



Re-: An Errant Glossary, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, *Cultural Inquiry*, 15 (Berlin: ICI Berlin, 2019), pp. 99–105

ARIANNA SFORZINI 

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Differential Monotony, Affects, Creation

CITE AS:

Arianna Sforzini, 'Repetition: Differential Monotony, Affects, Creation', in *Re-: An Errant Glossary*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, *Cultural Inquiry*, 15 (Berlin: ICI Berlin, 2019), pp. 99–105 <https://doi.org/10.25620/ci-15_12>

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the creative value of the notion of 'repetition' in Michel Foucault's texts from the 1960s and early 1970s. Re-enacting Gilles Deleuze's philosophy, Foucault implicitly refers to the Freudian repetition mechanisms in order to distort and reverse them. Foucault's repetition is de-psychologized, affectively de-individualizing, and temporally erratic, using the power of a senseless repetition to create new possibilities for the future.

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The notion of repetition has been variously analysed in twentieth-century philosophy as a means to question the concepts of representation and mimesis together with the traditional ideas of the subject and object of knowledge. Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida — among others — are the main philosophers who conceived of a new relation between history, subjectivity, and reality in which ‘repetition’ and its ‘difference’ are at stake. The Foucauldian reactivation of the Deleuzian concept of repetition as ‘difference without a concept’ is particularly interesting as it allows to approach this contemporary debate about the gesture of repeating — reaffirming a double which is never a simple copy of an original element. In order to describe this philosophical use of the notion of repetition, however, it is important to recall another central twentieth-century conceptualization of the repetition mechanisms that could be usefully described as an

'other repetition' in relation to which Foucault (the most Deleuzean Foucault) elaborates his thought: the Freudian repetition according to Freud's fundamental 1920 *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.¹

In this text, Freud questions his own theory insofar as it took the pursuit of pleasure as the only force regulating the behaviour of living organisms. Anyone would instinctively look for pleasure and avoid pain. Yet the observation of various patients showing strange compulsive behaviours convinced Freud that there must be something 'beyond' the simple principle of pleasure. Individuals often engage in repetitions of gestures or thoughts that are clearly painful, far from being a source of gratification. How is it even possible to fixate on a traumatic experience? Shouldn't the mind stick to pleasant memories and forget hurtful ones, as far as it can? *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is largely influenced by the spread of post-traumatic disorders, which were a painful reality in 1920 Europe, in the immediate aftermath of the World War I. These traumatic neuroses were believed to derive from physical injuries the soldiers sustained during the war. But Freud proposed another theory. He observed that the post-traumatic symptoms were common even among people who hadn't been physically wounded, indeed even among the civilian population, despite the fact that they hadn't witnessed the war first hand. Some patients seemed 'traumatized' by their own fantasies and desires.

What strikes Freud in post-traumatic neuroses is precisely these patients' compulsion to repeat traumatic ex-

1 Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* [1920], in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth, 1953-74), xviii: *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works (1920-22)* (1955), pp. 1-64.

periences, for example, by dreaming of them. Why should the unconscious mind re-propose images and feelings that have been traumatic for the individual? Freud himself had previously considered dreams as the symbolic expression of unconscious desires — for instance in his seminal 1900 work on the interpretation of dreams.² He thought the unconscious mind uses dreams to fulfil its own desires even if they go against social constraints. Nightmares, however, are difficult to explain with this analytical pattern. After traumatic experiences, bad dreams tend to activate the trauma itself indefinitely, despite the individual's conscious efforts to drive the mind away from it.

Oddly enough, Freud finds a possible answer to this repetition compulsion by analysing a children's game. He famously termed it the '*Fort-Da*' experience: he observes his 18-months-old grandson, Ernst, repeatedly throwing away a toy and picking it up again, while repeating the expression '*fort-da*' ('gone' and 'there'). Freud affirms that the child's behaviour is not guided by the principle of pleasure — by any kind of immediate self-satisfaction. The point of the *Fort-Da* is the repetition itself, or more precisely, the compulsion of repeating a particular traumatic experience: the mother leaving the child, the child's realization of the necessity of being separated from the mother. The repetition is a means of mastering a trauma in an active and creative way: the child is attempting to deal with a situation it couldn't foresee and which is definitely out of its control. More generally, following Freud, any trauma then presents itself as a feeling the individual couldn't anticipate nor expect — for example through anxiety — and that she is obliged to master through its repetition, even if this re-

2 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* [1900], in *The Standard Edition*, iv–v (1953).

peating action is a source of displeasure. Repetition is the compulsive return of a past the individual couldn't anticipate. It embodies a non-linear temporality the individual mind has to reproduce in order to master an affective and potentially disruptive energy. The repetition is a sort of 'technique of the self' more or less effective to make oneself survive one's own traumatic past.

The Foucauldian notion of repetition, re-enacting Deleuze's philosophy, implicitly refers to the Freudian one, but does so in order to distort and reverse it. The repetition put into play by Foucault has three main characteristics: (1) It is de-psychologized, acting on the level of discourse and not in the depth of the human mind; (2) It is affectively de-individualizing, dissolving the individual subject into a complex and heterogeneous web of anonymous relations; (3) It is temporally erratic, using the power of a senseless repetition not to provide a meaning to a traumatic past experience but to create a new space of future possibility. The repetition is not the reactivation of the *same*, from past to present, but the interruptive monotony of the *different*, from present to future.

'Repetition' is explicitly mentioned by Foucault in two texts he wrote on Deleuze's books *Difference and Repetition* and *The Logic of Sense*: 'Ariane s'est pendue' (1969) and *Theatrum philosophicum* (1970).³ It reactivates an-

3 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* [1968], trans. by Paul R. Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); *The Logic of Sense* [1969], trans. by M. Lester with C. Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990). Michel Foucault, 'Ariane s'est pendue' [1969], in Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, ed. by Daniel Defert, François Ewald, and Jacques Lagrange, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 1: 1954–1975, text n° 64, pp. 795–99; 'Theatrum philosophicum' [1970], trans. by Donald F. Brouhard and Sherry Simon, in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, ed. by Paul Rabinow, 3 vols (New York: New Press, 1998–2001),

other very important notion in Foucault's early works on discourse published in the 1960s: the *double*. The double is a peculiar attribute of discourse and of literature in particular. Literary language in general is for Foucault at the same time defective and excessive: defective because words are rare compared to things and language is irreducible to the real world; excessive because, in their autonomy from reality, words can become an instrument of freedom, transforming our attitude towards the world and inventing new forms of being, unexpected possibilities of thought and existence. The double is a name for this experience of freedom by means of literary language. Literature is a series of doubles, of 'doppelgängers', of mimes of reality whose role is not to truthfully represent reality itself but to modify it through its multiple repetitions, its heterogeneous reflections in a distorting mirror. The position of a double for Foucault is never that of a reproduction of an original model but the dispersion of the very idea of an 'origin' of sense through the indefinite re-proposition of its copies. The double is not the *same* nor the *other* of the *same*, but something new and irreducible in its own difference.

Foucault gives many examples of this literary repetition: the stupidity of Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, Sade and his almost boring descriptions of sex and violence, the 'mises en abyme' of Baroque theatre, the stories Sheherazade tells to escape death in *One Thousand and One Nights*, Raymond Roussel's *jeux de mots*, the surrealist poems, and many others. And yet, the most famous and probably the most intuitive examples of repetition as the emergence of difference are pictorial ones: Magritte's

11: *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. by James D. Faubion (1998), pp. 343–68.

works (in his renowned text ‘This Is Not a Pipe’)⁴ and Andy Warhol pop series. To take the example of his account of Warhol’s *Campbell’s Soup Cans*, produced in 1962: the same soup can is repeated 32 times, and it is precisely this apparently senseless repetition that allows for difference to arise as the minimal and yet fundamental fracture in the uniform space of meanings and values:

This is the greatness of Warhol with his canned foods, senseless accidents, and his series of advertising smiles: the oral and nutritional equivalence of those half-open lips, teeth, tomato sauce, that hygiene based on detergents; the equivalence of death in the cavity of an eviscerated car, at the top of a telephone pole and at the end of a wire, and between the glistening, steel blue arms of the electric chair. ‘It’s the same either way,’ stupidity says, while sinking into itself and infinitely extending its nature with the things it says of itself; ‘Here or there, it’s always the same thing; what difference if the colours vary, if they’re darker or lighter. It’s all so senseless — life, women, death! How stupid this stupidity!’ But, in concentrating on this boundless monotony, we find the sudden illumination of multiplicity itself — with nothing at its centre, at its highest point, or beyond it — a flickering of light that travels even faster than the eyes and successively lights up the moving labels and the captive snapshots that refer to each other to eternity, without ever saying anything: suddenly, arising from the background of the old inertia of equivalences, the zebra stripe of the event tears through the darkness, and the eternal phantasm informs that soup can, that singular and depthless face.⁵

4 Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe* [1968], trans. by J. Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

5 Foucault, ‘Theatrum philosophicum’, p. 362.

In an unpublished text on Andy Warhol's *Marilyn Diptych* (1962), Foucault affirms that the series of Marilyn's are a sort of deformed doppelgänger of the classical 'tableau', the diptych of the title and its series: the series of images are not 'serialized' in order to classify, master, hierarchize, and unify them.⁶ Rather, the 'series of series' composed by the repetition of Marilyn's smile, is a 'difference of differences': a 'savage multiplicity', the repetition of difference, the difference of repetition.

There is, then, a 'repetition compulsion' in the Foucauldian philosophical practice. But it does not correspond to the psychological need to master a traumatic past in order to build a meaningful individual subjectivity. It is, on the contrary, the power of breaking the uniform sets of values that shape our present and the present forms of discourse and individualities. It is the immense possibility of rupture that resides in any minimal difference repeated through the minute, tiny gestures of art, language, but also everyday lives. There is always another time within time, another possible world to create, hidden between the monotony of repetition and its differences.

6 Michel Foucault Archives, Bibliothèque nationale de France, boîte 53, (NAF 28730).

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