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 comple-mentary. 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, is that a lazy dichotomy such as this does not hold. It conflates different aspects of media (platforms, modalities, institu-tions, 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

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 point[2]:

(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

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[1]Hutchby (2001).

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

[3]This 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.

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[4]Inspired by the Frankfurt School, Baudrillard and other thinkers of postmodernism.
[5]Known as *otaku*.
[6]Azuma (2009).