



On Repetition

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Constantin Constantius, the protagonist of Søren Kierkegaard's strange, sometimes humorous 1843 text *Repetition*, seeks to repeat a pleasurable experience at the theatre. He returns to Berlin, Germany, where he stays in the same rented flat as on a previous visit, eats at the same restaurant, visits the same coffee shop and goes to see a production of the same play at the same theatre. His experiment in repetition is an abject failure, however. None of the revisited experiences prove to be repetitions of earlier ones, for all are undone by significant differences. The landlord of Constantius's rented flat, previously single, is now married; Constantius doesn't enjoy the coffee; the young woman he glimpsed in the theatre audience is no longer to be seen, and the comic actor fails to make him laugh. 'I endured [the performance] for half an hour, then left the theater thinking: There is no repetition at all!' (Kierkegaard 1983: 169). He concludes, 'that which is repeated has been – otherwise it could not be repeated – but the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new' (149). As an idea, repetition is revealed to be ironic: the very same condition – that something has already happened – simultaneously makes repetition of that thing both possible and impossible. One cannot repeat something that does not exist, yet the repetition is inevitably a new iteration of the existing thing.

In citing Kierkegaard's text at the start of mine, I am repeating the opening gambit of the editors of 'On Repetition', who begin their introduction to the issue with a reference to *Repetition* (Kartsaki and Schmidt 2015: 1). In re-citing this source and also citing their citation of it (and borrowing the issue's title), I am enacting the repetition that is often said in contemporary performance theory to be a key element of performance. Rebecca Schneider, for example, points to 'the basic repetitions that mark performance as indiscreet, non-original, relentlessly citational' (2011: 101–2).

Richard Schechner famously accorded the same foundational status to repetition through his concept of performance as 'restored behavior': 'Performance means never for the first time. It means: for the second to the *n*th time' (1985: 36). Schechner's concept is indebted to Erving Goffman's notion that both everyday behaviour and aesthetic performances are made up of 'strips' of activity that are continually replayed and recontextualized (1974: 10). For Goffman, the intelligibility of performance of any kind to its audience hinges on the repetition of recognizable behaviours in varying contexts.¹

Broadly speaking, performance theory sidesteps the irony of repetition acknowledged by Kierkegaard through Constantius by positing repetition in performance as always entailing difference. Whereas the apparent mutual exclusivity of these two terms leads Constantius to a conceptual deadlock, performance theorists see no contradiction between them. Rather, they consider repetition – both the repetition of entire events and structures of repetition within single events (Drewal 1992: 2–3) – to be fundamental to performance and simultaneously characterize repetition as a set of processes that inevitably modify the thing repeated. Schechner notes that 'restored behavior is always subject to revision', arising from processes of restoration themselves (1985: 37). In *Frame Analysis*, Goffman discusses frame transformations, repetitions of strips of activity that alter the identity of the original activity, and observes that such re-framings entail adjustments of the original activity to make it fit its new frame according to conventions he refers to as 'transcription practices' (1974: 138–54).

Some performance theorists see the gap between an event and its inevitably different repetition as potentially a space for innovation or critique. Mechtild Widrich, writing on both historical reenactments and re-performances of performance artworks, argues that

¹ Sara Ahmed 'describe[s] citation as a rather successful reproductive technology, a way of reproducing the world around certain bodies' and goes on to say, 'these citational structures can form what we call disciplines' (2013). I realize that in citing figures like Kierkegaard, Schechner, Goffman, and Gadamer I am reproducing the world of performance studies largely around white male bodies. Some of these bodies have proved to be more central to the project of performance studies than others, however. I argue that figures such as Kierkegaard and Gadamer have had little presence in that disciplinary formation, which has thus far failed for the most part to engage seriously with the branches of philosophy that they represent.

the act of repetition, far from erasing all differences between an event and its later instances, is a marker that allows us to see this difference more clearly, often creating new meaning, formally and contextually, which can only be understood in the light of the distance to the reference work or event. (Widrich 2014: 141)

The 'new meaning' to which Widrich refers occurs in the space created by the distance between the event and its necessarily different recreation. Glossing both Linda Hutcheon's concept of postmodern parody and Henry Louis Gates's discussion of the African-American practice of signifying, Margaret Thompson Drewal sees critical potential in acts of repetition that reproduce the original enough for it to be recognizable but also establish critical distance from it: "'to signify' is to revise that which is received, altering the way the past is read, thereby redefining one's relation to it' (1992:4). Like Widrich, Drewal sees repetition as creating the condition of possibility for the creation of new meanings through the achievement of both historical and critical distance.

Whereas Goffman treats strips of activity as concrete, identifiable actions that exist in a primary frame prior to undergoing transformations, Hans-Georg Gadamer takes the view that the materials from which performances are made have no meaningful existence apart from their realization in enactments: 'A drama really exists only when it is played ... A festival exists only in being celebrated' (2004: 115, 120). Gadamer calls the underlying schema of a theatrical performance, ritual, or festival (his examples) a structure that 'does not exist in itself ... rather, it acquires its proper being in being mediated' (117). Each performance of a given structure is a repetition in the sense that it derives from the same structure as other performances. Inasmuch as a performance is the coming-into-being of a structure, however, 'every repetition is as original as the work itself' (120). By arguing that the behaviour restored in performance does not exist independently of its restorations, Gadamer turns Schechner's dictum on its head: 'Never for the first time' thus becomes 'Always for the first time'.

Defining the kind of repetition that is intrinsic to performance as a set of processes understood

to generate difference through repetition of the same offers a solution to the problematic Constantius encounters, since it provides an account of how an event can be both a repetition and something new. But what about garden-variety repetition, repetition without difference? Constantius's desire is not alien, after all; we can easily imagine wanting to repeat pleasurable experiences, and the repeatability of performance seems to hold out the promise that this is possible. For example, in the summer of 1975, I had the good fortune to see George C. Scott play Willy Loman in the Circle in the Square production of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* that Scott also directed. I was so taken with the production that I went back a second time and brought a friend with me. I had enjoyed what I had seen and returned to see the same thing again and share it with another person. Of course, I didn't see the same thing again, for there had been a material change in the production: Martin Sheen had replaced Harvey Keitel in the role of Happy. Nevertheless, unlike Constantius, I came away satisfied that I had essentially repeated a pleasurable experience.

Tzachi Zamir states bluntly, 'Repetition is intrinsic to theater', in that the repetition inherent in performing the same role provides actors with opportunities to discover 'anew what is previously already intimately known' (2009: 367). From the spectator's perspective, 'the repetition implied by live acting feeds our attraction to the performance by focalizing not the content fictionally lived, but the relationship to lived content as such', showing us that multiple possibilities inhere in a single inexhaustible event (371). Although distinguishing between the performer's and the spectator's respective relationships to repetition in performance is useful, Zamir seems to suggest that actors have the primary experience of repetition through their engagement with their roles, while the meaning of theatrical repetition for spectators derives from witnessing its meaning for actors. By re-experiencing anew something they've already experienced, the actors model a way of being for the audience.

Arguably, for the spectators' attention to be focused on the actors' relationship to lived content is, as Gadamer suggests, 'to move out

of the real experience of the play' (2004: 116) by attending to something that lies behind the performance rather than 'giving oneself in self-forgetfulness to what one is watching' (122), Gadamer's definition of a spectator. Goffman also discusses the way that awareness of repetition may prevent spectators from fulfilling their role, albeit from a very different angle. In his discussion of the theatrical frame, Goffman argues that the audience has to act 'as if' it does not know certain things it actually does know, and some of these things centre on repetition. For example, if one knows the play already, Goffman suggests that one has to act as if one did not in order to play the role of audience member (1974: 135–8). Although Goffman does not use the language of metaphysics, Gadamer's notion of giving oneself is a useful point of reference here: one cannot 'give oneself to what one is watching' if one is focused on what one already knows. For Goffman, this means the audience has to suppress knowledge it already has and wilfully enter into an 'information state' appropriate to the role of spectator. Pace Zamir, while the performers' experience may derive its meaning from repetition and difference, from continually revisiting the same material to discover new aspects of it, the audience's ability to play its role may require suppressing knowledge of the repetitive nature of what one is watching in order to be able to engage with it as the present unfolding of a singular event. Repetition without difference results from the audience's choosing to perceive the performance that way, not from the self-identity of the performance. Perhaps this is why Constantius was unable to experience the repetition he hoped for: he sought it in the self-identity of the occurrences around him rather than in the stance he took towards those occurrences.

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