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Seriality

Elisabeth Bronfen

Ralph Waldo Emerson opens his essay 'Circles' with the claim: 'Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon' (1983, p. 402). If the conclusion to any sequence always announces the next episode, the correspondence between nature's evolution and an individual's self-reliance, which transcendentalism speaks to, is predicated on a logic of serial repetition. As Emerson adds, 'every ultimate fact is only the first of a new series' (1983, p. 405). Conceived in terms of seriality, all self-evolvement (as well as all self-recovery) is aimed toward a future achievable but not yet achieved. In the spirit of promise on which the American project is predicated, moral perfectibility entails an ongoing succession of pursuits rather than a conclusive fulfillment. To assume that a greater possibility already exists in the present, however, not only places the onus on the individual to actually realize this opportunity but also brings into play the question of interminability. If merely a thin line divides the final and the initial, then to conceive of life as a series of concentric circles also defies the idea of settling any case once and for all. For the American project, the claim that nothing is secure, but that the energizing spirit of perpetual transition has

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consequences, is both political and moral: 'People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them' (Emerson 1983, p. 413).

With his concept of the will to power, Friedrich Nietzsche (1980), in turn, introduces the issue of dominance into thinking the genesis of moral judgment in terms of serial repetition. For him, a new cycle begins when a more powerful reinterpretation of a set of moral values overwhelms a prior interpretation of the world already in place and, in so doing, engenders an adjustment of a previous truth. By picking up on the German philosopher's point that the transition from one set of interpretations to the next either involves a confiscation and reformulation of a prior meaning or its obscuring and obliteration, Gilles Deleuze (1995), finally, draws the issue of difference in repetition into focus. When moral philosophers combine elements from one set with elements of a subsequent set, the result is a process of construction based on the inclusion of difference. In that it continues even while it transforms what is already given, dynamic reiteration entails a gesture of evolution and engendering. Static reiteration, in turn, is repetition of the same, articulating instead an identity between different series of representations. While the latter, according to Deleuze (1995), should be thought of as naked repetition, the former makes use of masked reiterations. By foregrounding difference, dynamic repetition is a repetition that forms itself in the process of masquerading.

Emerson's (1983) discovery of a potentiality in the present still to be realized, Nietzsche's (1980) attention to dominance at play in an incessant reinterpretation of the world, and Deleuze's (1995) distinction between dynamic and static reiteration, all invoke a hermeneutic gesture (CF. KEYWORD GESTURE). In what way, then, is their discussion of serial repetition applicable in a more direct sense to literary and cultural analysis? In that every aesthetic formulation is never an irrefutable fixture but rather one of many possible representations, it makes use of the thin line between the final and the initial. The narrative closure most texts offer is never complete and instead opens itself up to reformulation, much as any critical reading is never exhaustive. The possibility that any text, much as any reading of it, may turn out to have been the beginning of a new series of rewritings and their readings is always given. In aesthetic representations of the world, as in any historical re-imagining of the past, something invariably remains unsettled. At the same time, in that, as Mary Shelley ([1818] 1986, p. 54) puts it, invention does not consist in creating out of void because the materials the writer works with must be afforded,

reading for seriality places the focus on the way any text can be thought of as part of a succession of previous texts; returning to and thus repeating prior texts, albeit with difference inscribed.

Rather than thinking intertextuality in terms of influence and intentionality, to instead placing the focus on the process of repetition it is predicated on, means conceiving of aesthetic genealogy as an open-ended series, with each text picking up on and reworking concerns and shapes of its predecessors. As the succeeding texts draw ever larger circles around those to which, by virtue of reiteration, they implicitly return, something is also resuscitated, coming back to us out of the past. Indeed, there would be no cultural memory without repetition with difference (Rimmon-Kenan 1980). At the same time, to think about aesthetic genealogy as a sustained series of returns to certain concerns and aesthetic shapings from the past also means foregrounding the cultural effect a prior text will have had once a subsequent text realizes part of the potential of this predecessor. As Walter Benjamin (1996) notes, as a mark of the continued life (*Überleben*) of a given text, its translatability (which is to say the possibility of its aesthetic reformulation) speaks to its eternal afterlife (*Nachleben*) in succeeding generations. His point is that to conceive of translation as a process of serial transformations entails maturation after the fact (*Nachreifen*). With each new reshaping, the original 'attains its latest, continually renewed, and most complete unfolding' (Benjamin 1996, p. 255). At issue for Benjamin is less the open-endedness of any aesthetic shaping and instead the conviction that there is something that cannot be directly communicated, yet toward which the evolving reiterations gestures, and which, in so doing, sustains the intensity of this ungraspable kernel. The simile he offers for this interminability reconfigures Emerson's circles:

Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point – establishing, with this touch rather than with the point, the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity – a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux. (Benjamin 1996, p. 261)

Itself concerned with the way something too ungraspable to be remembered survives in an oblique and fragmentary way, psychoanalysis distinguishes between two modes of repetition that come into play when repression produces gaps in memory. In a first instance, a compulsion to repeat past experiences—finding oneself in the same painful situations or

getting involved in the same personal entanglements over and again—emerges as a neurotic way of remembering. According to Freud, the patient acts out what he cannot bring himself to remember: ‘He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he *repeats* it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it’ ([1914] 1958, p. 150). This repetition entails a transference of the seemingly forgotten past onto aspects of the current situation, albeit in different guises. Taking on a panoply of symptomatic shapes, repetition compulsion replaces the impulsion to remember by acting out a series of masked reiterations that keep circling around a kernel of repressed material even as they block out any direct access to this memory. In a second instance, the psychoanalytic cure itself makes use of transference by transforming the compulsion to repeat into a sustained process of working through. In that a reconciliation with the repressed material means revisiting the memories as they are being recovered, and doing so over time until the resistance to remembering has been overcome, this also involves seriality. Both emerge as examples for dynamic repetition, even if the first series of actions introduces difference to reshape a past that is meant to be repressed, while the second series brings the experience of the analytic cure to bear on a restorative acknowledgment of the past, so as to give shape to a sustainable form of remembrance.

It is fruitful to turn to ‘prestige television,’ to illustrate how this interplay between repetition and difference impacts an aesthetic medium which itself reflects on seriality as a dynamic repetition. The following examples have been chosen because, rather than nakedly repeating the same plot with seemingly endless variations, they use the serial format to self-consciously perform dynamic repetition as a means of self-discovery and as a means of recovering hidden, forgotten, or repressed knowledge. In Matthew Weiner’s *Mad Men*, we find a textbook example for Freud’s dual aspect of repetition. Don Draper, creative director at a Madison Avenue advertisement agency, is caught in a repetition compulsion regarding his personal life. Conflicted regarding his responsibility toward his family owing to an aggressive individualism that will not let him compromise his desire, Don over and again not only jeopardizes his relations with others but also puts his career at risk. The flashbacks which repeatedly break into the present, in turn, gesture toward all the unfinished business from the past which is also haunting this con man. Something prevents him from being fully settled in the present after having committed identity theft on the Korean War front so as to pursue a career otherwise not open to him. *Mad Men*’s overarching serial narrative trajectory thus calls upon us to see

his infidelities, his substance abuse, and his erratic behavior as masked repetitions circling around a core problem which remains undisclosed.

One might, however, surmise that in so far as Don repeats because he represses, he also represses so as to repeat. He forgets because certain experiences can only be productive in the mode of repetition. In that these experiences need to happen over and again for something to become visible, this repetition also emerges as the dynamism behind *Mad Men*’s serial format. Even while we, the spectators, recognize the repetition compulsion long before our hero does, we share the profit of this seriality with him. The continuation of the show, and thus our enjoyment as its consumers, is predicated on this narrative circularity. Fully in line with Freud’s distinction between repetition as an avoidance of remembering and working through as its recovering, the show ultimately moves toward a moment of *anagnorisis* upon which a new dawn can follow. The encounter with another man’s pain during a group therapy session at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur marks the end of the serial repetition the show sustained over seven seasons. The ultimate fact Don has discovered about himself is, at the same time, the beginning of a new series. During a morning meditation, *Mad Men* cuts to the celebrated hilltop Coca-Cola commercial that was released in 1971. Along with this time capsule, the real of the past adhering to it catches up with the Weiner’s historical re-imagination. The time travel it performed has been worked through as well (CF. KEYWORD TIME TRAVEL).

The Wire, in turn, reflects on the serial format by drawing into focus a systemic repetition compulsion written into Baltimore’s war on drugs at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Rather than foregrounding the psychological development of its protagonists, David Simon’s show instead produces an atlas of the city by unfolding how the world of crime, law enforcement, politics, and media are mutually implicated. Mapping the interconnections between drug dealers, police, politicians, journalists, and social workers, the show comments on its own medium as well. For McNulty and his team to uncover the pattern behind the repetitive *modus operandi* of the drug dealers entails reconstructing the lines of association between all those involved in this drug war. The storylines they draw on the pinboard of their investigation room not only repeat the criminal activities which they have been able to detect owing to their surveillance. This recreation is also a self-reflexive comment on the collective work in the television writer’s room that engendered the multiple storylines of *The Wire*. The dramaturgic gesture at play in this serial reproduction is such

that it draws us as spectators into the act of repetition as well. Compelled to share the work of both the police and the media, as they produce meaning by virtue of reconstructing the criminal connections under investigation, we find ourselves engaged in the same search that is repeatedly dramatized in the story (Felman 1977).

Yet because *The Wire* is a polyperspectival narration, we are also drawn into narratives involving the criminal's point of view, and it is the latter that brings into play the perspective on which Simon's moral comment is predicated. The analogously conceived storylines produce a dense map of juxtapositions for which we are the privileged point where they connect. Crucial for this notion of repetition is that there is neither an end to conflict depicted nor an ultimate recognition offered with the closing narrative sequence. Instead, the open-ended serial politics *The Wire* renders visible implicitly continues even after our gaze is withdrawn. While the different storylines, touching each other at various points, continue to coexist, the final montage sequence makes use of parallel editing to offer up a visual mapping of business as usual in a city implicated in trafficking narcotics.

The dramaturgic wager of *Westworld* offers an equally self-reflexive comment on the seriality of its mode of narration. The artificially created hosts of the theme park are designed to repeat over and again the storylines with which they have been programmed. After each violent demise, they wake up again, having been restored in the laboratory at the heart of this virtual world. Yet because their creator has decided to install reveries in them, the glitch of difference is introduced into the coded repetition compulsion on which the theme park's successful business is based. As memories from past storylines long since abandoned by those who keep reprogramming the host are resuscitated, the artificial creatures begin to leave their predetermined narrative loop; they become unsettled. Drawing larger circles, they cause disturbances that threaten the entire system. One series of repetitions (the constant reenacting of the official narratives) comes into violent conflict with another series (the memory of prior lives as well as the experiences in the laboratory), engendering a dense experience of multiple, interconnected states of existence. The question the players in this world come to face is whether they can break a seemingly eternal cycle of nakedly repeating the stories they are encoded with, or whether, having recognized this seriality, they can free themselves of this repetition compulsion and, by becoming independent of their creators, develop a greater potential by coming to own their story.

Westworld recycles a panoply of literary references—including Shakespeare's *Tempest*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, John Ford's Monument Valley *Westerns*, and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*—such that this television series taps into our cultural memory archive as well. By offering a translation of aesthetically formulated intensities from the past, the creators of the show also partake in cyclic reiteration, yet in a way that draws our attention to the radical ambivalence inherent in serial repetition. For if, on the diegetic as well as the extradiegetic level, only a thin line divides the final and the initial, we are confronted with two contradictory implications regarding open-ended seriality. Can an acknowledgment of the fact that every ending begets a new beginning be transformed into a process of working through, aimed toward a degree of self-discovery and with it self-emancipation? Or does Emerson's intuition that around every narrative loop another loop can be drawn mean that there is only infinite succession, whether this is preordained (by an overarching creator) or simply the work of contingency? If, furthermore, the dynamic repetition *Westworld* performs suggests that this remains an open question, then the pleasure seriality affords and the hermeneutic problem it poses emerge as invariably entangled. Our attention remains focused on the intersections afforded when, in the process of uncovering lines of connection and points of contact, seriality produces meanings that implicate us, as viewers and readers, as well.

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Singularity

Luke Goode

The technological singularity, a notion originally coined by science fiction writer and computer scientist Vernor Vinge, is a predictive hypothesis premised on exponential and therefore dramatically accelerating technological advances. As a metaphor drawn from astrophysics—where a singularity is the center of a black hole in which the laws of time and space no longer hold—the technological singularity is a vision of the future with powerful connotations. Futurists who believe in the coming singularity (the singularitarians) see us approaching an “event horizon,” an irreversible tipping point beyond which we will be powerless to resist the gravitational pull of a technological revolution vastly more radical than any other in history and which promises to fundamentally change everything.

Singularitarians are especially excited by the promise of artificial intelligence (CF. KEYWORD AI). But they see this as part of a cluster of interlinked technologies involving fields such as biotechnology, robotics, neuroscience, and nanotechnology. As in computing, these fields are also subject to “laws of accelerating returns” (Moore’s Law, which broadly postulates the doubling of computer chip performance every two years, is the most well-known example of this.). This is not distant future-gazing. “The singularity is near,” according to the title of the most popular and influential book on the subject (Kurzweil 2005). Its author, Ray Kurzweil,

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