deformity, Mazrui blends it with myth-historic patterns. Both methods of distortion, unlike satire, plead a panacea of intellectual understanding, a soporific to the consumer, and a flattering of the type. Given the right socio-economic development and an eradication of the last vestiges of neo-colonialism, all forms of Aminism will vanish from the face of Africa. Empathy with those who experience the actuality is crude, unscientific response. I suggest that we ask the opinion of the vanishing breed of Ugandan intelligentsia, to see if they share this luxury of intellectual distancing!

10Ibid., p. 184.
11Like all culture-originated metaphors, “soul” is now employed to capture the “ineffable” values of experiencing in other cultures, most significantly in music. Inevitably, categorization tends to be subjective. Mine includes, among others, the music of Amalia Rodriguez (Portugal—Fado), Russian folk music, a somewhat smaller proportion of Irish music, Fatima (Senegal), Brahms’ German Requiem (unlike Verdi’s or Faure’s), Edith Piaf (France), Manitas de Plata (Spain—flamenco guitar), a vast number of Egba and Ekiti dirges, Nelly Uchendu (Nigeria—when she is not singing pop), and the majority of the blues greats, of whom Billie Holiday, Bessie Smith, and Ella Fitzgerald remain without equal. For all of these, I would also employ, interchangeably with “soul,” Barthes’ most felicitous expression “grain.”
14Ibid., p. 12.
15Ibid., p. 226.
16Ibid., p. 229.
18Twelve African Writers, p. 41.
19Perspectives on Analytic Philosophy (Amsterdam, NY: North-Holland, 1979), pp. 41-42.
20Image—Music—Text, p. 74.
21Ibid., pp. 210-11.

ON REPETITION IN BLACK CULTURE

JAMES A. SNEAD*

The Scope of Repetition in Culture

The world, as force, may not be thought of as unlimited, for it cannot be so thought of, we forbid ourselves the concept of an infinite force as incompatible with the concept “force.” Thus—the world also lacks the capacity for eternal novelty.

—Nietzsche, The Will to Power

After all, men have by now had to make peace with the idea that the world is not inexhaustible in its manifold combinations, nor life in its various guises and forms. How we have come to terms with the discrepancy between our personal growth, the very model of uniqueness and linear development, and the eternal physical plane upon which life unfolds, characterized by general recursiveness and repetition—this must also, in some ways, be the concern of culture. Coming-to-terms may mean denial or acceptance, repression or highlighting, but in any case transformation is culture’s response to its own apprehension of repetition.

Apart from revealing or secreting the repetitions of material existence, a third response is possible: to own that repetition has occurred but that, given a “quality of difference” compared to what has come before, it has become not exactly a “repetition,” but rather a “progression,” if positive, or a “regression,” if negative. This third response, most familiar to us in the West, tends to break down any notion of polarity (i.e., that a culture either admits or denies the existence of repetition) but emphasizes the fact that one finds a scale of tendencies from culture to culture. In any case, whenever we encounter repetition in cultural forms, we indeed are not viewing “the same thing,” but its transformation, not just a formal ploy, but often the willed grafting onto culture of an essentially philosophical insight about the shape of time and history. But even if not in intentional emulation of natural or material cyclicality, repetition would need to manifest itself. Culture as a reservoir of inexhaustible novelty is unthinkable. Therefore, repetition, first of all, would inevitably have to creep into the dimension of culture just as it would have to creep into that of language and signification because of the finite supply of elementary units and the need for recognition in human understanding. One may readily classify cultural forms based on whether they tend to admit or cover up these repeating constituents within them.

The important thing about culture is that it not be dead. Or if dead, then its transformations must continue to live on

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in the present. Culture must be both immanent and historical—something there and something to be studied in its present form and in its etiology. Our modern notion of “culture” only arose early in this century, after a five-hundred-year period of English usage as a noun of process rather than identification, referring rather to the tending of animals or crops than to types of music, literature, art, and temperament by which a group of people is made aware of and defines itself for others and for itself. But this initial connotation may still be preserved. “Culture” in its present usage always also means the culture of culture: a certain continuance in the nurture of those concepts and experiences which have helped or are helping to lend self-consciousness and awareness to a given group. Not only must culture be immanent now, but it must also give the promise of being continuously so. So the second way in which repetition enters the dimension of culture is in the necessity for every culture to maintain a sense of continuity about itself: Internal changes to the contrary, a basic self-identity must not be altered. Strangely enough, however, what recent Western or European culture repeats continuously is precisely the belief that there is no repetition in culture, but only a difference, defined as progress and growth.

Swift said that “happiness . . . is a perpetual Possession of being well deceived.” We are not far here from a proper definition of culture. At least a type of “happiness” is found by man through a perpetual repetition of apparent consensus and convention that provides a sense of security, identification and “rightness.” Yet however fervently culture nurtures this belief, such a sense of security is also a kind of “coverage,” both in the comforting sense of “insurance” against accidental and sudden rupturing of a complicated and precious fabric, and also in Swift’s less favorable sense of a “cover up,” or a hiding of otherwise unpleasant facts from the senses. Like all insurance, this type of coverage does not prevent accidents, but promises to be able to provide the means to outlive them. Furthermore, this insurance takes full actuarial account of the most and least likely points of intrusion or corruption to the self-image of the culture and covers them accordingly.

For example, most cultures seem quite willing to tolerate and often assimilate certain foreign games—such as chess, imported to Europe from the Middle East as early as the First or Second Crusade in the twelfth century, or lawn-tennis, developed and patented in England in 1874 from an earlier form of tennis. The fate of foreign words in language, however, has been frequently less happy, as witnessed in the coverage that European national languages institute against diluting “invasions of foreign words,” exemplified in England by the sixteenth-century “Cambridge School” (Ascham, Cheke, and Wilson), in seventeenth-century France by the purism of Boileau and the Académie Française (a linguistic xenophobia which has by no means yet run its course), and by the recurrent attempts to expel foreigners from the German language beginning with Leibnitz in the seventeenth and Herder in the eighteenth centuries and most recently seen in the less innocuous censorships of the National Socialists in the current century.

Finally, as in all insurance, you pay a regular premium for coverage; culture has a price. Might Swift’s phrase “Flaws and Imperfections of Nature” not also include the daunting knowledge that the apparently linear upward striving course of human endeavor exists within nature’s ineluctable circularity, and that birth and life end up in death and decay?

Cultures, then, are virtually all varieties of “long-term” coverage, against both external and internal threats—self-dissolution, loss of identity; or repression, assimilation, attachment (in the sense of legal “seizure”); or attack from neighboring or foreign cultures— with all the positive and negative connotations of the “cover-ups” thus produced. In this, black culture is no exception. Cultures differ among one another primarily in the tenacity with which the “cover-up” is maintained and the spacing and regularity of the intervals at which they cease to cover-up, granting leeway to those ruptures in the illusion of growth which most often occur in the déjá-vus of exact repetition.

In certain cases, culture, in projecting an image for others, claims a radical difference from others, often further defined qualitatively as superiority. Already, in this insistence on uniqueness and “higher” development, we sense a linear, anthropomorphic drive. For centuries (and especially within the last three), Europe has found itself in hot contest internally over this very issue. Culture has been territorialized and, with it, groups of its diverse adherents. Cultural wars have become territorial wars have become cultural wars again, and indeed into this maelstrom have been sucked concepts of “race,” “virtue,” and “nation,” never to re-emerge. Not so much the content of these cross-cultural feuds startles as the vehemence and aggression with which groups of people wrangle over where one coverage ends and another begins. The incipient desire to define “race” and “culture” in the same breath as “identity” and “nationality” finally coincides with great upheavals of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe—among them, the overturning of the feudal monarchies of Central Europe and the discovery and subjugation of black and brown masses across the seas. Herein the word culture gains two fateful senses: “that with which one whole group aggressively defines its superiority vis-à-vis another” and, a finer one, “that held at a level above the group or mass, for the benefit of the culture as a whole, by the conscious few (i.e., the distinction between haute and basse culture).” At the same time as Europeans were defining themselves over against other European nations, and some of them even against members of their own nations, they were also busy defining “European culture” as separate from “African culture,” the ultimate otherness, the final mass. Only having now reached this stage can we make any sense whatever of the notion of “black culture” and what it might oppose.

“Black culture” is a concept first created by Europeans and defined in opposition to “European culture.” Hegel, for example, saw “black culture” as the lowest stage of that laudable self-reflection and development shown by European culture whose natural outcome must be the state or nationhood. In his by no means atypical nineteenth-century view, Hegel said that black culture simply did not exist in the same sense as European culture did. Black culture (as one of several non-Western cultures) had no self-expression (i.e., no writing); there was no black Volksgeist, as in Europe, and not even particular tribes or groupings of Africans seemed in the least concerned to define themselves on the basis of any particular Volksgeist. Hegel (like most of Europe) was confused by the African: Where did blacks fit into “the course of world history”?:
In this main portion of Africa there can really be no history. There is a succession of accidents and surprises.

There is no goal, no state there that one can follow, no subjectivity, but only a series of subjects, who destroy each other. There has as yet been little comment upon how strange a form of self-consciousness this represents.

These remarks give, by inversion, a rather fascinating definition of European culture (at least as Hegel introduces his countrymen, in his “we”):

We must forget all categories that lie at the bottom of our spiritual life and its subsumption under these forms; the difficulty [in such forgetting when examining Africa] lies in the fact that we repeatedly must bring along that which we have already imagined.

Because Hegel gives the first and still most penetrating systematic definition by a European of the “African character” (and, consequently, of black culture), albeit in a severely negative tone, it is worth quoting him at length:

In general it must be said that [African] consciousness has not yet reached the contemplation of a fixed objective, an objectivity. The fixed objectivity is called God, the Eternal, Justice, Nature, natural things . . . . The Africans however have not yet reached this recognition of the General . . . . What we name Religion, the State, that which exists in and for itself—in other words, all that is valid—all this is not yet at hand . . . . Thus we find nothing other than man’s immediacy: that is man in Africa. As soon as Man as Man appears, he stands in opposition to Nature; only in this way does he become Man . . . . The Negro represents the Natural Man in all his wilderness and indocility; if we wish to grasp him, then we must drop all European conceptions.

What we actually understand by “Africa,” is that which is without history and resolution, which is still fully caught up in the natural spirit, and which here must be mentioned as being on the threshold of world history.

Hegel’s African has an absolute alterity to the European. This fact conveniently enables us to re-read Hegel’s criticism as an insightful classification and taxonomy of the dominant tendencies of both cultures. The written text of Hegel is a century and a half old, but its truth still prevails, as to the tendencies, in the present-day forms to be discussed later, of the cultures that Hegel describes.

What are the main characteristics that Hegel finds to distinguish black culture from European culture? Interestingly, Hegel begins by implying that black culture is resilient because reticent, or by nature of its very backwardness untouchable; it is totally other and incomprehensible to the European, whereas other cultures, such as the Native American, have combatted the European and have lost:

... the subjection of the land has meant its downfall.... as far as tribes of men are concerned, there are few of the descendants of the first Americans left, since close to seven million men have been wiped out.... the entire [Native] American world has gone under and been suppressed by the Europeans.... They are perishing, so that one sees that they do not have the strength to merge with the North Americans in the Free States. Such peoples of weak culture lose themselves more and more in contact with peoples of higher culture and more intensive cultural training.10

Noteworthy here is the persistent connection of physical and territorial suppression, attachment, and extermination with cultural inadequacy.

Hegel’s definition of black culture is simply negative: Ever-developing European culture is the prototype for the fulfillment of culture in the future; black culture is the antitype, ever on the threshold. Black culture, caught in “historylessness” (Geschichtslosigkeit), is nonetheless shielded from attack or assimilation precisely by its aboriginal intangibility (though particular blacks themselves may not be so protected). According to Hegel, the African, radical in his effect upon the European, is a “strange form of self-consciousness”: unfixed in orientation towards transgressive goals and terrifyingly close to the cycles and rhythms of nature. The African, first, overturns all European categories of logic. Secondly, he has no idea of history or progress, but instead allows “accidents and surprises” to take hold of his fate. He is also not aware of being at a lower stage of development and perhaps even has no idea of what development is. Finally, he is “immediate” and intimately tied to nature with all its cyclical, non-progressive data. Having no self-consciousness, he is “immediate”—i.e., always there—in any given moment. Here we can see that, being there, the African is also always already there, or perhaps always there before, whereas the European is headed there or, better, not yet there.

Hegel was almost entirely correct in his reading of black culture, but what he could not have guessed was that in his very criticism of it he had almost perfectly described the “there” to which European culture was “headed.” Like all models that insist on discrete otherness, Hegel’s definition implicitly constituted elements of black culture that have only in this century become manifest. Only after Freud, Nietzsche, comparative and structural anthropology, and the study of comparative religion could the frantic but ultimately futile coverings of repetition by European culture be seen as dispensable, albeit in limited instances of “uncovering.” Moreover, the very aspects of black culture which had seemed to define its non-existence for the phenomologist Hegel may now be valued as positive terms, given a revised metaphysics of rupture and opening.11

The Types of Repetition / Their Cultural Manifestations

They are after themselves. They call it destiny. Progress. We call it Haints. Haints of their victims rising from the soil of Africa, South America, Asia . . . .

—Ishmael Reed, Mumbo Jumbo

Hegel as a prophet of historical development was notorious, but not unique. We may accept that his assumptions have long been and still are shared, particularly the view that culture in history only occurs when a group arrives at a state of self-consciousness sufficient to propel it to “their destination of becoming a state”:

... formal culture on every level of intellectual development can and must emerge, prosper, and arrive at a point of high flowering when it forms itself into a state and in this basic form of civilization proceeds to abstract universal reflection and necessarily to universal laws and forms.12

The word state (Staat) is not to be defined as a strict political entity, but any coherent group whose culture progresses from the level of immediacy to self-awareness.

How then do European culture and black culture differ in their treatment of the inevitability of repetition, either in annual cycles, or in artistic forms? The truly self-conscious culture resists all non-progressive views; it develops. Hegel admits the category of change, and even the fact of cyclical repetition in nature, but prefers not to look at it, or if at all, then not from a negative “oriental,” but from a positive “occidental” standpoint. In such a view, Hegel states: “Whatever development [Bildung] takes place becomes material upon which the Spirit elevates itself to a new level of development, proclaiming its powers in all the directions
of its plenitude.”11 Hence emerges the yet prevailing “third option” mentioned above as a response to repetition: the notion of progress within cycle, “differentiation” within repetition.

So the first category in which European culture separates itself from “Oriental” and “African” cultures is in its treatment of physical and natural cycles. This separation into “occidental” and “oriental” must seem amusing to anyone familiar with, among other Western texts, Book XV of Ovid’s Metamorphoses, in which the “pessimistic” and “oriental” viewpoint appears in the lips of an “occidental” predecessor of Hegel’s, Pythagoras:

Nothing is constant in the whole world. Everything is in a state of flux, and comes into being as a transient appearance... don’t you see the year passing through a succession of four seasons?... In the same way our own bodies are always ceaselessly changing... Time, the devourer, and the jealous years that pass, destroy all things, and, nibbling them away, consume them gradually in a lingering death.... Nor does anything retain its appearance permanently. Ever-inventive nature continually produces one shape from another.... Though this thing may pass into that, and that into this, yet the sum of things remains unchanged... 14

The truth is that cyclical views of history are not “oriental,” but were widespread in Europe well before the inception of historicism, which began not with Hegel, but long prior to the nineteenth century (and here one might mention as Hegel’s precursors Bacon or Descartes in the Enlightenment, the progressive consummatio in the eschatology of Joachim of Floris, the Thomist orientation towards teleology, or even go back to the “final” triumph of the Heavenly City of St. Augustine of Hippo). The debate in Western culture over the question of the shape of history, for most of its course, has been pretty evenly waged, with the advantage perhaps initially even somewhat on the side of the cyclical view. Only with the coming of scientific progressivism (as predicted and formulated by Bacon in The Advancement of Learning in 1605) was the linear model able to attain pre-eminence, and then not for some two hundred years.15 The now suppressed (but still to be found) regarding of cycles in European culture has always resembled the beliefs that underlie the religious conceptions of black culture, observing periodic regeneration of biological and agricultural systems.16

Black culture highlights the observance of such repetition, often in homage to an original generative instance or act. Cosmogony, the origins and stability of things, hence prevails because it recurs, not because the world continues to develop from the archetypal moment. Periodic ceremonies are ways that black culture comes to terms with its perception of repetition, precisely by highlighting that perception. Dance often accompanies those ritualistic occasions when a seasonal return is celebrated and the “rounds” of the dance (as of the “Ring Shout” or “Circle Dance”) recapitulate the “roundings” of natural time: Christmas, New Year’s, funerals, harvest-time.17 Weddings especially are a re-enactment of the initial act of coupling that created mankind and are therefore particularly well-suited as recognitions of recurrence. Conscious cultural observance of natural repetition no longer characterizes European culture. The German wedding festival, for example, the Hochzeit, is today fully divested of its original ties to the repeating New Year’s festival Hochgezeit, and the sense of an individual marriage as a small-scale image of a larger renewal and repetition is now gone.18 Outside of the seasonal markings of farmers’ almanacs, the sort of precise celebration of time’s passage and return that we see in Spenser’s Shepheards Calender or in the cyclical mystery plays has been out of general favor in recent times (or simply consigned to the realm of the demonic as in the Mephistophelean “I’ve already buried heaps of them!/ And aways new blood, fresh blood, circulates again/So it goes on...”)19.

Yet the year does still go around: How does European culture deal with perceived cycles? Recurrent national and sacred holidays are still marked, but with every sense of a progression having taken place between them. The “New Year’s Resolution” and its frequent unfulfillment precisely recall the attempt and failure to impose a character of progression and improvement onto an often non-progressing temporal movement. Successive public Christmas celebrations and ornamental displays vie to show increase in size, splendor, or brightness from previous ones (although, significantly, the realm of sacred ritual, while immediately co-existing with the commercial culture, still works to bar any inexact repetition of religious liturgy, such as in the Nativity service). Other contemporary cycles, such as the four-year intervals of the Olympic Games and Presidential Elections, fervently need to justify their obvious recurrence by some standard of material improvement or progress: a new or larger Olympic site or new Olympic records, a new or better political party or personality.

In European culture, financial and production cycles have largely supplanted the conscious sort of natural return in black culture. The financial year is the perfect example of this Hegelian subsumption of development within stasis. For repetition must be exact in all financial accounting, given that, globally, capital ultimately circulates within closed tautological systems (i.e., decrease in an asset is either an increase in another asset or a decrease in a liability, both within a corporate firm and in its relations with other firms). The “annual report” of a business concern, appearing cyclically in yearly or interim rhythm (always on the same “balance-sheet date”), contains ever the same kinds of symbols about the concern’s health or decrepitude. It is only the properties of difference between year2 and year1 (as quantified by numerical changes in the symbols—say, in the cash flow matrix) which suggest the means by which the essentially exact repetitions are to be evaluated and translated into a vocabulary of growth and development. Capital, hence, will not only necessarily circulate but must consequently also accumulate or diminish, depending on the state of the firm. Economics and business, in their term “cyclicality,” admit the existence and even the necessity of repetition of decline, but continually overlay this rupture in the illusion of continuous growth with a rhetoric of “incremental” or “staged” development, which asserts that the repetition of decline in a cycle may occur, but occurs only within an overall upward or spiral tendency.20

The discourse used of capital in European economic parlance reveals a more general insight about the manner in which this culture differs from black culture in its handling of repetition. In black culture, repetition means that the thing circulates (exactly in the manner of any flow, including capital flows) there in an equilibrium. In European culture, repetition must be seen to be not just circulation and flow, but accumulation and growth. In black culture, the thing
The organizing force which makes the black style is black culture in a concept of ne~gritude (I do not), it is true philosopher Leopold Senghor’s attempts to fix the nature of that he has well described the role that rhythm plays in it: through), the cycle of desire and repression that underlies “that occurs as if by chance” seems to complete the within the limits of the European individual consciousness.24 Compulsion makes it also uncanny (unheimlich). Jacques “cut” or “seemingly fortuitous” (but actually motivated) By virtue of its accidence (or of its accidental way of showing or un-moral (unsittlich), but the lack of will in repetition than the original trespass: Both are against custom (Sitte), Wiederholungszwang or repetition compulsion. On the individual psychic level, cultural prohibitions lose their validity. Hence in repetition compulsion, as Freud describes it, repetition—an idiосyncratic and immediate action—has replaced memory, the “normal” access to the past. Instead of a dialogue about a history already past, one has a re-staging of the past. Instead of relating what happened in his history (Hegel’s category of objectivity), the patient re-enacts it with all the precision of ritual.23 This obsessive acting-out of the repressed past conflict brings the patient back to the original scene of drama. Repetition compulsion is an example of a “cut” or “seemingly fortuitous” (but actually motivated) repetition that appears in explicit contradiction to societal constraints and standards of behavior. Society would censure the act of unwilled repetition as much as or even more than the original trespass: Both are against custom (Sitte), or un-moral (unsittlich), but the lack of will in repetition compulsion makes it also uncanny (unheimlich). Jacques Lacan’s fruitful idea of the tuche—the kind of repetition “that occurs as if by chance”—seems to complete the identification here of repetition compulsion as one further aspect of non-progressive culture to have been identified within the limits of the European individual consciousness.24 By virtue of its accidence (or of its accidental way of showing through), the cycle of desire and repression that underlies repetition compulsion belongs together with the notion of the “cut.”

Repetition in black culture finds its most characteristic shape in performance: rhythm in music and dance and language.25 Whether or not one upholds poet-politician-philosopher Léopold Senghor’s attempts to fix the nature of black culture in a concept of négritude (I do not), it is true that he has well described the role that rhythm plays in it: “The organizing force which makes the black style is rhythm. It is the most perceptible and least material thing . . . .”26 Where material is absent, dialectics is groundless. Repetitive words and rhythms have long been recognized as a focal constituent of African music and its American descendants—slave-songs, blues, spirituals, and jazz.27 African music normally emphasizes dynamic rhythm, organizing melody within juxtaposed lines of beats grouped into differing meters. The fact that repetition in some sense is the principle of organization shows the desire to rely upon “the thing that is there to pick up.” Progress in the sense of “avoidance of repetition” would at once sabotage such an effort. Without an organizing principle of repetition, true improvisation would be impossible, as an improvisator relies upon the ongoing recurrence of the beat.

Not only improvisation, but also the characteristic “call-and-response” element in black culture (which already, in eliciting the general participation of the group at random, spontaneous “cuts,” disallows any possibility of a haute culture) requires an assurance of repetition:

While certain rhythms may establish a background beat, in almost all African music there is a dominant point of repetition developed from a dominant conversation with a clearly defined alternation, a swinging back and forth from solo to chorus or from solo to an emphatic instrumental reply.30 That the beat is there to pick up does not mean that it must have been metronomic, but merely that it must have been at one point begun and that it must be at any point “social”—i.e., amenable to re-starting, interruption, or entry by a second or third player or to response by an additional musician. The typical polyrhythm of black music means that there are at least two, and usually more, rhythms going on alongside the listener’s own beat. The listener’s beat is a kind of Erwartungshorizont (to use a term taken from a quite different area) or “horizon of expectations,” whereby he or she knows where the constant beat must fall in order to properly make sense of the gaps that the other interacting drummers have let fall.29 Because one rhythm always defines another in black music, and beat is an entity of relation, any “self-consciousness” or “achievement” in the sense of an individual participant’s working towards his or her own rhythmic or tonal climax “above the mass” would have disastrous results.

While repetition in black music is almost proverbial, what has not often been recognized in black music is the prominence of the “cut.” The “cut” overtly insists on the repetitive nature of the music, by abruptly skipping it back to another beginning which we have already heard. Moreover, the greater the insistence on the pure beauty and value of repetition, the greater the awareness must also be that repetition takes place on a level not of musical development or progression, but on the purest tonal and timbral level.

James Brown is an example of a brilliant American practitioner of the “cut” whose skill is readily admired by African as well as American musicians.30 The format of the Brown “cut” and repetition is similar to that of African drumming: After the band has been “cookin’” in a given key and tempo, a cue, either verbal (“get down”) or “Mayfield”—the sax player’s name—or “watch it now”) or musical (a brief series of rapid, percussive drum and horn accents) then directs the music to a new level where it stays with more “cookin’” or perhaps a solo—until a repetition of cues then “cuts” back to the primary tempo. The essential pattern, then, in the typical Brown sequence is recurrent: ABA or ABCBA
expectation. This peculiarity of black music that it draws irregular intervals: That it will do this, however, is itself an attention to its own repetitions extends to the way it does not hide the fact that these repetitions take place on the level always tended to imitate the human voice, and the tendency to "stretch" the limits of the instrument may have been there to "cut" the limits of the instrument may have been there already since the wail of the first blues guitar, the whisper of the first muted jazz trumpet, or the growl of the first jazz trombonist.

Black music sets up expectations and disturbs them at irregular intervals: That it will do this, however, is itself an attention to its own repetitions—extends to the way it does not hide the fact that these repetitions take place on the level of sound only. The extension of "free jazz," starting in the '60s, into the technical practice of using the "material" qualities of sound—on the horns, for instance, using overtones, harmonics, and sub-tones—became almost mandatory for the serious jazz musician and paralleled a similar movement on the part of European musicians branching out of the Classical tradition. But black music has always tended to imitate the human voice, and the tendency to "stretch" the limits of the instrument may have been there already since the wail of the first blues guitar, the whisper of the first muted jazz trumpet, or the growl of the first jazz trombonist.

The black church must be placed at the center of the manifestations of repetition in black culture, at the junction of music and language. Various rhetorics come into play here: The spoken black sermon employs a wide variety of strategies, such as, particularly, epanalepsis ("because His power brings you power, and your Lord is still the Lord") or epistrophe ("Give your life to the Lord; give your faith to the Lord; raise your hands to the Lord"). Emphatic repetition most often takes the form of anaphora, in which the repetition comes at the beginning of the clause (instead of at the beginning and at the end as in the first example above, or at the end as in the second case). Such a usage of repetition is not limited to the black church, however, and may even be derived in part from the uses of repetition in the key church text, the Bible, as in the following anaphora from Psalms: "The Lord remaineth a King forever. The Lord shall give strength into his people. The Lord shall give his people the blessing of peace" (29:10-11).

Both preacher and congregation employ the "cut." The preacher "cuts" his own speaking in interrupting himself with a phrase such as "praise God" (whose weight here cannot be at all termed denotative or imperative but purely sensual and rhythmic—an underlying "social" beat provided for the congregation). The listeners, in responding to the preacher's call at random intervals, produce each time they "cut," a slight shift in the texture of the performance. At various intervals a musical instrument such as the organ, and often spontaneous dancing, accompanies the speaker's repetition of the "cut." When the stage of highest intensity comes, gravel-voiced "speaking in tongues" or the "testifying," usually delivered at a single pitch, gives credence to the hypothesis that all along the very texture of the sound and nature of the rhythm—but not the explicit meaning—in the spoken words have been at issue.

Repetition in black literature is too large a subject to be covered here, but one may say briefly that it has learned from these "musical" prototypes in the sense that repetition of words and phrases, rather than being overlooked, is exploited as a structural and rhythmic principle. The sermon on "The Blackness of Blackness" which occurs early in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man lifts the sermonic and musical repetitions (Ellison says he modeled this sequence on his knowledge of repetition in jazz music) directly into view in a literary text—and not just in the repetitions of its title. The ad hoc nature of much black folklore and poetry, as well as its ultimate destination in song tends to encourage the repeating refrain, as in this paean to the fighter Jack Johnson:

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<td>Jack Johnson, he de champion of de wor'</td>
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<td>Jack Johnson, he de champion of de wor'</td>
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The AABBA repetitive format of so much black folklore and folk-lyrics often finds its way into the black novel (as it does into the blues) in unaltered form.

In Jean Toomer's Cane, the mixture of "fiction, songs, and poetry," presented against the theme of black culture in transition, provides a fine opportunity to view some typical (and not so typical) uses of repetition in the black novel. From the poem "Song of the Son" to the very last page, the repetitive forms of black language and rhetoric are prominent until one notices that gradually the entire plot of the novel itself has been all along tending towards the shape of return—the circle:

O land and soil, red soil and sweet-gum tree,
So scant of grass, so profligate of pines
Now just before an epoch's sun declines
Thy son, in time, I have returned to thee,
Thy son, I have in time returned to thee.

Toni Morrison continues this use of repetition, particularly in Song of Solomon, with Sugarman's song and the final song of "Jake the only son of Solomon." In the latter song, where Morrison describes the children, inexhaustible in their willingness to repeat a rhythmic, rhyming action game" and the will of black language to "perform the round over and over again," she puts into words the essential component of her own written tradition. Leon Forrest (most notably in There is a Tree more Ancient than Eden) and Ishmael Reed are able to tap a long series of predecessors when they include folk-poems and folklore in their narratives, whose non-progressive form they need not feel constrained to justify.

But particularly in the work of Reed (mainly Mumbo Jumbo, but also quite noticeably in The Free-Lance Pallbearers and Flight to Canada) the kinds of repetition we have seen to have been derived from spoken discourse become only an emblem for much wider strategies of circulation and "cutting" in black writing and a model, or supplemental meter, for their future employment. The explicitly parodic thrust of the title Mumbo Jumbo, first of all, rejects the need for making a definitive statement about the "black situation in America" and already implies, as all parody does, a comparison with as well as regeneration of
what has come before and the return of a pre-logical past when instead of words denoting sense, there was "mumbo jumbo." Jes Grew, the main "force" in the novel, besides being disembodied rhythm ("this bongo drumming called Jes Grew") or Senghor's "la chose la plus sensible et la moins materielle," is ironically the essence of anti-growth, the avatar of a time "before this century is out" when Reed predicts "... men will turn once more to mystery, to wondernment; they will explore the vast reaches of space within instead of more measuring more 'progress' more of this and more of that."39 Jes Grew epidemics appear and re-appear as if by accident; "So Jes Grew is seeking its words. Its text. For what good is a liturgy without a text?"37 But there is no text to be found (besides a "rhythmic vocabulary larger than French or English or Spanish") for the "text" is in fact the compulsion of Jes Grew to recur again and again—the "trace" of one such appearance is Mumbo Jumbo, the novel, but at the end of it, we are left again with the text of the quest, which is the repetition of the seeking.

Reed elides the "cut" of black culture with the "cutting" used in cinema. Self-consciously filmable, Mumbo Jumbo ends with a "freeze frame," underscoring not only its filmic nature, but also itself an example of a common cuing device for cinematic "cuts." Reed, also, in the manner of the jazz soloist, "cuts" frequently between the various sub-texts in his novel (headlines, photographs, handwritten letters, italicized writing, advertisements) and the text of his main narrative. The linear narrative of the detective story and the feature film (opening scenes, title, credits, story, final, freeze frame) also structure Mumbo Jumbo, but there is no progressive enterprise going on here, despite such evidence to the contrary. The central point remains clear right to Reed's very last words: "... the 20s were back again. Time is a pendulum. Not a river. More akin to what goes around comes around." The film is in a loop.

The Return of Repetition

Repetition is reality and it is the seriousness of life. He who wills repetition is matured in seriousness. Repetition is the new category which has to be brought to light.

—Kierkegaard, Repetition

In almost conscious opposition to Hegel's idea of "progressive" culture, European music and literature, perhaps realizing the limitations of innovation, have recently learned to "foreground" their already present repetitions, "cuts," and cyclical insights. As European music uses rhythm mainly as an aid in the construction of a sense of progression to a harmonic cadence, repetition has been suppressed in favor of the fulfillment of the goal of harmonic resolution. Despite the clear presence of consistent beat or rhythm in the common Classical forms of the ostinato or the figured bass or any other continuo instrument, rhythm was scarcely a goal in itself and repetition seldom pleasurable or beautiful by itself.

Although the key role of "recapitulation" in the ABA or ABBBA sonata form (often within a movement itself, as in the so frequently ignored "second repeats" in Beethoven's major works) is undisputed in theory, in live performance, these repetitions often are left out to avoid the undesirability of having "to be told the same thing twice." Repeating the exposition, as important as it no doubt is for the "classical style," is subsumed within and fulfilled by the general category called "development." By the time the music does return to the home tonic, in the final recapitulation, the sense is clearly one of repetition with a difference. The momentum has elevated the initial material to a new level rather than merely re-presenting it unchanged. Even though the works of Wagner and his followers represent a break from this traditional formal model of development derived from the sonata form, the Wagnerian leitmotif, for instance, is anything but a celebration of repetition in music. In the Ring, Wagner's consummate vehicle for the leitmotivic style of composition, the recurrent musical phrases are in fact a Hegelian progression or extended accumulation and accretion to an ultimate goal or expression that begins somewhere during the early part of the Götterdämmerung, or even starting late in Siegfried; the leitmotifs are invested in installments throughout Das Rheingold and Die Walküre and are then repaid with interest by the end of the Götterdämmerung.

In the pre-serial era, only Stravinsky took the already present expectations of concealed repetition in the Classical tradition and uncovered them by highlighting them. In Petrushka (1911) and Le Sacre du Printemps (1913) particularly, the use of the "cut" and the unconcealed repetition is striking. In the First Tableau of Petrushka, an abbreviated fanfare and tattoo from snare drum and tambourine set off the first section (rehearsal numbers 1-29)—itself in ABACABA form—from the magic trick (30-32), which is the new, much slower tempo after the "cut." The magic trick concludes with a harp glissando and a brief unaccompanied piccolo figure—the next "cut"—leading to the famous Danse Russe (33-46), overtly repetitive in its ABABA form, which then ends in a snare-drum "cut" (here, in 47, as well as elsewhere—at 62, 69, and 82). In Le Sacre du Printemps, exact repetition within and across sections exceeds anything which had come before it. Moreover Stravinsky has developed his use of the "cut," varying the cue-giving instrument. Interestingly, both Stravinsky compositions resemble black musical forms not just in their relentless "foregrounding" or rhythmic elements and their use of the "cut," but also in being primarily designed for use in conjunction with dancers.

In European literature, the recovery of repetition in this century is even more striking. Blatant repetitions of the folkloric, traditional, or mnemonic sort that had characterized European oral poetry, medieval sagas, and other forms of narrative right into late sixteenth-century Baroque literature began to be transformed into the pretense of an external reality being depicted, culminating in literary realism in the late nineteenth century. In a sense, all such representational conventions suppress repetition and verbal rhythm in the telling in favor of the illusion of narrative verisimilitude. They thus would portray an outside world, exhaustible in its manifestations by the supposedly inexhaustible and ever-renewable resource of writing—hence evading the need for "repeated descriptions" of that world.

Until recently—particularly in the writings of Joyce, Faulkner, Woolf, Yeats, and Eliot—this practice has been dominant. Now its dominance has begun to ebb somewhat. With Joyce, most of all, we have realized that the incessant repetition of particular words (such as pin or hat in the early Bloom chapters of Ulysses) are not descriptions of objects seen repeatedly in the external environment and then described, but intentional repetitions of words scattered here and there in a text by its author as if by accident.
Narrative repetition tends to defuse the belief that any other meaning resides in a repeated signifier than the fact that it is being repeated. Among European and American dramatists, Tom Stoppard, in *Travesties*, comes closest to understanding this insight. This play (in which Joyce plays a major role, along with Tristan Tzara and Lenin) not only refuses to cover up its repetitions, but makes clear that there must be a definite “cut” between them. The “cut” is explained in the stage directions as a manifestation of the unreliable memory of the main character, Henry Carr:

One result is that the story (like a toy train perhaps) occasionally jumps the rails and has to be restarted at the point where it goes wild... This scene has several of these “time slips,” indicated by the repetitions of the exchange between BENNETT and CARR about the “newspapers and telegrams.”... It may be desirable to mark these moments more heavily by using an extraneous sound or a light effect, or both. The sound of a cuckoo-clock, artificially amplified, would be appropriate since it alludes to time and to Switzerland.

Underlying this notion of “time” is not just Freud’s idea that repetition is a remedy for the failure of memory, but the related and necessary acceptance of rupture: in the smooth forward progress of the play and in the insistently forward motion of “time” on those occasions when history “jumps the rails and has to be restarted at the point where it goes wild.”

The cuckoo-clock in *Travesties* (borrowed from the “Nausicaa” chapter of *Ulysses*, in which it has a slightly different function) is the perfect signal for “cuts,” being itself an emblem of time. When in Act One Tzara repeats the word DADA thirty-four times in response to Carr’s homily “It is the duty of the artist to beautify existence,” one begins to think that the word’s meaning in the context, or even its etymology (interesting as it might be for DADA), are beside the point. A previous “cut” has made the point more clearly. Tzara (well known in real life for his “cut-ups,” or poems stuck together at random), while trying to seduce Gwendolen, cuts up and tosses the words of Shakespeare’s eighteenth sonnet (which she has been reciting) into a hat, shakes them up, and pulls the words one by one out of the hat. Instead of the expected random version of the original, a quite lewd poem, using the same words as the former sonnet, emerges:

Darling, shake thou thy gold buds
the untrimmed but short fair shade
shines—
see, this lovely hot possession growest
so long
by nature’s course—
so... long—heaven!
and declines,
summer changing, more temperate complexion ... *

What is the point of Stoppard’s “travesty” of Shakespeare? The cutting of the sonnet should have produced only “mumbo jumbo,” or at best “clever nonsense,” as Carr had called Tzara’s prior recitation of the word DADA. But the emergence of the “new” poem is the emergence of the real: Instead of poetry, lechery is Tzara’s concern. The true message of the sonnet is not transcendent (about beauty) but immediate in that it consists of words on paper that can be cut, but which only signify in the context of speaking, not by virtue of being masterfully arranged. Language—even Shakespeare’s—here is shown to be, on the most obvious level, exactly what is there, not what is elsewhere: It is of desire, not of meaning.
from a belief on metempsychosis (transmigration of souls—see Plato's Phaedrus, 248e-249d) and from Pythagoras' likely belief in a periodic history (1914), which year he expressed as "exact repetition in each phase" (see A. Philip, Pythagoras and Early Pythagoreanism [Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1966], p. 75).

The area of philosophy dealing with such issues—the philosophy of history—has been recently (approximately since Croce and Toynbee) rather neglected. The view of Hegel or Augustine on one side, being roughly opposed to their heritage except to Nietzsche or Vico on the other, is said to approximately delimit the poles of Western discourse on the subject, although the opposition is more fluid than a simple counterposition. For fuller discussion of this broad and highly complex issue, consult: on Bacon, Benjamin Farrington, Francis Bacon: Philosopher of Industrial Science (London: Macmillan, 1973); on the general topic of the philosophy of history, Sir Isaiah Berlin, Vico and Hume: Two Figures in the History of Ideas (London: Hogarth Press, 1976); Manfred Buhr, Zur Geschichte der klassischen bürgerlichen Philosophie: Bacon, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel (Leipzig: Philip Reclam, 1972); Kenneth Burke, Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose, 2nd ed. ed. Library of Liberal Arts (Indianapolis: Bobs-Merrill, 1965); Karl Löwith, Meaning in History (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1942), pp. 43-67.


Schenker's analyses present the extreme pole of the view that linear, descending cadential resolution is the aim of every tonal work. For discussion of this idea, see Readings in Schenker Analysis and Other Approaches, ed. Maury Yeston (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1977). For two splendid analyses of the role and consequence of repetition in the sonata, see Donald F. Tovey, Essays in Musical Analysis, Vol. 1 Symphonies (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 10-14, and Charles Rosen, The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven (London: Faber, 1977), pp. 30-34. Also see W. H. Hadow, Sonata Form (London: Novello, n. d.).

A fairly complete catalog of "cuts" in Sacre follows, with the instruments involved and practice numbers in parentheses: violin (12); tympani and bass drum (37); clarinet and piccolo (48); piccolo and flute (54); viola, cello, double bass, tuba, and trumpet (57); bass drum (72); clarinet and violin (93); cornet and violin (100), addition of tuba, bassoons, timpani, and bass drum (103-18); bass clarinet (141); piccolo, flute, and timpani (201).


Tom Hood, Travestire (New York: Grove, 1975), p. 27.

Ibid., pp. 53-54.