

BOOK REVIEWS

***On Repetition: Writing, Performance & Art*. Edited by Eirini Kartsaki. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. 231 pp.**

Reviewed by Nathan Flaig

Eirini Kartsaki's edited volume *On Repetition: Writing, Performance & Art* offers a rich exploration of repetition as a complex and vital device across a range of creative contexts, including theatre, dance, performance art, stand-up comedy, music, film, and poetry. *On Repetition* deconstructs the binary of the original/copy, revealing the poignancy of repetition as a conceptual tool for creators to evoke particular affective responses. The volume articulates repetition in both content and form, with contributions that write performatively, turning toward a refusal of closure. From this provocative standpoint, repetition emerges differently in each contribution, taking shape as a returning, an echo, an archive, a doubling, a haunting, the unfinished, and the citational. The various contributors to the volume mine these notions through a multiplicity of theoretical and methodological approaches, offering readers a richness of content from which to ponder the depth of the repetition as a creative trope and as a useful mode of appraisal when approaching creative works within a postmodern context.

The greatest strength of the volume lies in its multipronged appraisal of repetition, whereby contributors re-read, re-articulate, and re-format the concept of repetition in multidisciplinary contexts. The overall effect of this range of articulations produces a dialogue of sorts, in which a conversation around the affective, performative, creative, and intellectual applications of repetition modulates from chapter to chapter. This produces a feeling of unsettledness for the reader while pointing to the strength of the collected contributions from a curatorial perspective; they seem to hang together in such a way that each unique piece offers a significant angle in the approach to repetition as boundless possibility.

Early chapters take a robust theoretical approach to repetition. Swen Steinhäuser's "Of Secret Signals, Absent Masters and the Trembling of the Contours: Walter Benjamin, Yvonne Rainer and the Repeatability of Gesture" discusses repetition within the context of "being-in-rehearsal" and the radical performativity that is implied by repetition's situation toward the future. Furthering this theoretical exploration, Alan Read's "All the Home's a Stage: Uncanny Encounters Between Auditorium and *Oikos*" engages with Søren Kierkegaard/Constantin Constantius' take on repetition and the disorienting effects of being-at-home/coming-home. Read probes the scholarly "fear of the familiar," as it haunts the inherent citationality of academic enterprise, which is nonetheless plagued by the pressure to be "original."

The following chapters in the volume situate their analyses within specific case studies that deploy some aspect of repetition. Silvia Battista's "Repetition as Technology of the Numinous in Performance: *The Artist Is Present* by Marina Abramović" approaches the use of repetition in Marina Abramović's highly publicized performance/retrospective at MoMA within the purview of Rudolf Otto's concept of the numinous, exploring the relationship between the sacred and the secular within contemporary performance practice. Taking a novel approach to the analysis of repetition within Abramović's practice from a spiritual perspective, Battista explores the highly affective, quasi-devotional experiences of audiences when reciprocating Abramović's gaze from within the performance space. A major strength of this chapter lies in its creative and significant approach to spiritual practice within the context of contemporary performance; however, I did long for a more

in-depth discussion of the parallels between Abramović's performance and ancient religious practices.

Emma Bennett's unpacking of Stewart Lee's "The Rap Singers" joke continues the probing of repetition set out by Battista's analysis, while harking back to Read's discussion of academia's fear of repetition. Bennett offers up a wonderful passage on close readings and the process of returning to texts again and again through scholarly inquiry and performatively engages in reading and re-reading Lee's comedic routine as theory, as allegory, as bodies, and as Stewart Lee himself. In doing so, Bennett provides salient insights into the process of re-engaging with works to produce varied results. She concludes with a meta-reading of "The Rap Singers" as pointing to the impossibility of closure through linguistic representation and suggests that the delivery of the punch line allows us to (re)encounter this possibility in a unique fashion.

The next two chapters engage with repetition from the artist's point of view. Claire Hind and Gary Winters' contribution, "The Crying Channel" unpacks the authors' creative process in dialogue with Freudian theory and the shifting archive of reinterpretations of Roy Orbison's "Crying" on the Texas Community Cable TV Network. Lauren Barri Holstein's chapter outlines the use of repetition within her provocative feminist performance art, in particular with her pieces *How to Become a Cupcake* and *Splat!* While Holstein and Hind/Winters' contributions added significant dialogue on repetition from the artist's perspective, I found that these sections did not cohere, despite a shared focus on repetition's creative application.

However, the feminist groundwork laid by Holstein's chapter pairs nicely with Alice Barnaby's contribution, which details the repetitive nature of nineteenth-century pin-prick imagery. Barnaby's analysis of the "pointlessness" of pin-prick imagery connects the "monotonous" art-form to wider historical and societal shifts underway in the nineteenth century, providing a cogent discussion of pin-prick imagery as significant in a context of art appreciation that functions along lines of masculinist authenticity, subverting these dominant assumptions. Repetition is placed at the centre of this analysis, and such a focus gives way to an illuminating confrontation of masculinized systems of aesthetic worth through its re-evaluation of a domestic pastime.

The following two chapters take up the theme of repetition through poetry. Gareth Farmer's chapter provides a thoughtful and intriguing take on Andrea Brady's writings in relation to the process of interpellation and the inherited symbolic systems that impress upon the subject. Linda Kemp's contribution shows how Geraldine Monk's poetry holds a space for trauma, adding an important affective dimension to the work. Although both chapters brought excellent insights to the volume, namely for their focus on poetics and affect, these selections seemed to treat repetition as secondary.

However, Ruth McPhee's "Déjà-vu, Doubles and Dread: The Uncanny and Christopher Smith's *Triangle*" takes the discussion firmly back to repetition. McPhee's analysis of the shifting temporalities in *Triangle* is accessible and insightful, conveying a considered level of detail to concepts like the uncanny and déjà-vu. Kartsaki's contribution "Farewell to Farewell: Impossible Endings and Unfinished Finitudes" brings the volume to a close on a high note. Her impressive navigation of the cyclical process of returning takes into account the distance travelled by reader throughout the volume, ending the work on a positive affirmation of repetition's inexhaustive potential. Furthermore, Clare Foster's "Afterword: Repetition or Recognition" provides a poignant

and succinct dénouement to the volume, tying together the threads of inquiry woven by the various contributions to the work.

In sum, *On Repetition* follows through on its somewhat lofty aims, turning and returning to repetition from a multitude of vantage points in order to activate the expansive potential of the phenomenon. As a reader, I found myself constantly rethinking what it means to repeat with each successive chapter, coming to the end of work with a renewed appreciation for a concept that feigns simplicity, demonstrating the effectiveness of the volume as a work that engages with repetition through both content and form. A major strength of this particular collection lies in its multidisciplinary and its theoretical breadth. Although the contributions range in quality and depth of engagement with the unifying theme of repetition, the collection as a whole transcends these weaknesses. *On Repetition* is a useful and engaging guidebook to an often under-analyzed and under-considered phenomenon, breathing new life into areas that perhaps have appeared well trodden and overlooked through its careful navigation of the creative possibilities of repetition.