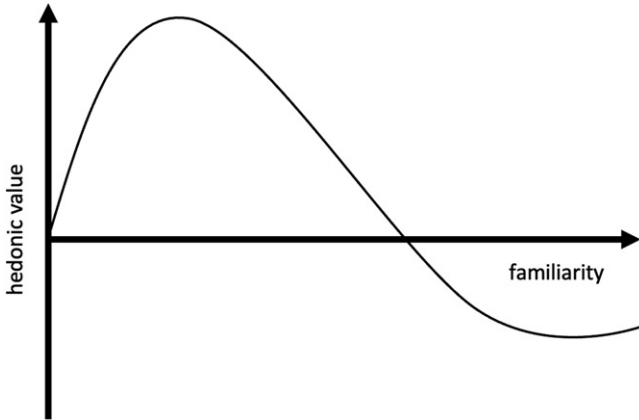


Fig. 2. Wundt Curve.⁷³

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.

Chapter 2

Learning to Love Your Stone: The Aesthetics and Experience of Computer Games

In old Greek mythology, Sisyphus was a king who behaved dishonourably in various ways: lying, murdering guests, abusing power and cheating the gods, including Death himself. Finally, Zeus punished him by condemning him to rolling a huge boulder up a hill in Hades. As soon as he reached the top, the rock would roll all the way down so that he had to start rolling it up again. The myth can be interpreted in various ways, such as the impossibility of avoiding death, the dangers of crossing the gods or the importance of never giving up, in more modern, positive psychology versions. It has, however, mostly become a popular way to describe meaningless tasks that are impossible to complete. Does this ring a bell? If you are a player, maybe you can already see how computer games could be a digital version of the Sisyphus hill.¹

One of the first computer games I ever played was *Space Invaders*, sometime in the late 1980s. The neighbourhood bar had acquired a second-hand cabinet, which was shoved into a corner behind the table football and among the litter of paper napkins on the floor. The sceptical clientele, mostly pensioners, did not touch it, preferring their dominoes or a game of cards. A friend dragged me there after school one day to look at ‘the machine’, a big box with a blue control panel with yellow flying saucers and Chewbacca-like alien shapes around the screen. I remember hesitating. Arcades (far away at the centre of town) were forbidden territory, since our parents feared that they were slot machines in disguise. However, we reasoned, there was only one innocent cabinet here, with no protruding arms, flashing lights or suspicious fruits. Surely the owner, who was also

¹There is actually a literal game version of Sisyphus’ struggle, made by designer Pippin Barr as part of his ‘Let’s Play: Ancient Greek Punishment Series’. There is no way of winning the game; you can only escape by closing the application (<https://pippinbarr.com/lets-play-ancient-greek-punishment/info/>).



our neighbour, would not instal something that could get us in trouble? There was no harm in giving it a try. We agreed that I would go first.

I inserted a coin as instructed by the screen text and waited. The black screen then changed to a scene with four house-shaped blocks at the bottom, under which a little cannon could be moved from left to right using two buttons in the control panel. There was also a 'fire' button, so you needed both your hands active at the same time. On the top part of the screen, five rows of aliens hovered over what we understood were my defenses, and immediately started moving from side to side while shooting down at me. The cartoony noise of the shots was inscribed into a background four-note rhythm loop that I found chilling, an ominous bass that gave me an unexplainable sense of urgency.

The first time, I did not live long. I was overwhelmed by the difficulty of both guarding myself from the alien fire and shooting at them effectively to avoid their breaching my defenses. A minute later, my friend suffered a similar fate, and just like that, our two coins were spent. We would return the next day, and the next, sacrificing a big part of our pocket money to this altar of coolness. There was something really important about saving the world from the alien menace, and we certainly put in the hours and got much better, reaching scores high enough to sometimes inscribe our name in the list of glory. Even today, the four-note loop gets my pulse racing, my survival instincts activated.

Space Invaders (in Spain unceremoniously called 'matamarcianos'/'martian killer') had no actual story, no edifying moral and nobody really missed it. We had no desire to know who the aliens were, why they were attacking or where our base was situated. The important thing was that it was our task to stop them. Like *Star Wars*, *Gatchaman* or *The War of the Worlds*, the game managed to tap into the zone of our imagination that had to do with spaceships, heroes, flying battles, laser sounds and the fear of the black, black void.

To me, the most frustrating (and at the same time alluring) part of the game was that the aliens just kept on coming, wave after wave, undeterred. No matter how many I had already killed, there were always more, and always faster. The beat would accelerate and I, regardless of how feverishly I punched the buttons, would be overrun. It was a last stand, a hill to climb up over and over, like Sisyphus'.²

If you have never played computer games, you might be thinking now that it sounds like a drab entertainment prospect to submit yourself to a monotonous act that can only end in defeat. Actually, when the gods want to chastise someone, they choose repetitive tortures, like in the case of Sisyphus, Tantalus or Prometheus.³ Why would players show a perverted penchant towards a pointless and even self-destructive act? Jesper Juul notes that games are a paradoxical art

²In the arcade age, most games were about delaying defeat for as long as possible.

³I became aware of this coincidence by reading Terrasa Torres (2021, p. 91).

form (like tragedy), where we willingly seek what would otherwise seem an unpleasant experience. Failure motivates us to improve our skills and is a source of different kinds of pleasure⁴, that do not necessarily need to be about positive emotions.⁵

Indeed, there was something entrancing about trying to take yet another alien before the inevitable disaster, about lasting longer with every game, my fingers growing one with the buttons, moving without me having to think. This strong allure certainly goes against the modernist roots of our understanding of what an aesthetic experience should offer, with its focus on the special, the sublime, the out-of-this world. Instead of being bored or alienated by the repetitive activity, I was entranced, like many players before and after me. As we will see in this chapter, entrancement is key to the aesthetic experience of playing computer games, which is made possible by different kinds of repetition. So much so that I would argue that computer games are essentially a repetitive art form, as several game researchers have noticed in relation to such central topics as game mechanics, replayability or ritual.

But why does intense repetition generate positive affect instead of leading to desperation or even madness? How can we thrive in such monotony? We can turn again to Sisyphus, whose story is also well known through Albert Camus' 1942 existentialist retelling, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where the struggle in the hill becomes the scope of human life, reduced to the ultimate absurdity. According to Camus, human life is characterised by suffering and irrationality. Most of the things we do at our factories or office desks are meaningless. We just repeat the same kind of futile actions without reflecting upon them, even though nothing can ever be finished, or achieved. We live on, hoping for a better future that only can bring us death, which is final, since there is no god. The universe is silent. Indeed, if human existence is so bleak and futile, the only coherent answer would seem to be to kill ourselves. But even though Camus frames his essay around this dilemma, he ends up arguing against suicide. He rather wants to show how it is possible to choose to live anyway, and through this choice actually create a meaning which life does not possess by itself. According to Camus, it is possible to live if we become lucid, that is, refuse self-deception and look absurdity in the face. Yes, our actions do not have a transcendental meaning, but we can still live and be masters of our own destiny. In other words, the rather dark story ends up in a hopeful note:

I leave Sisyphus at the bottom of the mountain! We always find our own burden again. But Sisyphus can show us the higher fidelity that negates the gods and elevates rocks. He too considers that all is well. This universe henceforth without a

⁴See Jesper Juul's *The Art of Failure* (2013).

⁵In fact, negative emotions are also a catalisator for game pleasure, as Mateo Terrasa Torres carefully unfolds in his PhD thesis *El alma Oscura del Juego: Teoría y Motivos Recurrentes de la Dificultad como Estética Ludoficcional* (2021). Repetition turns out to be a crucial factor to explain different kinds of frustrating experiences related to games.

master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each grain of that stone, each mineral flake of that mountain full of night, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.⁶

Liberated from the crippling need to find transcendence, Sisyphus here has accepted absurdity and can therefore enjoy the content of his days. I interpret the mineral flake that 'in itself forms a world' as whatever activity a human being decides to dedicate themselves to, a light in the meaningless universe full of night. This activity can be digging, writing, sweeping, serving food, gardening, mothering or gaming; anything that is done being lucid and present.

Perhaps one can question the idoneity of discussing computer games through existentialism.⁷ What would Camus have made out of the act of playing computer games? He might have seen them as one of the false illusions with which human beings fill their lives, as anaesthetic entertainment. Or he might see them as something in between illusion and lucidity, since playing computer games, like making art, is a futile endeavour that is deliberately chosen, and can therefore cultivate our awareness of the absurd condition of life.⁸ When we decide to spend our time shooting alien spaceships instead of toiling away at whatever productive role we have in society (as students, as workers, as parents. . .), we could interpret it as a small revolution, a refusal to blindly comply with an alienating system where some activities are artificially considered more transcendent than others. By choosing an activity that is explicitly marked as intranscendent, we are (maybe) able to look at our condition in the face. There is a whole world in the stone we choose and a lucidity in learning to grip it in the best possible way, roll it up the hill and see it fall. Again. And again.

This might be wishful thinking though. An attempt to claim a higher form of consciousness for gamers that somehow redeems an otherwise suspect hobby. Maybe we need to look more closely at the medium of video games and its dependence on repetition before we can make any such claims. It is certainly good

⁶This is my own translation from the French original (Camus, 1942) in Gallimard's edition from 1993, page 168.

⁷Although that is exactly what Gualeni and Vella do in their book *Virtual Existentialism* where they examine how we experience our existence within virtual environments, of which games are one kind. McKenzie Wark also turns to Camus' Sisyphus when discussing the game *Katamari Damacy* in his book *Gamer Theory* (2007). In this game, the player has to literally roll a ball to collect different kinds of objects. Here, Sisyphus is part of an argument about the topographic versus the topologic, where the logic of the digital subordinates that of the analog (pp. 79–85).

⁸I am on purpose ignoring debates about magic circles, playing games seriously or games having consequences in real life. I am aware of this scholarship but the point here is to foreground the existential quality of the gaming activity.

style to present some evidence before asking a reader to accept a conclusion. If this was a crime novel, we could cry out: ‘cherchez la femme’,⁹ or even ‘The Butler did it!’,¹⁰ and look for either women or butlers (even better, a female butler), in order to get to the bottom of the matter. The matter being computer games, we could start with a formalistic approach: what is repeated in computer games? However, I would like to not only talk about game mechanics but also include the players’ experience.¹¹ I am inspired by Walther and Larsen and their work on the phenomenology of game feel, where the body of players is the site of rhythmic interaction, a point I will return to later.¹²

There and Back Again

Repetition in games is a cyclical affair at many levels. Indeed, like any skill-based activity, games work upon the logic of trial and error. If you think back to the first few times you tried to ride the bicycle of the first chapter, they were probably rather clumsy, maybe even resulting in a fall, until your senses and the right muscles learnt to collaborate. Most computer games require motor skill mastery, which takes time and effort to acquire, as well as multiple fails. Trial and error also works at higher levels of abstraction in this media form. Let us illustrate this by using an example from the *Super Mario* game series, the legendary platform game which many people will have encountered in one version or another.¹³ In *Super Mario Bros*, the protagonist plumber has to rescue Princess Peach from her kidnapper, Bowser, overcoming a series of obstacles in the form of different levels. The player controls Mario in order to jump, run, collect coins and power-ups and defeat enemies in a rapid pace movement forward, which sometimes follows a fixed path and in other games allows for exploration of a world-like map. Each level represents a closed world that has to be ‘cleared’, typically with a boss fight at the end. Mario has a number of helpers (like his brother Luigi) that also can be

⁹A sentence that is repeated several times in *Les Mohicans de Paris* (Alexandre Dumas, 1854), and which has become a cliché of women being the root of all evil in pulp detective novels.

¹⁰A popular cliché of detective novels, associated with Mary Rinehart’s novel *The Door* (1930).

¹¹The academic study of computer games can be said to have started with a radical interest in form, which came to be known as *ludology*, even though its proponents were not an organised movement in any way. From its beginning shrouded in controversy, ludology aims to establish games as a separate medium worth of study in its own terms, and not through the standards of older art forms like narrative. Espen Aarseth’s manifesto-like editorial in the first issue of the journal *Gamestudies* is certainly a foundational text for this current (Aarseth, 2001).

¹²Walther and Larsen (2020).

¹³The games are part of the *Mario* franchise (Nintendo), the best-selling video game franchise of all time with dozens of versions of the *Super Mario* games since the first one appeared in 1985. There are also other media, like films anime or comics, spinoff games and all sorts of merchandise.

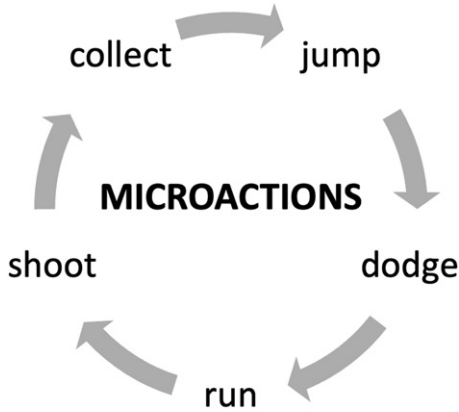


Fig. 1. Example of Microactions.

player characters in many of the games, as well as different kinds of enemies that reappear across levels and games.

In any game, there is a micro level of short actions, most often solved with one click of a button (or combination of buttons, like in the case of a specific fight combo) to be mastered in what Grodal calls ‘repetitive rehearsal’¹⁴ and Walther and Larsen call ‘the dance’.¹⁵ This happens very much at the motor skill level. These actions are the elementary blocks of gameplay, things like walking, running, shooting, jumping, or even looking (Fig. 1). This is a very anthropomorphic list that applies to the mostly humanoid avatars controlled by the player. However, simple actions can also be about manipulating more abstract objects, like moving our spaceship from left to right in the *Space Invaders* example that opened this chapter.

These *microactions* are usually the subject of game tutorials, either elaborate or in the form of a few instruction screenshots. In *Super Mario Bros*, the basics are not too hard to learn, but it takes some time to internalise them so the player does not need to think about them constantly. It is easy to run forward and jump, but it takes a bit of practice to jump at the right moment to avoid a moving enemy, or to fall precisely on top of a pipe in order to get down into it. Experienced players have a seamless style of movement with no hesitation, while new ones stop and restart in robotic ways that often end in failure, here represented as falling or getting caught by an enemy, which results in the loss of one’s life and the need to start again. While interacting through microactions, repetition is key to attain

¹⁴Grodal (2003, p. 148).

¹⁵Walther and Larsen (2020, p. 16). They describe three levels of game feel also divided into micro, meso and macro like I propose here (called *dance*, *learn* and *inhabit*), but their focus is on how players use the controllers to attain the different levels of the game feel, not on repetition. In their model, *dance* is based on temporality, *learn* on spatiality and *inhabit* synthetics both.

proficiency. Once we master these basic gameplay building blocks, they become subconscious operations allowing us to turn our awareness to a higher level type of action. In musical and rhythmic games, like *Guitar Hero* or *Taiko no Tatsujin*, this level is all-important; we need to become one with the music and the image prompts if we are ever going to complete a level without fail.

In relation to games, I suggest we call the next level *mesoactions*, defined as those that involve sequences of microactions and allow for engaging in some form of strategy play. Depending on the game genre, these mesoactions can take the form of a level to be traversed like in *Super Mario*, a round in a multiplayer shooter like *Counter-Strike* or a specific quest in a roleplaying game like *World of Warcraft*. Mesoactions are characterised by being more stretched in time than microactions. The player will typically have an opportunity to pause, often to save, so that the whole trajectory of the game becomes manageable, divided up into sizeable chunks that can be completed separately.¹⁶ Unlike microactions, mesoactions can be carried out in different ways (Fig. 2). This is especially obvious in games with a strategic component, like any battle simulator or the aforementioned *Counter-Strike*, because the presence of other people to play against automatically heightens the indeterminacy factor of any kind of game outcome. But this is even true (if less crucial) of a rigid platform game like *Super Mario Bros*, where you can clear your levels in different ways. You can decide if you want to risk taking all the coins or not, if you want to avoid enemies or attempt to kill them, or even if you want to prioritise speed over safety. Even if you avoid taking a conscious decision, no two traversals of a level will be the same because you will not jump the exact amount of times at the exact same place. That is, mesoactions allow for variation; new combinations of microaction sequences that can be attempted in the case of failure, even if the mission always stays the same: get to the end of the level. In the Walther and Larsen game feel system, this level is called *Learn* which they exemplify by dissecting the camping strategy in *Counter-Strike Global Offensive* and showing how it disturbs the rhythm of the game.

Finally, at a macrolevel, the whole game comes together through the aggregated repetitions of the previous levels, which Walther and Larsen call *Inhabit*: ‘The periodic riffs of controller handling, the rhythmic acting of tools, engagements and strategies all merge into a punctuated half note . . . the rhythm of play is both a reflection of strategies and (a kind of) music made from moment to moment responses to game situations . . . Finally, “Inhabit” offered a synthesis of the former two levels holding a two-folded inscription where tools, actions, and strategies carve into the player’s Body-Subject the same way the player’s actions and strategies carve into the game and its ecology’.¹⁷

A further repetitive macro-dimension is the fact that the game can be replayed. Again, this varies a lot in relation to different genres. Multiplayer games with a

¹⁶Although many game genres operate with time pressure or a play structure of intensive rhythm, where decisions have to be taken on the fly, like, for instance, in versus fighting games *Mortal Kombat* style.

¹⁷Walther and Larsen (2020, p. 23).

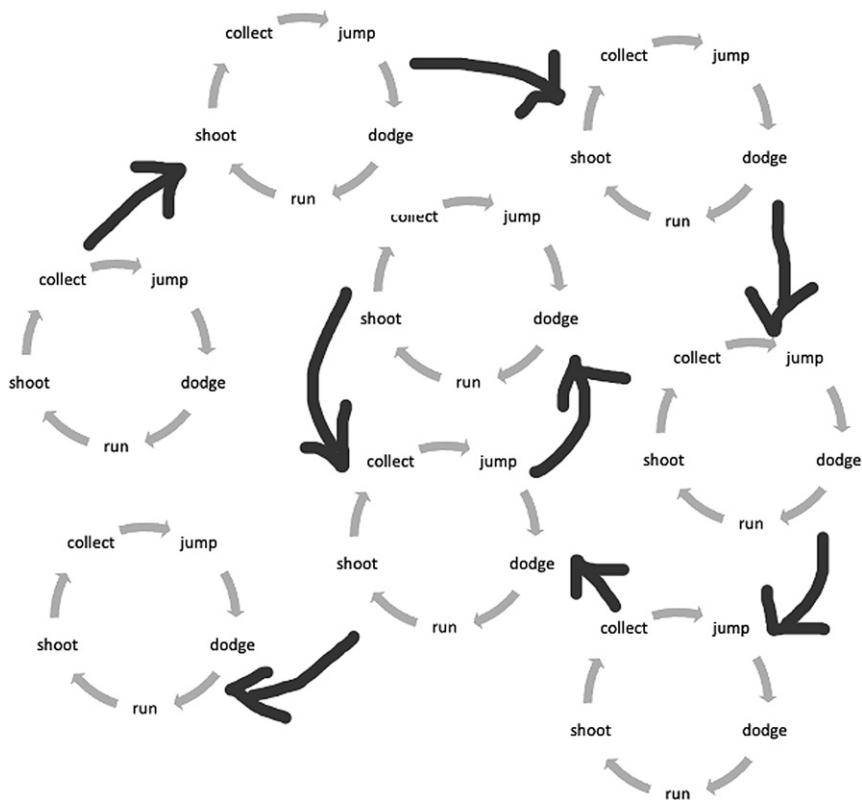


Fig. 2. Example of Mesoactions: Strategic Movement Through a Level.

high strategic component, like the aforementioned *Counter-Strike* can, like chess or many other board games, be replayed infinitely, for every game presents a unique challenge depending on the skill of the participants. For more linear progression games, replayability for pleasure alone is less straightforward.¹⁸ Considering the significant amount of time that it takes to play through a typical

¹⁸Jesper Juul proposed the concept of progression games for those games where challenges are serially introduced, and the player needs to complete them in a (more or less) linear way. Progression games often have walkthroughs (Juul, 2002).

game (*Super Mario* players report 22 hours on average), a replay is a much heavier commitment than deciding to see a favourite film one more time.¹⁹

To make replayability more attractive, many progression games incorporate rewards, that is, design features understood as extra incentives that are unlocked upon completion in order to encourage players to play the game again. In several titles of the *Super Mario* series, an endgame reward is to be able to play as other characters or the opportunity to explore new worlds and levels. In *Super Mario Kart*, the game lets you improve your previous levels, appealing to some players' desire for perfection.²⁰ A very common way to create replay value noted by Hanson is to unlock a multiplayer mode, thus incorporating a hugely variable element: other players, like *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, where players will be able to unlock rewards for the multiplayer game if they play through the story campaign.

There is also a specific genre of video games built around repetition that we could call time loop games, following Navarro-Remesal and García-Catalán.²¹ Games like 'Save the Date' and 'Force Code' force the player to 'repeat, explore and analyse past events', memorising and learning from them, 'focusing on the possible differences caused by different actions as well as the constants, obsessively running through the same scene again and again to unravel its mysteries'.²² Here, it is the whole story that changes according to the player's decisions, and in fact, the games need to be replayed several times to investigate all the possible effects of one's actions and find the best resolution. This makes them closer to narrative experiences like time loop movies or visual novels, which we discuss in Chapter 4.

I hope it has become clear how the repetition of short or long sequences is an essential part of the design and the experience of playing video games in ways that make no sense in other art forms. Most aesthetic or formal approaches to video games criticism take for granted that repetition is a necessary design feature and a cornerstone of the act of playing itself. However, it is more rare that repetition is signalled out as a specific aesthetic category to be looked at closely. Perhaps it seems too obvious, although there is a small body of literature I will be drawing from in the following discussion.²³

Upon closing this formal section, I want to again stress that the enormous variety of computer game genres make it hard to make assumptions that are valid for the whole spectrum of what can qualify as a computer game. It is not my objective to be exhaustive in such a manner, but to point to a series of ways in which a closer scrutiny of repetition as a concept can illuminate our

¹⁹The 22 hours average is calculated according to a survey amongst 151 GameFaqs users who had played *Super Mario Bros. Deluxe for Switch* (<https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/switch/248068-new-super-mario-bros-u-deluxe/answers/1-how-long-does-it-take-to-beat-this-game>).

²⁰Hanson (2014, p. 208).

²¹Navarro-Remesal and García-Catalán (2015).

²²Navarro-Remesal and García-Catalán (2015, p. 207).

²³Nonetheless, it has been the object of attention in Grodal (2003), Gazzard and Peacock (2011), Hanson (2014), and Remesal, V. N. and García-Catalán, S. (2015).

understanding of this particular cultural form and of contemporary media aesthetics in general.

Game Over. Do You Want to Reload From the Last Save Point?

After the previous section, centred on form, it is appropriate to move on to meaning, and ask ourselves what the semantic function of the different repetitions can be, as well as what kinds of experiences emerge for a player. As explained above, the only way of getting through a game is to repeat a number of actions at different levels. The interesting thing about engaging with games is that every time we start a new one, we need to figure out what our interaction possibilities are. In other words, it is not obvious what can be done and how. A game like *Super Mario 3D World* exploits this beautifully, by introducing the player to new mechanics at every stage, and then moving on organically. In other media forms, we are never in doubt as to the interaction pattern: every book that I read is going to have pages that I turn, even if the content is unique. However, every new game will have me scrambling for reference points to get started: how do I walk?, can I shoot?, how much of the map can I see?, what happens if I press this button? So much is always new in games, despite some genre conventions being repeated across similar games (like, for example, using the WASD keys for movement). As Kristine Jørgensen argues, game interfaces are not transparent at all, and every game must communicate the conditions for its own gameplay through visual (and other) cues.²⁴ This requires every player to go through a learning process that should be facilitated by a design that allows for initial fumbling or even directly thematises this process through guides, tutorials, test-levels and other design features. The necessity of repetition as stepping stones of the learning process makes both Grodal and Hanson remark that games are based on an aesthetics of repetition. Grodal identifies a series of stages for this learning process, ranging from unfamiliarity and challenge, to mastery to automation.²⁵

However, in accordance with the nuances presented in the previous section, I would rather argue that automation is only relevant for microactions, while it is crucial that meso- and macroactions can present a cognitive challenge to the player. Consider chess, at the microlevel; it is important to internalise the movement of the pieces, while at the mesolevel of a specific opening or even whole game of chess, it is absolutely crucial that the interaction remains non-automatic, to present a strategic challenge. This is very much related to the role of repetition in learning processes, as explained in Chapter 1.

For Hanson, the centrality of repetition in games is linked to their nature as a highly temporal art form. He builds upon Jesper Juul to affirm that games are state machines where the player's input forces a change that the machine has to respond to, causing another change of state and so on, in a series of concatenated loops. This temporal perspective allows Hanson to convincingly tackle the topic

²⁴Jørgensen (2013, p. 8).

²⁵Grodal (2013, p. 148).

of predictability, which could be said to be about repetition seen from the system's side. If the player is to optimise their actions, they need to be able to guess how they will affect the game system status in the future. For instance, the carnivorous plants in *Super Mario* hide and emerge at regular intervals, which the player learns (maybe by being eaten a couple of times, in trial and error) in order to traverse the level safely.

The convention of a player having several 'lives' in video games is also a way for the system to acknowledge that the player is always learning, or trying, a process that needs failure as fuel. Instead of being expelled from a game, there is always a new opportunity in which 'a player is given more time to learn the mechanics of play'.²⁶ Hanson explains this as the game resetting to an earlier state, most likely a lesser difficulty level than the point where the player lost their life. This segmentation of games into repeatable actions that can be tackled separately is made possible by the feature of 'saving', where the progress of the player is recorded at intervals. Death sends the player to the previous save point, and not the beginning of the game. Some games keep track of this automatically, others make players seek out (and activate) save points themselves, thus establishing temporal rhythms that make the game palatable as a series of (more or less reasonably long) fragments. You need to keep on playing until you get to the next save point. This is also one of the features that indicates the difficulty level of a game. Some like it extremely hard, like the lovers of the legendary *Rogue* game from the 1980s,²⁷ where players would lose all progress if they were killed at any point of the long dungeon exploration, having to start from scratch with a new character. But even without going to extremes, survival modes that the player can opt into are popular, like in *Fallout 4*, where the exploration of its bleak world becomes much more difficult when you have a limited amount of supplies and can only sleep when you find an actual bed. Even in mainstream games like *Minecraft*, there is a play mode where you cannot respawn if dead, here called 'hardcore'.²⁸ The mercy of respawning comes sometimes together with the punishment of losing all your gear or having to recover your own body, trekking alone to the very same perilous spot where you lost your life.

²⁶Hanson (2014, p. 207).

²⁷*Rogue* was released by Epyx in 1980 and inspired many other roguelike-games.

²⁸In *Minecraft*, there are two more game modes apart from hardcore. The default game mode is called 'survival', where you have to find resources and kill monsters, but can respawn if killed. In 'creative' mode resources are unlimited and you cannot be killed.

The very idea of respawning evokes religious imagery, and even Buddhist reincarnation. In connection with repetition, it is specially evocative of Mircea Eliade's concept of the eternal return, which resonates with computer games at several levels.²⁹ Eliade has been widely criticised for conflating too many disparate myths together and for overgeneralising, as his idea of sacred time is not as widely applicable as he would have us think. However, in the context of this chapter, empirical accuracy matters less, since he can be helpful to point to the cyclical ways in which games fuel our imagination.

Eliade argues that most ancient civilisations think that the state of the universe follows a cosmic cycle, ending in destruction and then restarting. Even though monotheistic religions introduce the idea of a definite ending of the world, this does not entirely do away with the cyclical return from other mythologies.³⁰ There is still a certain nostalgia for the mythical time of the beginning of things, even in our desecralised world. Eliade explains how in the archaic world, there are no 'profane' activities, 'every act which has a definite meaning – hunting, fishing, agriculture; games, conflicts, sexuality, in some way participates in the sacred'.³¹ Everything matters. This is also true of the simplified world of computer games, where the complexity of the real world becomes reduced to a limited set of actions that need to be performed again and again to get to the end of the cycle, and that is restarted with every death.

Computer games are to an exaggerated degree keen on tales of conquest and colonisation, which Eliade explains as 'the transformation of chaos into cosmos by the divine act of Creation', referring to the Viking colonisation³² of Iceland. There are countless games that start with a chaotic universe to be organised, terrain to be conquered, land to be cultivated, civilisations expanded and made bigger. All ancient societies have archetypal models of conflict that are reenacted in different ways. One of them is the archetype of war or the duel, which is a driving force behind a lot of games, the repetition of armed conflict as the ultimate act. In Eliade's paradigm, these examples reveal the 'primitive' ontological conception: an object or an act becomes real only insofar as it imitates or repeats an archetype. Thus, reality is acquired solely through repetition or participation; everything which lacks an exemplary model is 'meaningless', understood as lacking reality, a Platonic echo that might be too convenient.³³ However, the important point here is that the act of repetition of paradigmatic gestures erases time, since it allows us to connect directly to the primordial mythical moment.

²⁹Other researchers have seen a connection of Mircea Eliade to video games. Most notably, R.W. Guyker's PhD about video games as the contemporary expression of myth, part of the 'media that keeps myth timely, while myth keeps media engaged with the timeless' (Guyker, 2016, p. 405). The connection of Eliade to video games has also been briefly noted by researchers discussing their status as mythic narratives (Wagner, 2014a; Weight, 2008) or their connection to sacred spaces (Wagner, 2014b).

³⁰Eliade (1959, p. 129).

³¹Ibid., p. 28.

³²See fx Mukherjee (2017, p. 10).

³³Ibid., p. 34.

People go about their profane lives without meaning (to return to Camus), and once in a while connect to this sacred time, ‘the modality of the gods’. Could this also be one of the functions of games as repetition machines? I do not in any way want to suggest that games have a religious or sacred function, but that the kind of actions and available struggles become transcendent in their very necessity, connecting to an ‘epic’ past. The game means more than whatever is represented on screen, even though players themselves do not actually agree on which kinds of toil are meaningful or not.

Grind

As a simple internet search can reveal, opinions differ as to which degree of repetition in games is the best. Some are looking for the hardest possible challenge, a world where mistakes are harshly punished, but where completion gives a strong sense of achievement. Others are keen on becoming better at playing, but don’t want to halt their progress every time they miss a hard jump combo or cannot shoot an elusive enemy. An immense existing variety of game genres and subgenres caters to any kind of preference along the difficulty spectrum, so every person finds the amount of necessary repetition that is best for them. I am not referring to skill here, since repeated exposure to any game or genre will make any player become better at certain actions, but to the fact that repetition has an affective dimension that cannot be objectively explained. Let me illustrate it with another example.

The 20-year-old game *The Sims* invites players to manage the life of regular people in a cartoony suburban universe not unlike the one depicted in the film *The Truman Show*. Like virtual pets, sims have to be regularly managed, their bodily needs covered. Will Wright’s idea of creating a simulation where the player has to think strategically about everyday life was met with scepticism by his company, who could not see why players would want to deal with mundane issues when other games offered them the possibility of impersonating heroes in exciting fictional universes. But Wright pushed on and the game was eventually released to big success.

I was at the time sympathetic to the idea of the game, specially because it is favoured by female players of all ages. I also found its design pleasant to the senses, with its bright colours, close perspective and the lively gibberish of Simlish.³⁴ However, despite my best intentions, I never really got into it. In order to keep my sims alive and well functioning, I had to constantly manage resources, schedule maintenance and acquire objects. I seemed to spend all my time cleaning bathrooms, maintaining personal hygiene and making sure that I owned enough things so that someone would want to be my friend. Except for this last

³⁴The fictional language that the characters speak in the game.

consumerist issue, the game resonated suspiciously with my own real-world situation, which had just changed a lot around the same couple of months in which I played the game. I had gone from a relatively careless existence as a seemingly eternal student to a new life of adult responsibilities: a demanding career job, a mortgage and a live-in partner whom I had to negotiate housework with. Why would I want to unclog toilets or go to work *also* in a game? Not only that, why would I want to do it over and over again? It was a nightmare of reproductive labour in digital version, a series of domestic chores that never ends, because it is reset everyday at dawn, a stone you can never stop rolling.³⁵

To be fair, these tasks were not any worse than the grinding I was used to from my main game of choice at the time, *Everquest*, where I, like everyone else, had had to level up by fighting easy mobs and had strategised to maximise the obtention of experience points (XPs). However, the fact that the grinding in *The Sims* was thematised as housework made the game unbearable to play for me then. Maybe because I all my life had purposefully attempted to escape the housewife fate expected of women from my background.³⁶ For many others, domesticity did not seem to be a problem. *The Sims* has sold millions of units through its many expansions, and it still has a big player base. The game has also changed since its launch, now supporting various formats of sandbox play and allowing fans to build all sorts of creative storytelling around it, turning it into a kind of possibility engine. I got stuck at micro-management, while other players thrived and were able to carve creative paths for themselves.³⁷

This anecdote serves to illustrate the fact that repetition in games is not just a mechanics, a structural feature to be interpreted and enjoyed in the same way by all players. While the actions of shooting aliens in *Space Invaders* and maintaining a hygiene standard in *The Sims* are equally tedious per se, I perceived the first as the smallest part of a rhythmic performance in a highly addictive experience, and the second as aggravating. *The Sims* fans and I would not agree on what to call 'grind'.

Grinding, understood as 'performing repetitive and tedious tasks',³⁸ is a well-known gameplay mechanism, that Zagal et al. have even identified as a dark design pattern, meaning that players are forced to spend unreasonable amounts of time on an activity that offers little challenge or reward.³⁹ Grinding has become an accepted design feature of certain genres, while at the same time it is looked down upon because it favours time invested over skill.⁴⁰ This is an ambiguous criticism. Some grind in games is just that, an activity that takes time but doesn't require any particular ability, so in theory anybody can do it, and do it well. It is

³⁵The concept of reproductive labour was introduced by feminist scholar Mariarosa Dalla Costa in her book *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (co-authored with Selma James). It refers to the unpaid housework necessary for capitalism to function.

³⁶As the eldest daughter of a working-class catholic family in Spain.

³⁷The franchise is very much alive. *The Sims 5* has been announced to launch soon, this time in multiplayer mode.

³⁸Nakamura (2009).

³⁹In their article 'Dark Patterns in the Design of Games', from 2012.

⁴⁰Particularly multiplayer online roleplaying games.

impossible to get better at grinding, it is just something to get over with as quickly as possible. On the other hand, this attitude could also be a sort of elitism of the talented, for activities that anyone can do are surely not very worthwhile? Game designers would of course disagree, for you can sell more games that can be played by as many people as possible.

Moreover, players can sometimes pay or even cheat their way out of grinding by hacking the games to automatise certain routines. But even taking the long way through it, can we learn to love the grind? Can we, like Camus' Sisyphus, look at our stone and think ourselves happy? Aren't our video game toils a kind of masochism in disguise? Maybe we can. In any case, I have had players of *Minecraft Realms* happily tell me how they had to 'grind all their way up again' after they had lost all their gear and their forts had been wiped out by their own friends when their game had turned to total war. This was incredibly boring, they said with a smile on their faces, but well deserved, since they hadn't respected the rules they had agreed on. Wasn't it terrible? Nah, they answered, we just were together in Discord hearing music and chatting while we hacked and built for several days.

Actually, games might not be an entirely pleasurable affair, as Torill Mortensen and Víctor Navarro-Remesal have argued. 'Playing does not create a continuous state of joy; rather, players endure longer stretches of frustration, struggle, and even physical pain, broken by glorious moments of getting it right, of sudden relief from struggle'.⁴¹ This is no doubt a controversial statement in Game Studies, overwhelmingly focused on theorising the gratification of overcoming challenges. Nonetheless, their concept of purposeful suffering does complement other 'negative' approaches such as the already mentioned idea of games as machines of failure proposed by Juul, and Costikyan's observation of games needing a degree of uncertainty to fight against. In fact, games would put the player in such stress that they do not offer 'consolation but relief through both victory and confrontation'.⁴² This sounds very extreme, but Navarro-Remesal and Mortensen have a compelling argument where they relate the frustrations of playing games to Roger Caillois idea of *ilinx*, which is about purposefully losing our balance and experiencing vertigo, as it happens, for instance, in a roller coaster. Caillois had been invoked in relation to games mostly in relation to his concept of *ludus*, referring to rule-bound play, but his *ilinx* brings the body into the equation in a way that resonates with more phenomenological approaches to the experience of playing video games.

So by willingly choosing to play video games, we agree to enter a state of what Remesal and Bergillos call 'ludic suffering', which they relate to the Buddhist concept of Dukkha. While playing, there is always something missing, something waiting to be achieved, as we strive to make things different than they are. Ludic suffering is a vital part of the act of play.⁴³ What I like about their argument is that it acknowledges suffering as an essential part of human life, understood as

⁴¹Mortensen and Navarro Remesal (2019, p. 28).

⁴²Ibid., p. 30.

⁴³Remesal and Bergillos (2021, p. 103).

lack and striving. We tend to otherwise understand suffering in terms of something painful, impossible to bear or even related to existential tragedy. This other kind of everyday suffering is not the huge rock up the huge hill as punishment for insulting the Gods. For us, the common mortals, a smaller rock in a smaller hill is not only more relatable, but it also opens for an understanding of pleasure that can include this compulsion to create change.

Indeed, playing is wanting, having a stake in what is unfolding. Katherine Isbister links the responsibility that we take when we make choices in games to the emotions that they can generate.⁴⁴ Good decisions and good performances will lead to feelings of pride, while defeat might make us angry, or desperate. This range of emotions is not accessible through engagement with interpretive-only media forms, but is directly related to the constant need for (repeated) interactions that characterise games. Isbister, like many other game theorists before her, turns to the theory of flow put forward by Csikszentmihalyi to explain the highly satisfying psychological state of players immersed in play.⁴⁵

Flow, Interrupted

Flow, or the feeling of optimal experience, refers to the state of concentration that we experience when fully engaged in an activity that we enjoy very much. It can be any activity that occupies our awareness, requires skill, has clear goals and where we are required to exert some kind of action. It has to be challenging enough so that having control is not just a given, it would make it boring, but not so hard that we cannot keep up. We need to be so concentrated that we momentarily forget about everything else, also losing self-consciousness and maybe even experiencing a distorted passing of time, either very quickly or very slowly.⁴⁶ It could be any kind of activity, from playing an instrument or a sport, to gardening or climbing.

It is easy to see how the games where we can choose a level of difficulty that adapts to the degree of our ability can be excellent flow machines. Many games will also have a difficulty progression incorporated in their design, where the first few levels are easy and the difficulty gradually rises so that the player can learn the ropes. Flow theory goes well with the kind of ‘continuous’ way of playing characteristic of the platform games I have used as examples in this chapter, like *Super Mario* or even *Space Invaders*. A continuous loop of engagement in a series of quick repetitive actions is the natural way of interaction in the platform and action genres, where time pressure is usually a factor. It does translate less appropriately to other kinds of gameplay, like strategy games, adventure games or role-playing games (RPGs), where ‘breaks’ are worked into the gameplay so that we can think before acting. Here, the flow would be more in the change

⁴⁴Isbister (2017, p. 3).

⁴⁵The use of the theory of flow in video game theory and design has been criticised among others by Soderman (2021) who points to the pernicious ideological consequences of privileging flow. Here it is still useful because of its emphasis on repetitive action.

⁴⁶Csikszentmihalyi (1990, pp. 46–67).

between acting and waiting for our turn, in calculating the expected outcomes of our actions before we take a final decision, in choosing and then watching the consequences unfold. In strategic games, all play is replay, as we play out the scenarios in our head before executing them.

States of flow can be exploited for aesthetic effect on their own or in contrast to other kinds of action. Isbister reflects upon the game *Train*, which at the surface is about filling boxcars with passengers and moving them overcoming obstacles and challenges.⁴⁷ The players can immerse themselves on the flow of the mechanical actions. However, ‘Only at the end of the game do they learn the train’s destination: Auschwitz. Some players realize what’s happening midgame and turn their attention to saving as many passengers as they can. Almost all players feel strong emotions after they have experienced the endgame, whether or not they realized what was going on in the midst of play’.⁴⁸ Here, the historical context in which the mechanic actions take place makes for a horrific discovery.

The idea of flow resonates especially well with playing musical instruments, pun intended. And music has also been a useful referential framework to understand the phenomenological involvement with computer games. In *Aesthetic Theory and the Videogame*, Kirkpatrick looks at examples of action games that engage players in a flow-like state of action and reaction that he compares to a dance. The game is the musical script and the player is the performer, engaging in a choreography that is not mechanical, but has to be creatively interpreted.⁴⁹ This sort of creative tension, also of the body, is more productive to describe the act of playing computer games than using the metaphor of immersion, I would argue. Immersion has connotations of inactivity, and even of drowning, while dancing is just as involved, but more active. Phenomenological approaches to the act of playing, like that advocated by Brendan Keogh insist on not forgetting the body, on seeing the playing experience ‘as the coming together of the player and the videogame in a cybernetic circuit of embodied pleasures’.⁵⁰

Repetitive video game actions are of course the foundational element of any sense of rhythm, as Brigid Costello has noted in her study of repetitive rhythms in the games *Minecraft* and *Don’t Starve*. Her conclusion, reinforcing Kirkpatrick’s emphasis on the creativity of the player is that the playing experience is more rhythmically expressive if it is the player herself who exerts agency. Chopping wood in *Minecraft* feels therefore much more satisfying than in the case of *Don’t Starve*, where it is the game that provokes a specific response which the player does not control. Triggered rhythms do not involve us as much as performed rhythms. This study is interesting because it can help illuminate some of the paradoxes of grinding sketched above, how it can be both mind-numbingly boring and oddly satisfying. It also ties back to the point about suffering; the small, repeated motions make us aware: ‘Rhythmic expressivity can be valuable for enhancing repetitive tasks (...) physically performing the action rhythms as taps

⁴⁷Exhibited by Brenda Brathwaite Romero in 2009 at IndieCade, USA.

⁴⁸Isbister (2017, p. 10).

⁴⁹Kirkpatrick (2011, p. 137).

⁵⁰Keogh (2015, p. 1).

proved useful for revealing patterns of tension and release not consciously felt when immersed in gameplay'.⁵¹ Maybe this is the whole point? Let us flow, each little blow of the pickaxe chopping away at the suffering. Boring, but good. A game like *Walden* turns this into a design feature, as you play performing mundane tasks over and over again: taking care of your garden, fishing, conversing... ending each day with a reflective diary entry.

The key might be in the satisfying combination of flow with interruptions, or as Keogh puts it, inspired by Lefebvre, the interdependency of linear and cyclical rhythms. The linear rhythms refer to the progression forward, the passing of levels, improvement of skills, towards the final victory. The cyclical ones are the ones brought by 'failure, death and the stop-start repetition of practice and dressage'.⁵² This last concept comes from Lefebvre, who has, more than anyone, tried to use the idea of rhythm as a tool to comprehend human action.

The Banal Rhythms of Game Rituals

My treatment of repetition in games is filled with apparent contradictions, or at least with what would be contradictions in other art forms. So it would seem once more with the title of this section, which brings the ritual in connection with the everyday. Ritual is special, transformative and performative. Everyday life is banal, monotonous and filled with automatic actions. Here, I move beyond the games per se, and into a reflection of how they fit into our everyday life, where media consumption is also organised around different kinds of repetition, both transcendental and intrascendental.

An integral part of ritual is repetition: of movements, of words and of actions. But, of course, not all repetition is ritualistic. Gazzard and Peacock have proposed that some aspects of games are ritualistic in nature. Both ritual and game are ludic forms, bound to location, separate from the regular world, performed, requiring an initiation and a transformation.⁵³ Moreover, they consider that certain actions are 'ritual-like', such as collecting the pills in *Pac Man* to move to the next level, because they are the necessary conditions to traverse a threshold. In their view, ritual logic in games can be traced to actions that signal some kind of 'rite of passage' like checkpoints or 'save stations', or collecting objects. Their approach reveals a conflation of meaning and mechanics, for in truth, everything you do in a game is transformative, insofar as it improves your conditions for victory, or your point score, or makes it possible for you to advance. And what about the players' self-chosen thresholds? I can play *Super Mario Bros* with the self-imposed goal of collecting all the stars, or none, or have the intention of getting better at *Counter-Strike* until I reach a specific league. It might be an important rite of passage for me, but it would be a stretch to talk about ritual here because these goals and practices lack a collective dimension. In fact, I do not

⁵¹Costello (2018, p. 821).

⁵²Keogh (2015 p. 200).

⁵³Although the magic circle theory has been amply challenged in Game Studies.

think that the ritualistic aspect of games is so much related to the actual narrative of the game, but more about the liminal quality of the act of playing.⁵⁴

Playing a game can become a ritual if imbued with a more transcendental meaning that gets repeated and sustained by a community. In regular language, people talk about ‘rituals’ like getting a cup of coffee as soon as they get to work, or playing a round of domino every time they visit their grandparents. These rituals of everyday life also have a threshold/transformational function. They signal that the workday is starting for all the employees of this company (even if this occurrence happens every day) or link the present to the past by reproducing an action we have shared with our grandparents many times before, that maybe started when we were children.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, playing games was a popular way to kill time for the people in lockdown all over the world. For many, deprived of other social contact, games also became a daily ritual of community. In our family, we chose a few different games that we would play online with different people. One of the most enjoyable turned out to be *Among Us*, the multiplayer crime/social deduction game where one (or two) players are randomly designed as ‘imposters’ and have to secretly assassinate all the others one by one before they are discovered. The setting is a spaceship, and all the participants are rounded humanoid figures with different-coloured spacesuits. Me and my family would log into the game together with my brother’s family, nine people in total, and while we played on each our phone, we would have an open Discord channel at the same time to be able to talk as a group. Our *Among Us* sessions were ritualistic in different ways:

- They were marked as a special time outside the monotony of the lockdown daily tasks, a special time that would return cyclically every other day, following a fixed plan
- They had an explicit (and agreed-upon) transformational intention: to connect with the family we could not be together with, cheering each other up in difficult times
- We adopted special roles in order to participate, randomly assigned by the game every time (as crew members or imposters, all with different colour spacesuits and strange decorations in our head)
- We submitted ourselves to a restaging of murder, the oldest human act. We are actually also family, like Cain and Abel, which added spice to the transgression.
- We used a special language while playing, something that the uninitiated might not be able to follow: ‘That was kind of sus’, ‘Where?’ ‘Electrical’, ‘Vent’, ‘Red is faking the tasks’

The act of playing the game is ritualistic in itself, like a Mass. We first went into a waiting room, where we could choose the colour of our spacesuit, talk

⁵⁴Turner (1969).

(using Discord) about who was who or how our day had gone. Someone would beg the others not to cheat, not to let each other know who the impostor was. Then there would be a characteristic noise, signalling the start of the game, and there we would go, running around in the cartoonish corridors of the spaceship, doing our tasks or pretending to do them, killing others or trying to survive. When a body was found, someone would hit the emergency button, producing another characteristic sound. Then the conversation where all participants try to clear themselves of suspicion, sending the ball around, and always the same sentences: Where was the body? Where was everybody? What did they see? Who found the body? Who can vouch for *X*? Who did the task? before voting on who got ejected. Every game resolution became a small catharsis, a brief satisfaction for the victors and disappointment for the losers. But there was no time to dwell on this, for the game would start all over again, with new roles and the same steps through the script.

Of course, this kind of collective ritualising could have happened with another activity. For instance, Danish national television had a programme during lockdown where a musician played well-known songs at a piano and people would sing along, each from their homes, also describing this repetitive event as healing in the middle of the difficult times.⁵⁵ They were not directly communicating with each other like the *Among Us* players, but they felt a sense of community that was highly valued. However, I would argue that the sense of belonging, the transformation which is the point of the ritual, is stronger in the game example because we were both directly participating, we were intimately connected to each other *and* everyone's actions could change the outcome of the experience.

This is not to say that playing games is always ritualistic. In our *Among Us* sessions, there was an added significance, collectively negotiated and determined by a very specific external cause. Most often, playing games is integrated in the banal rhythms of everyday life, resurfacing again and again in much less transcendent configurations. We might place our game playing during the long commute, using our telephones as game machines to evade ourselves from the dullness of the train traversing a grey landscape. Or we might play at night, when everybody else is gone to bed, savouring the moments alone with the console in a luminous corner of the otherwise dark house. Games are here a cyclically returning leisure element that punctuates the linear rhythms of the 'productive' day: work, study and household chores. Games contribute to us achieving *eurhythmia*, the smooth combination of rhythms that ensure our body is healthy and our mind in sync. They can of course also make us imbalanced, destroy the *isorhythmia*, if we, for instance, lose sleep to all-night playing sessions. Being sleep deprived for the whole day makes it harder just to go through the usual motions, as we are weighed down by *arrhythmia*.

The previous paragraph loosely applies Henri Lefebvre's vocabulary of rhythmic analysis to attempt a description of the ways in which repetitive

⁵⁵Sørensen et al. (2021).



Fig. 3. Sisyphus, Re-interpreted by DALL-E and Me.

activities shape our everyday life, which he thought was punctuated by a tension between work, rest and play.⁵⁶ Incorporating games in our daily routine might even be considered a form of intervention against *dressage*, or ‘the process through which the state and capital impose disciplined rhythms of work, rest and play upon workers, as a domestic animal might be trained to comply with its owner’s demands. Crucially, such gestures are incorporated into the body, shaping its unreflexive habits and typically rendering it docile’.⁵⁷ Games are only one example among other restful/playful activities, but this is not the only reason why they have been connected to Lefebvre before.⁵⁸ There is also the understanding that the repetitive nature of the aesthetic experience of playing games makes them also specially suited to illustrating *dressage*, which here is understood as a rhythmic aesthetic experience, not devoid of pleasure, but also not only about freedom. If we adopt a phenomenological instance like Lefebvre wanted, the player’s body can indeed be seen as a metronome, tuning itself to the game system to once more stage a cycle of rise and fall, birth and death, beginning and end. Like Sisyphus (Fig. 3).

⁵⁶Systematised by Lyon (2019, p. 24). Lefebvre does not propose a systematic methodology in his book (1992).

⁵⁷Edensor and Larsen (2018, p. 732).

⁵⁸See mostly Wade (2008), Apperley (2010), Keogh (2015), and Walther and Larsen (2020).

There is a 2-minute animated film by Marcel Jankovics retelling the myth of Sisyphus in a single, unbroken shot made of a black line upon a white background.⁵⁹ We see Sisyphus roll his stone up the mountainside, making noises of excruciating effort. When he gets to the top, the camera pans out and we realise that the hill is made of piled-up stones. They are actually rather similar to skulls battered by an unforgiving sun. When he finally gets to the top, Sisyphus collapses for a moment, but then we see his figure prancing down the hill, springing from stone to stone with a happy gait. Whatever we think of the religious background behind Mircea Eliade's idea that suffering is not a meaningless experience for traditional cultures because of its connection to the eternal return, I would argue that the lure of the archetype is still alive.⁶⁰ The medium of video games can provide a scenario to play the mythical drama in everyday life, where death is always followed by resurrection and 'every defeat is annulled and transcended by the final victory'.⁶¹

Coda

I started this chapter by stating that computer games were the repetitive media form *par excellence*, where the essential experience consists of repeating actions at different levels, picking up the stone every time it rolls down the hill. The learning of a series of microactions allows players to internalise the mechanics of the game, so they can turn their attention to other pleasures, like those of strategy, setting their own goals or even the semiotics and ethics of the game in question. The concept of grinding showed the way to consider the uncertain ontology of suffering and pleasure, and how repetition can both be soothing and maddening at the same time. The affordance of repetition in connection to games is to immerse us in a game rhythm that is a mixture of linear progression intertwined with cyclical returns.

This makes for a very specific aesthetic experience that is not easily accepted as such. The constant change of pace and rhythm in gameplay seems to be off-putting to non-players, who, like critic Eugénie Shinkle, think that the 'temporal flow is hampered by constant interruption of the game narrative as the player attempts and reattempts particular tasks or levels' For her, computer games combine aesthetic awe (because of their often spectacular nature) with the boredom of the 'interruptions', so that it becomes appropriate to describe them using Sianne Ngai's notion of *stuplimity*, an amalgam of stupefying shock and boredom.⁶² I bring her critical view up here because it represents the resistance to the medium of video games from the point of view of high art critics. The mention of 'interruptions' as problematic reveals that the critic favours a contemplative

⁵⁹The Oscar-nominated short animation can be seen here: <https://www.openculture.com/2015/11/the-myth-of-sisyphus-wonderfully-animated-in-an-oscar-nominated-short-film-1974.html>

⁶⁰Eliade (1959, p. 96).

⁶¹Ibid., 101.

⁶²Shinkle (2012, p. 100).

aesthetic experience conducive to sublime awe. The sublime, however, with its focus on the unique, the unrepeatable, the bigger-than-human, is a category that does not fit so well with a repetitive art form, which is then dismissed as 'an art of surface and meaninglessness'.

This kind of judgement makes the oft-repeated mistake of assessing an art form by the success parameters of another. Computer games are (also) semiotic machines, but unlike traditional art forms, they afford more than immersive interpretation, letting us both play and perform. In fact, repetition in games can be understood through the pendular cognitive moment that is present in interactive forms of art, as Katja Kwastek (inspired by Gadamer) has argued. In interactive art, the user is forced to operate some kind of system to generate the aesthetic experience. This active participation ruins traditional aesthetic distance and contemplative experiences like that of the sublime, which become impossible. However, it does not follow that interactive art forms are necessarily superficial, for, as Kwastek puts it, our own actions 'become available as an object of reflection'.⁶³ The game affords our learning to operate in loops, to stop and restart, to reconsider and strategise, to pursue long-term goals through short-term actions and to see ourselves from the outside, playing. Unlike the heavy platform instrumentalisation of deathscrolling on social media, we are in command of repetition cycles in games, we can stop and we can win.

Repetition is key to the reflexivity of computer game play, as the experience 'manifests itself in a process of oscillation between flow and reflection, between absorption in the interaction and distanced (self-)perception, and between cathartic transformation and cognitive judgement'.⁶⁴ The active pleasures of repetitive art forms are inextricably linked to our toiling away, our trial and error and our assimilation of the basic mechanics in order to be able to go from exploration to expressivity. In the case of computer games, and as Pippin Barr illustrates with his *Sisyphus* game, they show the pleasures of indefinitely extending suffering. In other words, of learning to love our stone.

⁶³Kwastek (2013, p. 163).

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 162.

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Chapter 3

Sing, Goddess, of the Anger of Achilles

Formal Repetition in Storytelling

Imagine a blind old rhapsode, a long time ago, standing in the middle of a circle of eager listeners, about to embark in a long recitation without aids. There can be no mistakes; his livelihood as a wandering poet depends on performing flawlessly every time. He clears his throat, makes himself ready, and begins:

Sing, goddess, of the anger of Achilles, son of Peleus,
accursed, which brought countless pains upon the Achaeans.¹

If you recognise these words, you might feel satisfaction, maybe even awe, as the work they open is recalled to your awareness. Like other ancient works, Homer's *Iliad* begins with the auspicious ritual of invoking the muses, something to be repeated at every performance.² This is not only a magical act that connects the poet to divinity, so he can channel the voice of truth and myth for his audience. It is also a prayer, so the bard can remember the roughly 15,000 verses than the epic poem is made of, or at least enough of them to piece a compelling performance together. The muses, goddesses of art, are the daughters of memory, keen on the repetition of form and content to preserve knowledge and tradition. How could one plunge into such a long recitation without their help? Even allowing for slight variations, similar patterns and the exact repetition of certain sequences, this is a huge feat seen from our modern perspective, untrained as we are in the arts of memory.

The famous beginning serves also to situate the tale and focus on one of its main characters, already priming us, revealing who is responsible for the situation. Achilles' stubbornness is about to send many heroes to Hades. Can it all

¹The text is provided by the Perseus digital library, based on R. Lattimore's translation from 1951. <https://classicalanthology.theclassicslibrary.com/2012/05/30/iliad-1-1-7/>.

²I am aware of the scholarly disputes surrounding the doubtful existence of Homer as a unique individual (Graziosi, 2002, p. 16), but who compiled the ancient stories or what the origin of the ideas/fragments was has no bearing upon this argument.



really be the fault of just one man? This beginning plunges us *in media res* into the final period of the 10-year Trojan War, whose complicated causes, participants and development we get to know in painstaking detail. After many battles, duels, divine intrigues and deaths, the poem will end with the very same Achilles, his anger now spent, taking pity on his enemies and allowing them to bury their dead, celebrating the funeral of the Trojan Prince Hector. That is, *The Iliad* finishes without getting to the point where the war ends, and it does not tell us either how Achilles indeed is about to die himself, his famous mortal heel pierced by an enemy arrow. The poem shows that despite his victory, Achilles is still devastated, his love lost, even if he has recovered his honour. Could the main lesson of this story be that victory is indeed as expensive for the victors as for the losers? There is no universal agreement on what this ending means, and it remains open to an interpretation that has shifted through time, as we always look at the classic work through whatever current cultural lenses our age favours.

Maybe it is not even an ending, for the story of *The Iliad* continues in another epic poem, *The Odyssey*, which the old rhapsode might agree to sing about in his next performance. Both works have their own storylines, but belong to the same narrative universe and are consecutive in story-time, even invoking the same divine connection, as the sequel poem starts like this:

O Muse, tell me of that man of many ways, who travelled
Far and wide, after he sacked the sacred citadel of Troy.³

Now, the story follows one of the victorious Greek warriors after the Trojan War has ended: Odysseus, who had had the idea of gifting the Trojans a wooden horse full of soldiers that precipitated the city's downfall, attempts to return home to his island of Ithaca. This takes him no less than 10 years, as his sailing course and plans are thwarted again and again by a vengeful Poseidon, the god of the seas. He encounters the enchantress Circe, the sirens, Calypso, the cyclops and many other monsters and challenges along the way, and finally succeeds in getting home, solving his kingdom's problems with a blood bath.

These cryptic and only slightly parodic summaries do not do justice to the two epic poems, but I am taking the risk of assuming that the reader will know them, either through having read them directly or through one of their adaptations. If not, let this serve as a teaser, an encouragement to immediately get hold of a copy of these foundational stories of the Western Canon, some of the most repeated across any kind of media. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* together tell a story that many people have known and retold for centuries, even millennia.⁴ The texts are so widely versioned and known, that audiences have something at stake, as they

³The text is provided by the Perseus digital library, based on R. Lattimore's translation from 1965. <https://classicalanthology.theclassicslibrary.com/2012/05/30/odyssey-1-1-6/>.

⁴First, the story was known by regular Greeks, then by cultured people from Rome, and later spread to the rest of Europe (Dark Ages notwithstanding). What were once works of popular storytelling end up as the patrimony of a reduced cultural elite. Cinema and literary adaptations have popularised them again in our time.

are part of nostalgic memories of formative years. My own memories are from high school times, when I studied Classic Greek and Latin. For me, writing now about those opening lines evokes the suffering attached to translating difficult fragments and the mischievous smile of my teacher as she read my inept renderings aloud to the class. But they also rekindle my initial joy at getting immersed in a world of heroes and gods for the first time. Revisiting them is also becoming 16 again. The affective resonance of repetition is not only a matter of the stories themselves but also a subjective dimension of the act of reception across time.

These stories are also an ideal case to introduce this chapter and the next, as they incarnate so many kinds of repetition in relation to narrative structure and content. Both openings focus on one single hero (Achilles, Odysseus) and his personality as catalyst for plot development. A character flaw, perhaps a lack of virtue, pitches a man against the gods and the divine order, causing all sorts of upheaval in their communities. This is the preferred theme of much ancient storytelling, whose main function, no matter how thrilling the many different plots may be, is to be a reminder of the divine and social order. Stories about tragic destinies have the double effect of providing audiences with the voyeuristic pleasure of seeing others suffer just punishment while hopefully deterring them from engaging in similar forbidden behaviours. Homer's works can be placed at the centre of a network of stories that have elicited readers' enthusiasm across time in many individual acts of reception, and that often have a component of pleasurable repetition and recognition. They are not magically called forth from nothing, but are themselves the product of a long tradition of oral storytelling, which some scholars trace as far back as the Bronze Age. As for their projection into the future, they have inspired countless authors to retell or extend the tales, such as Aeschylus does in his *Oresteian Trilogy*, Virgil in *The Aeneid* (which I will zoom into in the next chapter), Shakespeare in *Troilus and Cressida*, Robert Graves in his *Siege and Fall of Troy*, Madeline Miller in *Circe* and Pat Barker in *The Silence of the Girls*; these two latter giving voice to the female characters that had been mute in all the other renderings.

This network of texts (backwards and forwards) contains every kind of sameness and repetition at the core of this chapter and the next. Here, I will focus on form/structure, the realm of *bits, plots, genre and archetypes*. The next chapter deals with content, the conscious efforts at world-making, adaptation and the repetition of actual fragments that get re-used in different productive ways.

The Iliad and *The Odyssey* also allow me to insist on the point that canonical texts are enmeshed in repetitive dynamics, so that repetition is not just a marker of popular culture texts or a result of the laziness of film executives without imagination. Umberto Eco already noted that popular culture is usually judged as 'more or less successful tokens of a given model or type'.⁵ What would happen if we were to judge high culture by the same standard? This is not as controversial as it sounds. After all, these two epic poems might be unique now, but there were

⁵Eco (1990, p. 84).

many other works which they were related to and we have never seen.⁶ We cannot know if the lost works were good or bad, or how different they were from the few surviving ones. However, it is reasonable to assume that the poems that have made it through the ages are the most beloved ones, those that got copied over and over, so that at least one manuscript managed to survive the dark middle age – in Eco’s words, the most successful token.

When considering the form of storytelling, it makes sense to begin with the smallest unit, and to move slowly upwards in size and even level of abstraction. The boundaries between some of these categories are rather fluid, and I must admit to a certain arbitrariness in deciding where to draw the line. It is my hope that this division can help understanding the different ways in which formal repetition can generate stories, both from a producer perspective and from the position of the audiences receiving and recognising the different traits.

There is an intention in representing the model as a series of concentric circles, like the ripples that appear in the water when we cast a stone (Fig. 1). Closest to the core are the smallest structures that can be contained within the biggest ones. Farthest away are repetitions with a longer cycle, which are more difficult to include in one sole work and rather refer to comparisons between works that share common scaffoldings.

Bits

I have called the smallest unit ‘bit’ adopting Konstantin Stanislavski’s term, which he mentions in several books and explains in *An Actor Prepares*.⁷ This is the diary of a fictional student called Kostya, who is learning Stanislavski’s acting techniques. In a brilliant chapter called ‘Unit and Objectives’, Kostya tells about a dinner at the house of Shustov, a famous actor, who illustrates the need to divide a play in smaller units by carving the turkey which the family is going to eat. Shustov explains how the whole turkey is an unmanageable size for consumption, so he carves the largest pieces first: the legs, wings and soft parts of the roast. Then he continues making meal portions which his children start stuffing whole in their mouths, to which he recommends cutting it up even further to suit mouth sizes and appetites. A play is just like that, an unmanageable size if taken as a whole, impossible to comprehend by an actor as anything other than an accumulation of disconnected moments. Actors must make an effort to understand what the biggest chunks are, and how they in turn are divided into smaller units, so that

⁶We don’t have a lot of information about lost oral epics, but other genres provide interesting comparisons. For instance, ancient Greek tragedy. In his two-volume work, *The Lost Plays of Greek Tragedy*, Mathew Wright argues that we have a very skewed picture of this genre, as we base all our analyses and assumptions on 32 existing plays, while there is evidence and fragments of hundreds more (and probably even more of which neither references nor fragments exist!). It is actually not entirely clear if the two poems are a product of oral/traditional composition or if they are a result of literate composition (Kahane, 1994, p. 5).

⁷Stanislavski (1936).

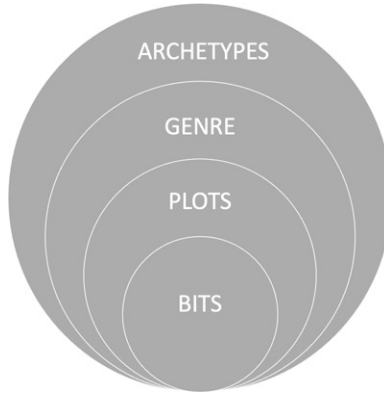


Fig. 1. The Units of Formal Repetition.

even though one can concentrate on a specific brief fragment, the understanding of the whole is never lost. The division into bits is not set in stone, and Stanislavski admits that what is a unit in one context does not serve in another. For instance, it is one thing to think of the main actions in one play, and then to have to rehearse specifically for one of them, which requires a narrower division in shorter bits. He distinguishes between smaller and larger bits, and worries that such a divisive attitude can cut up a play into too many meaningless pieces. Therefore, an important point is introduced: units are never disengaged from function: ‘The division of a play into units, to study its structure, has one purpose (. . .) There is another, far more important, inner reason. At the heart of every unit lies a *creative objective*’.⁸ This is crucial in order to be able to decide how small the units can be, for even if very brief, they must have their own objective.

But how do these bits work in practice? Let’s turn back to *The Iliad*, which can serve to illustrate all levels of our structural division. If we think of the fragments it could be cut into, there are 24 books, with each book divided into sections, typically indicated in analysis works by noting verse numbers. For instance, the first book contains the sections of the petition of the Trojan priest Chryses for the Greeks to return his daughter to him, Agamemnon’s denial, the nine days of plague, the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles, the seizing of Briseis by Agamemnon, Achilles’ declaration that he will not fight for the Greeks any more and lastly Achilles’ appeal to his mother Thetis so she will appeal to Zeus to avenge her son’s honour. These sections are much too long to be literally repeatable, but some of their components do turn up elsewhere in the long poem, creating an accumulated meaning that is heavy with the weight of foreboding.

Let’s look in detail at one of these bits: supplication. In this first book, there are several acts of supplication by various characters (Chryses, Achilles, Thetis), who beg other characters for different kinds of mercy. This happens all through the

⁸Ibid., p. 116.

book, and also in *The Odyssey*. Every time, there is a physical description of supplication that is repeated and described with similar words: 'the suppliant's gesture of lowering himself to embrace his opponent's knees, thus showing his humility and desperation'.⁹ Supplication can be made by strangers or acquaintances (in which case it is less formal and more like an exchange of favours). It can be between humans or gods, but also between humans and gods. Supplication is not just a matter of advancing the plot or creating characterisation; it also shows society's code of behaviour. Supplication is a known ritual which the public would have known well, like the arming of a warrior or the reception of a guest. The poet offers details according to the effect he wants to cause in the audience. Sometimes supplications are richly described if they constitute pivotal actions with important narrative function (like Thetis addressing Zeus in the first book), otherwise they are very schematic. Each act of supplication is something in itself, but it is their repetition that gives them a deeper meaning. Every time a bit is repeated, the question is why is it being repeated, what is the accumulated meaning and what effect is obtained by that repetition. According to Pedrick, the point of supplications in *The Iliad* is to get one's request heard, that is, to get attention without getting killed in the process. However, most supplications fail, despite offers of ransom, appeal to universal virtues (like respect for motherhood) or even the gods. Many supplicants are killed, so supplication is supporting, in fact, the theme of war and vengeance. In *The Odyssey*, the many supplications function in an entirely different way, since Zeus protects supplicants, so their success illuminates the hospitality theme of this work.

Supplication would also be familiar to the listeners of the poem, who might have found themselves at one of the two ends of this act in the course of their lives. That is, beyond their aesthetic weight, bits are also recognisable slices of everyday life, operating like Richard Schechner's concept of restored behaviour, which refers to 'living behaviour treated as a film director treats a strip of film', a collection of small units that can be rearranged in different ways and that structure human interaction at many levels (social, ritualistic and so on).¹⁰ Think of the way in which we go through the motions in a mundane visit to a supermarket: how our bodies stand in line, how we hold the basket until we can put it on the stand to empty it, how we place the goods on the conveyor belt and the words that we and the cashier speak aloud. All gestures and phrases have been said before hundreds of times, repeated like magic formulae. The situation might be boring, but it is safe and recognisable: we know what to expect and what is expected of us. Schechner notes that we do not usually know or care about how restored behaviour first appeared, we have just learnt it by exposure and have become proficient at practicing it.

Consider how many of these bits and pieces we keep in our mind, both in relation to everyday life and in relation to stories, without thinking about them or being able to name them individually. We can combine them as a collective

⁹Pedrick (1982, p. 125).

¹⁰Schechner (1981, p. 2).

creative pool that can be arranged and rearranged in every possible way, often in specific ways that respond to genre conventions. The supplication bit is no longer familiar to us in the shape that is presented in *The Iliad*, but we know other bits to beg for mercy (although we might not formulate it like that): someone taking flowers with them when they are going to ask for a favour, or the cheating husband on his knees, begging the wife to take him back. These two bits lead our thoughts towards the romantic genre, in dramatic or comedic versions. In fact, in our part of the world, the position of supplication is no longer done in other contexts than the romantic, as the website TV Tropes proposes in their entry 'The Grovel' (the underlined words are links to other entries)^{11,12}:

One character has hurt or betrayed another, usually their love interest. Perhaps their love learned that they only started dating because of The Bet, or perhaps the offender accuses the other of cheating. In any case, they are now in a Second-Act Breakup.

Eventually, however, the offender decides that they cannot live without their love interest or learns that they were horribly mistaken about them. But how to make it up to them? How to convince them to take you back? By groveling, an act of apology so sincere the love interest will have to forgive you. This may take the form of a long speech but occasionally circumstances call for something more drastic to prove they have really changed.

The offender is usually male and the forgiver usually female, but not always.

When done well, this trope provides drama and emotional catharsis for the audience. Debts have been repaid, sins have been forgiven, and the couple will now live Happily Ever After.

When done poorly, this trope can be seen as demeaning or emasculating the offender. The penalty is too harsh for the crime, and the apology is too extravagant for such a minor offense. On the other side of poorly done, this trope can make the forgiver appear weak. If reparations have not been made, a simple apology may be letting the offender off too easily. In real life, the Domestic Abuse cycle often consists of abuse – apology – abuse, which may imply that the abuse will continue.

¹¹Although in other cultures it is still a current bit, for instance in the Japanese, where businessmen or public personalities will apologise for their mistakes using the dogeza (土下座) position.

¹²<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/TheGrovel>

This trope is common in Romance Novels, Breakup Songs, and Romantic Comedies. The Pose of Supplication may or may not be involved. See also Idiot Houdini.

TV Tropes is an online repository, organised as a wiki, which contains thousands upon thousands of entries about all sorts of fragments (tropes) used to tell stories across media (film, TV, games, music and more). It is also a community, with around 16,000 listed contributors and many more people participating in the fora. TV Tropes is the best resource on the Internet to locate and browse through narrative units used in our current popular culture.¹³ Tropes vary in size, sometimes overlapping with what I have called bits, sometimes with plots, or genres. The site is a fascinating treasure trove for popular culture enthusiasts, as it wittily associates and explains, performing collective shrewd cultural analysis in a manner that was once the exclusive province of literature professors. The fascinating thing about TV Tropes is that this way of dissecting and relating has become common knowledge, that regular users can navigate and enjoy the pleasures of deconstruction.

Consider again 'The Grovel' entry I reproduced above, and how it connects character function with plot devices, while identifying the most common themes that go together with this structure. I find myself immediately wanting to explore more, clicking on the different links that take me to other entries in a hypertextual excursion that can occupy many long minutes if I am not watchful. Like the *memex* associative trails dreamt up by Vannevar Bush, TV Tropes connects many people's commentary on popular culture in a massive web of meaning and interpretation.¹⁴ There is a very distinctive pleasure of classifying, of knowing, of completing.

For producers and authors of popular culture products, bits are similar to the words that one needs to use in order to speak a specific language, minor design patterns that can be woven into bigger tapestries. The sole use of bits is not an indication of lack of originality, since they can be executed in more or less creative ways. A grovel scene can be cliché, an easy way to signal injustice and the submission of terrified subjects throwing themselves on the floor at the appearance of their ruler. But it can be used to great aesthetic effect. A celebrated grovel in popular culture is, for instance, the scene of *The Last Kingdom* where Uhtred and Alfred have to grovel to avoid being executed for having drawn a sword in the presence of the King. The scene balances comedic effect and true humiliation, building character depth for its two subjects. Or when King Arthur and his

¹³It is not the only repository of its kind, but the biggest and arguably most successful. It was founded in 2004 by Fast Eddie as a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fan resource, and it expanded and grew into other shows and genres, becoming the popular culture behemoth that it is today, where the founder is no longer active and a professional team manages the site. It has not been exempt of controversy throughout the years mostly about biases in the way diverse products or tropes are described, which different fandoms have complained about.

¹⁴Bush (1945).

knights in Monty Python's *The Quest for the Holy Grail* meet God and throw themselves to the ground, at which God exclaims, irritated: 'Oh don't grovel! One thing I can't stand is people grovelling!' He does not want them to apologise or avert their gazes either, he is tired of false expressions of awe and respect. A far cry from the Zeus we started our supplication with.

Plot and Seriality

Plot is the next ring in the water, the causal and temporal patterning that organises a narrative, 'the ways in which the events and characters' actions in a story are arranged and how this arrangement in turn facilitates identification of their motivations and consequences'.¹⁵ Plot is a term used in literary criticism and as a part of everyday discourse. Here, I will be considering it as the structuring of events in a narrative from beginning, to middle, to end. This structuring can serve different functions and seek different kinds of effects, again depending on the nature of the stories and the genre they operate within. Causality is the strongest force behind plot, the glue that makes everything fit together so we can understand the development of the narrative and anticipate what might be coming next, both operations a great source of narrative pleasure.

Plots are made of long strings of bits, but they need to be organised in temporal and causal patterns in order to make sense. In this way, a plot is an overarching scaffold, so abstract that there is not much point insisting that it is always repeated; that is precisely the function of a scaffold, always to be the same, supporting many different kinds of buildings/stories. This is the very abstract sense of plot as skeleton, which is well known from the oft-quoted Aristotelian narrative arc of beginning, middle and end, further developed by Freytag's concept of the climactic plot (Fig. 2).

If we again return to our guiding work in this chapter, *The Iliad*, we can see this plot structure in operation. The poem starts foreshadowing that the rage of Achilles will cause destruction and death. Its introduction/exposition tells us how the hero feels so insulted by Agamemnon stealing his captive Briseis that he refuses to fight for the Greeks any more. The rising complications include illness, battles, the burning of the ships, a lot of fighting and duels between heroes and the fateful death of Achilles' soulmate, Patroclus. This event is the climax of the story as it unleashes the rage of Achilles, who will run amok and slay many enemies, including the Trojan Prince Hector. The return sees the Trojans pushed back to their city, looking on helplessly from their walls at Achilles defiling Hector's corpse. Finally, his rage spent, Achilles accepts Priam's supplication and returns Hector's body to the Trojans so they can bury him. This is the catastrophe, the outcome or denouement of the story.

Nowadays, most commercial storytelling will adopt a three-act scaffolding in one way or another, so the schema in itself is always repeated, imposing a kind of

¹⁵Kukkonen, Karin. 2014. 'Plot'. *The Living Handbook of Narratology*. University of Hamburg.

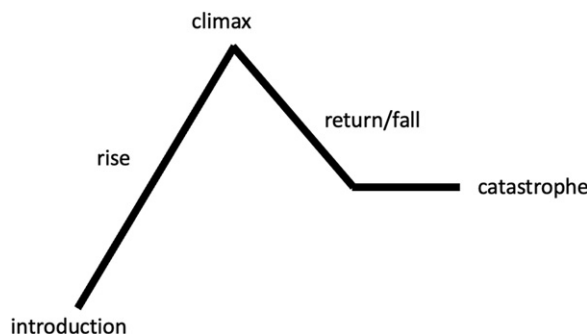


Fig. 2. Drawn after Freytag.¹⁶

ordering in the way our stories progress that might not be as ‘natural’ as we think. As Krystina Madej argues, this way of thinking became established in the nineteenth century, but it fails to explain other ancient ways of telling stories: ‘that evolved from the time of Homer such as epic, interlace, and frame structure, which place less emphasis on sequence, on formal beginnings and endings, and on plots, have been more enduring (in some cases by 2,600 years) and are more in accord with the process of peoples’ lives’.¹⁷ Indeed, even in *The Iliad*, there are a lot of parallel stories running into each other even as we tend to focus on the rage of Achilles as the overarching one. Madej’s concern is that our fixation with the beginning-climax-end structure will blind us to explore alternative ways of organising stories in relation to digital media, where a linear progression is certainly not the only possibility, but somehow has become all-powerful, even in relation to computer games.

Repetition is relevant in relation to plots in two main ways. The first one is the popular conception that there is only a limited number of fixed plots that can be identified in all stories, and the second is the idea of episodic repetition, where plots are both cut up and stretched to make long chains of stories that we call series.

In regards to the first, there have been several proposals to synthesise the number of types of possible plots.¹⁸ One of the best knowns is Christopher Booker’s *The Seven Basic Plots*, a monumental book where he, inspired by Jungian psychology, explores how most stories can fit one of these symbolic models (with some of his examples):

- (1) Overcoming the monster (*Beowulf*, *War of the Worlds*)
- (2) Rags to riches (*Cinderella*, *Great Expectations*)
- (3) The quest (*The Odyssey*, *King Solomon’s Mines*)

¹⁷2008, p. 2.

¹⁸We can trace this back at least to Polti (1916).

- (4) Voyage and return (*Alice in Wonderland, Orpheus*)
- (5) Comedy (*Aristophanes, Much Ado About Nothing*)
- (6) Tragedy (*MacBeth, Bonnie and Clyde*)
- (7) Rebirth or Redemption (*Sleeping Beauty, A Christmas Carol*)

According to Brooker, the primary function of storytelling is to educate the coming generations into what is morally correct, to which effect our culture has distilled a series of messages into these seven formats that can accommodate any kind of story. While the first part of the book is interesting from a narrative/structural point of view, Brooker's analyses do not really hold, as he tries to force all fiction to fit a mould that proves excessively reductive. However, the seven plots are useful for those composing stories, at least to think about patterns and their development. In a way, they provide some flesh to the bare bones structure of Freytag's triangle; a slightly more detailed design template.

The second way in which repetition is relevant at the plot level is the production of seriality, which etymologically refers to the property of something being arranged in a series, that is, a row of elements of the same kind appearing one after another. A series provides a story arch and a world in which lesser plot units can be integrated. Although the dominant medium for seriality is now television, it far predates it. In *A Thousand and One Nights*, a previously cuckolded sultan marries a virgin every day, only to have her executed the next morning before she has a chance to be unfaithful to him. Eventually, the country runs out of virgins, and the daughter of the Grand Vizier, Scheherazade, volunteers to marry the cruel ruler against the advice of her family. Close to dawn, she begs for a last favour, to say goodbye to her sister, whom she wishes to tell a story to. The sultan, curious, agrees, and Scheherazade begins narrating an intriguing tale about a merchant and a genie. The morning advances, the hour when she should be executed passes, but the tale is not finished, 'the sultan was so much taken with the beauty and accomplishments of his lady, and his curiosity was so much excited by the interesting story she had begun, that he became irresolute respecting his vow; and talking to his trembling Vizier on other affairs, he left him in suspense also as to the fate of his beloved daughter'.¹⁹

This famous collection of tales is one of the first examples of a serial framing where stories both can end (partially) in one session, but open up again, directing audiences towards the next episode.²⁰ Every night, Scheherazade tells enough of the story to keep the sultan entertained, but as the morning comes, she stops at a

²⁰Incidentally, and like Homer, this work is one of the most adapted and transmedially extended of all, with many literary retellings, ballet, opera, music, film and even computer games picking up on some of the most known tales (like Ali Baba or Aladdin) or the whole setup with Scheherazade as the prototypical storyteller.

¹⁹Full text of *The Thousand and One Nights* available at: https://archive.org/stream/thousandnights00unknuoft/thousandnights00unknuoft_djvu.txt.

²⁰Incidentally, and like Homer, this work is one of the most adapted and transmedially extended of all, with many literary retellings, ballet, opera, music, film and even computer games picking up on some of the most known tales (like Ali Baba or Aladdin) or the whole setup with Scheherazade as the prototypical storyteller.

suspenseful point that requires he let her live one more day in order to hear the end of the tale. Her stories keep on getting entangled in new stories, so that resolution is indefinitely postponed. She knows how to keep the audience coming back. Today, Scheherazade would no doubt be hired by a streaming service to write their next blockbuster series. She is a master at what Jennifer Hayward notes is the key to seriality, which ‘essentially creates the demand it then feeds’.²¹

The establishment of aesthetic and commercial strategies to support serial storytelling occurs in the nineteenth century. At this time, culture industries are eager to exploit an increasing consumerism of cultural products. Series keep readers coming back for more, as it has been masterfully explained by scholars in the field of French feuilleton, (Balzac and Dumas),²² or Victorian English literature, (Dickens and Thackeray).²³ There is the wonderful, though perhaps not entirely true, story of *The Old Curiosity Shop*²⁴ readers flocking to New York harbour to receive the next ship from England with the cry: ‘is little Nell dead?’²⁵ A serial work like this, distributed in instalments, can hold a mass audience interested for a long time, ensuring the continuous sale of newspapers. Every single part of a series serves as an advertisement for the next one, cultivating the emotional connection to a public caught in a web of ever stretching suspense. I do not choose the spidery metaphor randomly, for it also fits with more philosophical developments. It is around this time that the separation between high culture and popular culture becomes articulated as a question of value versus worthlessness, where the immature mass audiences are held captive in webs of deception.²⁶ This bias keeps returning, even when cultural commentators want to approach entertainment products in their own terms.

Take Umberto Eco, for whom seriality is the overarching category that defines mass culture production in the twentieth century.²⁷ He locates the origin of different types of repetition in older works, as he compares high and popular culture. For instance, Shakespeare, who is guilty of a more than fair amount of remakes, might have based his *Much Ado About Nothing* on Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*. As the most prestigious of semioticians, master of ceremonies of high culture, Eco has been determinant in redeeming the study of popular texts. In several of his works he refers to comic books, television and even porn and demonstrates that important insights about the process of meaning making and

²¹Hayward (1997, p. 3)

²²Cornejo (2021).

²³See, for example, the work of J. Don Vann (1985), Jennifer Hayward (1997) or Graham Law (2000).

²⁴Dickens (1841).

²⁵Glatt (2014).

²⁶Hayward traces this position through the Marxist currents of the Frankfurt School and the writings of Gramsci.

²⁷He articulates it in such a way that it also includes other kinds of variations, like retakes and remakes that I analyse separately in this book, even including intertextuality as part of serial mechanisms.

reception can be extracted from their analysis. Even though he praises some specific popular works, however, in his view, these are the exceptions that manage to break out of the drudgery of their genre conventions. Originality and uniqueness are for him still the most valuable traits, in relation to mass-produced culture as well as to high culture. He cannot hide a certain contempt, not so much for the serial works themselves, but for what they reveal about their eager audiences, trapped by the 'infantile need of hearing again always the same story, of being consoled by the "return of the identical", superficially disguised' (p. 169) Giving in to seriality is a weakness, maybe even a sin.²⁸

Seriality, like Scheherazade, trades in the doubtful currency of seduction, awakening in the audience a sort of dependence that has been frowned upon throughout the history of literary criticism. Seriality is too dionysian, and not apollonian enough. In his famous *Reading for the Plot*, Brooks wants to focus on the property of plot to move forward, making us want more, both in relation to the story and to changes in our state of mind, as we grapple with 'the temporal dynamics that shape narratives in our reading of them, the play of desire in time that makes us turn pages and strive towards narrative ends'.²⁹ He describes the apparently contradictory pleasures of dilation and closure, by which we desire to stretch the stories we enjoy, just as much as we want to get to their end and find out how everything, finally, makes sense. In his Freudian interpretation, he sees the relationship of a text with its audience as similar to that of the psychoanalyst and their patient, so that we, by reading, working our way through the stories, can bring order to the past. In this way, our looking for the plot is also a way to attain a sort of closure, a way for stories to do something in the world besides entertain us.

Could this therapeutic approach also be applied to our engagement with the repetitive plotting of the serial form? A less stigmatising explanation of our faithfulness to series might simply be that the more time we invest watching them, the more we feel we cannot leave without a reward. A film can be watched in one sitting, a series requires commitment over time, as the different chapters are released. It is of course technically possible to watch a whole season of a series in one go, but most people will slice the experience up into several sessions (the new

²⁸Eco (1985, p. 169). To be fair, Eco's relation to popular culture is more nuanced than this, as Norma Bouchard argues in her essay 'Eco and Popular Culture' where she notes his sometimes contradictory position but concludes positively about Eco's efforts for approaching culture holistically: 'Ultimately Eco's fictional works, combined with the many essays and books he has dedicated to the definition of culture (both popular and lofty), demonstrate that his understanding of culture, in its evolution from the modern specter of Kitsch to the postmodern celebration of intertextuality, suggests an intellectual development growing out of his initial intuitions about the arbitrary and relative nature of various kinds of culture. Eco's collected works emerge as a major contribution to the definition of postmodern culture because they bear eloquent witness to the interconnectivity of lowbrow and highbrow forms of expression in the contemporary world' (Bouchard, 2009, p. 15).

²⁹Brooks (1992, p. xiii).

practice of *binging*, or consuming many episodes of a series in one sitting is a testimony of how spellbound we can become as audiences).

Umberto Eco has explored some of the ways in which seriality plays with its audience.³⁰ He proposes the novels and short stories featuring detective Nero Wolf as a paradigm of mass produced text where ‘repetition, iterations obedience to a pre-established schema and redundancy (as opposed to information)’ are key. Every text proposes a ‘new crime’ involving a fresh set of secondary characters and locations, but the underlying story is ‘eternal’, since the relationships between the regular characters, the *modus operandi* of the detective and the underlying ethics are always the same.^{31,32}

Series reward our ability to foresee and remember, since the timeline is longer than one episode. However, even the longer cycles are for Eco infantile and superficial. He talks of two kinds of audience: the naive and the smart. The naive audience lets itself become immersed in the narrative world and believes that every instantiation of a series is new. The smart audience can see seriality and appreciate the variations. These observations reflect an elitism that Eco has tried to fight against in other places. He cannot see how the less cultured audience would be able to escape the thrall of absolute immersion, that is, they can only relate to the immediate plot before them and are blind to structures. But truly those two things can coexist, for even the less educated of audiences are able to enjoy and understand the pleasures of structural reiteration, as anybody who has watched cartoons with children knows. Take *Dora the Explorer*, whose episodes are all built up in the same way, just like *Colombo*. Dora always has to go on a quest and find a new place where she can solve a problem. Places and problems change, but Dora is always accompanied by her monkey Boots, uses the objects she brings in her backpack (particularly the anthropomorphic Map) and overcomes obstacles along the way (including the fox-thief Swiper) with the ‘help’ of the children who are encouraged to chant different things from home to assist Dora. Children enjoy the new quests and puzzles, but are also perfectly aware of the underlying structure that is always the same. I have been witness to many playful reenactments of *Dora the Explorer* in the park, where my children and their friends used to invent their own quests and reproduced the structure of the show as efficiently as any Disney manuscript writer.

Maybe Umberto Eco’s scepticism is not just a matter of elitism, but it also reflects the fact that our media world has changed enormously in the 40 years since he wrote his text. There has been an audiovisual explosion and a growth in the complexity of content, as television scholars have remarked.³³ Eco’s writings depict a much less sophisticated media industry and less literate spectators. Today, we have been trained to operate at different levels of abstraction.

³⁰In several writings but notably in his article from 1985 ‘Innovation and repetition: Between modern and postmodern aesthetics’, which is the source of the quotes here.

³¹Nero Wolf is a character created by author Rex Stout, who published 33 novels and many stories about the extravagant detective from 1934 to 1975.

³²Eco (1985, p. 162).

³³See Johnson (2006) and Mittell (2015).

Audiences now can move between ‘the dialectical relation among micro-structures (beat and episode) and macro-structures (arch and season)’, in a very similar conceptual move to what happens with computer games, as we examined in the previous chapter.³⁴ Marcel Silva offers a historical explanation of the simplicity of early television, which is due to its double origin as teleplay and feuilleton. Drama on television starts with the teleplay for infrastructural reasons: the unit of action of stories that are finished in one go makes for easier production. When owning a television set begins to be mainstream, infrastructural questions become important, that is, producers need to make sure that there is enough content for people to return to, so series are born. Early series like *Bonanza* ‘presented the episode with a unitary plot, which had beginning, middle and ending, restoring moral, unchangeable values of the protagonist’s superiority over the antagonist’.³⁵ The other tradition that influences the shape of early television is that of the feuilleton, which favours a slow unveiling of the plot and expands the storytelling thread as much as it can, delaying the resolution of dramatic situations. This is the tradition that gives birth to the genre of soap operas. Contemporary drama is a result of both, and the best of them, like *Borgen* or *Downton Abbey*, which Silva praises, are really hybrids that can harness the best of the two traditions:

...a progressive and complex representation of the World that, little by little, unveils its rhizomatic profundity, whose primeval function is to gradually deteriorate our initial comprehension of the World and to slowly reveal an ambiguous, multiform Truth that inhabits the deep bosom of the characters and their human relations.³⁶

Another semiotician with a love for seriality is Omar Calabrese, in the context of his work on the neo-baroque. He proposes a typology of kinds of repetition in television series, going from the simplest of repetitive gags through to long series like *Dallas*, which are tightly designed to always repeat the same overarching structure and then can accommodate variations at various levels.³⁷ Even though his examples are from the 1980s and 1990s, he stresses the combinatorial aspect of modern television as a key aesthetic feature that connects television to wider cultural movements that have to do with the mediatic acceleration brought about by the neo-baroque, related to ‘organized variation, polycentrism and regulated irregularity, and frantic rhythm’.³⁸

³⁴Silva (2015, p. 127).

³⁵Ibid., p.135.

³⁶Ibid., p. 139.

³⁷Calabrese (1992, pp. 35–44).

³⁸Calabrese (1992, pp. 43–44).

Genre: The Dance of Continuity and Newness

Moving to the next ripple of water from the model in Fig. 1, we come to the topic of genre. There is no doubt that this cultural category is still relevant; genre studies is a thriving research area, with significant contributions across all media arts. After the legitimization of popular media initiated by cultural studies in our omnivorous times, we can find scholarly discussions of genres which would have been considered minor or directly harmful in the past, such as gothic literature, fantasy or science fiction.³⁹ As Umberto Eco noted, the pleasure of mass media texts often comes from a combination of the recognition of some known schemata and a measure of original content (a variation).⁴⁰ That is, knowledge about genre serves audiences in two ways: to help them choose the texts they want to engage with, and to decode them successfully, something that cannot occur without a pre-existing encyclopaedia of formal and semantic components. In this way, genre is a relational concept, which cannot be discussed exclusively in terms of the text, the strategy of the producers or the reception by an audience, but in an integrated manner which takes all three dimensions into account: 'Genres can be defined as patterns/forms/styles/structures which transcend individual art products, and which supervise both their construction by artists and their reading by audiences'.⁴¹ Although Eco refers to genre as the exclusive province of mass media texts, I would argue that the above is true for high cultural products like this chapter's main case. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are epic poems built upon an existing tradition and received in a specific way by their audiences.

As film scholar Robert Altman has noted, genres have no stable identities and borders, and even our perception of works belonging to one genre or another can change with time.⁴² In contemporary media culture, there is an acceleration of the pace with which genres transform and merge with each other, as they are both sensitive to the development of market forces and the events of the world around them. A series like the Korean *All of Us Are Dead*, from 2022, described by Wikipedia as a 'coming-of-age zombie apocalypse horror' would have been impossible in 1978, when the original *Dawn of the Dead* inaugurated the genre. Now, terror can be mixed with adolescent angst, love with gore, tenderness with raw humour. In fact, the characters can even joke about their situation referring to fictions that deal with zombies. At the beginning of the series, when they are trying to figure out what might be the cause of the strange behaviour of people afflicted by a violent 'disease', Lee Cheong-San notes, to the incredulity of his classmates, that they look like the zombies from the film *Train to Busan*. Such self-awareness would be unthinkable in earlier examples of the zombie genre. In *All of Us Are Dead*, the characters can use what they know from popular culture to develop survival strategies. Not only that, the series also cleverly uses the trope

³⁹Warde, A., & Gayo-Cal, M. (2009). The anatomy of cultural omnivorousness: The case of the United Kingdom. *Poetics* (Amsterdam) [Online], 37(2), 119–145.

⁴⁰1990, p. 85.

⁴¹Ryall (1975, p. 28).

⁴²Altman.

of zombies to harshly critique the conditions of being young in Korea today: the enormous pressure to do well in a draconian school system, the bullying, the estranged relations of youths and their parents and, above all, the unwillingness of the government to help them; a system where the adults let the world go down and young people pay the price. There is also a certain freshness to Korean cinematography, an earnestness that contrasts with the self-irony of many Hollywood productions, and, a sense of hope that raised the show above bleak American genre classics like *The Walking Dead*. Because of the complex articulation of genre as an interplay of a system of production, a text, an author and an audience, the question of originality is not exclusively limited to the inherent qualities of a product, but is always relational. *All of Us Are Dead* was praised for its originality by the international press, a way to breathe life into tired clichés and overused tropes.⁴³ Originality here does not mean total newness, but clever variations that give the old schemata the opportunity to mean something else, something more. We would probably not consider this renovation of the zombie genre positively if the public had rejected it, of course, but the series was a reception success.⁴⁴

Moreover, originality can also be considered in terms of a single person, for the subjective component of the reception situation means that repetition is also not present/recognisable in the same way to all audiences. Literary critics might care about identifying the first occurrence of a specific theme or the birth of a genre, but this does not matter at all from a reception perspective; it has simply no bearing on the appreciation of the work. After all, no one reads literature or watches films in a chronological order, waiting until they have finished *The Canterbury Tales* before starting on *Paradise Lost*. Or maybe we do, when enrolled in literature class. In the real world, we consume fiction across media, high and low, with no regard to production times, in a hodgepodge of fancy, availability and chance. I can illustrate this with another anecdote. Three years ago, I went to see a Kabuki play for the first time in Ginza's Kabukiza Theatre in Tokyo. I did not know that much about Kabuki, other than it is a traditional art form with all-male performers in heavy makeup. I guess I was expecting something similar to Spanish Golden Age or Shakespearean theatre, but I was blown away by the strangeness of the spectacle. The stage design was impressive, the costumes magnificent and the way the actors moved, danced and could strike significant poses impressed me. The play lasted for more than four hours, which, contrary to my expectations, flew by. The recitation style was alien to me; an affected way of speaking, going up and down in pitch in unnatural ways that led attention to the

⁴³<https://www.smh.com.au/culture/tv-and-radio/the-zombies-are-alive-and-thirsty-in-korean-series-all-of-us-are-dead-20220204-p59ttx.html>, <https://www.polygon.com/reviews/22926194/all-of-us-are-dead-review-zombie-shows-walking-dead>, <https://www.commonsemmedia.org/tv-reviews/all-of-us-are-dead>

⁴⁴The series scored 87% audience appreciation in Rotten Tomatoes. For several weeks, it was the most watched Netflix production, globally (<https://www.nme.com/news/tv/all-of-us-are-dead-most-watched-third-week-running-netflix-globally-charts-3162625>), and it has been renewed for a second season. *All of Us Are Dead* has been approved as worthwhile by the wider interpretive community.

story and the feelings of the characters with a range of very different voices. Fortunately, spectators could rent a small screen where the archaic language was translated simultaneously into English. This way I was able to follow the story of three bandits who despite their crimes manage to be redeemed by their loyalty to each other and are rewarded with a honourable death at the end.⁴⁵ This is both a very old play and well known by enthusiasts of this art form, who of course also can appreciate the performance at a different level. The experts could find merit and fault in the different variations, reacting loudly with enthusiasm to different parts that I only could experience it as spectacularly new and strange, and therefore original.

In this way, the originality discussion becomes slippery. We have a tendency to consider it as an absolute quality, but in reality it is extremely contingent, and we would do well to remember this before getting entangled in essentialist discussions. There are numerous examples in media studies of how a genre that has become tired and clichéd in its original culture can flourish when introduced to a new audience. In Russia at the beginning of the 1990s, the whole country was glued to the Mexican series *Los Ricos También Lloran*, notwithstanding the alien cultural references. *Telenovelas* became a global export, where not only Russian but also Chinese, European and African audiences' enthusiasm spawned several local industries that now produce series where the format has been adapted, and developed.⁴⁶ Trends travel back and forth, and it is now the Turkish *Dizi* that fascinates Spanish-speaking audiences.⁴⁷

No doubt the contingency of originality means that producers can keep on selling their products, not just in the television industry but also in film, publishing and gaming. Indeed with online repositories of series, films, books and games, old products can always find new audiences, and old audiences keep returning to old content for comfort.⁴⁸ In this kind of economy, absolute originality is not a valuable currency.

Widespread online/streaming access also has the advantage of allowing enjoyment of products other than the immediately available ones in our country of residence, widening our cultural and language range. Niche genres can be made more accessible, and the theory of the 'Long Tail' proposed by Chris Anderson encourages producers to 'forget squeezing millions from a few megahits at the top of the charts. The future of entertainment is in the millions of niche markets at the shallow end of the bitstream'.⁴⁹ Although his optimism about the availability of

⁴⁵The play was called 'Sannin Kichisa Tomoe no Shiranami', a major work by Kawatake Mokuami who wrote many plays about bandits. The full-length performance was performed for the first time in 15 years at the Kabukiza Theatre. The Evening Show was followed by a dance performance by Bandō Tamasaburō, adapted from a masterpiece of the Nō Theatre.

⁴⁶Medina and Barron (2011).

⁴⁷Öztürkmen (2018).

⁴⁸<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/aug/21/the-age-of-comfort-tv-why-people-are-secretly-watching-friends-and-the-office-on-a-loop>.

⁴⁹Anderson (2004).

content has been recently questioned, his emphasis on abundance and near ubiquitous access is helpful to understand the ways in which genre operates nowadays in the daily saturation of our digital lives.⁵⁰

Conversations about genre are common in the mediascape, where critics and audience can use generic descriptions as communication tools, so that a new film is immediately categorised in a way that can shape its reception. Genres have also found their way as useful categories of our current algorithm-supported cultural consumption, where they morph into tags to influence the content that is presented to us. For instance, if you have told Facebook or BookBub that you are interested in Science Fiction, news about prominent releases in that genre will appear at the top of your feed, and you will be updated on every single Disney new production to do with the *Star Wars* Universe, while the latest Bollywood hit might pass you by. Using genre as a label to filter cultural products in this way is nothing new, bookstores and libraries have always done it, since a great number of material needs to be searchable through recognisable categories. There are, however, crucial differences in the ways classification works in the 'old' vs our current big data days. While bookstore genre divisions are more or less eclectic, libraries operate in a more strict way, using systems like the Universal Decimal Classification System, which combines topic classification with a number that indicates a location in the floor plan of the library.⁵¹ For instance, the 8 numbers are for the general class of linguistic and literature, 82 is specific for literature, 82-3 for fiction and 82-32 for short stories, so this is where I would go to find that collection of disquieting tales I liked so much, even if I did not remember that Edgar Allan Poe was the author. This is an advantage over algorithmic search on a free text box as we know it from search engines like Google, since we do not need to know the exact name of what we are looking for, but use genre and topic to narrow our options. It also allows for serendipitous findings; as we peruse the aisles, inevitably, other materials will arouse our curiosity.

One could ask the critical question of who makes genre nowadays, or for whom. For genre is also very much about marketing. Genre categories are embraced by producers (publishers, film makers, streaming services) in order to segment the market and guide us to the correct box. If anything, the amount of recognisable genres has grown exponentially along the last couple of decades, as producers across the arts have gone from a stable set of limited divisions (comedy, drama, romantic, horror...) to more and more cross-over combinations and specialised labels, like the famous undercategories which Netflix uses to identify films, and that have been reverse-engineered by various cultural outlets.⁵² These

⁵⁰As I take up again on chapter 5.

⁵¹Based on the Dewey classification system from 1876, this is the most widely library classification system in the world. There are others, like the Library of Congress (US) or the British Museum (UK), and other local ones.

⁵²Over the years, Netflix has refined their classification system. They do not release it, but there are several lists that reverse-engineer it, like <http://ogres-crypt.com/public/NetFlix-Streaming-Genres2.html>. The examples here come from: <https://www.finder.com/netflix/genre-list>.

categories are the result of accumulating individual tags and provide such entertaining combinations as ‘Absurd Cult Comedies from the 80s’, ‘Understated French Gay and Lesbian movies’, ‘Quirky Race Against Time Action and Adventure’ or even ‘Controversial Spiritual Documentaries’. It is difficult to imagine any actual audiences looking specifically for any of these categories beforehand, so this prompts the question of who the tags are for, and maybe why they are not made available as a list of possibilities by Netflix themselves. This is, however, not hard to answer, for such a long list would be too confusing. Effective search by humans is only served by a reasonably limited number of categories, so we can have a complete overview of what to include and exclude. Cumulative tagging like this is by contrast very useful for machines, that can not only identify films as belonging to the same category but also make families of connections where single films share one or more tags, so the machine searches for similarities in order to make recommendations, as we will explore in Chapter 5. The end user does not need to know, and indeed can be left wondering what the specific affinity is behind any recommendation.

An increased knowledge of very specific tagging can, in fact, highlight some of the paradoxes of digitally supported consumer culture. Database consumption encourages acceptance of someone else’s classification system, for as I pointed out above, database search only works out for humans if they know *exactly* what to write in the search field. So we learn that it is called ‘chick lit’, ‘young adult dystopia’ or ‘midlife crisis comedy’. There are many such phrases that we recognise today but would be obscure only 50 years ago. This development might seem harmless enough, unless it hurts our feelings that a favourite movie becomes marked as a banal token of a derided genre. However, hegemonic categorisation practices also have discursive effect, contributing to normalising issues that maybe deserve to be treated more seriously (do midlife crisis exist and are they always ridiculous?). A good illustration of this comes from the realm of pornography, where there is a small body of scholarship on the effects that the tagging of pornographic films has not only for discoverability but also for the kinds of sexual practices that are sanctioned as normal, or on the contrary become underrepresented.⁵³ Take, for instance, the many tags destined to identify women types, by age (young, MILF, granny. . .) or ethnicity (latina, Asian. . .), objectifying them in the process. How are female users supposed to navigate this when looking for films that might potentially appeal to them?

Archetypes and Universals

The last ripple in the water is the most tenuous one: the idea that there is a reduced number of narrative archetypes behind any kind of story, an even more abstract version of the concept of the finite plots I presented above. These archetypes are functional and not thematic, that is, the objects are always exchangeable, but the relations between them are what defines the archetype.

⁵³See, for instance: Mazières et al. (2014), Saunders (2014), and Fesnak (2016).

From this perspective, ‘Frodo took the ring to Mordor’ and ‘I returned the borrowed book to the library’ are the same story. There are several notable versions of this very functional perspective, and they have all been influential in the development of the field of digital narrative.⁵⁴

Influenced by the work of Carl Jung, Northrop Frye proposed that all literature can be placed within one of the four narrative archetypes: comedy, romance, tragedy and irony/satire.⁵⁵ These archetypes define the conflicts that will occupy the protagonists and antagonists. In comedy, the hero will meet opposition by a representative of the status quo, until he is able to exert change and thus ‘win’. In romance, the conflict is that of a noble hero against some form of evil, so this archetype is centred around the fight (agon). In tragedy, a privileged hero makes mistakes (or cannot overcome a flaw) and catastrophe ensues. Finally, in irony/satire, the hero is metaphorically torn to pieces because the flawed society makes it impossible to actually carry out heroic behaviour. We could no doubt make lists of work that fit one or the other category, but this approach has been criticised for being so abstract that it becomes meaningless, and it certainly cannot be applied to do specific literary criticism of any work.

The next often mentioned structuralist author is Vladimir Propp, who based his theories on an exhaustive analysis of Russian fairy tales, in order to identify the different character functions that drive stories forward. In *Morphology of the Folktale*, Propp identifies seven dramatis personae: villain, donor, helper, princess/sought-for-person, dispatcher, hero and false hero. Then he synthesises 31 functions that relate these personae to each other or determine the course of the action, such as ‘Absentation’, where someone leaves or dies, ‘Violation’, where someone breaks a rule or ‘Trickery’, where the villain tricks the hero. These functions can be combined in different ways to analyse any folktale, and the proponents of this theory have demonstrated how it works across many different cultures.⁵⁶

The last of the three chosen authors to illustrate the functionalist perspective is Joseph Campbell, whose *Hero With a Thousand Faces* has influenced countless Hollywood scriptwriters, genre novel writers as well and video game designers. Most notably, the idea of the hero’s journey, also called the monomyth, is behind the *Star Wars* series which George Lucas himself has stated was made with the explicit intention of recreating the mythical structure (Fig. 3).⁵⁷

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.⁵⁸

⁵⁴Partly because of Janet Murray’s interest in them as presented in her ground-breaking *Hamlet on the Holodeck* in 1997.

⁵⁵Frye (1957).

⁵⁶Propp (1984).

⁵⁷Baxter (1999).

⁵⁸Campbell (1949, p. 23).

A scaffold such as this can be endlessly repeated and is extremely useful to aid production, commercialisation and distribution. This epic master pattern fits very old works like *The Odyssey* as well as the latest Hollywood action or fantasy production. However, it also presents a number of problems, both seen from the production or the reception side. In the first place, it favours a specific kind of mythical story. Most old tales and myth exist often in different versions, but in Campbell's argument, they get flattened to fit the requirements of the monomyth: a male hero who continues his quest undeterred, no matter what happens, while everybody else is an accessory to the plot. These tales are also usually tales of conquest, of dominion, of an individual being placed above a community due to intrinsic questions of value.

From a reception perspective, the monomyth is too abstract to be operationalised as a cognitive clutch or an analysis tool. As was the case with the seven plots, the more stylised the scaffold, the less it can say about specific stories, so we would not get much analytically by trying to establish if a particular story follows it or not, even though (or perhaps because) the character functions and overarching lines are easily recognisable.

There are two more innovative ways of considering abstract patterns (archetypes, folk tales personae, monomyth) in our current media landscape. The first one is in relation to user-generated content, where the kind of cycle at the centre of the hero's journey can be reproduced in much shorter versions, not in 3 hours films but in 30 seconds in a platform like TikTok, which I will explore in Chapter 6. The second consideration is that although these patterns might be more or less timeless, they have not rested unchanged since Frye, Propp and Campbell formulated them. This is related to the high trope literacy of audiences, allowing hero stories to expand their range and to integrate different kinds of semantic units than classic tales of old or twentieth-century cinema.

Consider a work like the comic book series *Rat Queens*, an epic story in which the protagonists are a group of irreverent female warriors (elf, human, dwarf and smidgen) that swear, kill, drink and happily have interspecies sexual relationships without remorse. *Rat Queens* has been praised for the quality of its art, plot and dialogue and displays influences from classic fantasy, but also specially from the world of roleplaying games. Some might say that it is a subversion of the archetype, but from a functional perspective, it is completely classic. For instance, the first volume, tellingly named *Sass and Sorcery*, begins with the reluctant heroes being forced to take on a patrolling mission that will lead them to a trap and a much more complicated story of a bigger evil plan behind the killings of a lot of mercenary adventurers like them. There are thresholds, helpers, mentors, magical objects, challenges and temptations and certainly transformations. But there is also genuine warmth in the way the friendship between the protagonists is depicted. Paradoxically, the characters are both stereotypes (the hot-headed mage, the stubborn warrior...) and at the same time have depth, compelling backstories and meaningful interaction. *Rat Queens* is a brilliant deconstruction of the sword and sorcery (S&S) genre without falling into straight parody (although there is quite a lot of humour). Structurally, there is a very long but direct line from Achilles to Hanna Vizari, who are both responsible for a lot of mayhem, have supernatural parentage and carry the heavy weight of a heroic

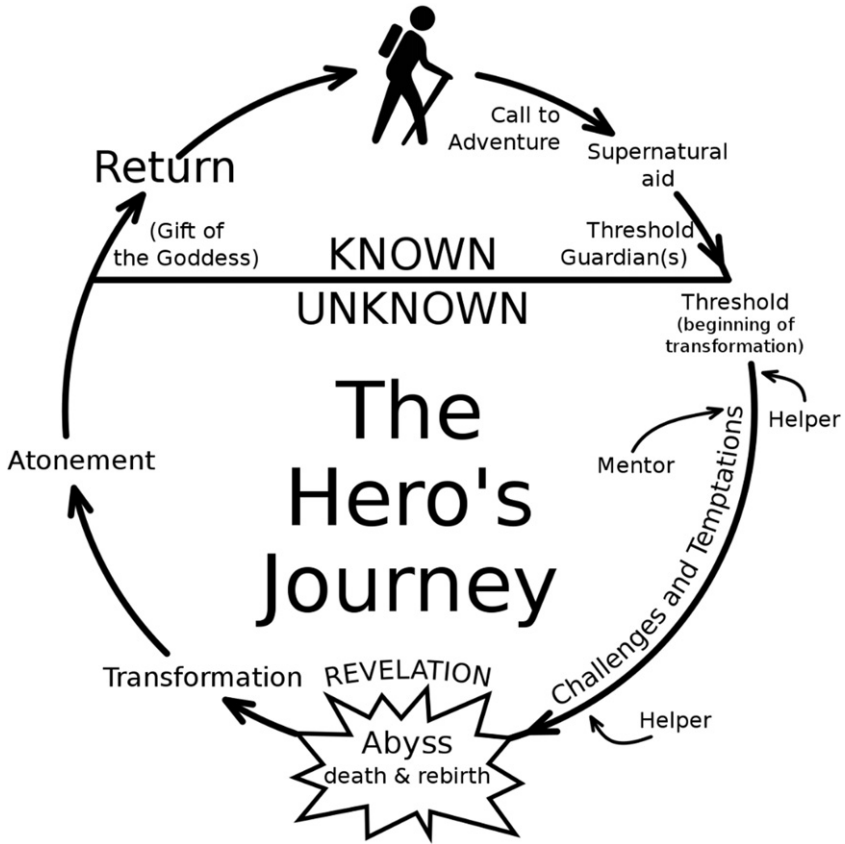


Fig. 3. The Hero's Journey.⁵⁹

destiny. This kind of new epic is only possible now, in our postmodern times after a lot of antiheroes, cross-over genres and the coming-of-age of transmedial audiences. The hero's journey scaffold is so well known that it can now bear real variations, even subversive ones.

Coda

In this chapter, I have examined the ways in which structure can be repetitive in relation to storytelling. I have distinguished between four levels, related to the scope of each unit: bits, plot, genre and archetypes, each of them illustrated with examples from current media practices.

Bits can be understood as brief units of codified behaviour which make sense in a storytelling situation. Audiences hold many known bits in their repertoires and can also apply them in relation to their everyday lives.

A plot is a medium-level unit that refers to the causal and temporal patterns that organise a whole narrative, like a fairy tale or a film. Plots create suspense and manage the interest of audiences, who get interested in knowing what happens next, longing for a resolution. Plots can also be understood at a more overarching level, based upon the repetition of story units organised in a sequential manner. Seriality is a prominent phenomenon in our contemporary media ecology.

Genre is a relational category that can serve to identify common traits in a great number of works, stories and series alike. A genre is a pattern, useful for creators, and recognisable for audiences, that changes with time.

Archetypes are the most abstract of the categories, and refer to a high-level scaffold that explains the basic functions and essence of a narrative. Archetypes cannot be used for detailed work analysis, but can say something about the overall significance of works and themes and the cultural ideologies behind the stories we keep on telling.

The abundant repetition of these structural patterns in our current media landscape carries the affordance of training audiences in the perception of the dialectics of scheme and variation, as I introduced in Chapter 1. The more repetitive media we consume (stories, series, genre works), the more aware we become of the scaffoldings behind. There is pleasure both in recognising the scheme, identifying something as belonging and in detecting the variation.

Decoding structural repetition is a new competence that plays out in relation to media consumption, but also contributes to boundary dissolution between media, as Ndaliansis has remarked.⁶⁰ The widespread awareness of the units I have examined in this chapter (bits, plot, genre, archetype) makes for very literate audiences that not only can recognise them across media platforms but also use them to frame their own lives. Like strips of behaviour, they situate us and teach us what to expect, prefiguring plot turns and character positions.

As an example of the first kind of operation, or how fictional structures function as cognitive frames across genres, I have another personal anecdote. I was looking forward to introducing my daughter to the world of Jane Austen, hoping that she would find it as fascinating as I did at her age. So at some point in her teenage years, I gifted her *Pride and Prejudice*. She dutifully digged into it, and to her credit managed to finish it, although she judged it to be slow and boring. It was clear that it did not elicit the sense of wonder that I had hoped to share with her. It was too predictable, she argued, from the very beginning of the novel. When Elizabeth overhears Mr. Darcy say something not very nice about her, making her decide he is an arrogant idiot nor worthy of their time, it was a dead giveaway as to the romance that awaits them at the end of the story, akin to

⁶¹‘She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men’.

⁶⁰Ndaliansis (2004, p. 72).

restored behaviour with fixed patterns.⁶¹ The characters progress through the motions of disliking each other, misinterpreting each other, and then fluctuate between falling in love and being rejected in various ways (often with third parties involved) until all the misunderstandings are solved and true love emerges. Whatever freshness Jane Austen's work possessed in the eighteenth century had been 'ruined' for my daughter by her previous diet of lightweight romantic Hollywood comedies, *shōjo* manga and Korean TV-drama. It had become a recognisable pattern, so repeated as to become banal. The 'enemies to lovers' pattern has been extremely productive across all sorts of media, including social media. You can, for instance, try to search for related content in YouTube, where fans curate long reel videos of their favourite enemies to lovers stories; Spotify, where there are playlists dedicated to the topic or Instagram, where the hashtag #enemiestolovers is used to tag materials that thematise this apparent contradiction, a big favourite of the grammar of romance in our time.

As for the second cognitive operation, of abstract patterning as a way to understand and express everyday life, there are plenty of examples. To continue with the topic of love, people show awareness of fictional patterns when they talk about their love life in specific ways, situating themselves as protagonists and letting their ex-lover play the villain, for example. This is so common as to be banal. Its very ubiquitousness makes it invisible, but as Lakoff stated 'without our ability to categorise, we would not function at all, either in the physical world or in our social and intellectual lives'.⁶² Cognitive linguists Lakoff and Johnson showed how we understand love in very different ways depending on the metaphor we use to describe it (as journey, as natural force, as fire, etc.). Our possibilities for agency and the way we take (or do not take) responsibility for our actions become also facilitated by the dominating metaphor, which mirrors our understanding of love.⁶³ In their framework, the metaphors that have been used again and again, become crystallised, something available for everybody in that culture to frame and understand their experience in the world. The abstract patterns from storytelling function in the same way.

Maybe this is easier to see with a more spectacular case. We probably all still remember the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, as it was such a shocking event that drastically affected the nature and quality of our everyday lives. Alongside the authorities' information, the constant stream of news and the worried exchange of messages with friends and family, a lot of people were also engaging in humorous distribution of memes comparing the virus outbreak to various zombie movies and television series (Fig. 4). Even the traditional media made use of this frame of reference to understand what we were living through. There were after all no real-life analogies since this was the only pandemic which our generation has ever experienced. Headlines like 'Zombie genre feels real during the pandemic' allowed us to recall the relevant schemata that we have

⁶¹'She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men'.

⁶²Lakoff (1990, p. 6)

⁶³Lakoff and Johnson (1980).



Fig. 4. Internet Memes at the Beginning of the COVID-19 Lockdowns.

learnt through multiple encounters with zombie genre products: isolation as the only safety, scourged supermarkets and increased risk by going out.⁶⁴ Suddenly our streets looked like those post-apocalyptic movies that have been on the rise during the last 20 years. The zombie genre became a schemata to see the world through, perhaps even an aid to survival, like in the above mentioned *All of Us Are Dead*.

This last picture humorously comments on the heroic nature of the zombie genre, in which combat skills are the key to survival. In our much less glamorous reality, survivors hoard toilet paper. So it turns out that the epic schemata ultimately fail to accurately describe our mundane reality. If nothing else, they serve to comment on its most ridiculous side, or the difficulties of heroism in a consumer society. Formal repetitive elements can in any case serve as ways to think about our world, a process that is both playful and serious at the same time, just like the many children that have reenacted the Trojan War, and all the other wars it can stand for, fighting with wooden swords in countless playgrounds through the ages.

⁶⁴<https://pavementpieces.com/zombie-genre-feels-real-during-pandemic/>

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Chapter 4

Many Happy Returns: Sameness in Digital Literature, Narrative Games, Adaptations and Transmedial Worlds

Seven hundred years after the rhapsode from the previous chapter successfully performed his epic, another poet is sitting in his room, finding his own way through the dactylic hexameter form, taming it to his own language. He wants to write a worthy sequel, but nothing seems good enough. He rewrites, he polishes, but time will catch up with him and he will actually die before the poem is finished to his satisfaction. Fortunately, it does not get burned as he had commanded, but goes on to become one of the most admired of all Latin literary texts. The name of the poet was Virgil and his work, *The Aeneid*, a poem that not only cements the direct connection of Rome to ancient myth but also celebrates the end of the chaotic civil wars and the birth of a new political system.

The Aeneid is actually a proper spin-off from Homer's epic poems, where a secondary character suddenly gets his own show. Aeneas, a son of Aphrodite/Venus and a mortal, is one of the less prominent Trojan warriors, not as competent in battle as the better-known heroes, so he does not appear for many lines in the original epic. Despite this, or maybe precisely because of it, he is the ideal blank canvas unto which Virgil can project the Roman virtues that needed to be exalted in order to legitimise Augustus' new reign and trace his lineage to divinity. The poem is a deliberate political operation, with as careful a honing of the intended target group as any contemporary Hollywood franchise. Structurally, it imitates both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and starts 7 years after the Trojan War, with which the audience needs to be familiar in order to situate the derivative work. This connection is taken for granted, which is a clever strategy. It taps the energy of the old canonic works and pours it into what should serve as the mould for Roman national identity. The first part of the poem covers Aeneas' journey home to Latium, and the second, the wars in his homeland. The themes directly connect to those which unfolded in the previous epics; there is meddling by the gods, battles, love, single combat and even a visit to the underworld. However, the new text's ultimate goal, the establishment of a Roman national

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identity based on virtue, requires that some crucial elements are modified. Not only are the gods here called by their Roman names, but the protagonist sets out to find Latium, the promised land, where the remaining Trojans can settle. Virgil, by the way, also invokes the muse:

O Muse, the causes tell! What sacrilege,
 or vengeful sorrow, moved the heavenly Queen
 to thrust on dangers dark and endless toil
 a man whose largest honor in men's eyes
 was serving Heaven? Can gods such anger feel?¹

Aeneas appears as a more modern heroic archetype than its homeric predecessors. He is on the losing side, a tragic figure with a burdened destiny because of the sins of his ancestors. When we first encounter him as he is fleeing from the disaster, he literally wishes he had died in the battlefield. This can be interpreted as an initial refusal of the heroic call, in Joseph Campbell's sense, but it also essentially means that Aeneas has an inner life as a man in conflict with what is expected of him as a hero. However, Aeneas is no modern antihero. As we will discover through the poem, the pious Aeneas always follows his duty.

Sameness and variation go hand in hand, for they need each other to be recognised for what they are. The new story succeeds in recreating the same old world of the Trojan War from the beginning, even starting with a storm at sea, where Juno convinces Aeolus, the king of winds, to help her destroy Aeneas' ships. Many perish, until the waters are calmed by Neptune and the hero sails further on to an unknown coast that will provide interesting plot developments.

I remember this beginning as satisfying, like a homecoming. The text had been assigned to my Latin literature class at University, and fragments were also used to practice translation. I was back at the perilous sea that was hostile to Ulysses in *The Odyssey* of my high school days, with vengeful gods as a familiar cast of characters. I could feel the same sense of purpose and adventure in the hero's strife to get to a promised land. To me, the long gap between the two works meant nothing, I even doubt that I was aware of it. There was a continuity in the world building, as if the two poems were seasons of a contemporary television series, separated by a few months of filming and post-production. However, as I got further along in my reading, the story began to feel different, and my translations, while better than the homeric ones, acquired an involuntary parodic veneer that my professor deplored. I am not sure how it started. It could be that reading about the context of Virgil's work on the poem, I was put off by the realisation that it was a sort of propaganda operation. In those days, I firmly believed that art should only exist for its own sake. I think, however, that it was not only a consciousness about the conditions of production, which made me think less of the

¹The text is provided by the Perseus digital library, based on D. West's translation from 1990. <https://classicalanthology.theclassicslibrary.com/2012/07/31/aeneid-1-1-33/>.

work. Something had changed in relation to the violent, chaotic world of old. This hero was wiser and less selfish. Judging from my own commentary, scribbled in pencil along the sides of my old book, it seems that Aeneas' piousness, oft-praised in the text, provoked me and that I was irritated by the way he always put duty before his own desires, going as far as to dump Dido in a really weaselly way. I realised that the praise was meant to inspire the reader to emulate this kind of strong civic conscience, and for some reason (maybe just youth), this put me off. Maybe I should read it again now, to find out what new Deleuzian insights I might gain; the text is the same, but I, like Heraclitus' river, am not.

Just as *The Aeneid* relates to Homer's epic poems, this chapter is a sequel to the previous one. Where I previously have focused on form and structural repetition in relation to stories, I will here move on to content, understood as short word sequences that get repeated verbatim (like the verses that the rhapsode needs to remember in his recitation) as well as bigger semantic units such as plots or characters, and big scope story-worlds with their own laws of physics, flora, fauna, history and philosophy. This is a very muddy terrain, as Julie Sanders notes when she explores the semantic range of adaptation: 'variation, version, interpretation, imitation, proximation, supplement, increment, improvisation, prequel, sequel, continuation, afterlife, addition, paratext, hypertext, palimpsest, graft, rewriting, reworking, refashioning, re-vision, re-evaluation (...) mash-up, remix, hack and sample'.² For me here, all the elements of this semantic family are related but not equivalent, and their very chaotic parentage can again illustrate how repetition is never a straightforward affair.

In this chapter, I will concentrate on three repetitive content modalities that all build and capitalise on the encyclopaedias and emotional attachments of audiences. First, I will consider the literal iteration of *short content units*, exploited in rhetoric, poetry and literature, which has also given rise to combinatorial storytelling genres where repetition is necessary for aesthetic effect, like hypertext, visual novel games or loop narratives of different kinds. Second, I move up towards bigger elements, no longer textually literal but certainly recognisable as concrete units, like specific plots or characters, that evoke the centuries-old discipline of *adaptation*. And finally, at the broadest repetitive scale, I will focus on *entire fictional worlds*, which function as familiar homes to be again inhabited, and which storytellers can expand with new stories, characters, timelines and all sorts of additions across media.

Short Sequences

Poetry is born from music, and repetition (of sounds, of words or concepts) is a way to create rhythm and different kinds of semantic effect. In fact, repetition is the oldest rhythmic strategy in any kind of wordplay across languages, where

²I would not call of these concepts and operations adaptations. For me, adaptation has a much narrower range, as it will become clear in a few pages. However, her paragraph is very useful to give an idea of the complexity of this conceptual area. Sanders (2016, p. 5)

both poetry, word games and baby talk share repetition as meaningful element.³ Think of the exhilarating effect of hearing the same sentence in the chorus of your favourite pop song.⁴ Poetry can also change your mood and stimulate affect and cognition through repetition and other figures of speech. Consider, for instance, a poem like *The Raven*, by Edgar Allan Poe, or better yet, listen to it. There are several good versions on YouTube, or you can read this aloud yourself⁵:

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore –
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
“’Tis some visitor,” I muttered, “tapping at my chamber door –
Only this and nothing more.”

Feel how time is stretched and suspense created through the rhythmic repetition of the sounds: dreary/weary, napping, tapping, rapping, rapping, tapping. And note the closing ‘nothing more’, which gloomily reverberates with the most repeated word in the poem ‘Nevermore’. It will be introduced a bit later and appears a total of 11 times, always closing a stanza, as the ominous answer to the poet’s questions as to when he will recover hope. Now go and listen to the whole poem before returning to this text. This insistence on repeating the exact same short units works wonderfully in poetry and song, as introduced in Chapter 1, but is not tolerated in the same way in other communicative genres that use longer sequences of text as their medium.

As Aristotle already noted, if repetition appears in a text, like a speech, it must have a rhetoric effect.⁶ Repetition goes against the pragmatic ideal of language efficiency, as, for instance, prescribed by the Gricean maxims, and therefore, must always add something. The listener/reader benefits both in terms of communication (more nuanced, more informative. . .) and perhaps even aesthetic pleasure, otherwise, the extra processing effort, and maybe annoyance at hearing the same words, would not make sense. If we consider prose genres, it is hard to bear repetitions that are longer than a sentence or two, but it can still be used to intense effect, like the growing intensity of each ‘I have a Dream’ as Martin Luther King recites his famous speech for hope. His message gets clearer and clearer, bolder and stronger with every repetition, like a hammer hitting a nail, making us hopeful. In fact, poetry and rhetoric share a number of repetitive figures of speech

³As explored by José Antonio Millán in *Tengo tengo tengo* (Millán García, 2017).

⁴DeNora (2000, p. 55).

⁵You can, for instance, decide by yourself if you prefer the voice of Christopher Lee or that of Christopher Walken, who have very different rhythmical reading patterns.

⁶Mammadov et al. (2019, p. 5).

that have for many centuries been identified as artful ways of signalling emphasis: alliteration, anaphora and epistrophe.

Longer text genres can also take advantage of this kind of amplification, but it needs to be very carefully measured out to avoid saturation. A good example is Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, where the sentence 'So it goes' gets repeated more than a 100 times, whenever there is a mention of death (bold typeface is mine)⁷:

And Lot's wife, of course, was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been. But she did look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human. So she was turned into a pillar of salt. **So it goes.**⁸

And Billy had seen the greatest massacre in European history, which was the fire-bombing of Dresden. **So it goes.** . . .⁹

Martin Luther King was shot a month ago. He died, too. **So it goes.**¹⁰

There are many deaths in the novel, the highest tally coming from the bombing of the city of Dresden, which kills 135,000 people, but there are also individual deaths and more abstract deaths. A detached attitude towards death is also a key element of the philosophy of the Tralfamadorians, an alien race that can experience time as simultaneous and not linear. The protagonist Billy Pilgrim is abducted by them and becomes a kind of prophet to them. 'So it goes' is both a tragic and banal expression in the novel. It chills us to the bone every time it appears. The many deaths become flattened by this sentence, all made equally small, meaningless and unavoidable. The short phrase points to both the need of the living for moving on and the futility of trying to accomplish anything of value. For some readers, the sentence can act as a sort of anaesthesia, desensitising them to the suffering of others; others can see it as a wise reminder of our mortality, stoically preparing us for our own inevitable end; and yet others can become indignant upon its indifference to human suffering. There is not a critical consensus on what exactly the sentence *means*, as simple as it is, and this is good. It succeeds as a rhetorical device, adding extra value to the decoding process, so pragmatic relevance is ensured, but it also succeeds as an aesthetic device, creating ambiguity and pleasure along the way. You can also use phrase-repetitions in a more prosaic but equally effective way, for characterisation: 'A Pound of Flesh', 'Barkis is willing', 'The name is Bond', 'Scooby-dooby-doo'. We associate these sentences with their characters and almost look forward to them saying them.

⁷Vonnegut, K. (1967). *Slaughterhouse-Five or the Children's Crusade*. Dell Publishing.

⁸Ibid., p. 19.

⁹Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 182.

Somehow the sentences encapsulate a central character trait or dilemma, so they become iconic. Recognition is pleasurable.

This would not be the case if the unit to be repeated was a whole paragraph, or an entire page in a novel. Most likely, we would think that it was a mistake, the printer having perhaps messed up the manuscript provided by the author. And yet, there are some genres of digital storytelling that make use of unit repetition at a larger scale than a phrase. Unlike print literature, digital formats take advantage of the non-linearity of the medium, so some pieces of context can be reused and called forth in different contexts in various ways. I will here look at hypertext and visual novels to illustrate this.

Digital storytelling has always been tied to repetition in one way or another: from the hypertext works and interactive fictions of the 1980s and 1990s, through the electronic literature experiments of the last 30 years, to the explosion of computer game genres with a focus on narrative structure. In all ergodic genres, where reader/player activity is key, repetition is often an important aesthetic tool, especially in more lyrical works.¹¹ Through repetition, readers can be forced to pay attention to specific elements of the text, be it small fragments or bigger sections. Slight variations make things appear in a new light, and even exact repetitions are fruitful when seen in a new context; maybe the second (or third) time around, the reader will understand something else.

In the 1990s and early noughts, hypertext was an exciting novelty, seen by authors and digital theorists as the interactive future of literature. Hypertexts are fictional networks where units of texts (called nodes) are connected to each other through links, which the reader actively chooses in order to move around the network. It can be thought of as a sophisticated version of the *Choose Your Own Adventure Books* for children, and even though links are widespread now, as the basic organisational unit of the Internet, it was a novelty then. Branching structures are also the basis of mainstream computer game genres like adventure, roleplaying or visual novels. The challenges of creating a multiplicity of interesting stories while at the same time allowing for a reader's choice have been vigorously discussed in the field for many years, and there are strong arguments as to the best way of describing the different kinds of networks that can appear,¹² and even the degree of configurative freedom allowed for readers.¹³ Here I am interested in how the repetition of actual text units can create rewarding meaning even though the units themselves are rather long compared to the examples from poetry or speeches considered above.

Afternoon (1987) is one of the most celebrated hypertexts from this first wave of digital creativity, probably the best known of them, judging by the sheer amount of academic references (Fig. 1). A lot of readers have traversed its paths, trying to piece together the story of Peter, who sees a wrecked car on his way to work and wonders if the covered bodies by the side of the road could be that of his

¹¹Aarseth (1997).

¹²See, for example, Bernstein (1998) or Ryan (2001).

¹³Aarseth (1997) and Ryan (2011).

ex-wife and his son.¹⁴ Are they even alive? It is then, at the very beginning of the story, that the reader encounters this node: ‘I want to say I may have seen my son die this morning’. The sentence will keep reappearing through the reading, as a memory that Peter cannot suppress. He goes to work, and we follow him around in his daily life and his musings about other characters, their mutual infidelities, memories, dreams and reflections about life and the nature of storytelling. It might not sound very exciting, but at the time, it was exhilarating to be able to choose and steer a literary narrative, even though this work and others from the first wave of digital literature are very much weighed by the choice to make their theoretical concerns explicit. If branching stories were a species, we could say that hypertext was the literary high-brow offspring, whereas visual novels and other kinds of games are the popular culture progeny. But let us return to *Afternoon*, because as we read, trying to figure out what is the secret at the centre of this story, a few nodes keep returning, like the ‘I want to say I may have seen my son die this morning’, which mimics the way in which Peter cannot forget what he has seen and feels guilty about not stopping with his car.

It is a feature in *Afternoon* that the reader cannot see which words are links (words that yield, as Joyce calls them) to be activated, so we have to advance by trial and error. That is, we click on words but we do not know if we are activating a default traversal sequence or if the word we clicked takes us to a specific branching choice.¹⁵ Moreover, it also happens that when we see a node for the second or third time, clicking on the same word will take us somewhere else, as if links became clickable only when we already had seen them once, so repetition is a way to identify new paths. This, combined with the reshuffling of nodes, so that they make part of slightly different chains of meanings as they are paired with different nodes around them, means that repetition is the essential aesthetic feature of *Afternoon*.

In order to understand this disorientation and interpretive work, let us consider a node which only contains the words:

<What shall I call you?> I ask
<nausicaa>, she says calmly

This text does not follow any development from the previous screen, so this feels out of context in my first encounter: Who is this woman the narrator is talking to? Is she the same that two nodes before had said: ‘You could call me Giulia’, and are these their real names or some sort of roleplay? I cannot even be sure that the narrator is the same as in the previous node. The narrator in *Afternoon* is generally pretty unreliable (he does not know everything, but he also manipulates), which has become a common trope for interactive narratives in the more popular video game genres. Jill Walker has identified the uncertainty of re-interpreting nodes we re-read in *Afternoon* as an example of Nietzschean

¹⁴Walker-Rettberg (1999).

¹⁵This is very uncommon in hypertexts. Most other authors made their links explicit.

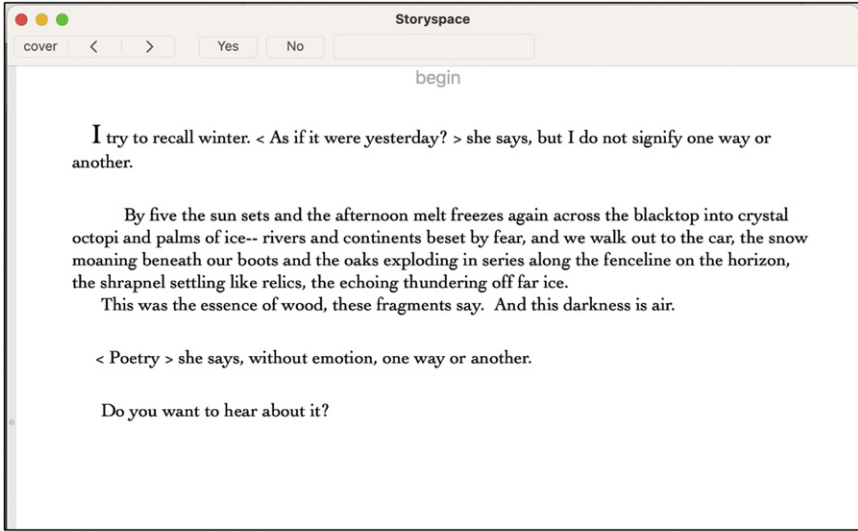


Fig. 1. A Screenshot of *Afternoon*.¹⁶

repetition, which is based on difference, and has the function of both disorienting the reader and helping them find patterns. Reappearing nodes are both familiar landmarks and ghostly appearances since their turning up in a new context means that they are not exactly what they were before.¹⁷

The branching structure of hypertext is so widespread now, as the basis for all web content, that it has lost its aesthetic strangeness. It has been incorporated into a number of more popular genres, where audiences are asked to put the story together themselves. A recent example is the film *Bandersnatch* (2018), the Netflix experiment on interactive storytelling, which is often compared to computer games.¹⁸ *Bandersnatch* has a branching structure, and the spectator is invited to make choices while watching the movie. Some of the choices are inconsequential (should the main character eat Frosties or Sugar Puffs for breakfast?), leading to the same next scene. But other decisions will take the viewer down different paths, opening up for alternative stories and eventually different endings. Many of these endings are dead ends; in some, the main character dies. The film gives viewers the opportunity to 'go back' and take another decision at a key point in order to try to find one of the more satisfactory (longer/more complete) narrative paths through the story. The film cleverly thematises its own interactive nature and the topic of choice, since the plot revolves around the main character struggling to finish

¹⁷Walker-Rettberg (1999, p. 12). She also notes how *Afternoon* contains 'false repetitions', where most of the words of a node will be the same, but there can be a variation, which contributes to the uncertainty and ghostly appearance of the text.

¹⁸The film was made as a special episode for the dystopian series *Black Mirror*.

programming a video game that adapts the legendary *Choose Your Own Adventure* book, raising questions of free will and the nature of reality.

In *Bandersnatch*, traversing the branches and looking for answers is the point of the viewing session: is the main character living a series of parallel lives? Has he got a way to control the spawning alternative worlds and find truth and success in the end? As a textual artefact, the film deals with choice both at a semantic and structural level, so that there is a satisfying aesthetic overlap of these categories. The characters and the viewers will both be in doubt: is this real? Who is making the choices? Is there a way to go back and choose again? At some point, the whole thing becomes very metaleptic, and the puzzle is so cleverly composed that plot and structure become completely imbricated, making it doubtful that this structuring method would work as well with any other theme.

As it is, the film showcases some of the problems of branching storytelling and the indiscriminate repetition of sequences:

- Some choices feel inconsequential
- Some endings feel random (not justified by how the choice was framed)
- The endings have clear ‘values’ so there is not a lot of motivation to explore different paths

Despite the initial buzz, *Bandersnatch* has not created enough enthusiasm to make this genre finally take off.¹⁹ I argue that these problems have to do with the film fighting against its own repetitive nature, that is, insisting on the multiplicity of endings as its main purpose and aesthetic advantage, instead of exploiting repetition in a more productive way. The film’s obsession with foregrounding interactivity and downplaying repetition is only viable because the very idea of interactivity is the theme of the film, but it would not work with any other kind of plot. In this, *Bandersnatch* is not alone. The way that digital storytelling has been theorised tends to frame the uniqueness of the experience as its highest value (a sort of holy grail of non-repetition), but in truth, the strength of both *Afternoon* and *Bandersnatch* is not that they produce a story that is different for each reader/

¹⁹*Bandersnatch* is not the first interactive movie to be produced by Netflix. They have made a few of what they call ‘interactive specials’ mostly based on existing franchises like *You Vs Wild* or *Minecraft: Story Mode*. There have been many interactive movies since Radúz Činčera made the first one, *Kinoautomat* in 1967, which was operated with the steering of a human moderator. It is symptomatic that this first movie also thematised its own structure, since viewers had to choose ways to avoid catastrophe, which ended in the building burning anyway, as a commentary of humans not really being able to control their destiny.

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viewer because this cannot happen, as everybody traverses the same paths in very much the same way. They both show great promise of fruitful repetition, of how longer textual units (nodes and whole scenes) can be 'reused' within the same text, since they gain renewed significance every time they turn up. *Afternoon* is more cyclical, and the reader can decide themselves when to stop, while *Bandersnatch* has clearer paths that need to be explored separately and endings that are clearly marked as more narratively satisfying, exactly like the looping games of Chapter 2.²⁰ Their real aesthetic value is thus relational, and dependent on the fact that the different paths are tightly controlled by the authors of the works, and reader interactivity is limited to occasional binary choices.

In digital media theory, the issue of interactivity has been heavily debated, often with the underlying assumption that it is desirable to have as much of it as possible in order for new media to distance themselves from the tyrannic linearity of old formats. Marie Laure Ryan writes that:

I would like to argue that digital texts are like an onion made of different layers of skin, and that interactivity can affect different levels. Those who regard the existence of interactive stories as a *fait accompli* are satisfied with an interactivity that operates on the outer layers; those who regard interactive stories as "an elusive unicorn we can imagine but have yet to capture" (...) want interactivity to penetrate the core of the story. On the outer layers, interactivity concerns the presentation of the story, and the story pre-exists to the running of the software; on the middle layers, interactivity concerns the user's personal involvement in the story, but the plot of a story is still pre-determined; on the inner layers, the story is created dynamically through the interaction between the user and the system.²¹

Her distinction is very helpful for us here in connection to repetition, for if the sequences are fixed, and the repetition orchestrated by the authors of the system, then interactivity is, in fact, only simulated. But my point here is that this does not necessarily pose a problem, for the variety is not in the generation of an infinite number of different stories, tailored to each and everyone of us, but in the different meanings that we can get from the same subset of nodes, because the value of the experience is in putting them together. Computer games have been better at framing this advantage, or maybe they are just blessedly free of post-modern hype.

Narrative computer game genres include adventure games, action adventure, roleplaying games, survival horror... Here I will focus on Japanese Visual

²⁰'Save the Date' and 'Force Code'.

²¹Ryan (2011, p. 37).

Novels,²² more specifically the subgenre of Otome games.²³ Visual Novels/Otome games have a rather static gameplay: they do not require any other input from the player but that of reading, and once in a while choosing a narrative path that will eventually bring forth an alternative ending. As such, the games are closer to literature or *Choose-Your-Own-Adventure* books than to action-heavy game genres. The text is always framed on top of beautiful background images and character designs, and typically, key moments in the story will be rewarded with the unveiling of a special image (CG) or animation, depicting the situation in a more pictorial manner. Thus, completing the stories also means collecting a series of images. Most of these games have a very prominent aesthetic use of sound, as they have evolved to include specially composed music, and the dialogue lines are voiced by well-known *seiyuu*.²⁴

This repetitive genre operates upon the premise of several replays, that is, their story can only be fully experienced through a thorough exploration of all the narrative possibilities. In Otome games the alternate routes are linked to pursuing different male characters as love interests. This might sound like an immoral predicament, but it nonetheless allows the playing character access to very varied sources of information about the game world as well as the possibility of empathising with very different points of view. Games labelled as Visual Novels are more story-heavy and do not necessarily include any romance, although some, like *Collar X Malice*, *7Scarlet* or *Norn9 Var Commons* blur genre divisions.²⁵ The plots and settings vary, but there is a preference for mystery, detective, science fiction or supernatural stories, catering to popular tastes.

In the game *Collar X Malice*, I play the role of Ichika Hoshino, a young police officer charged with helping the citizens of Shinjuku, an area of Tokyo under lockdown following a series of violent crimes by a terrorist group called Adonis. Even though I am a junior member of a very big department, and am usually only allocated to small tasks, I am for some reason at the centre of this mystery. A few days ago, I was kidnapped and woke up with a collar around my neck that is directly connected to the terrorists, who are able to talk through it and issue threats and orders. The collar cannot be removed or it will inject deadly poison into my neck. I must keep this connection secret while I toil away to find out why I have been targeted, how to take the collar off and stop the chain of crimes that will eventually lead to a catastrophe baptised as ‘X Day’ by the criminals. Tonight, I am watching a horror movie with Kei, my secret agent boyfriend. I do

²²Visual novels are generally considered to have been born in 1983, with the launch of *Portopia Renzoku Satsujii Jiken* (Yuji Horii) directly inspired by western graphic adventures.

²³Otome means ‘maiden’ in Japanese. The origin of the subgenre of Otome is dated back to *Angelique* (Keiko Erikawa), from 1994.

²⁴Japanese voice actors.

²⁵Visual novels branch out into many related genres, and all together make for a solid subculture of branching storytelling, including eroges, dating sims for men and the fact that their mechanics have been incorporated into other hybrid genres such as roleplaying games like *Persona 5*.






Mineo Enomoto	Takeru Sasazuka	Kei Okazaki	Kageyuki Shiraishi	Aiji Yanagi
				
Kidnaping of policemen	Online Game Guild Murders	Male Stalker Killed	Suspicious murder- suicide	Mystery of the collar, letter
Murder of corrupt officers	Hacking the collar	Truck and motorcycle apparent accident	Leaks and Hanging	Adonis leader identity

Fig. 2. Some of the Different Criminal Incidents Investigated in Each Route.

not like horror movies, so I hide under the blanket while he pats me on the head; he thinks I am cute. We have made up after an argument, where I discovered that he had a plan of dying while protecting me in some sort of self-redeeming mission. I have told him that I do not want him to die, and I would rather he lived, with me. But I am not sure he listens, and to be completely honest, I do not really mean it. He is rather self-absorbed, and although his tragic past is supposed to make him heroic, I actually miss the lighthearted dorkiness of my previous boyfriend, Mineo, whose route I finished yesterday and who now treats me like a stranger. Which of course I am because every time I restart the game, the non-playing characters lose all memory of our interactions, no matter how passionate they were. Only I remember. And I will have to romance all five main guys in order to get to the bottom of the mystery, since each route reveals important information needed to piece the story together (Fig. 2).

Collar X Malice forces its players to go through the same overall story five times.²⁶ We could say that the *fabula* is always the same, but the *syuzhet* changes with every narration and point of view, focusing on the different events which each character is privy to. Slowly, the player gets a full picture, and the different focalisations are a source of pleasure, like in the four interconnected novels of the *Alexandria Quartet* by Lawrence Durrell.²⁷

Other game genres offer even more openness through the use of simulations, natural language commands or even a database structure instead of a set of predetermined paths. This latter kind of narrative structure is purely fragmented, and repetitions are thus initiated by the user themselves, in search for meaning. An example of this (more open) kind of narrative is the indie game *Her Story*

²⁶At least, there is also another extra story following the discovery of the identity of the terrorist group leader, and each of the routes has multiple endings.

²⁷The distinction between *fabula* and *syuzhet* comes from Russian formalism and has been used widely in narratology and film theory. It refers to the difference between the chronological order of events (the story as it happened) and the way it is told (with omissions, temporal changes etc.) There are slightly different understandings in Propp, Shklovsky or Bakhtin, but the overall point is the same (Tomashevsky, 1973, p. 268).

(2015) developed by Sam Barlow. *Her Story* is a database of 271 short video clips that are fragments of the seven interviews where the police interviews a woman about a crime she might or might not have committed. The user can only access the videos by typing keywords which will summon them from the database. From the beginning, it is clear that there is something strange about the woman's testimony, and it is up to the player to continue looking for clues until they are satisfied that they have figured out what is going on. Any more information about the plot would ruin the story for you, so I will not say what the solutions are, or even if there is a solution. Like in hypertext, the player is encouraged to stop when they think they know, even if they have not seen all the videos. Repetition in this case becomes more a matter of fact-checking, as we suddenly might remember something that the woman said in a past video and want to see it again armed with the new information. While playing, I made a list of keywords on a piece of paper, and wrote small summaries of what the videos said. I kept going back and forth, as if it was a research project and I was coding people's interviews looking for academic gold. Here, I was watching the same clips not because I especially enjoyed the performance of the actress (although she is very good), but because I needed to, in order to put the puzzle together. Repetition becomes a strategic necessity and can only cease when the story has been revealed. But this is not an exclusive feature of computer games.

There is a specific genre of fiction that thrives on using the exact repeated fragments as narrative device, not as a source of interpretative pleasure like in the examples above, but as intra-diegetic punishment for the characters, or rather, usually only one character. I am referring to time loop stories in which a character is literally trapped within the same narrative sequence over and over again. There are many examples of this trope, both in literature, film and video games, but possibly the most iconic one is the film *Groundhog Day*, the story of the grumpy weather journalist Phil Connors (Bill Murray), who continues to wake up to the same winter morning in the small town where he had been sent to cover a festival.²⁸ He is the only one experiencing the time loop, as all the other characters just go about their regular lives, nonchalantly repeating the same movements and lines over and over, as if they were NPCs in a roleplaying game.²⁹ The story arch is about Phil trying to break the loop by attempting all sorts of strategies, and occasionally falling into despair and bouts of dark behaviour. Here, repetition is the enemy to be conquered, which only happens when Phil begins to pay attention to the apparently banal details of his life in Punxsutawney. He starts listening to people, getting to know them and their lives, gradually developing empathy and even falling in love, which ends up breaking the curse.³⁰ There is obviously a redemption subplot unfolding in the film, a spiritual awakening of sorts where Phil moves from a very selfish position to opening up to the world and others.³¹

²⁸Columbia Pictures (1993).

²⁹NPC means Non-Player Character, and is a typical abbreviation in computer games.

³⁰I am trying to not spoil the stories I write about in this book, but I am assuming that no one hasn't watched this iconic movie. If I am mistaken, my apologies.

³¹Daughton (1996).

The interesting thing for me here is that Phil's growth is facilitated by repetition. When the world is offering absolutely no stimuli, because everything is always the same, he must make an effort, look inwards and try to understand other people. Repetition liberates Phil from himself, so he can carve another path to act in his life. The many repetitions and his new attention to minimal variations actually create narrative suspense: what will he see/do today? The time loop can be understood as a metaphor for our daily lives, often buried in routines we do not even question. What would we learn if we paid attention?³²

More recent time loop movies are less contemplative and more strategic about the characters working to break the time loop, like the comedy *Palm Springs* or the science fiction film *Edge of Tomorrow*, which unfolds in the very different setting of a future Europe overwhelmed by an alien invasion.³³ William Cage (Tom Cruise), an army PR officer with no combat experience, gets sent to take part in an attack towards the invading forces as disciplinary punishment. The attack is a spectacular failure, with all human forces getting wiped out. Cage dies in action, as he gets covered in the corrosive blood of an alien he has killed. But a second later, he wakes up again at the beginning of the previous day, and has to re-live the same events. His attempts to warn his superiors backfire, since no one in the repetitive story world believes his story. Like Phil in *Groundhog Day*, Cage seems to be the only one trapped in the time loop. Eventually, he finds another soldier, the war hero Rita Vrataski (Emily Blunt), who is also conscious of the time loop. They start collaborating to defeat the aliens: she trains him for battle and shares all the information she has uncovered. Over the course of the same day, repeated hundreds of times, Cage learns by trial and error (which here means death) what is the best possible way to act at every turn, minutely choreographing his action route through the battlefield. In this way, the film is an enactment of video game mechanics. Vrataski and Cage collaborate to solve the mystery of the time loop and in the end manage to destroy the aliens, who are the obvious enemy all the way through. However, Cage also needs to change himself. Along the way he becomes not only more proficient in battle but also more creative, empathic, brave and dependable. He grows into a hero. *Edge of Tomorrow* is task-oriented, and Cage's progress through it thematises the trial-and-error dynamics of a video game session as we saw in Chapter 2. Here, the point is that knowing exactly what is coming can liberate the hero's energy to find out what to do next. The repeated sections are not shown in full to the spectator. Once the point has been made, the film cleverly avoids real-time repetition of all the scenes, indicating they are passing with just a couple of seconds of footage in more and more staccato compositions, knowing all too well that watching repeated long sequences is as unbearable for the spectator as for the heroes themselves.

³²I have written about feeling trapped in a time loop in the lockdown enforced by the authorities when the corona pandemic was at his highest in 2020. *Groundhog Day* features in this article as an annoying impossibility since I was unable to break free from any of the routines imposed by the situation (Tosca, 2021).

³³Warner Bros. (2014)

To summarise the many different threads touched upon by this section: repeating a short sequence in a text calls attention upon it. This generates different effects according to the formats. In poetry, repetition makes rhythm and music; in speeches, it helps drive an important point home; in novels, it highlights the importance of a motif or theme; in hypertexts, it emphasises the passages which the reader needs to reinterpret; in Otome Games, it offers different pathways to piece a complex story together; in time loop films, it allows for the character's learning and developing, and perhaps the audience with them. This is not meant as an exhaustive catalogue, there are many other forms and nuances, but it illustrates a wide range of themes, genres and modalities that demonstrate that repetition is much more than noise.

Adaptation

As we move up in scale regarding the size of the content elements to be repeated, the idea of literal repetition must be abandoned. In the middle layer, I will consider the repetition of plots and characters, in order words, what is usually known as adaptation, and has become a discipline of its own anchored mostly in literary and film studies, although cultural issues also arise.

Adaptation refers to texts that have been re-written and are presented again to the public. It can happen within the same medium (for instance, the novel *Eligible*, by Curtis Sittenfeld is an adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, by Jane Austen) or across media, where the 1995 BBC adaptation of the same Austen work, starring Colin Firth and Jennifer Ehle is one of the best known renditions.

We could consider adaptation as a form of translation, across languages, modalities or perhaps simply times and dominant discourses. A translation is never objective or straightforward, and any form for adaptation will include many creative choices, even when the aim is to reproduce the original work. Like musical variations, each individual translation focuses on different aspects while still attempting to be faithful to the same meaningful core. We can illustrate this going back to our pivotal epic poems. Think, for instance, of the many ways to translate the ambiguous term, *πολύτροπος* (*politropos*), that describes Odysseus at the beginning of *The Odyssey*. Literally, it means 'of many forms', but this is still rather open, so it has been made concrete in English translations from different times as, among others, 'the man for wisdom's various arts renowned', 'resourceful man', 'man skilled in all ways of contending', 'man of many ways', 'man of twists and turns' and 'a complicated man'.³⁴ Which one is *your* Odysseus? In my youth, I used to see him as an extremely clever problem-solver, the MacGyver of the ancient world. Later, I have come to think less of him, and am troubled by his duplicity and his domestic situation. He does indeed carouse with changing lovers while his wife is stuck in Ithaca, fending off usurpers to ensure the

³⁴These translations of *The Odyssey*, respectively, by Alexander Pope (1725), E.V. Rieu (1945), Robert Fitzgerald (1961), Richmond Lattimore (1965), Robert Fagles (1996), and Emily Wilson (2018).

survival of the kingdom. None of the translations above can encapsulate my less favourable opinion of Odysseus, and I would probably propose a new one if I was charged with that commission. As you can see from the range of variations, translators interpret *politropos* as a quality or a flaw, stressing different nuances in between, sometimes leaving the moral qualities of the word undetermined, others attempting to explain what those could be. The interpretative reward for a returning reader (or spectator, if this was a film) resides in perceiving the subtle details, perhaps even in disagreeing. Thus, a translation, like any other kind of adaptation, invites a double process or reception, where we consider the two related texts at once, although one of them can of course be enjoyed without knowledge of the other.

Adaptation is also the most straightforward way we have to produce media content, as it is evident every time a new platform emerges into the existing media ecology and needs to get going before having found its own aesthetic conventions: the radio dramas of the 1920s were based on theatre and novels; the early interactive fiction, *Zork*, was inspired by preexisting roleplaying games like *Dungeons and Dragons* and so on.³⁵ This happens with everyday storytelling too. Most people do not invent a new story every time they need to put their kids to sleep, but most likely narrate their own version of whatever folk tale they remember, or their children ask them to repeat. If we hear a good story, fiction or not, we are bound to re-tell it, share it with others whom we think will enjoy it as much as us or who might be able to use it in their own lives: 'Did you know that David won over Goliath even though he was much, much smaller?'. We might even embellish the story a little bit, amplifying it or adding some elements, pruning others, adapting it to our audience. Artists do the same thing, for it is impossible to re-tell a story without somehow appropriating it in smaller or greater measure. In this way, we can probably safely assume that the stories that survive through the centuries are those that get told over and over. Do they become less worthwhile as they age and mutate slightly? A good story is a good story, no matter how many times it is told, and it will always be new to someone. The question seems preposterous, and yet, it gets complicated if we consider the issue of authorship and how its understanding has evolved through history.

Many of the stories that get told and retold have no recognisable single author, they are 'no one's' or rather 'everyone's'. For instance, the European fairy tale of *Red Riding Hood* can be traced back to the folklore and oral tradition of several countries/languages, and has been retold in many different ways and across various media (text, paintings, films, computer games. . .), but they are all recognisable as versions of the same story, with returning plot points, characters and endings. Not all the elements might be present in the same way in all the instantiations, but enough will be so that we can identify the story as the same one. In fact, even changing a crucial element, like a happy ending into a tragic

³⁵Infocom (1977).

one, will only make sense precisely because we know it is a variation of the original schema, as we will explore later. Some of these versions have authors, like Perrault, Grimm, Roald Dahl or Angela Carter, but we cannot identify the origin of the tale for sure. Many 'old' stories operate like this. Folk tales, myths, fables, legends. . . they are part of a shared repository of stories that serves as an inexhaustible pool for collective creativity. There is a certain tolerance for these stories being picked up again and again, as they acquire a near-scaffolding quality that allows them to be used as blueprints to tell other stories in more modern times, as we have seen in Chapter 3.³⁶

However, adapting or retelling suddenly takes on another character when there is an identifiable first version with a named author, even if they also were inspired by others. Let us consider the tragic tale of Carmen, that has passed through several authorial hands and perhaps has become a myth in its own right. When French romantic author Prosper Mérimée was travelling in Spain, he heard the real story of a woman who was killed by a jealous lover. The tale impressed him so much that he was inspired to write the short novel *Carmen*, but he threw in a good dose of exoticising, dangerous beauty, black eyes, knives and all too proud men.³⁷ He also made the assassinated woman into a passionate gypsy and her brawler lover into a soldier fallen in disgrace, introducing new tragic social elements.³⁸ Mérimée's compatriots, dramatists Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, adapted the story into a mediocre comic opera libretto, but fortunately, the musician commissioned was Georges Bizet, who managed to create a brilliant score. Even though the genre was supposed to be lighthearted, the initial reception was catastrophic, as the scandalised Parisian public judged the story to be amoral. Not too long after though, the opera started gaining popularity as audiences became fascinated by the violence of Spanish passions. It ended up becoming the most popular French opera ever, but Bizet, who died 3 months after the opening, never found out. There are now more than 50 film adaptations of the story, and the character of Carmen, the *femme fatale*, has become an archetype recognised around the world. *Carmen* has been the source of heated ideological battles that

³⁶As I write these lines, Netflix has launched the film *The School for Good and Evil*, which incorporates old fairy tales for a new YA take on a story of friendship and proving yourself.

³⁷Mérimée (1845).

³⁸Mérimée scholars have noted that his fascination with gypsies was not only a product of his travels in Spain but was also shaped by his reading of books, among them George Borrow's *The Zincali*, and possibly by a poem by Aleksandr Pushkin. It is not entirely clear what the real story was, which local historians have attempted to throw light upon on several occasions (see, for instance, Rodriguez Gordillo, 2012 or Martín de Molina, 2017). Mérimée's version in the short novel seems to be an amalgamation of different anecdotes: there was indeed a jealous soldier who killed his lover (a dancer), there were smuggler women collaborating with bandits in the mountains, there was also a nobleman in love with a worker from the cigar fabric whom Mérimée knew personally and finally, his diary reveals a (to him) shocking encounter with a young Spanish woman in a tavern. Their conversation, as recorded in the diary, is very similar to the dialogue with which Carmen meets Don Jose for the first time in the novel.

still can incense audiences. Spanish directors have tried to de-exoticise and culturally reappropriate it, and more recently, a production of the opera has changed the ending so that it is Carmen who kills her lover (in self-defense), and not the other way around, an artistic intervention looking at the topic of partner violence through a critical lens.³⁹ Who has the right to decide how the story should be told? Who owns Carmen? Is it the short novel or the opera libretto that generates the archetype? Is there an unknown, but real Carmen, buried in the pages of history? Is the story French, Spanish or universal? With every repetition, someone else has appropriated the story for their own means.

Unravelling dilemmas like this have occupied adaptation scholars for decades, and they treat each further appropriation with caution. The question of originality has indeed been at the centre of the field, so that relations to an urtext are always carefully traced and demonstrated through rigorous analysis. This perspective tends to favour the older text, typically a literary source that gets adapted, for example into film, while the newer renderings cannot be anything but inferior.

This enduring attitude is surprising if we consider one of the inaugural texts in the field: the essay *Laocoon* by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, from 1766, which deals with the relation of the visual and the textual arts. This text is the first time that someone makes a case for art forms to be judged according to their own premises. For the longest time, the idea of mimesis, that art had to imitate nature, had dominated, so that the art form that somehow managed this best (painting, which for Lessing covers all visual arts including sculpture) was considered superior to the rest. That is why poetry and prose had to compensate for their 'shortcomings' by presenting elaborate descriptions that recreated reality as faithfully as possible. Lessing shows how painting and poetry each use their own medium to create art differently: painting uses form and colours in space, and poetry, sounds in time.⁴⁰ They cannot therefore be expected to do things in the same way. Lessing has liberated poetry from the need to imitate painting, and new kinds of poetic expression arise. His essay is also important because it starts paying attention to what today we might call the affordances of each medium, liberating content from its formal realisation. The underlying idea is that content then can be successfully represented/recreated in any medium, and that each medium will do it in its own way.

Such an argument might sound obvious to our hypermediated ears, but amazingly enough, the field of adaptation theory has been deaf to this realisation for a long time, and instead been preoccupied with establishing a moral discourse of 'fidelity' to the superior original text. More recent scholarship has challenged this perspective. Linda Hutcheon, in *A Theory of Adaptation*, insists on the idea that the new text also has its own value and even own agenda, so that we cannot assume that it will always be conveniently subservient to the original text: 'Adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication. And there are

³⁹This production was put up in Florence, in 2018, directed by Italian Leo Muscato.

⁴⁰He does not use this word, which is a more modern understanding of how meaning is realised. A medium is, for instance, image, sound, text and so on.

manifestly many different possible intentions behind the act of adaptation: the urge to consume and erase the memory of the adapted text or to call it into question is as likely as the desire to pay tribute by copying'.⁴¹

Indeed, Hutcheon advances the adaptation field, moving from the text-to-text 'literature as superior' position, and articulating the creative value of intertextuality, with numerous examples of adaptations that reinterpret, challenge and renew older texts. I was inspired by her commentary on the work of author Priscilla Galloway, who adapts mythical narratives for children.⁴² Galloway thinks that these valuable stories cannot be accessed without a 'reanimation', so her endeavour is to retell them in a way that can engage contemporary audiences.⁴³ Despite its zombie connotations, *reanimation* is a good word because it shows how old stories and characters get a new life so that they also can communicate to us today.

Along the same ideological lines, Julie Sanders proposes that adaptation can be seen as 'a form of collaborative writing across time, and sometimes across culture or language', in a dynamic conception of text that can be traced back to Julia Kristeva's proposition of intertextuality.⁴⁴ Her *Adaptation and appropriation* shows how our culture's obsession with originals is in fact connected to the copyright system and property laws. In former times, like Shakespeare's era, people and authors were much more open to borrowing and imitating one another. In fact, imitation was part of regular schooling and understood as practice to develop proficiency with different text genres, as we will see in Chapter 6.

Following Deborah Cartmell, Sanders proposes three categories to understand adaptation, which all make explicit how repetition is never neutral, but always adds a new intentionality:

- (1) Transposition: it relocates source texts in new ways (cultural, geographical, temporal. . .), to bring them closer to the new audiences' frame of reference. It can also change the text's genre. For instance, Baz Luhrmann updates Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in his film of the same name, where the original text plays out in an extravagant modern universe seen through the prism of Luhrmann's trademark "red curtain aesthetics".⁴⁵
- (2) Commentary, comment on politics of source text, or the new adaptation, or both. The impact of this adaptation is dependent on the audience knowing the older text, like how the 2000 film *Mansfield Park* makes explicit how the British colonies success is built upon slavery in a way that critically interpellates the original novel.

⁴¹This quote is from the second edition: Hutcheon (2012, p. 7), but Linda Hutcheon had already made this point in the first edition from 2006.

⁴²Among them, her book *Aleka and the Queen* (1995), centred around the women of *The Odyssey*.

⁴³Hutcheon (2012, p. 8).

⁴⁴Sanders (2016, p. 60).

⁴⁵Cook (2019).

- (3) Analogue. A sort of reinvention, exemplified by the *Clueless* film, which is loosely built upon Jane Austen's *Emma*, keeping a lot of the plotlines and character functions, even if the characters get new names and traits. The setting and script are original, so the analogue adaptation is less close to the source text than the transposition, although it can also involve similar relocation elements.

Sanders proposes a distinction between adaptation and appropriation, where appropriation does not signal back to the original text as clearly as adaptation, and is more clearly generating a whole new cultural product that can actually be a sort of 'hostile takeover', where the original is completely revamped.⁴⁶ Both adaptation and appropriation are in this way not mere repetitions.

To illustrate more closely how modern adaptation practices work, we can keep on following the trail of Jane Austen. The Emmy award-winning web series, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, or TLBD, is a 100-episode work broadcast on YouTube that adapts Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.⁴⁷ The story is told by Lizzie herself, who makes videos mostly in her room (in Vlog fashion), on and off accompanied by her sisters, a friend and other characters.⁴⁸ Most events happen offscreen and are therefore either narrated (or reenacted) by Lizzie, who also interacts with viewers in Q&A (question and answer) episodes. Other characters have social media accounts and post their own videos, so we get to see their perspectives and versions on events. In fact, the hype around this series was greatly helped by the transmedial activity of all the linked accounts and platforms. Now, only the videos remain, so the experience of watching them is much more static and contained, although it can still give a good idea of the kind of pleasures offered by this format.

Lizzie's videos are repetitions, part retelling, part reenactment. As she explains, they always take a starting point on something from her everyday life, which she talks about directly facing the camera. These anecdotes are often 'acted out' with Lizzie and other characters impersonating the people talked about. This is usually done in a lighthearted parodic fashion, which allows the actor to use a more formal, scripted tone. In this way, the parody works as a way of establishing a *contract* with contemporary audiences that can accept old-fashioned language and behaviour because they are presented with ironic distance. That is, for instance, why we never see Lizzie's mother, who is always impersonated by someone else (mostly Lizzie) so she is almost exclusively reduced to her outdated obsession with marrying her daughters off. Parodies are not for everyone though. Darcy's earnest character for instance does not really fit with such duplicity,

⁴⁶Sanders (2016, p. 26).

⁴⁷The series is produced by Jenni Powell and was distributed in *YouTube* through its own channel in 2012 and 2013. The producers went on to found the company Pemberley Digital as a result of the success of the series.

⁴⁸A *Vlog* is a video blog. In the beginning of the 2000s, this expression was used to distinguish video blogging from textual blogging. Now, most people talk about *blogging* without specifying the medium, and video blogging is the dominant form.

although he at some point impersonates his friend Fitz, who acts as a comic relief character. This is not ‘slice of life’ unadulterated footage, but the artificiality of the videos does not matter, because it is a premise of the format that there are several meta-layers of retellings and commentary on top of the original story. Modern repetition is often about media containing each other, as we will explore in Chapter 6. The story world is adapted to our present, where the female characters go to university, find jobs and can have sex before marriage. Character traits are modernised, too, so that, for instance, the scoundrel army officer George Wickam, who seduces the youngest sister, Lydia, and makes her elope with him in the novel, becomes here a swimming instructor that coerces her into making a sex tape about to be shared online. Events can also take on more contemporary shapes: a tea visit becomes a party where people drink alcohol and trash the house, or a letter from Jane becomes an exchange of ‘care packages’ that can be boxed/unboxed on camera. *TLBD* is more media saturated, fast and colourful than *Pride and Prejudice*. The result is an entertaining *transposition*, in Sanders’ terms, where not only the semantic level is relocated to the future, but just as importantly, the chosen media format radically alters the relation between narrator, characters and audience. The novel is told in the voice of a third person omniscient narrator who has access to the characters’ inner lives, but the source of focalisation is mostly Elizabeth Bennet. This narrator occasionally comments ironically on the characters and the situations, allowing Jane Austen to let Elizabeth make a fool of herself; her misjudging others’ characters becomes a source of narrative tension and learning, both for her and the reader. In contrast, the *YouTube* series, being told in the first person, naturally conflates narration and focalisation, so that Lizzie only tells us what she knows or speculates about. *TLBD* chooses to maintain the humorous glint of *Pride and Prejudice*, but now it is Elizabeth who has to carry all the irony, so she comes across as rather detached in her reflections and interactions. There is less compassion and possibly also insight in Lizzie, as compared to Elizabeth, at least by the end of the novel. This is not to say that Lizzie is callous, but that the format, based on comic retellings and reenactments, does not allow for heartfelt confessions. It would be ridiculous in this context to look at the camera and show real affection or sadness, too raw and unpolished, a display of low media literacy,⁴⁹ since ironic distance is rampant on *YouTube* and has even been considered a defining characteristic of postmodernism.⁵⁰ In that way, *TLBD* is a child of the times.

However, as successful as it was, the *TLBD* recipe might well be outdated already, maybe even more than *Pride and Prejudice*, securely comfortable in its ‘old medium’ status. Pemberley Digital, the producing company of *TLBD*, has suffered for this in their own business model. After *TLBD*’s success, they went on

⁴⁹Although the ‘authentic’ style is a feature of other genres in YouTube, like the confessional, see Dekavalla (2022).

⁵⁰Hutcheon (1987).



Fig. 3. *Pride and Prejudice* as Shōjo Manga, by DALL-E and me.

to produce vlog adaptations of other classic works (like *Emma*, *Frankenstein* or *Little Women*), but they were not as popular.⁵¹ One explanation could be that the *Pride and Prejudice* story is simply better suited to the online video format because of the focus on the heroine and the confessional style. But maybe it is simply that the timing is no longer right, and the media ecology has readjusted. That is, when *TLBD* launched in 2012, it still fitted within the existing vlog culture of YouTube, but this too has moved on. Nobody makes videos like this anymore. Now, audiences are used to the more fragmented and amateurish look and feel of TikTok videos, so the scripted monologues of Pemberley's adaptations are not fresh. They might still be an innovation compared to text or film adaptations, but our expectations as to the aesthetics of online video have shifted dramatically. Digital media aesthetics are evolving fast, and this degree of media convention instability might be one of the most poignant characteristics of adaptation in our time, where the known story is practically the only safe anchor, as we find our way through a maze of shifting platforms, modalities, framings and audience expectations.

Jane Austen's works will no doubt resurface in the media of the future too, since, through periodic repetition through the years, they have become part of the canon of 'very adapted texts', which Sanders identifies as a group of specific

⁵¹*TLBD* videos had often more than half a million viewers, some episodes even over one million. *Emma Approved* has mostly between 100,000 and 200,000, *Frankenstein* under the 100,000 and *March Family Letters* rarely over 20,000.

authors including Shakespeare and Dickens. These works seem to occupy an intermediate position between being just delimited works and the status of literary archetype. They continue to appeal to us, as more and more people have experienced one of the previous versions. Maybe we can even pretend that new media forms cannot be considered mature until they have tried their forces with the adaptation canon. Just as we wonder if Joel Coen's *The Tragedy of Macbeth* can be as good as they say, we might also expect that someone will soon find the perfect recipe for channeling Jane Austen in *TikTok* or an AI image generator, in a sort of combinatorial enthusiasm where stories, platforms and storytellers can shape things in different ways (Fig. 3).⁵²

This adaptive exuberance is a matter for rejoicing:

Adaptation and appropriation, we might add – supplementing, complementing, coming after Derrida and Darwin, as it were – are all about multiple interactions and a matrix of possibilities, about different versions of things. They are, endlessly and wonderfully, about seeing things come back to us in as many forms as possible.⁵³

In this middle ground, repetition goes hand in hand with variation to make adaptations endlessly interesting. We began the section by considering how translations engender polysemy, and continued with examples from different genres to illustrate how the successive variations upon an original theme enrich and widen its scope. Adaptations are never neutral, they appropriate, reinterpret, update, contest and even reject.

Transmedial Worlds

The last category expands on stories at an even bigger scale, when the repetition is not limited to plot or character (although both can be part of it), but at the top layer of vast fictional universes that can house a multiplicity of stories. In the case of the Ancient Greek epics, the multiple re-tellings through the ages have enriched them so much that they have become a story-world with a reproducible topos and ethos, an entire fictional-mythical universe where innumerable side stories can unfold. Story-worlds are a specific instance of sameness, understood not as literal unit repetition, but as a more structural concept where elements and patterns become recognisable as being similar to something else, or fitting into a particular worldview. Here, familiarity morphs into repetition and back, as some elements are very clearly repeated, such as a specific use of language that identifies characters by their epithets, and others are more vague or open to interpretation. Isolated fragments function as prompts for our imagination (a Corinthian helmet

⁵²This is a 2021 film adaptation of *Macbeth* directed by Joel Coen, with Denzel Washington and Frances McDormand as protagonists.

⁵³Sanders (2016, p. 212).

in a book cover) transporting us to the fictional world and invoking the relevant interpretive frameworks in an instant.

Together with Lisbeth Klastrup, I have researched and published about this topic for some 20 years, so I am not about to repeat myself too much here.⁵⁴ Our key proposition is to look at these fictional universes as imaginative constructs shared by audiences and producers, that is, not focus on one single product as ‘authentic’ but more on the common experience of a vast fictional world. Since the focus is on the world and not on any particular plot or story, we have proposed three concepts to describe and understand the essence of the said world, their *worldness*: mythos, topos and ethos, that is, the foundational stories, history and myths, the space and places, and the belief systems that organise sociality. Such a world can be inhabited by many characters, each with their own story, and it can be expanded nearly infinitely, adding new characters, plots or timelines, across a number of platforms and modalities. What is repeated here is the whole setting, so transmedial worlds are a growing mould that always can generate new stories.

In our work, we have tested our concepts in analyses of transmedial worlds like *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter*, also incorporating Japanese media mix cases. We have looked at how these worlds are recreated and reproduced in comics, films or computer games, among other products, and how each new instantiation both expands and slightly modifies the shared image of the world in audiences and producers. Transmedial worlds are always work in progress, and they motivate audience engagement again and again, although of course it is difficult to predict when they will be a success. The entertainment industry is keen on establishing recognisable transmedial worlds, in this context most often referred to as *IP* (Intellectual Property) or *franchises*, as they ensure continuous revenue for years. I would argue that the strategic development and nurturing of franchises has been one of the main driving forces of our current media industry, who rely on audiences tolerating, perhaps even craving, a certain amount of repetition. Film is the best example of how the ubiquity of repetitive strategies turns into a continuous search for and exploration of the most productive transmedial worlds.

Looking at the 2022 Worldwide Box Office listings, we can see that out of the first 20 top grossing movies of the year, most are repetitive in one way or another, with only four movies whose screenplay was originally written (*Elvis*, *Nice View*, *The Lost City* and *Nope*).^{55,56} The rest are three sequels, five adaptations and eight franchise installments, most American, some Chinese⁵⁷:

⁵⁴Lastly in our joint book, *Transmedial Worlds in Everyday Life* (Tosca & Klastrup, 2019), where the essence of our approach is explained and unfolded.

⁵⁵IMDBS: <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/year/world/>.

⁵⁶I am writing this in October, maybe it will change by the end of the year, specially due to the Christmas season.

⁵⁷A sequel can of course morph into a franchise if more and more products keep being added.

- Sequels: *Top Gun: Maverick*, *Water Gate Bridge*, *Sonic the Hedgehog 2*.
- Adaptations: *Uncharted* (video game), *The Bad Guys* (childrens' books), *Bullet Train* (novel), *Too Cool to Kill* (Chinese version of a Japanese film), *DC League of Super-Pets* (comic book)
- Franchises: *Jurassic World Dominion* (Jurassic Park), *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (Marvel), *Minions: The Rise of Gru* (Minions), *The Batman* (DC), *Thor: Love and Thunder* (Marvel), *Fantastic Beasts: The Secrets of Dumbledore* (Harry Potter), *Lightyear* (Toy Story), *Morbius* (Marvel).

Sometimes there are fluid lines between adaptations and franchises, and even though they are not equivalent in terms of world building, I will consider them together in this section, since my focus is on how the medium of film relies on 'tried and tested' formulas rather than risk new developments: the same story, the same characters or the same world.⁵⁸ I can feel my own underlying prejudice here, between the lines. My point is not to judge a whole industry though. While blockbuster films are the flagship of the business, there are many other kinds of mid-budget or low-budget productions where other creative rules apply. Still, that the top industry level is dominated by repetitive practices says something about the changing cultural role of cinema in our time. This is what everyone, worldwide, is watching: a comfortable return to well-known worlds with some (hopefully thrilling) new developments. Adaptations have always been present in film, but scholars talk about a 'franchise era' from 2001 on, defining franchise as 'the expansion of a single intellectual property (IP) into different texts'.⁵⁹ When considering how producers develop their franchises, Fleury, Hartzheim and Mamber distinguish between multimedia (simply adapting material across media) or transmedia (developing pieces of the same story puzzle) strategies, drawing on Henry Jenkins idea of transmedia as more organised and complementary. At this point, and with the increasing complexity of storytelling conventions, with higher and higher intertextuality, I would argue that it is difficult to distinguish between the two. I am here more interested in the reasons behind this overwhelming use of repetition. In their book, the authors offer different explanations, with the economic one being prevalent. Blockbuster films are so expensive to make that producers need to ensure stakeholders that there is an existing public (and therefore revenue that ensures a return of their investment) even before the first line of the screenplay has been written. In other words, it is a mere question of industrial survival, which the authors trace back to the Hollywood studio era and the accelerated standardisation of filmmaking. In a way, the film industry is reacting to television, where a lot of innovation in terms of themes, plots and characters happens these days. Big budget films have specialised in spectacle and extended world building. Franchises attract more international audiences than

⁵⁸Sometimes adaptations become franchises, and franchises include adaptations in their ecology of products.

⁵⁹Meikle (2019) and Fleury et al. (2019, p. 1).

tent-pole movies,⁶⁰ so there is a better possibility for reaching foreign markets.⁶¹

Kyle Meikle has proposed five dimensions to understand the franchise era of endless repetition (adaptation and transmedial alike)⁶²:

- (1) Quantity. There are more and more adaptations, across more different media than ever, establishing increasing intertextual connections.
- (2) Legality. While previous periods were less worried about owning the actual IP (for instance, adapting texts that were out of copyright), there is now both an interest in reinforcing the owned IPs and a draconian legal system in place to manage them.
- (3) Interactivity. An increased number of products that extend franchises into media that require playful user participation, such as computer games.
- (4) Materiality. Franchises have become increasingly focused on toys and other kinds of physical merchandise.
- (5) Juvenility. Meikle notes that there is a disproportionate share of juvenile content, with franchises growing both from children and YA texts, but oriented towards the general public.

This analysis points to an increased level of professionalisation that is making American franchises closer to Japanese media mix in terms of corporate development of strategies for extending the life of successful IPs.⁶³ From the audience's perspective, this abundance of self-referential texts means that their beloved franchises are everywhere: in their breakfast cereal, on their t-shirts, on streaming services and social media. Their constant re-appearance, in various guises, ensures that we never forget them. Meikle recovers the wise words of Marsha Kinder, who already in 1993, reflected about the consequences of the intense proliferation of the same content, so that 'eight-and-a-half-year-olds find themselves gazing into a "Lacanian mirror" in which the imaginary signifier "is not static or stable, but dynamic and processual . . . constantly moving backward and forward in time and constantly shrinking and growing – like Alice in Wonderland or Through the Looking-Glass"' Transmedial worlds offer a familiar place to return to, looking for new meanings and comfort.⁶⁴ Products are regularly launched, awakening

⁶⁰A tent-pole movie is expensive to produce but generates so much revenue that it can keep the studio afloat for a while, maybe financing other enterprises too.

⁶¹This paragraph is based on the introduction to their edited volume, *The Franchise Era* (Fleury et al., 2019).

⁶²In Chapter 6 of Meikle (2019). Here I summarise and explain in my own words.

⁶³A media mix strategy refers to the integrated way in which Japanese producing companies launch their IPs across several media that support each other, for instance manga, anime and game. The Japanese media mix has grown into a perfect media industry machine, as documented by Marc Steinberg in his illuminating *Anime's media mix franchising toys and characters in Japan* from 2012. I have worked on several prominent media mix cases, specially with *Gundam*, together with Aki Nakamura (Nakamura & Tosca, 2020, 2021).

⁶⁴Meikle (2019, p. 171).

nostalgia and acting like data points in a tightly connected rhizome of meanings and affections. When we recognise characters, plots and places, the world suddenly makes sense again.

Coda

In this chapter, I have looked at the repetition of exactly the same content in three layers of literal text, adaptations and transmedial worlds. It has become clear that the affordances of repetition shift as we move up through the different layers.

The first layer reveals that short sequences have the simple but strong effect of communicating that the things that get repeated mean more, confirming the findings of Chapter 1. The repeated elements catch people's imagination as they are highlighted again and again, increasing affect with every encounter. This section is mostly about the craft of storytelling, the detail of composition and how audiences experience it. In other words, here we are at the level of stylistic affordances and how they facilitate aesthetic experiences.

The second layer, of adaptation, gives attention to the dance of familiarity and variation, where the repetition of elements sparks the interest of knowing audiences, always ready to re-visit the classics, or re-adopt an old story that presents itself in new clothes. Here, audiences have something at stake, as they need to compare, evaluate and appreciate.

The third layer, of transmedial worlds and franchises, showed how repetition becomes an industry strategy to mitigate risks, relying on people's long-time affective attachment to specific fictional worlds.

Repetition in adaptations and transmedial worlds gives rise to ideological affordances, since determining which works get repeated, transformed and extended over and over has consequences for our cultural and political life. One dimension of this is of course the formation of a 'canon' of preferred works in any medium: the great works of literature endorsed by ministries of education, lists of the best films of the century voted for by experts, vintage TV series that attract the greatest number of viewers and therefore get repeatedly broadcast to ensure advertisement revenue. The reasons behind the formation of a canon are many: cultural, political and economic, but the effect is always the same: a repeated and accumulated exposure to a selection of cultural works. Attempts to expand the canon are often met with mistrust; how is it possible to include something new in a list we know so well? How can we be sure it deserves to be there? We will not know until we have encountered it often enough. The obsession with 'tried and tested' formulae makes it difficult for new stories to be told.

Another affordance related to repetition in this overarching layer is that the stories that get repeated over and over colonise our imagination, offering us ways of knowing that go beyond the anecdotal example and can frame our way of understanding the world, like the love metaphors from Chapter 3. If the love stories that our culture prefer are tragic (*Tristan and Isolde*; *Romeo and Juliet*; *The Sorrows of Young Werther*; *Bonnie and Clyde*...), the message is that suffering and love belong together, so maybe we will end up pursuing impossible partners,

putting up with too much misery or doubting that a joyful relationship can be real love. The power of discourse to organise sociality has been well established at least since Foucault, although of course, if we subscribe to a more modern view of audiences as active participants, we will acknowledge that people have free will; they can also reject any trope and be able to separate the pleasures they derive from entertainment from the way they live their lives. We cannot, however, escape the fact that myths have power, and cultural meanings become myths through sustained repetition and adaptation.

The most important affordance related to the repetition of content in the way examined here is that we develop an emotional connection to the words, sentences, stories, characters and worlds that we encounter over and over again. We have nostalgic attachment to the media of our childhood, and positive feelings emerge when we recognise a story, a trope or a motive. Well-known worlds become secure havens, where we know what to expect. The more time (and money) we have invested in engaging with a particular fictional universe, the more rewarding it will be to revisit it again. That is why franchises and revivals feel so safe, both for audiences and producers.

I must admit that I am conflicted about this last point. On the one hand, I think it is unsettling that I keep on being invited to the same fictional worlds over and over, like a place I can't ever leave. Have we become afraid of visiting new places? Can we even see the value of stories that cannot be attached to any franchise or transmedial world upon release? On the other hand, I wonder why we are we so preoccupied with always innovating. Maybe we do not need any more stories (or fictional worlds), if the ones we have are enough to express all the range of human experience. Think of storytelling in less mediated societies. The average person of a hundred years ago would not have been exposed to as many stories as us, without television or streaming services, without a robust literary industry sprouting hundreds of criminal novels every year. What stories did they know and love? Why not return to the few well-known ones and 'just' pass them on to the next generation? When language or plot become archaic, the stories can simply be adapted, as we saw above, revamping them for modern taste.

This discussion cannot be closed here, but I hope that one thing has become clear throughout this chapter. Repetition is a tool that storytellers of all kinds can deploy to engender different kinds of familiarity and recognition. Repetition is lauded in one field as great craftsmanship (the brilliant speech, the beautiful rhythm in a poem) but seen with suspicion in another (the adaptation, the franchise). If high and low cultures are making use of the same kind of aesthetic strategies, maybe the thorny question of cultural value should be reconsidered and reformulated.

The diverse repetitive strategies examined here also offer different kinds of aesthetic value to audiences, related to some of the pleasures and learning opportunities introduced in Chapter 1. There is both recognition and comfort in terms of affective pleasures *and* cognitive rewards in terms of learning (comparing adaptations, invoking the whole through the part, correlating similar occurrences in search of a coherent story). If Virgil had known all this, he would no doubt have been more hopeful about the fate of his *Aeneid*.

Chapter 5

If You Liked That, You Will Love This: On Sameness-Based Algorithmic Recommendation Systems

Echo was a lovely nymph with a beautiful voice who got into trouble with the queen of the gods. According to Ovid, Jupiter had charged Echo with distracting his wife Juno with long conversations so that he could engage in his unfaithful escapades with various nymphs.¹ Unfortunately, Juno discovered the ruse and chastised Echo by taking away her voice, or rather, by making her lose the power to formulate her own thoughts, since the only thing she was thereafter allowed to utter were the last words of whatever was spoken to her. As if this tragedy was not enough, Echo fell in love with the self-absorbed Narcissus, who rejected her (as he did everybody) and caused her to fade away, so her bones turned to stone and the only part of her that remained was her voice. Narcissus did not go unpunished for his cruelty though, since Nemesis condemned him to fall in love with his own reflection in the water, so much so that he wasted away and ended up dying, even if he was changed into a flower by the gods.

This myth is about divine punishment, losing humanity, the despair of repetition and the dangers of excessive mirroring. The stories of Echo and Narcissus also illustrate two complementary sides of algorithmic culture: the tension between the individual and collective dimensions of sameness that will articulate this chapter.

Echo is desperate, condemned to waiting for the sounds that others make, in the hope that she can use their last words to express herself; she has lost her own language, the seductive tongue she was so adept at using. We can understand her frustration just by doing an online search. The algorithms there offer us the echoes of other people's answers, aggregated in massive calculations, whose distilled

¹I am basing this retelling on the English translation of the *Metamorphoses* by Anthony S. Kline (2000), hosted by the Electronic Text Center of the University of Virginia Library. The story of Echo and Narcissus is on Book III: pp. 339–510 (Accessed <https://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Ovhome.htm> on January 2022).



results acquire the aura of truth. Maybe they can fit our questions too? In social media, our attention is besieged by the whims of a multitude of strangers that share some similarity with us. Maybe they live in our area, maybe they are also women, academics, middle aged, maybe they once liked a video of a baby rocking a puppy to sleep. The machine gives us what lots of them liked: a dress with pockets, an inspirational video about body positivity or a trip to a remote Swedish village. We are not necessarily interested in any of these things; their echoes do not fit us.

Narcissus is lost too (Fig. 1). Ovid writes, ‘unknowingly he desires himself, and the one who praises is himself praised, and, while he courts, is courted’.² His kind of self-absorption is sterile and leads nowhere. The story is also a warning: if we only look at what we already are, we cannot move, we wither. And the dangers of navel-gazing are not just solipsism. Can we evolve if all we look at is our own reflection? A mind that is never challenged, or exposed to something new, stagnates (or so it seems if we embrace current discourses about education which place innovation, creativity and the ability to adapt at the centre of a flourishing life).³ This desire for dynamism seems at odds with algorithmic systems built to give us what we already know and love.

This chapter considers how algorithmic recommendation systems are changing the way we find and enjoy media products, focusing on books as a case study. Even though I am occasionally puzzled, annoyed and at times even angry at the feedback of the algorithms, I am not taking an apocalyptic stance. Methodologically, I will be working with autoethnographic vignettes, but this is not about me, or any other individual user. 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.

Taste: Individual Inclination and Collective Norm

Aesthetic taste is an elastic category that refers to an individual’s ability to appreciate art and culture, with critical implications for the functioning of all sorts of communities. The study of taste is a whole field in itself within aesthetic philosophy, and it carries other meanings related to our bodily and cognitive experience. Taste is of course one of the five senses (historically considered the basest), and it is from sensory experience that the aesthetic development of the concept departs.⁴ Throughout history, taste has had a moral, value-laden aspect, starting, perhaps, with the things we put into our mouths, but then on to other kinds of preferences, artistic and mundane; our taste in clothes or interior decoration. The Romans had a maxim *De gustibus non disputandum est*, with versions in many languages, that points to the fact that it is useless to try to convince others of the superiority of our own taste. There is no universal agreement as to what constitutes great art, or delicious food, and it is extremely difficult to disentangle which

²Ibid., pp. 402–436.

³Crystallised around the notion of *21st Century Skills*.

⁴Rudolph (2017).



Fig. 1. Algorithmic Echo and Narcissus, by DALL-E and me.

qualities might reside in the object and which might be purely subjective or situational. Still, from antiquity on, philosophers continue to disagree about the superiority of certain tastes as if this was an objective matter, and it has been essential in the conceptualisation of beauty and aesthetics.⁵ I argue that the confusion around the notion of taste comes from our usually mixing up two different understandings of the word:

- (1) the personal aesthetic preference of an individual, indisputable and subjective (although obviously formed by whichever access to culture the individual has had)
- (2) the exalted idea of aesthetic taste that a given society considers the pinnacle of civilisation, sophistication and, as we will see, beauty and truth (this notion partly overlaps with the idea of the *canon*)

In order to avoid further confusion in what follows, I propose to call the former *taste*, and the second *Taste*, capitalised, for it is in the struggle within them that my points will become clear.

Classic understandings of Taste are built upon the platonic notion of beauty as truth, which cannot be disentangled from questions of morality. This understanding begins to shift in the eighteenth century, when Hume proposed that beauty is not in the object, but that we ascribe it to the object that produces a pleasurable sentiment in us. Kant expanded upon this notion, highlighting that we are interested in sharing this with others, creating a community of Taste, an

⁵Kivy (2015).

‘aesthetic common sense’.⁶ But even as philosophers were leaving moral judgements behind, the older notion of ‘Good Taste’ as attached to virtuous character has persisted, as part of the ideological project of shifting power elites and the struggles around defining cultural capital.^{7,8}

As aesthetic philosophy has moved from a normative towards a phenomenological position, Taste has lost preeminence as a cultural category, and we now prefer to talk about ‘the aesthetic experience’. The nature of this experience is not solely dependent on the formal properties of the object nor exclusively on the sensorial and interpretive ability of a human appreciator, but is rather a combination of both. The aesthetic experience is the result of a meeting or an interaction, that actualises/realises the artistic object. Despite this ‘new’ understanding of the aesthetic experience and the attempt to throw off the shackles of morality in discussions of art and beauty, I would argue that the idea of Taste as a sort of essentialist faculty to recognise the ‘right thing’ is still very much operative in everyday life.⁹ Good Taste becomes then a competence to be developed, a mix of education and sensibility, that makes our personal taste magically align with the Taste. Further, having ‘bad taste’ shows not only aesthetic incompetence, it is also morally reprehensible. In this understanding, Taste is seen as something objective, attached to the object/work of art in ways that everybody can appreciate if they try hard enough. Each culture develops a normative value system to judge itself and its works of art. A whole society can aspire to something, for example by looking at the past as an example of some lost virtue, or by wanting to establish a specific vision of the future. There are many examples of particular moments in time when art forms (and thus the Taste that favours them) are attached to value judgements, for instance being seen as progressive or decadent. Politics and art cannot be disentangled.

Acquiring Good Taste is seen to be part of developing as a citizen and a human being, and is done through exposure to a specific canon of cultural works.¹⁰ This is an assumption that has been behind many a pedagogic and political initiative since the Enlightenment. Countless canons have been produced in different times, countries and across cultural platforms: lists of works essential for everyone with hopes of becoming a cultivated person and a good citizen. However, there has also always been a certain resistance on the part of individuals, as the canon inevitably looks back, and may, therefore, be out of step with society’s development. This is an older problem than we might think. In 1914, Nelson A. Crawford complains that the school system was failing in fulfilling the purpose of the study of literature, which is: ‘the development of good taste in reading, so that the pupil upon completion of the school course in the subject shall, in some measure at least, recognise the worthy and choose it for his own

⁶Ibid.

⁷See for instance Axelsson (2019).

⁸Guillory (1993).

⁹Most notably since Romanticism.

¹⁰That is, make our taste overlap with the valid Taste of our time.

reading'.¹¹ However, he must sadly admit that this was not happening, and people, fresh out of the school system, preferred to read newspapers and light contemporary novels, having developed an aversion to the canon. 'Most people do not feel the universal appeal in literature unless it touches, in an apparent way, the things with which they are familiar'.¹² Crawford proposes that instead of filling the young minds with information and indiscriminate reading, maybe the canon should be opened up and incorporate contemporary texts that dealt with issues the students cared about. Only then might a love of reading and real discernment be developed. I introduce this discussion here because it feels rather contemporary: taste and Taste pointing in opposite directions. Even today we discuss what should be part of school and university curricula, as society changes and we become aware of how the canon has ideologically shaped us.¹³

Despite the controversies and various canon extensions, the 'oldest' high art would still seem to be the most valued, both by our education system, the art world and the media in general. A sure sign of an elevated spirit, even today, would be to be able to not only recognise but also appreciate a Beethoven symphony, a Shakespeare play or a Matisse painting.¹⁴ Here, two idealised notions converge: the spiritual highness of art with the Rousseauian educated citizen invested in freedom and the community.

To understand the reasons behind this unhelpful conceptual blend, we need to go beyond the field of aesthetics and into the sociological understanding of taste, best represented by the influential work of Pierre Bourdieu. He proposes the notion of 'cultural capital' to describe the fact that people appreciate different things depending on their upbringing and social status.¹⁵ There are class patterns to the way different arts and objects are understood and preferred, that is, taste is not just a matter of aesthetic experience, but also a question of belonging. The national context is extremely important in this respect; his notion of 'field' is very much bound to the nation state.

The idea of cultural capital has been empirically tested recently, in a large-scale Australian study, that confirmed that education and occupation are strong factors in determining taste.¹⁶ The elite have been good at building up walls around a

¹¹Crawford (1914, p. 562).

¹²Ibid., p. 564.

¹³These struggles have been specially visible in the American context, with the so-called culture wars and the attempts to open up the Eurocentric literary canon including works from other contexts (Bona, 2017). I can recognize the kind of discussions and arguments also in my native country (Spain) and adopted one (Denmark), with similar clashes between centralising conservative forces and peripheral voices. The contexts are different but the intermingling of aesthetic and ideological arguments is the same.

¹⁴Even though questions about the morality of art resurface regularly, for example when we ask ourselves how was it possible for nazi officers to commit atrocities and enjoy classical music at the same time.

¹⁵Bourdieu (1984).

¹⁶The project has produced several book publications, <https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/ACF>.

palace that few others can enter. Inside the palace, there is Good Taste: the refined, the high, the elegant; outside, bad taste: the vulgar, the low, the tacky. Access to the palace is, as the Australian study demonstrates, a matter of resources and upbringing, but masquerades as a matter of spiritual sensibility. Social class allows for exposure to the forms of art and culture that have value as cultural capital and provides individuals with the necessary literacy to both decode and appreciate them. This process happens primarily at home, in the family and close social circle of each individual, perpetuating a cycle of unequal access.

Enter the Internet. As I have shown above, our idea of Taste has evolved according to different aesthetic considerations variously entangled with moral, normative and sociological notions of class. Has access to culture through the Internet changed this? In the early online days, the democratising possibility of unlimited access to quality content was celebrated, even as some critical voices warned us about the dangers of non-curated cultural distribution.¹⁷ Now, we are in a more pessimistic place, as the Internet is seen as the source of a lot of societal problems allowing ready circulation of fake news, hate speech and harassment campaigns.

Enthusiasts and detractors alike can agree on one thing: there is an unprecedented amount of culture available to be accessed. Books can be downloaded from libraries and e-book sellers, films, series and music can be streamed, and computer games have their own repositories. Everything is available if you can find it, and here we can see the value of curation, for without visibility there is no availability.

This abundance caters to the double understanding of taste as socially valuable *and* personal. Everybody can access the cultural canon and develop the kind of Taste that engenders cultural capital, and everybody can find something to their taste, no matter how narrow the interest. The ‘long tail’¹⁸ has been celebrated, where access to large repositories of items counteracts the culture industry’s tendency to focus on the next blockbuster.¹⁹ To make sense of all this, algorithms help people find what they want, usually based on a sameness principle: what did people similar to you like? What is similar to what you yourself liked in the past?

First Interlude: Personal Taste, the Canon and the Algorithm

My own experience of developing cultural Taste is a mix of aesthetic pleasure-seeking (taste) and adapting to social cues (the canon). This is the story of how I became a bookworm. Growing up in a working-class family, my exposure to books in general and the canon in particular happened at school,

¹⁷See Surowiecki (2005) or Benkler (2006).

¹⁸Anderson (2004).

¹⁹The equalizing effects of this have been more recently challenged, as the algorithmic recommendation systems still seem to favour ‘big stars’ or to be skewed in favour of general categories like gender or geographical location. See fx Ordaining and Nuns (2016), Tan et al. (2017), or Coelho and Mendes (2019).

where we were introduced to the great works of literature through fragments reproduced in our textbooks. For most children in my neighbourhood, this was a necessary evil; nobody read as a pastime. But I liked to immerse myself in books and, wanting more, I started to visit the school library. There I realised that there were all sorts of books; not just the classics, but also more entertaining stories, where I could live other kinds of lives full of adventure and fantasy, leaving the real world behind. Books were a door to wonderland, and I became such a voracious reader that I got a special deal with the baffled school librarian: I was allowed to check two books out every day (which were returned the next day) in exchange for helping to tidy up.²⁰ At primary school, I read all the canonic prescribed texts as well as everything from the children's shelves. Eventually, I ran out of fairy tales, Enid Blyton, Roald Dahl, Michael Ende, Lewis Carroll, Gloria Fuertes and all the rest, so I moved on to the community library and CS Lewis, Tolkien, Jules Verne, Alexandre Dumas, Conan Doyle and on and on I went, in a totally eclectic manner, guided by whim and limited only by whatever the library had acquired. Serendipity reigned supreme, and I had a permanent sense of wonder at the many discoveries I made. There were also 'bad' books I did not enjoy when I began reading them, but I forced myself to complete them for two reasons: (1) it was the only book I had that day and (2) even the most boring book could contain a treasure, a small passage or sentence that made it all worthwhile.²¹ I developed both a wide taste and a sense that the canon was important, so I resolved to systematically educate myself in the great works of literature.²² I would develop good Taste. The method was this: every time I checked out a 'pleasure' book, I also took another clearly marked as 'a classic', say *Dragons of Autumn Twilight*²³ and *Eugénie Grandet*.²⁴ I would read them at the same time and only return for new books when they both were finished. With this method, I covered a lot of ground, making many discoveries and learning to love a lot of the classics. In fact, sometimes the 'pleasure' book was a classic. I also read things which I did not understand and was not ready for, chugging along regardless, like a machine. I wanted to become an educated person, like the ones I read about in the novels; someone who owned shelves of well-thumbed books, went to the theatre and visited museums.

²⁰The rule was otherwise one book a week per student.

²¹Even today, it is hard for me to stop reading a book I do not enjoy. What if there was something wonderful hidden in one of its pages and I wasn't giving its author a fair chance?

²²Or what I gathered were the great works of literature from school textbooks, encyclopaedias and the like. I operated a bit like the Autodidact which Roquentin befriends in *La Nausée* (Sartre, 1938). I do not remember having been directly inspired by him, but who knows.

²³This is the first novel of the trilogy, *The Dragonlance Chronicles*, by Margaret Weiss and Tracy Hickman. It was published in 1984 and was all the rage for us who played tabletop roleplaying games.

²⁴This is one of Honoré de Balzac's most acclaimed novels, published in 1833 and the beginning of his big project, *La Comédie Humaine*.

This account is embarrassingly personal, but I daresay that the impulse behind it is universal: beyond the pure pleasure of reading, there is also a young person who is *outside* wanting to get *inside*, for whatever reasons, probably extremely muddled in my case. Without ever having heard of Bourdieu, I could see that people higher up in the class ladder had more comfortable lives, and occupied themselves with more interesting cultural pursuits. I wanted to belong to that group, mostly because I had the naive hope that I would then finally have someone to talk about books with.²⁵

In this story, Taste formation and its partial overlapping with taste is an assemblage of many different forces at play – personal interest, aesthetic pleasure, the school system, a vague conscience of class, textbooks, the canon, librarians, shelves, a library card, the physical disposition of shelves, the colour and form of book covers, intertextual citations in books – all contributing to discoveries and developments that together account for a colourful reading biography. Sameness and repetition were part of my method: the proximity of the shelves, the classification of books in genres, the things written by the same author or someone in the same period.

There were no recommendation algorithms at that time, I can only wonder what would have happened with that extra factor added to the equation. If I had had the means to buy or download books online, and the algorithm had kept on offering more novels that were *the same as* Enid Blyton. Would I ever have dared read out of my comfort zone? I decided to conduct an experiment: what kinds of texts would the Amazon algorithm recommend if I started with some of the classics like in my story above? Would I encounter similar things and would my taste have had the chance to develop in the same direction? When you browse the Amazon site looking for products, there are three main paths of discovery: ‘Frequently Bought Together’, ‘Customers Who Viewed this item also viewed...’ and ‘Products related to this item’. The two first ones are clearly built on collaborative filtering, while the last one might also incorporate some tagging or curation by Amazon themselves, following categories that are unclear to me. Like Echo depending on the sounds that others make, I decided I would ride the wave of all that was thrown at me, seeing if some of it resonated with paths I had taken as a child. I wanted to explore what kind of sameness would unite the books found by the algorithm.

I would start with one of my favourite books from my early discovery days at school: *Don Quixote*, by Miguel de Cervantes. Since this 1605 work is one of the foundations of the western canon, I assumed it would yield many connections. I was curious to find out if the engine would just point to all manner of old canonical titles (Taste) or if it would ever move into more modern or genre literature (taste). I have not ever purchased this book through Amazon, and I usually do not buy Spanish literature through them, so I thought my slate would be relatively ‘clean’. I also wrote the title in English. The system would probably

²⁵It was only much later than I realised that good Taste is not a ticket to the middle class and that there are not many in the middle class who talk a lot about books anyway...

attempt to relate this book to my purchase history, which is mostly contemporary fiction in English across a wide span of genres. I established that I would observe through four levels of recommendations. Since a lot of the connections offered are often to works by the same author, I decided that I would never pick a book by the same author I 'came from', and instead choose the first variation that took my fancy (to imitate my serendipitous shelf-hopping as a child), conflating the three categories 'Frequently Bought Together', 'Customers Who Viewed this item also viewed...' and 'Products related to this item' as one, limited to what one can see on one page (that is, I would not activate the arrows that allow you to find more products in any of the single categories). This is what happened:

I input *Don Quixote* in the search function and it presented me with various editions of the same work (Fig. 2). I picked a random one and then it suggested:

Level 1. Other editions of *Don Quixote*, *Crime and Punishment* (Dostoevsky), *1984* (Orwell), *The Count of Montecristo* (Dumas), *Frankenstein* (Shelley), *Candide* (Voltaire), *Little Women* (Alcott), *Wuthering Heights* (Brontë), Edgar Allan Poe's selected works.

Not surprisingly, the suggestions are all part of the canon, even if we have moved away from Spanish literature. I decided to explore two avenues by opening two links in different tabs, to give two distinct search branches: a Russian one (*Crime and Punishment*) and an English one (*1984*).

Level 2. The *Crime and Punishment* tab suggested lots of books by Dostoevsky until the 'Customers Who Viewed this item also viewed...' offered me *War and Peace* (Tolstoy) and 'Products related to this item' pointed to *The Trial* (Kafka). On this second level I am also presented with *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald), *Pride and Prejudice* (Austen), *Dubliners* (Joyce), *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (Conan Doyle), *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (Conan Doyle) and *Macbeth* (Shakespeare), as the algorithm steadily pulled me into English literature. I selected *War and Peace* and *The Trial* to move on.

The *1984* branch was satisfyingly different, taking me immediately to a selection of more dystopian novels and other parts of the canon that are closer to suspense and adventure, although still pretty traditional: *Animal Farm* (also Orwell), *Lord of the Flies* (Golding) *Brave New World* (Huxley) *The Sign of Four* (Conan Doyle), *At the Mountains of Madness* (Lovecraft), *Moby Dick* (Melville), *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald), *Around the World in Eighty Days* (Verne), *Little Women* (Alcott), *Dubliners* (Alcott). I continued this branch with *Lord of the Flies* and *Brave New World*.

Level 3. *War and Peace* took me back to Dostoevsky with a few editions of different works, and then as a novelty, *The Iliad* (Homer), *Wuthering Heights* (Brontë), *War Lord* (Cornwell, this is the first book that I had never heard of), *War of the Worlds* (Wells), *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Stevenson), *Little Women* (Alcott). *The Trial* (Kafka) took me back to *1984* (Orwell), more Dostoevsky, *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald) and a few new things, some of which seemed to be latching on to the word 'war': *War of the Worlds* (Wells), *The Art of War* (Tsu Zu), *The Prince* (Machiavelli) *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne), *The*

Customers who viewed this item also viewed

Book Title	Author	Format	Price	Shipping	Rating	Count
The Count of Monte Cristo (Penguin Classics)	Alexandre Dumas père	Paperback	\$7.29	\$14.57 shipping	★★★★★	5,768
Don Quixote (Penguin Classics)	Miguel De Cervantes	Paperback	\$14.59	\$13.75 shipping	★★★★★	2,504
War and Peace (Penguin Clothbound Classics)	Leo Tolstoy	Hardcover	\$15.49	\$15.99 shipping	★★★★★	2,359
Crime and Punishment (Penguin Clothbound Classics)	Fyodor Dostoyevsky	Hardcover	\$24.60	\$14.27 shipping	★★★★★	2,020
Don Quixote (Signet Classics)	Miguel De Cervantes...	Mass Market Paperback	\$7.29	\$12.68 shipping	★★★★★	223
Paradise Lost	John Milton	Paperback	\$7.99	\$13.13 shipping	★★★★★	938

Customers who bought this item also bought

Book Title	Author	Format	Price	Shipping	Rating	Count
The Count of Monte Cristo (Penguin Classics)	Alexandre Dumas père	Paperback	\$7.29	\$14.57 shipping	★★★★★	5,768
Crime and Punishment (Penguin Classics)	Fyodor Dostoyevsky	Paperback	\$7.29	\$14.27 shipping	★★★★★	2,020
Paradise Lost (Penguin Classics)	John Milton	Paperback	\$7.99	\$13.13 shipping	★★★★★	4,058
Wuthering Heights (Penguin Classics)	Emily Brontë	Paperback	\$7.29	\$12.68 shipping	★★★★★	21,473
Ulysses (Wordsworth Classics)	James Joyce	Mass Market Paperback	\$7.29	\$12.68 shipping	★★★★★	1,939
The Divine Comedy (The Inferno, The Purgatorio, and The Paradiso)	Dante Alighieri	Mass Market Paperback	\$7.29	\$12.68 shipping	★★★★★	2,674

Fig. 2. Screenshot From Amazon.com Recommendations After I Chose Don Quixote (In the Penguin English Edition). Source: © 2023, Amazon.com.²⁶

Jungle Book (Kipling), *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain). For the next level, I dug deeper through *The Iliad* and *War of the Worlds*.

In the other branch, the suggestions now took a more adventurous turn, as a lot of Conan Doyle and popular fantasy and dystopian science fiction began to sneak in: *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee), *The Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger), *Animal Farm* (Orwell), *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (Conan Doyle), *The War of the Worlds* (Wells), *The Colour Purple* (Walker), *The Sign of the Four* (Conan Doyle), *The Art of War* (Tzu), *Return of the Dragonborn: the Complete Trilogy* (Howell) *Fahrenheit 451* (Bradbury) *News of the World* (Jiles), *The World Walker* (Sainsbury), *Shadow World* (Kos), *Magical New Beginnings* (Trim), *Selfsame* (Wolfe), *Viridian Gate* (Hunter), *Scienceville* (Gibson). This selection looks a bit like the ‘pleasure’ books I used to check out. I decided to continue with *Fahrenheit 451* and *News of the World*.

Level 4. *The Iliad* took me to *Metamorphoses* (Ovid), *The Odyssey* (Homer), the *Aeneid* (Virgil), *The Cypria* (Smith), *The Secret Garden* (Hodgson Burnett), Edgar Allan Poe’s Selected Works, *Macbeth* (Shakespeare). Had I clicked on *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald), I would have got *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee), *1984* (Orwell), *Pride and Prejudice* (Austen), *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (Conan Doyle), *Frankenstein* (Shelley), *A Tale of Two Cities* (Dickens), *Macbeth* (Shakespeare), *Gulliver’s Travels* (Swift), *Emma* (Austen). If I had clicked *War of the Worlds* (Wells), instead, I would have got some of the same things, which surprises me: *1984* (Orwell), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee), *Grimm Tales*, *A Christmas Carol* (Dickens), *Around the World in Eighty Days* (Verne), *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (Verne). And suddenly, a lot of adventure stories: *Moby Dick* (Melville), *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll), *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald), *Great Expectations* (Dickens), *The Jungle Book* (Kipling), *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Sawyer), *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (Verne).

The *1984* branch continued to expand its suggestions, and even though there is a lot of repetition of titles (more than in the other branch), I was definitely connecting now with works outside the canon, mostly in crime fiction: *Go Set a Watchman* (Lee), *War Lord* (Cornwell), *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (Verne), *Frankenstein* (Shelley), *Her Majesty’s Will* (Blixt), *Animal Farm* (Orwell), *The Picture of Dorian Grey* (Wilde), *Anna Karenina* (Tolstoy), *Catch-22* (Heller), *Franny and Zooey* (Salinger), *A Bird in the Hand* (Cleeves), *A Day in the Death of Dorothea Cassidy* (Cleeves), *A Bend in the River* (Naipaul), *The Colour Purple* (Walker), *Witch Fire on the Levels* (Hodges), *Poison in the Pond* (Blake), *Around the World in Eighty Days* (Verne), *A Clockwork Orange* (Burgess), *Where the Crawdads Sing* (Owens), *A Gentleman in Moscow* (Towles), *The Colour of Lightning* (Jiles), *Enemy Women* (Jiles), *Simon the Fiddler* (Jiles), *Lighthouse Island* (Jiles), *The Power of the Dog* (Savage), *This Tender Land* (Krueger), *Whispers of the Walker* (Holmes), *Goodbye to Budapest*

²⁶I have taken this screenshot more than a year after the experiment, so it is not exactly the same list of recommendations, although many are.

(Morris), *Dark Fire* (Sansom), *The Illuminati Conspiracy* (Rees), *The Dry* (Harper), *The War Planner Series* (Watts). I did not know any of the last 14 mentioned titles and had to investigate them. This last branch puts my sameness prejudice to shame: the algorithm did indeed take me to other places.

I started with *Don Quixote*, a story that makes fun of an excessive love of fiction (among other things) and ended with modern dystopias thematising evil or great fantasy conspiracies. Still, most of the recommendations were books that certainly would count towards developing Taste, maybe that was the heart of the sameness pursued by the algorithm in this experiment. In my field notes, I wrote: 'are people buying complete syllabus for introductions to literature all around the world?' My recommendation journey seemed like a literary version of the 'Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon' game, where all paths will take a reader to the *Iliad* or *The Great Gatsby*. It is in this respect interesting that the collaborative filtering did not have an eye for diversity. But how can this be? I do not understand how my own previous purchase history might have influenced this particular set of recommendations, but I am surprised that the algorithm steadily holds on to the canon, mostly English, masculine, white; since my own purchases are much more mixed. I take this as a sign that all of us book buyers are seeking to walk the same steps as so many before us. To repeat the same readings is to become an educated person, like I did perusing physical shelves marked as 'classics' at the local library. Or maybe it is just that another component of the algorithm is to recommend titles published in the same collection, like Oxford World's Classics. One could of course argue that these are not really reading recommendations, since they are not based on people having read or enjoyed the books, but on purchases or shared publishing houses.

To sum up, if I had followed the Amazon algorithm as a child, I would have been able to acquire quite a good knowledge of the canon, to develop Taste. However, I was not tempted to buy any of the unknown books that were recommended, which is rather disappointing considering the delight I have always had in book discovery. Maybe the context was at once too thin and too overwhelming, and it was hard to forget how artificial the whole experiment was. I was also most likely resisting the fact that someone else had made the connection for me. I do not like being explicitly told what to do. There is an inherent normative pressure in the way that the recommendations are built upon what similar subjects have liked, suggesting I might want to be like them, and I refuse to let the algorithm discipline me.²⁷

The algorithm's selection was not more random than shelf placement in my community library, but I lacked the motivation to follow through and buy them. I learnt that I was less motivated than I usually am at a bookstore or library because the physical books were missing. It worked more like a nostalgic exercise where I could perceive the connections between works I knew and the taste/Taste I have developed over many years of reading and submitting to the canon.

²⁷Cohn (2019, p. 8).

How Recommendation Systems Work

Recommendation systems are algorithms that push content to us based on an aggregated calculation of other users' choices and/or our previous choices, following a principle of sameness or closeness and usually claiming that their recommendations are specifically tailored for us.²⁸ Phrases like 'best choices for you', 'top picks for you', 'uniquely yours', want to bridge the intimate space between us and our machines. Netflix, Amazon or Spotify suggest they know me even better than I know myself. How else could they offer me what I do not yet know I want? One could argue that the marketing industry always has used similar rhetoric, trying to awaken in us the desire to acquire something that makes us happy, first creating an artificial need and then fulfilling it, but this is different. Unlike market segmentation techniques, recommendation systems are not defined by pre-established categories linked to the identity of the users (age, gender and so on), although sometimes parameters like location can play a role. They are not selling specific lifestyles or versions of happiness. They do not need to imagine how these products might have a role in our lives in order to push them at us. Instead, these platforms register all user activity, including our own, and detect affinities that are likely to predict successful engagement. These affinities can be between similar objects (Spotify: the song you liked shares characteristics with this new song); or they can be between people (Amazon: others who bought that book, also bought this book). Netflix does a combination of this, and films are offered to you based on your previous viewing habits, and in relation to those of other users ('top 10 films in Denmark today').

This is really not so different from analogue search-find strategies like asking your librarian for another crime novel set in the Cotswolds or watching a film which your friends are raving about, even if these two examples allow for much more agency on your part and a nuanced negotiation of your taste and preferences. The difference is in scale and filter. The library has certainly many books, but even if the librarian was not there, you could conceivably browse the 200 crime novels on display until you found one that took your fancy. Your friends see many films, but they will only talk to you about those that made a real impression. Someone has already curated content to reduce it to a manageable amount, and you have the means to ask them about those decisions and narrow your focus even further. Sure, these strategies can fail, and there are bad recommendations and terrible reading experiences because we were seduced by a beautiful cover. But we also learn whose recommendations to trust and whose to avoid.

However, when a platform contains all the books and music in the world (at least it feels like that), idly browsing is going to be frustrating and most likely fruitless. That is why we grasp at structures offered to us to help us navigate the sea of content. The recommendations and the categories built upon them suddenly become appealing, but that does not make them 'uniquely suited' to us.

²⁸Of course, the algorithms of different recommendation systems work differently, but this could be applied to most.

There is by now a solid body of work dedicated to scrutinising the most popular recommendation algorithms. One of the common worries in these texts is the kind of manipulation that they can subject us to.²⁹ Critics assume users are passive, subject to the whims of the machines, and that ‘production and consumption will be in the hands of semi-autonomous algorithmic technologies’.³⁰ They will choose both the content and the way to present it to us, and we will have no way of knowing how those choices were made, since the opaque algorithms are black boxes that do not reveal their inner works to us. It is implied that algorithms are probably not working to serve our interests, but their own, even if they can sometimes overlap.

A case in point could be the Netflix recommendation system (NRS), which has become a domestic companion for many people around the world.³¹ It is powered by machine learning and combines content-based filtering (the user’s past interaction data), catalogue data (where each item has been manually tagged according to genre, category, actors and so on, plus a taxonomy of tags) and collaborative filtering (data from other users grouped into global taste communities).³² Niko Pajkovic set out to find out how effective NRS personalisation really is, so he made four archetypical personas to interact with the NRS, choosing and consuming content according to a set of fixed parameters.³³ After letting the experiment run over two weeks, he found that their splash screens became radically different, as the NRS adapted to give each of them more of what they had selected previously. He analysed the surface grid that was offered to each persona and concluded that the algorithm assumes that consumption of something is an ‘authentic taste performance’.³⁴ If you have watched a few romantic movies, it assumes that this is your innermost preference, and adjusts the grid to show thumbnail after thumbnail of couples kissing or about to kiss.

But this is not all there is to the NRS. It will also adapt the advertisement of big new releases to present them in ways that might be attractive to all profiles. Pajkovic compares the artwork personalisation behind the releases of the series *Outer Banks* and the film *La La Land*. The ‘sports fan’ got a thumbnail of people running with surf boards and dancing, the ‘hopeless romantic’ got thumbnails of people kissing (in both of them) and the ‘culture snob’, solitary figures that looked defiantly at the camera.³⁵ Netflix has invested big sums in these works and wants

²⁹Crawford (2016).

³⁰Pajkovic (2021, p. 214).

³¹According to Statista, Netflix has 223 million subscribers worldwide by the end of 2022. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/250934/quarterly-number-of-netflix-streaming-subscribers-worldwide/>.

³²Ibid., pp. 216–217.

³³The four personas are Die-Hard Sports Fan, Culture Snob, Hopeless Romantic and Disruptor. His method included choosing films that appeared to cater to these personas tastes (which he had defined in advance) and then letting the film run so the NRS thinks they have ‘watched it’ and can use the information to build future recommendations upon.

³⁴Ibid., p. 231.

³⁵Ibid., p. 223.

to promote them as much as possible. But truly, these works do not really fit the taste of everybody, and the adapted posters are just a falsification attempt, a way to make users think that the new content fits just them. In this system, it does not matter whether we choose to watch the offered movies or not, the important thing is that we get the impression that Netflix is filled to the brim with offerings that cater to our specific taste. This exaggerated self-confirmation is the incarnation of the Narcissus nightmare, a mirror where we can gaze at ourselves endlessly, and which justifies keeping our subscription. It may, however, serve to change the way we think about our own taste, as it is so clearly reflected back at us. Pajkovic argues that ‘taste, like the operations of algorithms, is performative and transformative, it exists and functions in a constant state of revision, where its cultivation and purpose is negotiated among the various actors involved in its becoming’.³⁶ The algorithm shows us that what before perhaps was subconscious, as we are invited to ‘perform taste through consumption and interaction’.³⁷

The NRS is not all-powerful, of course. Its agency is only partial, among other ‘traditional’ constructors of taste, including other media, critics or blogs. In fact, the position of algorithms should perhaps be characterised as that of a new kind of cultural intermediary (to continue with Bourdieu). Jeremy W. Morris has proposed the term ‘*infomediaries*: organisations that monitor, mine and mediate the use of digital cultural products’.³⁸ While traditional intermediaries traditionally represent the tastes of the petite bourgeoisie, producing and exerting cultural capital, infomediaries are not specifically invested in any ideological position. Their only function is to maximise engagement, and the actual content we engage with is inconsequential to them. Infomediaries are iterative, they live on sameness and repetition, riding upon the content produced by others, like parasites. They might even be the carrier of future ‘diseases’, for like Morris notes, they ‘fuel a recursive loop of future cultural recommendations. When every skip, rewind and pause feeds into a process of intermediation that curates what we view, hear and read next’.³⁹ I can certainly recognise this. Sometimes I click on something on Netflix just to check it out, for example because my child is watching it. I am careful to then delete it so it doesn’t haunt my ‘continue watching’ strip. However, I wonder if those 6 minutes that I watched will have any influence on how the algorithm shapes its future recommendations, since it cannot know why I sometimes click on shows that are so far from my regular profile. The algorithm cannot distinguish between my motivations for engagement, its pragmatic statistics caught in the paradigm of the ‘good enough rationalism’.⁴⁰ My algorithmic persona is not me, but the NRS always assumes that what we watch is who we are – a very limited understanding of taste, which is bound to have a lot of blind spots.

³⁶Ibid., p. 230.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Morris (2015, p. 447).

³⁹Ibid., p. 460.

⁴⁰Finn (2017).

Second Interlude: Letting the Algorithm Seduce Me

My second experiment wanted to test how the Amazon recommendation system understands users, and how it tries to cater to the taste which it ‘thinks’ the user has. In order to interrogate the quantitative operationalisation of my taste, I decided to reverse engineer Amazon recommendation engine in the same way that Pajkovic did with Netflix. I was curious as to what it would latch on to; what it would think I wanted. This required to go against my regular practice, as I have always tried to protect myself from the algorithm’s prying eyes by purposefully ignoring any recommendation thrown at me. This has meant never writing any reviews or using Goodreads with a profile that cannot be linked to the email I use with Amazon. There is no rational reason for this other than I do not want ‘them’ to know what I am doing, or worse still, what I am thinking. Good books are something I really want, however, and I appreciate recommendations in other settings. I keep a list of ‘interesting books’ with notes about books I want to buy or borrow. In this, my sources are never algorithmic recommendations, but rather reviews in outlets I trust, personal recommendation by friends or mentions in other works. I curate this list fiercely, to avoid it becoming too rampant, since I already have too many books.

Amazon recommendations are built using what Amazon calls *item-to-item collaborative filtering*, which scales to massive data sets and produces high-quality recommendations in real time. ‘Rather than matching the user to similar customers, item-to-item collaborative filtering matches each of the users purchased and rated items to similar items, then combines those similar items into a recommendation list’.⁴¹ This sounds like it could really be a good idea with books, even though it does not work so well with the rest of the products which Amazon sells.⁴² Item-to-item filtering is what makes Amazon recommendations so special, and is behind both their personalised recommendations and regular browsing on their site, which I tested in my previous experiment. Now, I would work with their recommendation emails.

Amazon recommendation emails come every couple of days, sometimes every day, but I have always just deleted them without reading them. I cannot remember if I ever have signed up to receive them. Maybe they are just sent automatically to anybody who has bought books on their site. For this experiment, I decided I would read the emails and jot down a few notes every time as to how their perception of me as a user affected me, specially if I thought the recommendations were interesting or made me want to buy something. This experiment, like any story, has a three-act structure.

⁴¹Linden et al. (2003, p. 78).

⁴²I once bought a watch and got recommendations for lawnmowers and puzzle games as possibly related purchases.

The Beginning: Introduction and Enthusiasm

The experiment starts really well, I feel. The first few emails recommend works that are either by authors I like, or that I had thought of buying anyway. *Klara and the Sun* by Ishiguro gets written on top of my 'to buy' list. I rejoice at how well the algorithm seems to know me already, as it recommends *Piranesi*, by Susanna Clarke, which I just have finished reading and love. Another email reminds me of author Keiichiro Hirano, whom I had once sought but forgotten I wanted to read. Also, I get notified when there is a new price for an item in my wish list. Sometimes I also get recommendations for books that I have browsed for but then acquired by other means, like *Media Life* by Deuze. This seems extremely useful, and I am a bit mortified that I have never paid any attention to these emails before. I am now very satisfied that the machine seems to see me, to know why I am sometimes aimlessly browsing even if I do not know it myself. Even in cases where the algorithm offers me a book for the wrong reasons (a YA novel I once browsed for a birthday present), I still salute its ability to remember my past actions. This positive vibe continues for a couple of weeks, where I also buy some of the suggestions, waiting to have accumulated four to five so I can make an order where the shipping costs are justified. This has no effect on the emails that arrive only from [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). I wonder if my positive attitude has to do with the pleasure of feeling that the machine sees me. I realise with surprise that I really want the machine to know me.

The Middle: Complication and Annoyance

Halfway through the experiment, something happens. The field notes start turning more critical. Sarcastic comments about the recommended titles or the ineptitude of the machine begin to appear. I find a note that can illustrate this animosity: 'You precede your emails with a "we found some items we think you might like", pretending to be people, pretending to be a group of people! Like a friendly literary salon circle that cares about what I like. This provokes me. You do not even bother to explain why these things should interest me. There is just a picture of the item and a button (SHOP NOW), so subtle... not. But I do not know any of these authors, and I do not like the covers, so I will not click'. What is going on? Is it because I would prefer the emails to be more sincere? Perhaps headed by a phrase like: 'our machine found these patterns in your shopping behaviour, crossed them with other people's patterns and maybe you can be tempted with their choices?' I feel betrayed by the pretence: *we* found, *we thought* you might like. The whole thing is wrong. *You* are not thinking, *you* are parsing. *You* are not even *you*.

However, the experiment must go on, and even though there are still some items that match my preferences once in a while, I have become hyperaware of the rhetoric of emotional connection, and this interferes with my immersion in the project. I realise that my attitude is not very productive, so I force myself to click through some of the unknown titles with unappealing covers to give this a chance. The email of the day seems to be made up of a lot of bestsellers or books that are

nominated to different prestigious prizes; the new canon is on its way. All books are accompanied by hype, accolades from well-known newspapers and media outlets. This disturbs me. I thought I was well versed in books, but these titles are unknown, how could they get past my radar? Can this praise be real? One of the titles catches my attention, *Migrations*, by Charlotte McConaghy, about a woman who follows the last migration of a bird species on the brink of extinction to Antarctica. I make a note to buy it when the Kindle price becomes more reasonable.

I unwillingly continue to pay too much attention to how the recommendations are framed. For instance, a mail is entitled: 'Looking for something in Science Fiction and Fantasy books? We have some suggestions for you'. I have never told Amazon I like these genres, I have never made a review or rated a book, but of course they can infer this from my purchase history. I get some recommendations that I do not recognise, an old title by Asimov (which I didn't enjoy a long time ago), and four novels by Jeff Vandermeer, whose name I have noticed before but whom I have never read. I get lost in reading various reviews of his oeuvre in other websites, and find several books that look like something I might enjoy. Still I am paralysed by indecision and resolve to note his name in my 'to buy' list and wait for clearer indications of where to begin reading. Meaning: maybe a review will pop up in some of the media outlets I trust, or on one of my friend's social media postings. This browsing seems to encourage the algorithm, so the next few days I keep getting recommendations for space novels. I hate space novels, incidentally, so I cannot be cajoled. And just how much time do 'they' think I have? If I had to read all these books, I would not be doing anything else. Still, I try to half-heartedly follow some of these recommendations. I am amused by the title 'Tentacles and Teeth'. Unfortunately, this turns out to be an earnest YA novel and not a lovecraftian parody as I had hoped. The failures follow each other. The 'We found some items we think you might like' line feels like mockery when the recommended items turn out to be a bunch of crime novels (three supernatural and one Icelandic). I detest crime novels and have never bought one, so there is no way this can be built upon my own behaviour. In my mind, I picture the algorithm as desperate because I never buy anything as a result of my clicking through the emails, so it is attempting to profile me according to the fact that I live in Denmark, nordic noir and all that. I imagine my case being turned over to a human *recommender* whose job is to bypass the algorithm and manually look for ways to connect to recalcitrant readers. No doubt a delusion of grandeur, since my spendings on Amazon are hardly of key importance for the survival of the company. Even when the emails accurately identify my preferences, like when I get suggestions for David Mitchell novels, I get unreasonably irritated: how dare 'they' suggest something like that when I already have read them all? I have gone in my notes from 'the machine' of the beginning to a distant 'they'. I must still long for the algorithm to know me, for otherwise I would not be angry. It feels like when we expect a lover to understand us without us having to explain anything. It showed so much promise, claiming to work just for me, but this was obviously a lie. At this point, the experiment is going off the rails, and the field

notes are shorter, bad-tempered and irrational. The Easter break arrives and I decide to be offline for the whole week, hoping it will clear my mind.

The End: Resolution and Despair

On the other side of the holiday, I have to review six Amazon recommendation emails that have accumulated in my absence. This is overwhelming and I wish I was not doing the experiment and could just delete them all. There are ups and downs, a lot of recommendations that do not really interest me and the repetition of some of the early successes, like emails that push items and authors that have won big literary prizes, the Nobel, Pulitzer, Booker. . . I get a reminder again that I want to buy *Klara and the Sun*, but somehow, because it is in that email, I resist doing it even though I want to.

Even when the algorithm seems to get it right, I find fault with it. An email proposes that I buy three academic textbooks that I have used before in my teaching. This is a pleasant surprise until I remember that a few weeks ago I had searched for each of these titles because I was making the syllabus and it is often quicker to find the publication date and place through Amazon's 'look inside' feature than through our library's website. Or when an email asks (again) if I am looking for recommendations in Science Fiction and Fantasy, and lists ten of Ursula K Le Guin works. I own these books and love them, that is not the problem, but I feel provoked, as if the algorithm had reduced her to a mere genre drone.

The last few weeks of the experiment arouses more disappointment than anything else, as I convince myself that this is not a way for me to get inspired to discover new relevant literature. There are a few highlights that end up in purchases, generally fuelled by my desire to compensate the algorithm when it does something good, as if it was a puppy in training. For instance, the day when I got a recommendation for *The Shakespeare Requirement*, a novel by Julie Schumacher that is the continuation of the hilarious *Dear Committee Members*. I am pleased that Amazon has picked up on this, somehow. I had discovered these novels through a colleague a few years back and had enjoyed them both, seeing myself mirrored in the ridiculousness of university life. The email reminds me of the laughs I had while reading them, and I browse Schumacher's books looking for a distraction from the many student essays that need to be graded. I end up sending myself a free Kindle sample of her latest novel: *The Unbearable Book Club for Unsinkable Girls*, which I will later buy for my summer holidays.

The field notes show that I feel relief that the end of the experiment is approaching. Actually I have become so aware of these emails that I now wish to unsubscribe from all Amazon communications, as ignoring them will not be enough any longer. In the last few days, I observe an upsurge of recommendations of fairy tales anthologies, YA literature and romantic novels. It takes me some time to realise that this is the kind of materials that BookBub has been pushing to

me, since both services are connected.⁴³ When I click on BookBub's links, the Amazon algorithm interprets that I am interested in the items. However, I most often click to find out what the items are, and sometimes even to gloat over terrible cover design. Now the emails begin to get more personal, the algorithm has smelled blood, 'Still thinking about this book?' But I was never thinking about that book. Conflating browsing and clicking with wanting really *is* a problem. Amazon's quantitative profiling of me only maps a small part of my taste as a book reader. If the engine should really know me, it would also need to have access to all the other qualitative reasons for affinity and relevance. I know rationally this is impossible, so I do not really expect it from the machine, but the way its rhetoric pretends that there is a 100% correspondence between its profiling and my taste is extremely off-putting.

You really do not get me, Amazon. I must leave you. It is not me, it is you.

How Much Do You Really Know Me?

A lot of algorithmic culture criticism presupposes that the user is passive, but this does not correspond with my own experience or that of the people around me. We all have strategies to qualify the algorithmic recommendations. We look for the new Netflix series review in our favourite newspaper and on *Rotten Tomatoes*, we ask a jazz enthusiast friend to share a good Spotify playlist with us, we download a book that an author we like is posting about in Goodreads. It is not about great acts of resistance, but just the process of algorithms becoming integrated into whatever network of routines we already have. I have yet to meet a person that shuts out all the other information channels and decides to just go along with the algorithms.

In this respect, I am inspired by the strong user perspective of David Mathieu and Pille Pruilmann-Vengerfeldt's work about the 'data loop'.⁴⁴ They oppose the common assumption that all-powerful media colonise passive media audiences, and they foreground user agency in relation to datafication processes. The data loop is 'a circuit model in which media actors and audiences interact, in a relation of mutuality, throughout digital interfaces of data collection and retroaction'.⁴⁵ That is, media producers have specific images of the users in mind as they design the way their algorithms should curate content and collect user data to adjust their offer. In the same way, users do not just passively let themselves be guided by the recommendations, but 'use the inputs from data retroaction to imagine and understand themselves as audiences', including ideas about their own selves.⁴⁶ Here, datafication is not invisible, but becomes an agent which users relate to, as in Tanja Bucher's concept of the 'algorithmic imaginary', where she documents how users see the algorithm whenever there are breakdowns/faulty predictions.

⁴³BookBub is the object of the third experiment, below in the chapter.

⁴⁴Mathieu and Pruilmann-Vengerfeldt (2020).

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 119.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 124.

Mathieu and Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt go a step further and suggest that this exchange with the algorithm is a formative process of discovery, a mirror for self-reflection.⁴⁷ In my second experiment I was frustrated that the reflection Amazon presented to me in the mirror was not as faithful as I had hoped for; the algorithm made me question my taste and its manifestation.

Along the same lines, Emanuele Arielli suggests that we can apply the metaphor of an ‘external mind, in which search and storage of information is handed over to mechanisms outside our minds’, following a double logic of externalisation and automation.⁴⁸ Like the ‘technologies of the self’ proposed by Foucault, recommendation algorithms let us see our own reflection.⁴⁹ She notes how the reinforcement and repetition of the same patterns can have the effect of recommendation systems becoming a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, that is, the algorithms also cultivate our taste to maximise our engagement.⁵⁰ The more of the same kind of thing we encounter, the more will we come to like it, or so they hope. Recommendation algorithms attempt to fulfil our desires but of course only to the extent that it means engaging with the products they have in their archives. Arielli therefore insists that profiling is never just descriptive, but transformative. Ideal users, codified in the way the algorithm works, are not random explorers letting themselves be guided by serendipity and curiosity, but ‘preference maximizers, transparent in their cultural consumption and inclined to share their data with the system and the community of other users’.⁵¹ This is a false picture which we cannot but struggle against as users, I argue, as we relate to sameness and repetition in different ways.

Third Interlude: The Narcissistic User of BookBub

More investigation is needed in order to relate the algorithm’s recommendations to the user’s own identity work. If Mathieu, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Arielli are right, there must be constant negotiation between the user and the recommendations they are presented with. I will, therefore, record that negotiation to get a picture of how a user relates to the mirror that the algorithm throws back at them. This time it is not about what the algorithm thinks I am, but about what I think of what the algorithm thinks I am.

For the third experiment, I made an account in BookBub, a free book discovery service that helps users find e-book deals in their favourite genres or related to specific authors – a perfect case to test my own data loop. BookBub monitors many platforms and is connected to Amazon’s Kindle. My plan was to read the daily emails and the weekly compilations for two months and to download the books that took my fancy (free or not). I would also attempt to read as many of

⁴⁷Bucher (2017).

⁴⁸Arielli (2018, p. 78).

⁴⁹Foucault (1998).

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 86.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 89.

these books as possible. BookBub's selections are a mix of curated content by specialist editors, paid advertisement from publishers and authors, the user's own preferences and whatever is on sale at any given time. *Bub* is slang for brother or buddy. This is an account of the way I related to BookBub's way of seeing me, an attempt to make explicit the algorithmic imaginary that emerged in our 'relationship'.

I set up a profile and am immediately asked to choose my favourite genres. Even though there are a lot of options, it is difficult to find labels that are adjusted to what I often read. I ended up only ticking 'literary fiction', which is the fluffiest of all labels and could in reality contain all others. So I forced myself to pick up a few more, 'science fiction' and 'fantasy', even though I knew I would regret this because there is a lot of science fiction and fantasy that I do not like. I also ticked a few favourite authors, although BookBub did not present me with an extensive list. Already from the start, I felt that the platform does not give me enough opportunities to make a profile that really represents me.

My first few days are a bit disconcerting because I receive a lot of recommendations about authors and books I have never heard of. I am sure I should know Eric Maria Remarque 'From the author of *All Quiet on the Western Front* comes the profound story of a doctor living in Paris after fleeing Nazi Germany', but I do not. Maybe this is a classic case of cold start, I reflect, where an algorithm simply does not have enough information about my tastes yet to suggest anything I can recognise as relevant. I must be patient.⁵²

There are good recommendations of old classics like *Rich man, Poor Man* (Shaw), if only I hadn't read it. The emails are sometimes thematised, for instance, all the books in one email have become successful film adaptations. There are also quite a few historical novels and a few romances. I become irritated by this, but I know it is my fault for having ticked 'literary fiction', which is the same as say: send me anything. I wish there also was an opportunity of filtering categories out, it would be easier than choosing them.

The first success comes after a couple of weeks. I get an alert about an anthology that includes a short story by Neil Gaiman which is one of the authors I marked. It only costs \$1,99 on Amazon. When I log in, the price goes up for me to \$2,49. I guess it is because I am doing this from Europe, but am irritated that BookBub does not take it into account. Still I decide to buy the book, but I have some credit card trouble on the site and it takes a couple of days for the transaction to go through. I notice that in these two days, the book has now become the number 1 bestseller in the category of fairy tales. I deduce that BookBub has a real effect on sales if a lot of people like me have clicked through to purchase.

I have a few experiences where prices are very low in the email, but go spectacularly up when I log on to my Amazon profile (from \$1,99 to \$8, for example). I browse strange titles and covers and download quite a few free samples or very cheap books, wondering if I will ever read them. At this point, it actually feels like the 'external mind' of the algorithm knows that I am stimulated by curiosity and novelty. Before continuing, I resolve to read one of the things I randomly

⁵²Seaver (2018, p. 2).

downloaded, *Unlovely*, by Celeste Conway, which is a horror story about a young woman fleeing her abusive parents and moving into a faraway cottage where she starts getting involved with a man who lives in the world behind her mirror. . . It is actually pretty interesting in a claustrophobic sort of way, so I gather new strength to continue the experiment. I may not have time to read everything now, but if I just collect things, future good reading experiences await.

After this purchase, I start getting many suggestions for horror literature, which I did not select as one of my favourite genres, but maybe it is my true inner self that is this way presented to me. I give it a chance. I buy a few more titles with good prices and intriguing stories tending more towards the fantasy and science fiction genres. The borders are not clear. I also get recommendations for classic works, but I avoid them, this is not that kind of experiment. My notes reveal that I see BookBub as a good instrument to enjoy literature as entertainment, much more attuned to personal taste than in the other experiments. I follow this pattern for a while: buy intriguing things, avoid classics, romance and historical fictions, so much so that I worry that I might not have time to read all that I have bought.

Halfway through the experiment, the field notes begin to focus a lot on the language of the emails I receive. I personify BookBub and see it as a conversation partner. When all the suggestions are unknown, I rely on the description lines to assess if I am interested in the title. I notice a hyperbolic language that abounds in adjectives, modulating what we must think of the work, even before we have read it. BookBub speaks like a car seller, I am not sure I am comfortable with that.⁵³ In the genres of science fiction and fantasy, the verbs are about conflict, the adjectives inflated, in an effort to arouse excitement (my italics):

- When neuroscientist Amira Valdez is given a *controversial* human cloning assignment, she *must contend* with all who *want to put a stop* to the project – and *confront* an *unthinkable* secret.
- In a New York rife with *paranormal* activity, *immortal* adventurer Ace Dante grudgingly *undertakes* a mission for his ex – only to *stumble* into a conflict between two *powerful, ancient* gods. . .

In literary fiction, however, the descriptions are low key, insisting on recognition, on character lives that are just like our own. The books offer a unique framing that will give us deeper understanding and appreciation. These descriptions are often endorsed with quotes from reputable sources, and are not so much focused on what the story is (like the genres above), but on what the story does to us as readers (my italics):

- From a *New York Times* bestselling author comes ‘a *soothing* slice of small-town life’ (*People*): When a group of friends decides to start a monthly

⁵³Actually, upon reflection, I do not know who writes these blurbs. It could be the editors at BookBub, but it could also be Amazon, the publisher, an AI . . . In the auto ethnographic notes I assume it is BookBub.

supper club, they soon find themselves sharing their secrets, insecurities, and regrets alongside dinner. ‘Bright and *fascinating*’.

- In this NPR Best Book of 2019 and ‘definitive work of millennial literature’ (*The New Yorker*), 30-year-old Millie struggles to escape from a life defined by her meaningless job. ‘Butler *made me laugh and cry enough times to feel completely reborn*’ (*The Paris Review*).

This makes me think of BookBub as a sneaky, multiple personality individual, able to find just the right thing to whisper in my ear and make my finger hit the purchase button. But that is nonsense, it must be humans writing the individual descriptions, even though they are so formulaic at times that one could be in doubt. BookBub puts together its emails by pulling different items from a huge database. I notice that a lot of these descriptions attempt to point to similarities of the unknown new work to other books which fans of the genre would no doubt recognise. A book called *Crimson Tempest* is described like this: ‘Calling all fans of dragons and Jane Austen (RT Book Reviews): Sparks fly between headstrong Aliza Bentaine and a haughty dragonrider as Merybourne Manor is beset with monsters! A spellbinding fantasy remix of *Pride and Prejudice*’. Jane Austen and dragons might not seem like the most appropriate combination, but if you think deeper, it is a good pairing. Jane Austen has been the model for a lot of distilled expectations as to how exciting romance occurs. Genre literature cannot get enough of the trope of the ‘headstrong’ lady and ‘haughty’ hero that hate each other at the beginning and no doubt will be together in the end. Jane Austen has also been the source of several remixing efforts that pair her work with contemporary entertainment genres.⁵⁴ This is an interesting question in relation to the theme of sameness: what part exactly of Jane Austen will we recognise in the new work? What is being repeated? I have encountered Austen in every corner of this book project, it cannot be coincidence.

I am however increasingly irritated by the many self-help like suggestions, where I realize that BookBub sees me as just another middle-aged woman. A lot of literature is aimed at this particular demographic, books about friendships, divorce, career burnout, the death of a close person or cancer. A subset of this genre is when the female struggle is set in another time period. I resist the rhetorics of the ‘must-read’, of how will this inspire me and comfort me in my life. I do not remember if I revealed my age and gender when making the profile or if there just is a lot of this fiction, a thriving genre that makes its way into everybody’s lists. But it makes for an odd mix with the gruesome supernatural mysteries, the books that remind you of the *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, the books about warriors against Satan or ‘born-mage’ people. Midways, I am still buying quite a few books, but not really having the time to read through them all (Fig. 3). I am

⁵⁴Most notably, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, first a book by Seth Grahame-Smith and then adapted into a film. Also, *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters*, by Ben H. Winters. Both books were published by Quirk books, and are mash-ups that reproduce the original text by Jane Austen and interlace it with extra paragraphs that turn the story into a horror book according to the tropes of genre literature.



Fig. 3. The Author and Her *tsundoku*, by DALL-E and me.

mostly buying good deal of books I already knew by other means, a lot in the speculative fantasy genre, (which will tilt the Amazon algorithm as explained above).

Towards the end of the experiment, I feel real BookBub fatigue and start putting off reading their emails, so that a few accumulate and then it makes for an even more overwhelming experience. Now I see BookBub as a false friend, someone you talked to too much during your first week at work, and now you are stuck with them for the rest of your life, even though you have realised they are shallow. As for me, I am a bad friend too, for not responding, for ghosting BookBub. I keep procrastinating and putting off reading BookBub emails, so I always come too late to the good deals, which last only for 24 or 48 hours. As if they know I am drifting away, I get an email urging me to rate more books to improve my recommendations. I do it, to see if I can train the algorithm better, to make it work for me and not the other way around. However, a lot of the items to be rated are the ones I bought during the last few weeks, which I haven't even opened yet. I leave the site, the project unfinished.

My field notes get shorter, tedium ensues. I wonder if their emails are accelerating, sometimes more than one will come on the same day. I begin to dread the 'list emails', like your ebook bargains for Saturday, or Reese Witherspoon's 19 favourite books. I feel that the generic lists do not see me at all, as they are pushed to everybody with whatever current bestsellers are at the top. My field notes increasingly record how I am not interested in any of the pushed topics. I am inflamed by the kinds of praise that are peppered all over each email: 'impossible to put down, irresistible, riveting, absorbing, enthralling, the genre at its very best, dark and glorious *tour de force*, her best yet, page-turning, elegant and delightful, thrilling, intense, heartrending, like *Interview with the Vampire* but better.' How

can so many books, dozens every day, be so exceptional? How many new George R. Martins can America spawn every week? How can romance sneak into every single other genre?

I now doubt how BookBub labels work. I had assumed that the category of 'literary fiction' would not include genre fiction, but a lot of the novels which get pushed to me are sentimental love novels, or historical novels. The borders between the genres are not always clear, and there are of course works that are complex, but this puzzles me, and it makes me distrust recommendations, no matter how many endorsements they come with.

I have no faith that BookBub has any real clue of what I enjoy, I open their emails without enthusiasm. I have stopped buying, now sure that I cannot ever catch up to the huge reading list that I have built myself in my Kindle. The last straw is a promotional email that makes me finish the experiment a couple of days before time. BookBub invites me to access their new platform for audiobook deals, called Chirp. The email is enthusiastic about this new possibility: 'I love listening to audiobooks while cleaning up around the house, while cooking in the kitchen and even while exercising. With Chirp I can binge audiobooks and discover new authors without breaking the bank. The best part is that there's no subscription fee or commitment, and new deals are added daily!' More books! BookBub, how could you? Now you see me as a hyperactive *hausfrau*, effectively cleaning *and* listening to podcasts! But that is not me at all. I can't stand other people's voice reading books aloud. I appreciate the silence of everyday activities, a rare opportunity for thinking my own thoughts. Your rhetoric of bingeing, of excess, of every single minute of my day occupied with books, the words of others in my head, fills me with dread. I do not want to turn into that person. So I stop.

Coda

I started this chapter with the myth of Echo and Narcissus, as a way to thematise both excessive mirroring and the frustration of being formed, we could now say aggregated, by other people's voices. A leading question was if algorithms, based on pursuing sameness, had fundamentally altered our idea of Taste/taste and the way we find culture to consume. I have used the case of book recommendations to explore these questions dialogically through three autoethnographic experiments aimed at dissecting my ambivalent relationship to the algorithms in relation to the development of taste and Taste, the way algorithms profile us and our own identity work in response to the algorithms.

I found that sameness works in strange ways, not erasing our previous practices around finding and curating cultural consumption, but complementing them with more data, that we, as users, do not just seem to take at face value. Sameness still pursues the canon, but also adds an alternative one made of the sum of many people's choices. The algorithm that sometimes sees us and sometimes misses the mark completely is a parasite, a bug that we can allow to infect us, as it tries to keep our attention trapped into the specific database that it works for. There is a sort of mutual domestication; for us, a guide through the maze of many products

is useful, for the algorithm, it is useful to know what we like in order to keep us inside their specific fence. But the algorithm does not ultimately care about aesthetics, only about retaining us. It treats cultural products (books, music, films) as commodities, and maybe here is where the gap is.⁵⁵

To me, as an avid reader, books are instead works of art, portals to other worlds, sources of wonder at language use, plots, characters, ideas, beloved aesthetic experiences, deeply imbricated with my idea of who I really am. I have been bothered by the simulation of intimacy performed by the machines, first taking it at face value, wanting to be seen, and then reacting with disappointment when I realised I was not. They only pretend to care about books, to make me buy them.

In terms of affordances, recommendation algorithms offer us a familiar path to traverse an infinite, unknowable forest of content. This very familiarity is also their weakness, for they can give us a false sense of totality and control: *this is all there is for me*. Typically, this is conceptualised as a filter bubble, where we only get confirmation of our previous opinions and are never challenged. But there is something that this argument misses, for I found that the algorithm does not understand what our opinions really are. It might be a bubble, but it is not exactly our bubble.

There is another dimension to this false comfort: a sort of dysphoria, where we feel that what the algorithm is throwing at us, insisting that it is tailored specifically for us, is at odds with our inner voice. We, like the machine, can come to confuse momentary taste performance with some kind of deeper truth. We can be kept in a permanent state of pre-elation, where what we just picked was almost right but not quite, so we need to find another thing (book, song, film), like the dark design pattern of infinite scrolling, where we keep on going and going, waiting for the thing that will be just right, if we can stay a little bit longer.⁵⁶

According to Nick Seaver, it was not always like this. Recommendation systems were born to help us find our way in vast information repositories. However, at some point, developers realised they could not really predict people's taste; how they would rate items was impossible to pinpoint, so they switched to attempting to capture our attention, or engagement:

'Instead of predicting explicit ratings, developers began to anticipate implicit ones, and with this came a plainly captological approach to design: using traces of interactions recorded in activity logs, developers designed their systems to elicit more interactions. The prototypical recommender system was no longer a support for finding information, but a trap for capturing fickle users'.⁵⁷

⁵⁵Pedersen (2020, p. 87).

⁵⁶Dark patterns are design 'instances where designers use their knowledge of human behavior (e.g., psychology) and the desires of end users to implement deceptive functionality that is not in the user's best interest' (Gray et al., 2018). It is widely acknowledged in design literature that infinite scrolling is a dark pattern of design (Monge Roffarello & De Russis, 2022).

⁵⁷Seaver (2018, p. 10).

This is the key to an even greater problem than filter bubbles: the death of aesthetic desire. Recommendation algorithms have become push machines to keep our attention engaged in a constant stream of desirable cultural products. A push machine does not wait for a user to interact, it addresses the user itself. It attempts to give me exactly what I like *even before I know I want it*, in fact, it will teach me that I want it. But in order for desire to be born, there must be a gap, both in time and in accessibility, a moment where we can be conscious that we cannot have something. If I can get anything as soon as I see it for the first time, there is no room to develop any form of longing. This explains why I was predominantly paralysed in my book recommendation experiments. I did not want them enough. Total abundance and constant push of nearly-right content engenders indifference. Maybe that is why Narcissus rejected all his would-be lovers.

But I do not wish to end on too pessimistic a note. Yes, recommendation systems are traps, but they are not totally closed. This would imply that users are prisoners who cannot seek cultural products by other means. As this chapter has shown, there are many other factors at play that affect our taste formation, how we relate to Taste in our social context, and how we manage our lifelong engagement with cultural products. We might not yet be very good at articulating how exactly algorithms work, but there is no doubt that algorithmic literacy is already in the making.

Chapter 6

Good Artists Copy, Great Artists Steal:¹ Creativity and Originality in a New Media Landscape

Skillful Daedalus is the most famous craftsman of the ancient world: artist, architect, inventor, he excelled in all areas of human creativity. Throughout Greece, people claimed to own works by him, wanting a stake in a reputation that connected his work to divine inspiration.² The sculptures he made were so lifelike that they had to be tied down, lest they run away.³ He is best known to us for his work at the court of king Minos of Crete, where he built many wonderful things, including a dancing floor for princess Ariadne and a labyrinth to imprison the Minotaur.⁴ Daedalus had also lent a hand in creating the legendary monster in the first place. There are different versions of this myth, but in all of them, Minos refuses to sacrifice a magnificent bull that had been destined for the god Poseidon, exchanging it instead

¹This is a famous quote that circulates in many versions and attributions, some apocryphal. Please see Garson O'Toole's article about it in *Quote Investigator* if you are curious as to its origins. <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/03/06/artists-steal/>.

²Pausanias, 2-4-5 (Pausanias, 1918). From the Perseus library online version: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0160%3Abook%3D2%3Achapter%3D4%3Asection%3D5>.

³At least according to Socrates, quoted in a Plato dialogue: *Meno* (97d) (Plato, 1967). I used the Perseus library edition, which is the translation by W.R.M. Lamb. The translator explains that according to an old legend, Daedalus had 'contrived a wonderful mechanism in his statues by which they could move'. So it is not entirely clear if the wonder is mechanical or supernatural, but in any case, his fame was unsurpassed. Available at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0059.tlg024.perseus-engl:97d> (Accessed on December 2022).

⁴The dancing floor and the labyrinth are mysteriously connected. Some authors suspect that it might be the same thing. The labyrinth has sometimes been depicted as an open ceiling maze and other times as an underground building. Ariadne's knowledge of its intricate design, that allowed her to help Theseus and the other Athenian youths escape, might have come from the design of her own dance floor (Ghiselin, 1972).

Sameness and Repetition in Contemporary Media Culture, 141–167



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for a lesser specimen and keeping the superior one for himself. In revenge, the angered Poseidon instills in Minos' wife, Queen Pasiphaë, a violent lust for the animal. Her unnatural desires are fulfilled with the help of Daedalus, who makes a wooden hollow cow inside which the queen can hide in. The bull mistakes the cow for a real one and mounts her, mating with the queen instead. Nine months later, Pasiphaë gives birth to a monster, half-bull, half-human, and the shame and blasphemy of the King are open for the world to see. The monster needs to be locked away, so Daedalus builds the labyrinth to serve as both a prison and a ritual execution place. Every year, Athens sends a tribute for having lost a war against Crete: seven young men and seven young women, who are forced into the labyrinth to be devoured by the Minotaur. After this, the chronology and causality is not clear in the sources, but Daedalus and his son Icarus are also imprisoned, maybe in the labyrinth, but certainly on the island. Perhaps the king has found out about his building the wooden cow, perhaps it is for some other offence. All hope seems lost until Daedalus has the genius idea of making wings out of bird feathers so he and his son can fly away. Sadly, the young man fails to heed his father's warnings about not flying too high nor too low. Icarus gets too close to the sun and the wax that binds the feathers in his wings together melts, so he plunges to his death in the sea below. There are many pictorial depictions of the death of Icarus, as a favourite cautionary tale about the folly of youth, hubris, filial disobedience or the danger of abandoning the golden mean. For me, the story of Daedalus is of great interest here because it contains the seeds for a discussion of repetitive forms of creativity in contemporary media.

The first of these forms is *mimesis*, a Greek word for imitation or representation. It has been used to refer to 'how written and visual arts mimicked or imitated the world' and is the basis of aesthetic theory from Plato to the eighteenth century.⁵ Painting imitated reality through its use of form and colour, sculpture through three-dimensional representations, poetry through descriptions in words and so on. A mimetic understanding of art judges the quality of each work by how faithfully they depict nature. Artworks are then copies of a truth that is somewhere else, but which they ideally want to mirror. In the myth of Daedalus, the sculptures are so lifelike that they come alive, the cow is so close to nature that the bull is deceived. Daedalus manages to get almost as close to truth as the gods themselves; maybe this is a cause of offence.

While *mimesis* is focused on results, on the products of artistic invention, the Latin word *imitatio* rather underlines the creative process. *Mimesis* refers to the imitation of nature, but *imitatio* is about other artists or authors. *Imitatio* is more than just copying. 'An imitator was expected to emulate many models, join imitated material seamlessly to his own, reshape and vary it for its new context, and improve upon it'.⁶ The theory of *imitatio* develops in connection with the teaching of the art of rhetoric, set down by Dionysius of Halicarnassus in his famous treaty *On Mimesis*. The idea is that by imitating others, you will get an

⁵Fronda (2012, p. 3416).

⁶Fronda (2012, p. 3416).

understanding of how a genre works (be it poetry, funerary speeches or historical accounts) and later be able to develop your own style within that genre. Daedalus needs to get off the island, so he thinks systematically about routes of escape: ““He may thwart our escape by land or sea” he said “but the sky is surely open to us: we will go that way: Minos rules everything but he does not rule the heavens.” So saying, he applied his thought to new invention and altered the natural order of things’.⁷ By observing how birds fly, he was able to understand the ‘system’ and emulate it using other materials (wood, feathers, beeswax, the human body).

This myth also touches upon the third form of repetitive creativity I want to engage with in this chapter: *combinational creativity*. Daedalus alters ‘the natural order of things’ by combining unexpected elements and producing a new order, something never seen before: a flying human! He might have been inspired by the methods of his nephew Talos. Back when Daedalus was living in Athens, his sister sent him her clever son, Talos, as an apprentice. Daedalus realised that the boy was indeed so sharp that he already rivalled his own inventiveness. Ovid tells how the child ‘studying the spine of a fish, took it as a model, and cut continuous teeth out of sharp metal, inventing the use of the saw’. Daedalus gets so jealous that he kills Talos,⁸ which is the reason he has to run away from Athens.⁹ Talos’ method combines concepts from two separate domains (zoology, carpentry) to produce a new concept. Things are recycled, reused, remixed, either by serendipity or by systematic probing.

Perhaps ‘repetitive creativity’ sounds like an oxymoron to you, even after I’ve set out all three forms. Before examining the first of them, I need to deal with a monster that has stalked me since starting to write this book. I hope that this chapter ends with my slaying it, but for now, let us know our enemy: the hydra of originality, with its many heads wriggling their way into all sorts of contemporary discourse.

Even though both *mimesis* and *imitatio* lived through the antique period and the Middle Ages, and for many centuries the domains of the arts and crafts were not separated, something happened that made our culture wary of repetitive strategies. The idea of originality being the most valuable quality in art and the true measure of creativity arises during the Romantic period, first in relation to poetry and then extended to the other arts. The real poet/artist is the original genius who has ‘the talent for producing works that are independent of the ideas and expressions of others’.¹⁰ This presupposes a totally unique work, created in a cultural vacuum without relation to tradition or contemporaries, an absurdity that has been contested by many critics, but that nonetheless lives on in the way

⁷Ovid, 2000. Book VIII: pp. 183–235.

⁸According to Ovid, he hurled him from a citadel, but Minerva took pity on him and transformed him into a partridge, half-way. The whole story is in Ovid, 2000. Book VIII: pp. 236–259.

⁹A crime the gods will make him pay for much later, with the life of his son Icarus.

¹⁰Millen (2010, p. 92).

we value art even now.¹¹ Jessica Millen argues that the cause for the birth of this particular conception of originality is related to the social context in which the romantic movement emerged. Both the German and the English poets were reacting to budding processes of industrialisation and mass production, fearful of the rise of mass culture and wanting to state that art could not be made by a machine, worried about what they saw as a generalised identity crisis of the soul and spirituality. Their defence was to propose that creativity comes from an unconscious force, close to the supernatural ‘which results in a work free of any borrowed elements’.¹² Genius is born, not made, the special sensibility of a genius cannot be learnt; only they can bring art into existence channelling the forces of the universe.

This new image of the potent genius interrupts a long tradition of overlap between artists and artisans and creates an elitist club, which regular people cannot enter. It also paves the way for discourses of excess where real artists are larger than life and deserve to be idolised. Despite the recent upsurge of ideas around innovation that re-conceptualise creativity and apply it to domains other than art (design, business, science), and despite the critical revision of the cult of the male genius, creativity is still very much associated with originality in everyday language and in the media.¹³ As Philip Prager has noted, ‘Classical, romantic, and psychoanalytic notions pervade the discourse on creativity even in the twenty-first century and ignore the scientific research that has been conducted in the last forty years. Cognitive scientists typically define creativity as a combinatorial process in which ideas or objects from seemingly incongruous domains merge to produce surprising new meanings’.¹⁴

The many-headed monster, which movements like Dada, Fluxus, OULIPO, pop art and many others have tried to slay time and time again, has been reenergised with the appearance of digital art, which has roots in these avant-garde art movements, as well as in the field of engineering, and which uses a different rhetoric of invention.¹⁵ All forms of digital art are based on repetition, it being a basic principle behind algorithmic machines. In previous chapters we have encountered some of them, like computer games or interactive fiction, but there are many more: robotic art, digital poetry, data visualisations, sound art, net art. All have been questioned for not conforming to our idea of uniqueness and creativity: is this art? Is it really original? Can a machine be part of the artistic process? Walter Benjamin has also been invoked in relation to the products that

¹¹An example of this criticism is the work of Bloom, already discussed in chapter 1. His *The Anxiety of Influence* (1997) shows how poets lean on each other’s work, even as they try to escape from it. Even the highest valued geniuses of our literary pantheon are part of a complex system of textual influences.

¹²Millen (2010, p. 96).

¹³See, for example, Felluga (2005) and Casteras (2012).

¹⁴Prager (2013, p. 240).

¹⁵Paul (2003).

emerge from these processes: the never-ending copies, as we saw in Chapter 5.¹⁶ Digital art seems to be the realm of fakes and false mirrors.

The most recent example of the power that the concept of creativity attached to genius and originality still exerts over us, is the current cultural ruckus about Artificial Intelligence.¹⁷ In the words of Lev Manovich ‘For some, art, aesthetics, and creativity are the pinnacle of human abilities and therefore represent a final bulwark against the seemingly unstoppable advances of AI. In other words, this complex field becomes the ultimate testing ground for AI’s possibilities and limitations’.¹⁸ Our aesthetic ideals have been disrupted by the release of OpenAI products that seem to be able to make just that: art. Many people are playing with the different modules, testing how good ChatGPT is at developing arguments or telling stories, or DALL-E 2 at composing pictures from textual prompts, among others. OpenAI even states on DALL-E 2 start page: ‘DALL-E 2 can create *original*, realistic images and art from a text description. It can *combine* concepts, attributes, and styles’, my emphasis to illustrate how provocative this might sound to many, the affirmation that DALL-Es productions are original work even though it is based on recombinations. As Manovich and Arielli suggest ‘The encounter between AI and aesthetics is crucial because aesthetics is considered a quintessentially human domain’.¹⁹ If artificial intelligence (AI) ‘just’ mimics the examples it has been fed and generates variants according to patterns, how can we call its productions ‘new’? Is creativity reserved only to humans? The hydra is breathing down my neck. For now, let us leave her there, as I tackle the three kinds of repetitive creativity one by one: *mimesis*, *imitatio* and *combinational*.

Mimesis

Traditional *mimesis* is about the imitation of nature by art through processes of representation. At first glance, it looks like this repetitive format could be the least productive of the three in relation to contemporary media forms. Nearly every text about digital media and aesthetics written in the 1990s and early 2000s distances itself from mere representation, be it pictorial or textual, in one way or another. Mimesis is the dominion of the static, that which is only to be looked at and interpreted but cannot be changed. Digital art is by contrast interactive, it is not only to be looked at, but manipulated, constituted by the subjects’ interaction. This makes the new form of art fundamentally different.²⁰ *Interactivity* is the key concept of what we could call the first wave of new media theory. The discussions have an optimistic vibe. There is a sense of possibility in the new media forms that give rise to a different kind of user experience beyond the interpretative.

¹⁶Wands (2007).

¹⁷At least at the time of writing, December 2022.

¹⁸Manovich and Arielli (2021, p. 7).

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰See, for instance, Aarseth (1997), Murray (1997), Manovich (2002), Kampmann Walther (2003), and Qvortrup (2004).

Another idea also gets traction here, connecting interactivity to the main principle behind mimesis, that of the imitation of nature. *Simulation* describes the algorithmic mechanisms that make computer representations more ‘real’ than pictures could ever hope to be, a bit like Daedalus’ enchained statues. This is not Baudrillard’s fruitless surface simulation, but the creation of a functioning artefact that can mimic how real objects work. According to Gonzalo Frasca, ‘to simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains (for somebody) some of the behaviors of the original system (. . .). Simulation does not simply retain the – generally audiovisual – characteristics of the object but it also includes a model of its behaviors. This model reacts to certain stimuli (input data, pushing buttons, joystick movements), according to a set of conditions (. . .). A photograph of a plane will tell us information about its shape and color, but it will not fly or crash when manipulated. A flight simulator or a simple toy plane are not only signs, but machines that generate signs according to rules that model some of the behaviors of a real plane’.²¹

While a lot of interactive art is abstract, conceptual or non-figurative, and thus is often seen as the opposite of mimesis, simulation depends on representation for the user to figure out the rules of the interaction.²² In the flight simulator example, the interface visually mimics the image of a flight’s real cockpit, adding interactivity to the working of the levers and buttons, the steering of the plane and the navigation computer. The principle of simulation allows designers to build virtual worlds that can be inhabited and interacted with, in computer games or virtual reality. In fact, the early theorists of virtual reality are attuned to theories of mimesis. Oliver Grau proposes that VR fits into the long history of illusion mechanisms, like Roman frescos, *tromp l’oeil* or the panorama, so that it really is a sort of upgraded mimesis, where classic illusion is augmented with participation as well as the suspension of the separation between subject and object. We become part of the artwork.

While some VR is abstract or creates fantasy worlds, a lot of its applications are about recreating some aspect of the real world. You just need to browse experiences in Steam VR or Oculus to get an idea. There are a lot of educational, informational experiences where we can travel to remote places (including space) or recreate historical events, and of course many, many games.

Bolter, Engberg and Macintyre have proposed the term ‘reality media’ to refer to both augmented and virtual reality (along with television and film) as these media ‘place themselves figuratively or physically between us and our perception of the everyday world, and, in this sense, they redefine or construct reality itself’.²³ While all media represent aspects of reality, they argue that some of them are of a ‘second order’, that is, they represent reality symbolically, depending on interpretation, like literature or a photograph. However, reality media are expansive, and surround us, immersing us through several senses, like film, television and

²¹Frasca (2013, p. 223).

²²For a review of the many genres of interactive art, see Paul (2003).

²³Bolter et al. (2021, p. 6).

now VR and AR. Reality media do not aspire to be a transparent representation of the real, instead they work by comparison to other media, so when we are immersed in VR, we appreciate the three-dimensional experience by considering how different it is from watching television, for instance.²⁴ In fact, every time a new medium enters the media ecology, its proponents enthusiastically hope that ‘it will allow them to experience events and people just as they would experience them without any media at all. The irony is that this claim to reality usually depends on earlier media forms (...). Photography reconfigured elements of landscape and portrait painting; film reconfigured techniques of stage drama; television borrowed from conventions of vaudeville, stage drama, and film. Throughout the history of media, the context has been one of rivalry to create an “immediate” or “authentic” or “compelling” experience’.²⁵ This is the core of Bolter and Grusin’s concept of *remediation*, or ‘the representation of one medium in another’.²⁶ The content of media is always other media, so no medium is isolated but is instead always part of a complex system where reality seems to be the least of our worries. They lean on Derrida for a dynamic account of mimesis, where what is compared is not the objects, but the experience of the subjects.²⁷ Because true media transparency is impossible, and reality cannot ever be reached, the best we can hope for is for media to provide us with a similar, immediate (and therefore authentic) emotional response.²⁸

While this last affirmation might have been taken to the extreme for rhetoric effect, there is no doubt that the McLuhanesque idea of media reflecting other media is extremely compelling. And it is of course the shape of modern mimesis. I can illustrate this with two snapshots that have to do with AI, machine learning and the question of what is real.

Snapshot 1. Deepfakes

You have probably heard about *deepfakes*; the false representation of a person made to look like someone else, mostly on video although it can also occur through audio or pictures. Deepfake technology uses AI (machine learning) to imitate the original person’s appearance and mannerisms, usually by modifying another person’s performance (for instance, by layering the face image on a famous actor on top of an impersonator). Deepfakes can be playful, like the parodies where Jim Carrey stars in *The Shining*.²⁹ These are usually clearly marked as parodies, for successful decoding requires that we are aware of the two identities at the same time, the real and the fake. To appreciate craftsmanship, we need to know it is a copy, otherwise we cannot ‘get the joke’. It is part of the charm that we realise that the @unreal_keanu TikTok account is not run by

²⁴Ibid., p. 14.

²⁵Bolter and Gromala (2003, p. 86).

²⁶Bolter and Grusin (2000, p. 45).

²⁷Ibid., p. 53.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HG_NZpkttXE.

Keanu Reeves, but entirely made of deepfakes. The account has millions of followers, some confused about the identity of its AI protagonist, whom we, for instance, can see cleaning the house with funny movements. Most followers enjoy the silly content because it fits with the image they have of the actor, or, as one user writes 'I choose to believe in him because he gives me hope'.³⁰ Unreal_Keanu has become *someone* in his own right, a repetition of Keanu Reeves but not him, artificial but still real.

Deepfakes can also be very harmful. A sadly common and malicious use has been the layering of women's faces onto the bodies of porn actresses. This can be done to take revenge, to blackmail or to humiliate the victims, celebrities or not, and has its own name: deepfake porn, and a myriad of apps and extensions like *DeepNude*, where anyone can upload a picture of a woman to 'undress' her convincingly. Other problematic uses of deepfakes include manipulating the appearance of politicians to say things that are harmful to themselves or their government. A famous example of this is the series of videos edited to make American Democrat Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi appear drunk or speech impaired, or the video where Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky orders his troops to surrender to the Russians at the beginning of the war in 2022. Their images, facial expressions and voices are repeated so convincingly that it appears that they said things which they never said. These twisted examples are so chilling because they are nearly indistinguishable from the real thing, which we would do well to remember is already mediated. That is, deepfakes remediate real video genres (porn movies, political speeches, etc.). Few of us have seen Nancy Pelosi or Volodymyr Zelensky in the flesh; all our 'interaction' with them has occurred through mass distribution of images (either recorded video or live television). Despite Baudrillard's efforts and the many years existence of Photoshop, we have taken for granted that images show reality. The introduction of deepfakes disturbs our faith in images in an unprecedented way, and it seems likely that new certification systems will be necessary, just like digital signatures, to give a mediated seal of authenticity.

On the other hand, if we embrace the idea of remediated people, deepfake technology can be used for wonderful things like bringing someone back from the dead. This has already been tried in the film industry, to complete films where the death of an actor had left some scenes unfinished. I want to mention the touching project *Dalí Lives!* that can be experienced at The Dalí Museum in Florida, where the painter talks to museum guests from displays scattered through the museum. There are 125 videos with can be combined in many possible ways as the AI reacts to visitor responses, or comments upon the weather and the actual date. AI Dalí moves and talks like the famous painter and is surprisingly present and interesting to talk to. We can even take selfies with him. We know he is not real, but it does not matter.

Snapshot 2: AI-generated portraits (Fig. 1). Maybe it is hard to agree on what reality is, but one thing we tend to be sure about, Descartes notwithstanding, is our

³⁰In <https://dailyhive.com/vancouver/keanu-reeves-parody-tiktok>.



Fig. 1. Four Versions of me, Generated by *Drawanyone*.

own existence. Drawanyone is an AI-powered image generator using text prompts.³¹ Its website says ‘AI-generated portraits, any way you want’. You just have to upload 5–10 pictures of yourself (or another person), wait for the AI to process them and then write prompts that will generate something like ‘portrait of a silver haired woman with ethereal lighting and flowers all around’ or ‘portrait of a digitally painted woman in a cyberpunk city’. I, together with many people, have been trying this, first with the designated prompts, then creating my own. Our social media has been flooded with people sharing their portraits. The fact that a lot of us were using the same initial prompts makes for strange family resemblances, where suddenly all my friends could be members of the same renaissance court. I observed that the most repeated adjective applied to the generated pictures was ‘uncanny’, which apart from its regular meaning as unsettling or difficult to explain, is also a Freudian term referring to the dread we feel when our childhood fears seem real. I find it fascinating that people could agree on using this term. To me, there was nothing unsettling or mysterious about the images, even if I do not know exactly how the AI works. I had submitted five of my pictures, the programme had calculated a sort of average visual identity from them, and then pitched that against several visual genres. Some I liked, some I did not. Some were more recognisable than others, but that is largely due to the styles that the AI tried to conform to. For instance, everybody’s faces are elongated and pale and our noses straightened when we ask to be drawn in Botticelli style.

I believe that the feeling of uncanniness is due to an implicit expectation that the AI acts like a mirror, so the slight modifications disturb us. But why is this? If we expected a deepfake effect, it is true that the AI’s fantasy portraits seem slightly off. But why would we? We are after all used to the artificiality of selfies, where filters and camera angles repair our imperfections and smooth our lines. We also know that the AI is not a mirror, that it does not know how we *really* look. We just submitted five pictures where our image was already mediated, and had perhaps been retouched. Furthermore, Drawanyone promises to generate portraits, not mirror images. A portrait always contains an interpretation, no matter how realistic the style. Maybe our assumptions about the portrait as genre

³¹In the last few months, DALL-E, Midjourney and Stable Diffusion have been made available to the public, as well as a lot of applications and programmes that build upon them.

are still very much attached to an old concept of mimesis. Pope Innocent X might have preferred to be painted by Diego Velázquez rather than by Lucian Freud; and so do we all, apparently. Drawanyone can do both, and of course there are decidedly uncanny prompts, with many people versioning themselves as vampires, zombies or gothic heroes. I argue that the uneasiness appears because people are chasing their dreams (and not their nightmares as Freud would have it). Browsing Drawanyone's gallery, I find an endless flow of images with the words 'handsome, beautiful, good looking' added to whatever prompt. No matter what appearance and genre, every picture wants to be more beautiful than the source images. This is who we secretly wish we are; no, this is who we really are. What is unsettling is not so much the result, which we covet, but the vulnerability of sharing it on social media, as we suddenly reveal to the world what the improved version of ourselves should look like.

Perhaps what is needed for us to be able to deal with this new mimesis (*deepfakes*, AI-generated images) is algorithmic literacy. As Erik Salvaggio has put it 'Every AI generated image is an infographic about the dataset. AI images are data patterns inscribed into pictures, and they tell us stories about that dataset and the human decisions behind it'. The images reveal the biases, blind spots and quirks of the algorithm, as well as the intentions of the person writing the prompt. AI-generated images are never just one flat thing, never transparent images of reality (what is?) but incorporate an interpretive layer that brings them back to Bolter and Grusin's 'second order' media. We just need some new interpretive strategies to be able to deal with an increasingly complex picture with more participating agents.

Imitatio

Imitation is mimicking. When Alec Baldwin impersonated Trump in *Saturday Night Live*, he was imitating. When we use the Latin word *imitatio*, we are also talking about mimicking, but in this case an organised method with a distinct goal. *Imitatio* is a learning technique developed in ancient rhetoric when neophytes were exposed to the best examples of a particular genre, such as political speeches, and were then encouraged to imitate their form and content.³² *Imitatio* is also known in relation to more artistic endeavours like poetry and the visual arts, as it also fits with the master–apprentice framework. Donatello was an apprentice at Lorenzo Ghiberti's workshop, Raphael at Pietro Peruginos'. Their tasks included finishing something that their master had started, following their style exactly so the clients would be satisfied with the authenticity of the work. Through copying for years, they honed their own skills and went on to be great masters themselves, with their own style.

In the learning context of the rhetoric class, *imitatio*'s focus is not on the product but on the dynamic creative process.³³ Indeed, producing exact copies of

³²Frona (2012).

³³Pechat (2001).

one particular text is not the objective; it might even be frowned upon. Rather, exposure to different authors and styles fosters a meta-critical awareness of genre and style so that the neophyte can eventually go from *imitatio* to *superatio* (leaving the beginner stage behind). *Imitatio* thus evolves from a ‘superficial, rule-based imitation’, which is appropriate in the training period, into a ‘natural sort of imitation predicated on long experience and thorough analysis’ that is typical of mature artistry.³⁴

Imitatio is performative, and even in antiquity it made sense in a community of practice where being recognised as an imitator was a sign of belonging to the same genre or school of thought as the master, and a way to ‘acquire by reflection some of his prestige – and covert use to create an élite community of those readers cultured enough to recognize it’.³⁵

Imitatio resonates strongly with the many imitative genres flourishing in social media. In this section, I will be considering *YouTube* and *TikTok* to illustrate different sides of *imitatio*. Both platforms, appealing to different age groups, are populated by autodidacts, in the process of *becoming* YouTubers or TikTokers. Users learn from each other how videos are made, edited and cut, and submit themselves to copying the existing genres that get traction, like renaissance apprentices in a master’s workshop. An aspiring YouTuber might try their hand at making unboxing videos,³⁶ ‘my followers ask me’ videos, reaction videos,³⁷ or response videos.³⁸ The aspiring TikToker might aspire to go viral with a great dance choreography or a well-timed comic reaction video. These genres have become cultural templates to be imitated and the most famous stars, the masters to be followed.

Snapshot 1: Historical Costuming on YouTube

YouTube is illustrative of the idea of learning by doing. Christine Wolf has examined the culture of DIY (do it yourself) on *YouTube*: ‘DIY projects may span a broad range of topics and include things like home life (such as home repair, decoration, cooking, and gardening), crafting (such as knitting, sewing and scrapbooking), personal fashion and style (such as jewelry, make-up, and hair techniques), making and tinkering with computers, and so on. The common thread is that individuals “do-it-yourself,” meaning amateur, untrained individuals learn how to do specialized, expert tasks’.³⁹ These videos are not only used as instruction manuals to be followed to the letter but also serve as a means of identity work, as people dream themselves able to do different things, regardless of their getting round to doing them or not. By watching what others do, we

³⁴Gazda (2002, pp. 158–159). This paragraph is based on the review of *imitatio* literature that I wrote for Tosca and Ejsing-Duun (2017).

³⁵Conte and Glenn (2015).

³⁶Nicoll and Nansen (2018).

³⁷Kim (2015).

³⁸Lewis et al. (2021).

³⁹Wolf (2016).

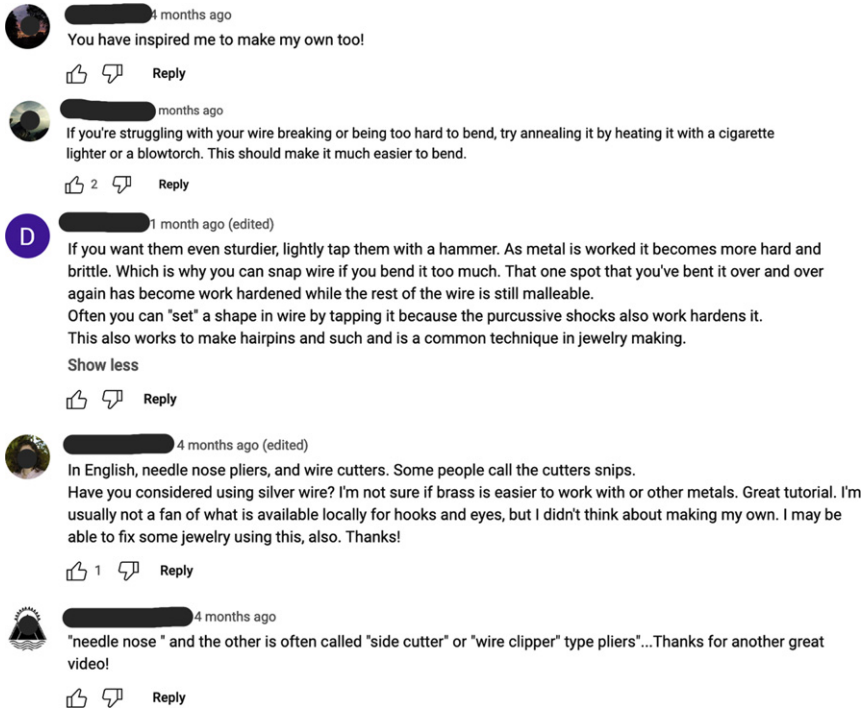


Fig. 2. Lively Exchange for 'How to Make Your Own Hooks and Eyes'.⁴²

imagine alternative ways of living, things we also would like to do. By following in their steps, *imitatio*, we learn the basic elements of a craft or process, aiming for an ideal *superatio* moment where we obtain a deeper understanding of the genre at hand and are able to formulate our own principles and juggle with the different ways of doing things. Then, perhaps, we are ready to make our own videos to share; ones worthy of being imitated.

There are many creative domains represented on *YouTube* to illustrate what David Gauntlet has called 'everyday creativity', or the joyful impulse to engage in crafting.⁴⁰ For some time I have been following a loose collection of channels and crafters that have to do with historical costuming; the craft of sewing historical costumes. All the YouTubers I follow are women, although there is also the odd man participating in the network. Most of the people in this community have a few thousand followers, but some of the stars have many more, like Bernadette Banner with 149 million or Karolina Żebrowska with 127 million followers.

⁴⁰Gauntlet (2013, p. 17).

The first time I encountered a video in this genre was a few years ago, trying to find a pattern or instructions of some kind to make a medieval-looking cape for one of my children, who is very fond of LARPing (Live Action Roleplaying). There are many step-by-step videos, where the creators walk you through the steps of drawing the pattern, buying the fabric, cutting, sewing, fitting, often with links to places to get the material or download specific instructions. An example video could be 'How to sew an easy medieval kirtle' by Elin Abrahamsson, who has a really accessible style and is very clear in her instructions, so that even someone as bad at sewing as me can follow them.⁴¹ Her videos are full of enthusiastic comments, questions and praise from others in the community, where she and others get into conversations as to how to improve designs.

People in this community are helpful, generous and, above all, enthusiastic (Fig. 2). We all become apprentices in the digital workshop, trying to imitate each other and sharing our successes or questions: 'Everyday creativity refers to a process which brings together at least one active human mind, and the material or digital world, in the activity of making something which is novel in that context, and is a process which evokes a feeling of joy'.⁴³

The historical costuming community is imitative in other ways. Most often, there are no templates and patterns to recreate old clothing, so they must do the research themselves, trying to reverse engineer from other sources, like paintings or books, and then filling in the gaps with their own solutions. Bernadette Banner excels at this kind of detective work and her framework is useful to explain this kind of creativity, since making is connecting in several ways.⁴⁴ To make something new, you put things together (here ideas, materials, desires); then you connect with other people who also make things (supported by YouTube and other online platforms like blogs) and then you share stuff in the world and also connect to it (physically).

This last part extends the life of the recreated dresses, which some of these crafters integrate in their daily life. There is, for instance, people like Madison Lynn, who wears historical costumes to work for 1 week, and teaches and goes to meetings dressed up as a seventeenth-century gentlewoman,⁴⁵ or Abby Cox, who has worn eighteenth-century clothes for 5 years, in her attempt to understand the historical period and her relationship to clothing and her own body.⁴⁶ There are even creators who have developed entertainment-oriented genres, like Karolina Żebrowska's idea of doing 'speedruns' getting dressed in old clothing quickly. Her video of 1778 dress speed run has 231.000 views,⁴⁷ but her record of 3:41 minutes

⁴¹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRvzUQ8v9Ss>

⁴²<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHP4CbLhjf0>

⁴³Gauntlett (2013, p. 76).

⁴⁴<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=327azBjatjg>

⁴⁵<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTXpMUutfWI>

⁴⁶<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DyWnm0Blmh4>

⁴⁷<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UpbiPXoSQ3E>

has now been beaten by another crafter, Ash L G who could do the same in 3:22 minutes.⁴⁸

Crafting historical clothes, like in most other DIY communities, turns out not to be only about the products, the results or even becoming a master crafter, although there is undoubtedly pride in that. YouTube offers a framework for participation in a community, and *imitatio* is the path to proficiency, belonging and ultimately joy.

Snapshot 2: Life Hacks

I am a notoriously impractical person who is not very good at the old art of ‘keeping house’, so I am fascinated by the many tricks, shortcuts and ingenious use of everyday objects that go under the name of ‘life hacks’. My *TikTok* feed is also attuned to this, for I must have liked enough life hacks that they keep on coming. Only this week I have learnt all these fantastic things:

- How to wriggle a chicken wing so as to remove the bone and eat all the meat
- How you can turn a pizza box into a half pizza box to keep your leftovers
- How to fix ripped tights with hairspray
- How to grow endless basil
- How to clean the shower floor with vinegar
- How to wrap up oddly shaped gifts

If you are not impressed by the selection, go ahead and search ‘*TikTok* life hacks’ plus the topic of your choice; maybe you are interested in cars, travelling, gardens, carpentry. . . there are entire repositories of short-edited pearls of wisdom about any of these. Life hacks are often simple solutions that offer sustainable alternatives to the excessively commercialised ways of solving problems in our everyday life. I want to know these things to make my life easier and less wasteful. They satisfy an aspirational impulse to become better, not just to solve a specific problem. I cannot help but fantasise that once I can do all these things, no domestic problem will ever seem overwhelming again. Life hacks are uploaded to be imitated, there is an inherent normativity in teaching other people better ways. But not all life hacks are about solving problems. A lot of them want to educate you in the way you present yourself in the world. If you search for ‘life hack fashion’ or ‘life hack makeup’, you will see how these videos are often set up as dichotomies with a screen split in two. The ‘what not to do’ part to the left is marked with a red X, and ‘what to do instead’ part to the right is marked with a green V. On the left, a girl might be wearing a pair of trousers with a blouse hanging over, while on the right, the blouse will be elegantly pinned inside the trousers. This might seem harmless enough, a concrete style tip following the fashion of the day. However, the constant bombardment with this kind of

⁴⁸<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yTsdN9Vpopg&list=PL-KvVPxvMrSXF8MvI8xDgHLeg7tE8GPWp>

content, with only one acceptable way of wearing wide trousers, long earrings or smokey eyes, makes for a narrow life path where many things are 'wrong'.

Life hacks, with their rigid ways, could be seen to be part of a tradition of 'self-help' literature, starting with the religious manuals, and continuing with the Renaissance books of conduct (for example, *The Art of Wordly Wisdom* by Baltasar Gracian, who offers advice in terms of virtues and behaviour, but advises on what will attract the interest of other people and make you popular).⁴⁹

Consider his advice number iii 'Keep Matters for a Time in Suspense'⁵⁰: 'It is both useless and insipid to play with the cards on the table. If you do not declare yourself immediately, you arouse expectation, especially when the importance of your position makes you the object of general attention. Mix a little mystery with everything, and the very mystery arouses veneration. And when you explain, be not too explicit, just as you do not expose your inmost thoughts in ordinary intercourse'.

Now consider this *TikTok* video I picked at random by searching for 'life hack dating'. TikToker Dave Perrotta (who has 177,000 followers and helps 'busy guys meet and date high quality women') is on a balcony looking at the camera with fancy glasses on as he gives the following advice about texting a girl after a first date⁵¹:

This is actually something I see a lot of guys screw up. (...) You think the date was awesome so you text her afterwards and say: "hey, I had so much fun, I can't wait to see you again". That's like one error I see you guys make. The other error is they automatically try to start planning the next date in the first text message. (...) The problem with this is it exposes all of your intentions right out of the gate. She already knows, hey, this guy likes me. Hey, he wants to see me again. . . What's much better is to let it breathe. You want her to sit there for a day or two thinking: does this guy like me? Does he want to see me again? You can text her and say "hey. Last night was fun. We gotta go easier on the tequila next time". Now the power of a message like this is it's subtle, you know. You are implying that there might be a next time, but you're not like trying to set it up specifically right then and there. There's still like some mystery to it.

Baltasar Gracian would be proud, and to be honest, keeping the suspense is one of the oldest tricks in the book. However, its new packaging, as a 1-minute part of a never-ending reel, algorithmically optimised to conform to the whims of any single user, means that the average youth looking at *TikTok* will be digesting 60 of these absolute truths per hour. I have not yet seen any wide-ranging study of

⁴⁹Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* comes to mind.

⁵⁰Text freely available at: <https://www.sacred-texts.com/eso/aww/aww10.htm>.

⁵¹https://www.tiktok.com/@daveperrotta/video/7059131499181968686?is_from_webapp=v1&item_id=7059131499181968686



Fig. 3. A *TikTok* Duet Dance Challenge, Reimagined by DALL-E and me.

the platform that explains how this mode of consumption translates into imitative activities in people's life.⁵²

Snapshot 3: Duets

The last snapshot is very brief, and not really about *imitatio*, but about playful imitation, also as a way to connect to the next section. Imitation is one of the earliest forms of play, and it is recognised that it helps children learn behaviour patterns.⁵³ There is pleasure in being able to mimic the actions of another person, and in the case of infants and young children, a sense of discovery as they learn new ways of using their bodies or their voices.

TikTok has become the place to go for a lot of imitative play thanks mainly to the duet feature, implemented initially to support practices of lip syncing and dancing (Fig. 3). At first the imitation could only be silent, but later it became possible to add audio to respond to other videos, and now it is possible to string together chains of duets.⁵⁴

⁵²Maybe it does not. But it would be a very interesting study.

⁵³Piaget (1962).

⁵⁴Kaye (2022, p. 62).

TikTok is in many ways a performance enabling platform, where people can engage in singing, dancing and music playing, alone and together. It is the perfect platform for all the playful people who like to perform, act silly, dress up and sing at family birthdays; a platform for clowns, show-offs and would-be divas. I mean this in the most positive of ways, as the joy of performing, sharing and just playing, becomes possible again, even for adults.

Bondy Kaye proposes that we can understand these processes through the concept of distributed creativity ‘defined as groups of individuals who join together to produce a new creative output that ranges from the relatively predictable and constraints to relatively unpredictable and constrained’.⁵⁵ But why is it such fun to imitate each other on *TikTok*? I suggest that the platform becomes a playground where we can unfold one of the most human of needs: that of play. Philip Prager argues that ‘improvising – that is, exploring ideas, objects, materials, and people without considering sense, purpose or function – is one of the key features of play. Play, in turn, is not the evolutionary recipe for only the success of our mammalian class and human species but also for the origin of creative innovation – the recipe for our social cohesion, our mental facility and our physical health’.⁵⁶ No wonder that the world fell in love with *TikTok* in the middle of the COVID-19 lockdown.⁵⁷

Combinational Creativity

The concept of combinational creativity originates from the work of Margaret Boden who in her books *The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms* and *Creativity and Art* lays the foundation of a processual theory of creativity based on cognitive science.⁵⁸ Her theory bridges the gap between artistic and cultural understandings of creativity and creative algorithmic formats that were nascent when she wrote the second book.

She defines creativity as ‘the ability to come up with ideas or artefacts that are *new, surprising, and valuable*’.⁵⁹ In her view, any aspect of life – science, art and architecture – can all be creative. Creativity is not a special faculty, but an aspect of human intelligence in general. The Romantic view of creativity as reserved for a spiritual elite has had ‘horrendous educational implications’. From her perspective, anybody can come up with ideas that are new to them (psychological, or P-creativity), even though only a few come up with ideas that are new for the whole of humanity (historical or H-creativity).

⁵⁵Kaye (2022, p. 66).

⁵⁶Prager (2013, p. 241).

⁵⁷Only in 2021, 626 million people downloaded TikTok, which made it the most downloaded app worldwide. Source: Statista: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1285960/top-downloaded-mobile-apps-worldwide/>.

⁵⁸Boden (2004) and Boden (2012).

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 29.

Boden defines three forms of creativity:

- a. Combinational: about ‘making unfamiliar combinations of familiar ideas’, like in poetic imagery, collage and analogies.⁶⁰ It ‘requires a rich store of knowledge in the persons mind, and many different ways of moving around within it’.⁶¹
- b. Exploratory: refers to conceptual spaces that are ‘structured styles of thought’, like styles of sculpture, fashions and recipes, which we can explore, systematically wondering about which things are also possible and experimenting consciously.⁶² Innovation in this area is equivalent to adding a new trick to our repertoire, something that already fits the existing thinking style.
- c. Transformational: realises the limitations of an existing mental map and makes an effort to change it. It is the most extreme form of innovation, for it introduces ‘impossible ideas’, things that were before inconceivable in that mental space.⁶³

Even though the second and third type are related to repetition in relation to cognitive domains, patterns and known genres, they are meta-abilities that require a trained human mind, so I will focus on the first one here, for it is accessible to both untrained humans and machines. In combinational creativity, a pool of elements can be combined in different ways in order to produce a new result. Anybody can make a collage or compose a poem. Anybody can combine film stills and a sentence from a politician and make a meme. Anybody can use an image-generating AI. That we can combine these things does not necessarily mean that the result is something which everybody will appreciate, but it is likely that we will appreciate being able to do it.

Snapshot 1: Remix

The concept of *remix* has been the kind of combinational creativity that has attracted attention in digital media theory since the beginning of the 2000s, mostly in relation to music and some of the spectacular lawsuits that punished the re-use of fragments and melodies, and which kickstarted a social movement against the rigidity of current copyright laws.⁶⁴ A famous remix could be *The Grey Album*, which musician Danger Mouse released in 2004 and that mixes rapper Jay-Z’s

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 31.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid., p. 32.

⁶³Ibid., p. 33.

⁶⁴This movement can be said to crystallise with the publication of the documentary *A Remix Manifesto*, written and produced by Brett Gaylor. The four main points of the manifesto read as follows:

1. Culture always builds on the past.
2. The past always tries to control the future.
3. Our future is becoming less free.
4. To build free societies you must limit the control of the past

The documentary can be found at <https://topdocumentaryfilms.com/rip-remix-manifesto/>.

The Black Album with samples from the Beatles' *The White Album*, starting a bit controversy where EMI records tried to stop its distribution.

Stefan Sonvilla-Weiss distinguishes between remix and mashup. For him, 'collage, montage, sampling or remix practices all use one or many materials, media either from other sources, art pieces (visual arts, music, video, literature etc.) or one's own artworks through alteration, re-combination, manipulation, copying etc. to create a whole new piece. In doing so, the sources of origin may still be identifiable yet not perceived as the original version'. On the other hand, a mashup 'puts together different information, media, or objects without changing their original source of information, i.e. the original format remains the same and can be retraced as the original form and content, although recombined in different new designs and contexts'.⁶⁵

In a remix, things melt into each other and become an integrated whole; in the mashup, the different layers can always be separated. In general, Sonvilla-Weiss' and others' approach to the remix/mashup is mostly preoccupied with establishing how remixes generate *new art* in relation to an *original* source.⁶⁶ Eduardo Navas proposes, for instance, that there are three kinds of remix: extended (adds material), selective (adds and subtracts, that is, edits) and reflexive (challenges the original).⁶⁷ These definitions are relevant when remixes are a way for artists to produce new content for which they want to get paid. The remixes of our social media era, however, are not made by professionals or intended for artistic consumption, but have become a mundane occurrence, mass-produced by anybody in the form of memes, graphic or video. We do not care about a relation to an original because there is no expectation of originality. The modern remix is commentary, parody, meta. Everything is cut up, dismantled and remediated.

A good example of the mediated layers of the new remix is the music video 'Billie Jean but every lyric is an AI generated image', where the authors just entered the lyrics of the Michael Jackson song into Midjourney and produced a collection of strange and wonderful imagery.⁶⁸ At the beginning, the music generates only colourful images of instrument play, then we encounter the woman 'like a beauty queen from a movie scene'. The next sentence, 'I am the one' shows an isolated figure that seems strangely lonely, 'who will dance' shows a disco dancefloor, 'on the floor' becomes a sort of circus-like empty scene, 'in the round' shows eerie couples dancing beside a creepy house. Jackson's exclamations ('heeeeeehheeee') generate only monsters.⁶⁹ And on it goes until the final screen 'Billie Jean is not my lover' where the AI has produced a likeness of Michael Jackson. This remix blends modalities and has no other purpose

⁶⁵Sonvilla-Weiss (2010, p. 9).

⁶⁶Like Navas (2007).

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v58MIJ2USBiCc>. The authors are JG Vision Media, who in their channel declare that they cannot 'monetise' these creations because they are using copyrighted music. Their YouTube channel contains other videos of this kind.

⁶⁹Maybe the AI was influenced by the Ayuoki game. This was a horror game parodying Michael Jackson, where the player has to escape from a mansion while being chased by the Ayuoki monster, who makes 'hee hee' noises when he approaches the player.

than playfulness, although of course the production company gets a lot of views and increased recognition. Our joy as spectators is at evaluating how the AI ‘interprets’ the lyrics of the song, rejoicing at some clever combinations and recoiling at the creepiness of others. But actually, despite its multiple forms, this work is not illustrative of another important feature of the modern remix: its social nature and its openness to anybody.

We saw above how *TikTok* duets were an example of playful imitation practices. Many of the *TikTok* dances and challenges can also said to be remixes. In fact, the platform is made to support active remix creation, as has been argued by Diana and David Zulli, who read *TikTok* as a memetic platform, because ‘imitation and replication – the driving forces of mimesis – are latent in *TikTok*’s platform design’.⁷⁰ They review the imitative affordances of the platform, where two of these features are specially supportive of remix practices:

sound icon, it appears when you are watching a video and can be clicked so you are taken to a page storing every video made with that sound, so you get an idea of the range of ‘versions’ already existing. You can also click on ‘use this sound’ to make your own video and join the collective remix repository.

video effects (like green screen, sparkle, hair tint. . .) *TikTok* does not present effects in well-organised menus, but they appear as vague headings where the only possible strategy for users is to explore what other users have done with the effect before them. Copying is, therefore, encouraged, and the creation of new remixes and relations between items.

One of these remixes could be the famous ‘Wellerman trend’, which united people all over the world in remixing the old sea shanty put forward by Scottish musician Nathan Evans. His recording was viewed more than 4 million times on *TikTok*, and then hundreds of people started duetting, adding harmonies, different vocal parts, instruments dances and more until it became one of the most remixed pieces of all time.

There once was a ship that put to sea
 The name of the ship was the Billy of Tea
 The winds blew up, her bow dipped down
 Oh blow, my bully boys, blow (huh)
 Soon may the Wellerman come
 To bring us sugar and tea and rum
 One day, when the tonguing is done
 We’ll take our leave and go

⁷⁰See Zulli and Zulli (2022). The citations do not have page numbers because they are not indicated in the online version.

The Wellerman explosion happened in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, which might partly explain the enthusiasm people had for collaborating in this manner. It was a beautiful new incarnation of the original purpose of a shanty: to coordinate the sailors' movements onboard a ship when working together. Many other trends have spread through *TikTok*, both before and after, like the Yeehaw Challenge,⁷¹ the Towel Challenge,⁷² the Savage dance⁷³ or the SexyBack dance.⁷⁴ *TikTok* is an open playground for all.

Zulli and Zulli also noted that 'it appeared to be particularly advantageous for users to merely remix popular videos rather than create their own, as evident by the saturation of similar videos on *TikTok*'. This seems to be the most successful 'entry strategy' to the platform from a producing point of view, and is also what most users try first. Of course, there is great value in launching some original content that could start a series of remixes, pushing our videos to top popularity; however, most participation occurs in the form of responding to what someone else has created, so much so that Zulli and Zulli talk about 'imitation publics' as key to understanding interaction in the platform.

Snapshot 2: Generative Art

Margaret Boden defines generative art as: 'the artwork is generated, at least in part, by some process that is not under the artist's direct control'.⁷⁵ Or, as Lioret and Berger note, where 'algorithms generate results after their calculation'.⁷⁶ This is not so high-tech as it sounds, and it could conceivably also happen in an analog format. Lioret and Berger's example are the tiles of The Alhambra in Granada, which follow an automation principle based on the establishment of pattern rules, and a repetitive execution that relates these old crafts with the avant-garde of the twentieth century (Fig. 4).

Lioret and Berger are inspired by artist Jérôme Saint-Clair's definition of generative art, which is made in the form of an algorithm⁷⁷:

START

Define a set of items (ie: shapes, colours, people, sound, ...).

Define space(s) (ie: screen, wall, scene, ...).

⁷¹People in regular clothes start hearing the 'Old Town Road' by Lil Nas X and drink from a juice, which turns them into a cowboy.

⁷²In this challenge, two people holding towels intertwine them in strange ways trapping their bodies and then they have to come out without letting the towels go.

⁷³A dance choreography for Megan Thee Stallion's song Savage.

⁷⁴People danced a specific choreography for the song SexyBack by Justin Timberlake, but there were also many doing alternative dances with objects and animals.

⁷⁵Boden (2012, p. 138).

⁷⁶Lioret and Berger (2012, p. 17) My translation.

⁷⁷ibid., p. 120.

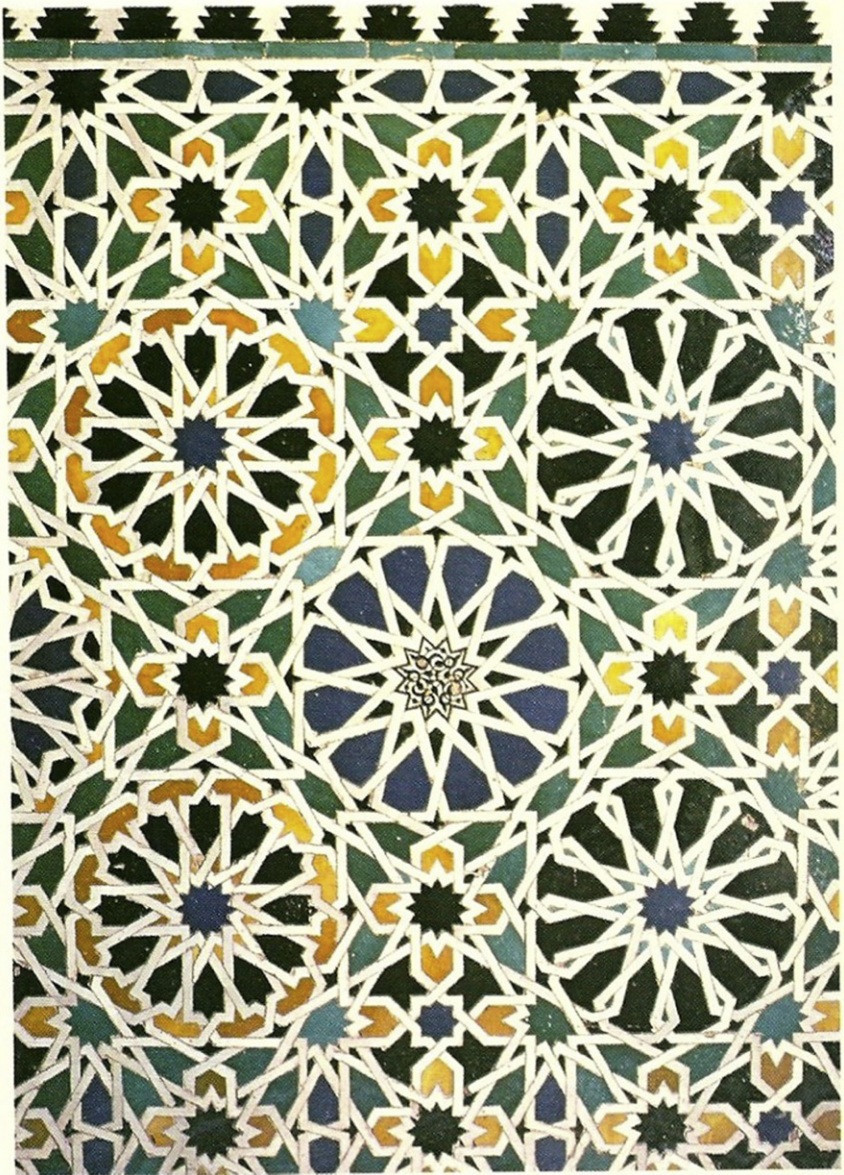


Fig. 4. *Alhambra tiles.*⁷⁸

⁷⁸Picture by Nathan Hugues Hamilton, Creative Commons, downloaded from Flickr.

Define a set of organisation/transformation rules for those items within the (these) space(s).

STOP

In generative art, the artist has no direct control of the product resulting from the execution of the algorithm, even though they have defined the interaction rules and the set of elements which the programme can draw from. The result can be unexpected, indeed it is part of the charm of generative art to inspire surprise even in its creators. A semi-autonomous system can provide the element of randomness that is necessary to take us out of our usual mental structures and augment creative output.⁷⁹

Generative art has been around for a long time, also in textual form. Roberto Simanowski finds one of the oldest computer generators as far back as 1952, where Christopher Strachey invented ‘The Love letter Generator’,⁸⁰ a programme which automatically produced love letters from fixed words and patterns, but there have also been analog predecessors, like the Eureka Latin Verse Machine⁸¹ or even using *volvelles* as platform, like Ramón Llull’s *Ars Magna*.⁸² However, the name is nearly universally associated with the production of abstract graphic patterns, as, for instance, in the volume *Generative Design*, whose introduction celebrates that ‘new and fascinating visual worlds are emerging where the coincidental is shaped to help correlations become visible’.⁸³

This last sentence could be applied to any of the new AI image generators already mentioned in this chapter, which I would argue are the latest forms of generative art and probably the first to attract so many people to interact with them. In the case of DALL-E or Midjourney, the algorithm is the textual prompt formulated by the users, while the correlations are executed by the machine combining a pool of millions of graphic assets over which users do not have any control. The scope of this database is so phenomenal that nobody can exactly predict what gets mixed and spouted out, and the machine can learn. The conscious operations of combinational creativity happen for the involved humans at the level of reverse engineering the images. We start with an idea of what we want in our minds, like I did above when I asked DALL-E to generate images of a *TikTok* duet dance (Fig. 3), and then we write all the keywords we can think of that could produce just that: ‘a photorealistic picture of *TikTok* dance duet challenge people in three screens doing the same dance different colours detailed photography happiness living room’. I am clearly not very good at prompting; there is something off about the faces and bodies of the dancers, something slightly inhuman.

⁷⁹Prager (2014, p. 41).

⁸⁰Simanowski (2011, p. 94).

⁸¹<https://poetrybynumbers.exeter.ac.uk/about/>

⁸²Gravelle et al. (2012).

⁸³Bohnacker et al. (2012).

Creating good prompts is indeed not easy. Usually, the production of a satisfactory image requires several attempts, with us second-guessing which and how many adjectives we need to include to create something that fits the imagined style and mood, while still maintaining a clear view of the desired object. There are prompt guides, and marketplaces where people trade with prompts, so anybody can buy one to make better art, or sell another when they make a good discovery themselves.⁸⁴ Despite the hypothetical total openness of this process, where the prompt square pulsates as white and empty as any new Word document, it turns out that a lot of people are generating more or less the same kind of pictures. Artist Kirsten Zirngibl has generated an explorable map of KREA AI's Stable Diffusion Search Engine and found out that the most frequent categories had to do with attractive females, celebrities and pop culture as well as fantastic environments.⁸⁵ It has to be mentioned that the existing engines do not allow the production of nudity or pornographic material because if they did I am guessing that the balance would look different.

This is no doubt combinational creativity, even if we are not doing the combinations directly ourselves. But then, who is the author of the produced images? The idea of authorship and intentionality has been crucial to our understanding of creativity. I can illustrate this problem with the first public controversy about generated art winning a prize.

Fantasy game maker Jason Allen submitted a picture called 'Théâtre D'opéra Spatial' to the Colorado State Fair's fine arts competition in 2022 and won in the category of 'digitally manipulated photography'.⁸⁶ The picture is a detailed portrait of three sumptuously clad figures looking out through a round window at a mysterious sun-washed world from within a great hall of alien architecture. It is beautiful and otherworldly. There is just one problem: Jason Allen did not make this picture, Midjourney did.

The *Washington Post* describes how Allen 'started with a simple mental image – a woman in a Victorian frilly dress, wearing a space helmet' – and kept fine-tuning the prompts, 'using tests to really make an epic scene'. Allen spent 80 hours making more than 900 iterations of the work, adding words like 'opulent' and 'lavish' to finetune its tone and feel. He has declined to share the full series of words he used to create his art, saying this is his artistic product, and that he intends to publish it later. This is important, as I hinted above, it is not easy to formulate a good prompt, less still when you have a very clear aesthetic expression in mind. Nine hundred iterations sound like quite a lot of work to me,

⁸⁴Like <https://dallery.gallery/the-dalle-2-prompt-book/> or <https://promptbase.com>.

⁸⁵It can be accessed live here: https://atlas.nomic.ai/map/809ef16a-5b2d-4291-b772-a913f4c8ee61/9ed7d171-650b-4526-85bf-3592ee51ea31?fbclid=IwAR1XaSRpAEC27PFO557CdML7Bkxg_4v12sru4EFYKcZ1GZ9-bpWBVzRapZs.

⁸⁶According to the article by Drew Harwell, 'He used AI art from Midjourney to win a fine-arts prize. Did he cheat?', published in *The Washington Post*. (2022, September 2). Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/09/02/midjourney-artificial-intelligence-state-fair-colorado/>.

considering that the category Allen was participating in was ‘digitally manipulated photography’.

The story reminds me of the old Chinese tale of the king who asked the painter to draw him a rooster. The king waited for a whole year without hearing back from the painter, so he went to his atelier and angrily demanded that the painter did what he had commanded. The painter then took the brush and produced a perfect rooster in a few seconds. ‘How could you keep me waiting for so long when you can draw the rooster so quickly and perfectly?’, said the king. The painter then showed him a room with hundreds upon hundreds of discarded attempts to draw the rooster. It had taken him one entire year to learn to draw the perfect rooster.⁸⁷

But Allen’s picture is not the rooster, at least not according to how many people see it. After he won the competition, online outrage ensued, followed by a heated discussion between those who dismiss such practices as cheating, and those who argue that Midjourney is just another tool that Allen demonstrated he can use. Allen’s own argument is that artists learn their craft also by copying other styles and artists, but this also has been pointed out as part of the problem: no artist has given their permission for their productions to be used to train the image generator software. Truth be told, there are so many million images that a single author’s production in or out of the dataset might not make a huge difference. What is crucial in this discussion is the complete absence of the romantic author from this scene. Authorship becomes distributed across four kinds of agency:

- (1) the authors of the image dataset which the AI was trained on
- (2) the human user who enters a self-made prompt
- (3) the developers of the AI system
- (4) the AI that generates the final product

The first one is not always obvious, even though a lot of the generated art prompts I find in the online galleries specifically mention the names of famous painters and photographers. The second one carries arguably more intentionality than any of the other three, so maybe Allen is right in his argument, but it can also be further distributed if the user is borrowing a prompt from someone else, or slightly modifying it. The third is a sort of meta-authorship, since the designers make the system, but have no control over the products that the system generates. The fourth agent is not human, and we cannot really know how it operates, since the workings of the algorithm remain opaque. In principle, it can incorporate biases and constraints we are not aware of, such as not allowing nudity or being more nuanced in its treatment of white people. None of the three agents fully controls the others, and the resulting combination is always at some level a surprise for the human user. Maybe that is what explains the enthusiasm around the new image generators, as we are attracted to the kind of uncertainty that imbues tinkering with these platforms with a touch of revelation. The creative

⁸⁷Compiled in Chang (1969).

combination becomes more a matter of alchemy than chemistry, more magic than cold reason.

Coda

This chapter has considered three kinds of repetitive creativity that all contribute to slaying the hydra of romantic originality, the monster that has hunted me since the first page of this book. I hope it has become clear that creativity and repetition are not polar opposites, but friendly companions. That creativity is open to anybody, that it can be aided and even generated by machines, and that the concept of absolute originality does not make sense in a hypermediated world. Perhaps the question is then if there is another understanding of originality that could be more productive in relation to our current media culture – something to be covered in the next chapter. To conclude, what affordances do the three kinds of creativity make possible? The myth of Daedalus allowed us to connect them to antiquity and different forms of invention, but they now all have new formats. The addition of computers as creative agents of their own complicates the picture in interesting ways.

The old tradition of mimetic art is disrupted by the intervention of algorithmic generated pictures. The new *mimesis* invites us to reconsider our understanding of how reality and media are connected to each other. Deepfakes make us reconsider the credibility we have bestowed upon older media like television and film. AI-generated pictures are not seamless windows into reality, but neither were all the other pictures that came before. They can perhaps be an instrument of self-introspection, as they confront us with alternative versions of ourselves and the world, making desire visible.

Imitatio shows a pathway to creative craftsmanship. Social media enable the thriving of creative communities, like the ones we find on *YouTube*, but also incorporate easy-to-follow, imitative paths in their design. *TikTok's* interface offers users a non-intimidating way 'to replicate popular formats for themselves' in what they call a process of circumscribed creativity.⁸⁸ Producing mimetic content becomes a mundane practice, where the joy of performing is shared among many strangers. *Imitatio* understood as aspiration to a better life also opens the door to a proliferation of normative advice videos that see reality in black and white terms. Here, repeating means conforming to a norm and avoiding social ostracism.

The theories behind combinational creativity help us understand how remix and generative art are derivative creativity formats that have changed radically in the last 20 years. Difficult questions about authorship and the nature of originality come into the spotlight. Combining existing content is the lowest threshold to participation in a platformised creative ecology where everything can be connected. These formats, supported by algorithmic generation of images and recommendation systems in entertainment reels, provide entertainment and joy to

⁸⁸Kaye et al. (2020, p. 246).

an entire generation of creators. Perhaps, like David Gauntlett suggests ‘because modern life is often tiring and complicated, we are often likely to welcome the blessed relief of the “sit back and be told” elements which don’t require us to *do* very much. The “making and doing” culture does require a bit more effort – but it comes with rich rewards’.⁸⁹

All in all, the three repetitive creativity formats can help us to see new connections in the way that the machines (interfaces, AIs) filter, shape and display the content we are engaging with. As Victoria Vesna suggests, writing about database aesthetics: ‘Databases and archives serve as ready-made commentaries on our contemporary social and political lives’ these works can ‘raise the awareness of a wider audience about the importance of considering how our social data are being organised, categorised, stored and retrieved’.⁹⁰ We recognise the agency of the machines and wonder about our role in the complicated equation. I argue that engaging with these forms of creativity can make us more data literate.

⁸⁹Gauntlett (2013, p. 245).

⁹⁰Vesna (2007, p. xi and p. xiv).

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Chapter 7

In Praise and Criticism of Repetition: The Cultural Affordances of Repetitive Media Formats

At the end of this project, it is time for a brief closing reflection. With such varied understandings of repetition across so many media forms and experiences, there is no possible single conclusion. Nevertheless, I will attempt to gather some of the threads I have spun through the labyrinth of the six previous chapters. The scrutiny of our collective discomfort with repetition and sameness has revealed important insights about our aesthetic assumptions and cultural values, not least about the false opposition between high art and popular culture. I hope that it has become obvious how repetitive media, repetitive storytelling strategies and repetitive user practices are not only ubiquitous but also legitimate ways of making culture. Creativity and repetition are not opposites, but are complementary. It is high time that we stopped longing for an idealised and unattainable version of originality and uniqueness.

I must confess that I had decided on the title of this section from the beginning of the project, vaguely hoping to be able to present two neatly opposed columns: one with all the ‘good’ instances of repetition and one with all the ‘bad’ examples. Perhaps the ‘good’ ones would be related to the way in which repetition facilitates learning and can formally support storytelling, the creative possibilities of playful imitation, the healing comfort of repetitive media consumption or the help that sameness algorithms can be to navigate a supersaturated media world. The ‘bad’ instances of repetition would have to do with the way that media producers reject risk in favour of easy, tried-and-tested solutions, the way algorithms manipulate us or how difficult it is to ever experience anything new. In other words, the good column would be about ‘pull’, how users themselves decide and exert agency, while the bad column would be about ‘push’, how someone else (producers/algorithms) forces content and engagement upon us. If I have learnt something in the course of this project, however, it is that a lazy dichotomy such as this does not hold. It conflates different aspects of media (platforms, modalities, institutions, use) and reproduces some of the assumptions about the pernicious effects of mass culture that I have criticised. In this simplified picture, users are always

Sameness and Repetition in Contemporary Media Culture, 169–172



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active and resistant, and agency goes in only one direction. It falls both into the trap of technological determinism (media do things to us we cannot help) and overstated social constructivism (users unilaterally decide and act, regardless of constraints).

However, there is a way out of this particular dead end with the help of Ian Hutchby.¹ If I am to take the idea of affordances seriously, I need to acknowledge that any media situation is a complex set of factors with shifting agents, intentionalities, material practices and aesthetic and social contexts that are wholly situated and very difficult to generalise about. That is, while any object has a limited series of affordances (you cannot make them up), there is not a single way of either conceptualising or experiencing them. The affordances of repetitive media formats are always both enabling and constraining, their potential to be realised in many different ways. Hutchby has proposed four ‘emphases’ to unpack this important point²:

- (1) Different sources of affordances are interrelated. For instance, an animal in nature would find possibilities for action both in the environment (run, hide) and in its interaction with other species (enemy, prey); it is the combination of specific factors in a situation that determines the best possible course of action. Likewise, repetition strategies do not operate in isolation, since media and cultural institutions are part of all sorts of other systems that determine their value, effect, range and configurative power. The economically hard-pressed national television channel that decides to run *Matador* for the umpteenth time might be able to capitalise on the emotional comfort of a well-known and respected classic. However, people could just as well choose the uncertain but exciting new high-profile series on their streaming platform.³
- (2) Affordances are ‘not just functional but also relational aspects of an object’s material presence in the world’, that is, they enable and constrain each agent differently. Hutchby gives the example of water – which offers the affordance of being walked upon by insects, but not by humans. The same repeated storytelling trope such as ‘enemies to lovers’ can be different things to different agents: a source of easy income for a script writer who complies to a producer’s briefing, a scaffold for a group of friends to create a TikTok parody, a source of unbearable boredom for a spectator dragged to the cinema by a friend, a way to entertainingly fill a Saturday evening for a fan

¹Hutchby (2001).

²Building upon Gibson’s understanding of affordance in the context of the psychology of perception (Hutchby, 2001, pp. 448–449).

³This is a 24-episode Danish production first launched in 1978–1982, authored by Lise Nørgaard and directed by Erik Balling. It is a historical fiction that follows the lives of a few families in a provincial town in the Denmark of 1929–1947. It is considered the quintessential expression of the Danish national character and as such, it has been shown on television many times.

of the main actor. The same agent can make use of different affordances of a repeated media strategy depending on the situation.

- (3) Affordances are complex and are not necessarily perceived automatically by agents. For instance, we need to learn to operate technology so we can use it. Sometimes the affordance is there and we cannot see it, or we refuse to use it, so its potentiality is lost. Re-reading a novel can free my attention from the difficult plot I got so confused about the first time around. I could discover new nuances in characterisation or the way the language is used. But I will never experience this if I do not know the benefits of re-reading.
- (4) Affordances can be designed purposefully into the artefact. Repetition by design is an important aesthetic feature of several contemporary formats like computer games or AI-generated pictures that we need to learn to appreciate in their own terms. This does not mean that we stop being critical, but rather that we interrogate design from a perspective of potentiality. For instance, while not strictly a dark design pattern, scrolling as the default interaction mode with our social media has been designed to keep us repeating the same swiping gesture, getting stimulation once in a while, enough to keep on going even if most of what we see is boring or irrelevant and we would rather be doing something else.

This more sophisticated approach forces me to ask again what is the potential for action that emerges from repetitive media practices. Going back to previous chapters, I can think of a few insights that involve all agents, such as producers, users and machines, that embrace the complexity of situated repetition. We can, for instance:

- learn to critically appreciate variations. We need to develop a richer way of evaluating how stories are revisited, how songs are remixed or how paintings quote each other
- interrogate the reasons behind repetitive practices like nostalgic song listening, binge watching of series or doom scrolling. What kinds of agency are being exercised? What contexts of use and needs are being covered?
- become conscious about the cyclical nature of contemporary entertainment, with its seasonal rhythms and different types of serial consumption. Someone is indeed earning money through our engagement in repetitive media practices, but this should not automatically disqualify them as experience providers
- work towards a new understanding of creativity that embraces imitative and combinational practices instead of striving for an idealised, impossible version of originality
- learn to harness the power of the different repetitive formats, including collaboration with artificial intelligence so that regular people can imitate and create freely
- become aware of the conditions under which algorithms help us navigate vast amounts of information, complementing their input with other qualifying strategies

Ubiquitous repetition at all these levels also constrains and challenges. Some critics have alerted us of the dangers of losing ourselves in a mirror world of copies without substance.⁴ Hiroki Azuma coined the term of the 'database mode of consumption', referring to the users of Japanese popular culture, who are not interested in great narratives or aesthetic depth, but instead focus on isolated components like the specific hair colour of a character or a personality trait.⁵ An exploitative system of production repeats these tropes endlessly, feeding a public of collectors of superficial and ultimately empty signifiers.⁶ These dehumanised database animals, as he calls them, become unable to see the big picture, in fact, there is no big picture anymore.

I disagree. An awareness of form, components and the many ways in which they can be arranged and repeated does not destroy immersion. More knowledge equals more freedom, to see the big picture or to ignore it. We do still enjoy formulaic storytelling, repetitive games or imitative play, but can also consider them at a meta level. The affordances of repetitive media strategies are not only about producing enjoyment, there are also cognitive advantages to be gained from becoming aware of formal repetition.

I have suggested that higher literacy about repetition and sameness can help us develop our pattern recognition ability, which is a useful skill in an algorithmic society. Perceiving sameness, we become conscious of patterns and the way complex structures belong together. Imitating, we perform repetitive actions in manageable chunks, and we learn. I argue that these general cognitive abilities can also cross domains. Being able to dissect an artificial system like a transmedial narrative or a strategy game can make us better at seeing the workings of other human-made systems, like politics, religion or a promotion system at work.

With repetition, meaning gathers.

⁴Inspired by the Frankfurt School, Baudrillard and other thinkers of postmodernism.

⁵Known as *otaku*.

⁶Azuma (2009).

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