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The Corrosive Effect of Repetition on Temporality and Signification in Works by Samuel Beckett and Bruce Nauman

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Artwork: Bruce Nauman, *Clown Torture*, 1987. © Bruce Nauman / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York and DACS, London 2022.

There is something disconcerting about repetition, particularly the prospect of infinite repetition. Its machine-like relentlessness can be unsettling. Although the familiarity of routine can be comforting at times, it may be that, in some cases, too much of a good thing can actually have the opposite effect, resulting in a rupturing of that routine. In his book *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory, and Text* (2007), Steven Connor analyses the motif of repetition in Beckett's work. Regarding the prevalence of the concept of repetition in contemporary art, Connor labels it a subversive act:

The principle of repetition seems to have acquired a particular power in the cultural era we have come to know as the 'postmodern': in painting, writing and film, the modernist imperative to 'make it new' has been superseded by a desire to recirculate the old or the already known, if only in the attempt to subvert the grounds of familiar knowledge.¹

Take, for example, a remix or a cover of an old favourite song; sometimes, the updated version might have only minimal variations in melody, rhythm, or tone, but in other cases the new

¹ Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory, and Text* (Colorado: The Davies Group, 2007), p. 2.

version is radically different from the original. In this sense, Connor's use of the phrase 'if only in the attempt to subvert' belies the very radical power of subversion. Applying Connor's notions of repetition to the artworks of American artist Bruce Nauman (b. 1941) can be illustrative, particularly the difference between circular and linear repetition, as well as Gilles Deleuze's concept of difference. Repetition can also disrupt signification, disturbing the process by which viewers arrive at meaning. Kathryn Chiong, in her article 'Nauman's Beckett Walk', focuses on some common threads between the work of the playwright and the artist, including repetition and time. Chiong refers to 'Beckett's and Nauman's production, when a spoken phrase becomes a maddening refrain, when a sound begins to grate in its seeming sameness.'² The present study picks up where Chiong leaves off by applying concepts from French literary theorist Roland Barthes's essay 'The Third Meaning' (1970) to Nauman's work in order to delve more deeply into the deleterious effects of repetition on signification. This study also more fully investigates the debilitating effect of repetition in Nauman's video installation *Clown Torture* in its stalling of viewers' perception of time.

Repetition to Break Repetition

Some habits can be hard to break, and it's as if one has become stuck in a rut. Ironically, the repetition of the looped videos in Nauman's immersive installations can act towards breaking the habitual thinking of the audience. Connor begins his examination of Beckett by exploring the idea of habit as a key feature of the concept of repetition. Regarding the playwright's work, Connor writes, 'His early works show the hopeless, habitual wanderings of characters struggling to escape from habit, even though they are themselves constitutively enslaved by it.'³ A fitting connection can be made between the struggle to escape embodied in Beckett's characters and that of the characters in Nauman's *Clown Torture*. Portrayal of the continually asinine activities in which the characters in *Clown Torture* are embroiled, such as the one repeatedly walking into the room to have a bucket of water dumped over his head, parallels the utter ridiculousness of some of the quotidian endeavours society is commonly caught up in each and every day. However, repeated viewing of the video may also ironically enable the repetition portrayed by the clown in the video to potentially breach the cycle of habitual thinking in the viewer. The repetition turns in on itself, serving as a mechanism to potentially disrupt the habitual routine of everyday life. Connor asserts that art can 'free us from our contemporary servitude to the social forms of repetition in standardization, routine and consumption.'⁴ Connor then refers to an excerpt from Deleuze's *Différence et Répétition* in which Deleuze suggests art as a vehicle to disrupt the monotony of the everyday:

The more standardized our everyday life seems, the more stereotyped, the more subordinated to the accelerated reproduction of objects for consumption, the more art must fix upon and draw out that tiny difference that plays elsewhere and simultaneously between the different levels of repetition.... Every art has its techniques of imbricated

² Kathryn Chiong, 'Nauman's Beckett Walk', *Bruce Nauman* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018), p. 76.

³ Connor, p. 1.

⁴ Connor, p. 9.

repetition whose critical and revolutionary power can attain the highest point in leading us from the dreary repetitions of habit.... (*DR*, 375)⁵

Connor analyses Deleuze's two concepts of difference, both the 'clothed and the 'naked.'⁶ Clothed repetition reveals subtle differences each time. Small variations in the recurrent scenarios in Alain Robbe-Grillet's novel titled *Jealousy* provide an example, where slight changes exposed in the narration are oftentimes barely noticeable for readers, such as subtle shifts in scenery or decor. Connor also sheds light on Deleuze's concept of 'nomadic' difference, which suggests a liberation from the duality of original and copy. Naked repetition, on the other hand, is exact, one-to-one replication, like Jacques Derrida's notion of drawing a second circle on top of the first. The looped videos of Nauman's *Clown Torture* would qualify as naked repetition in that there are absolutely no variations in the repetition. Seeing the video of Nauman's clowns for the first time is a new experience; the second time, the event is replicated. There is, of course, no change in the video footage the second time around; nonetheless, exact duplication is impossible, as Connor notes, 'for there can never be any such thing as pure or exact repetition.'⁷ The environment of the gallery or museum won't be exactly the same. There will, for example, be different people around, and we might go as far as saying the spectator's viewing experience itself will never be the same each time, as in the famous axiom about never being able to step foot in the same river twice.

On Repetition Breaking Signification

The naked repetition of Nauman's video installation impedes signification. After repeated viewings of the looped video footage, there could be said to be a movement in two opposite directions: accumulation (Connor prefers the term 'excess'⁸) and disintegration. There may be a sense upon the first viewing that the clowns in the videos represent, for instance, the idea of suffering. Watching the performances again, the clowns' actions may seem to suggest futility. Another viewing might point to the clowns as a metaphor for the audience. This repeated viewing leads to a sort of layering, yet as layer upon layer of meaning begin to build up, rather than solidifying or cementing the first meaning, this accumulation eventually boils over and dissipates, destabilizing meaning. The link between signifier and signified begins to gradually dissolve in a process of emptying the signifier of meaning. In this way, Nauman's artwork, in effect, obstructs the turning cogs of signification. This concept of accumulation calls to mind Barthes' analysis in his essay 'The Third Meaning' (1970), in which he refers to the third meaning as 'the supplementary meaning.'⁹ Barthes describes the first level of meaning as 'an informational level' while the second is 'a symbolic level.'¹⁰ These first two are both in the realm of what Barthes calls 'obvious.' A third level Barthes labels as 'obtuse', and this obtuse meaning is disturbing:

⁵ Connor, p. 9.

⁶ Connor, p. 6.

⁷ Connor, p. 7.

⁸ Connor, p. 32.

⁹ Roland Barthes, 'The Third Meaning,' *Image Music Text* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1977), pp. 54-55.

¹⁰ Barthes, p. 52.

In short, what the obtuse meaning disturbs, sterilizes, is metalanguage (criticism). A number of reasons can be given for this. First and foremost, obtuse meaning is discontinuous, indifferent to the story and to the obvious meaning (as signification of the story). This dissociation has a de-naturing or at least a distancing effect with regard to the referent....¹¹

Barthes asserts that ‘The obtuse meaning is a signifier without a signified, hence the difficulty in naming it.’¹² Barthes’ analyses of film stills removes the images from of the context of Sergei Eisenstein’s films, leading to this theory of the third meaning; similarly, the repetition in Nauman’s videos results in a kind of third meaning. Barthes illustrates how ‘the still, by instituting a reading that is at once instantaneous and vertical, scorns logical time.’¹³ Taking the film still out of context breaks the narrative sequencing just as the looping of Nauman’s videos thwarts forward narrative progression.

Later in his book, Connor notes the self-reflexivity of Beckett’s work, how it turns in on itself like a mobius strip. The characters are just ‘there’ as, indeed, are the plays themselves, like signifiers without clear signifieds. Connor refers to Sidney Homan’s *Beckett’s Theatres: Interpretations for Performance*:

The plays therefore no longer require reference to a pre-existing world, or the addition of any commentary to elucidate meanings which are hidden or allegorically elsewhere; the plays are simply what they are, in an elementary performing present, without before or after, the action [according to Homan] ‘complete, pure, itself and immediately experienced by the audience.’¹⁴

This telling description of Beckett’s work, that “the plays are simple what they are”, calls to mind the Minimalist sculptures created by some of Nauman’s contemporaries. Just as Abstract Expressionism did with painting, works by Carl Andre and Donald Judd, such as cubes on the floor of the gallery, took sculpture down to its bare essentials: namely, form. These sculptural objects, then, “are what they are”, that is, pure material and pure form, devoid of figuration or representation, and, to some degree, devoid of signification. The objects themselves become less about their own objecthood and more about the viewer’s bodily relationship to, and engagement with, those objects in the space of the gallery or museum. Connor notes how ‘repetition can sometimes involve the attempt to efface the signifier, so as to collapse the distinction between it and the signified.’¹⁵ Though Connor is referring here to Beckett’s language, the same could be said of Nauman’s use of the medium of video in *Clown Torture*. There is a curious double movement at play. In one sense, the effacement of the signifier can be thought of as a gradual process of closing the gap between signifier and signified, as if signifier and signified move more closely towards one another and eventually fuse together. Seen in another light, this effacing of

¹¹ Barthes, p. 61.

¹² Barthes, p. 61.

¹³ Barthes, p. 68.

¹⁴ Connor, p. 130.

¹⁵ Connor, p. 37.

the signifier, as mentioned above in the analyses of accumulation and disintegration, can be thought of as an abrupt rupture of the threads linking signifier to signified, so that they drift apart, unmoored from one another.

Repetition and Time

Some of Nauman's video works, such as *Playing the Violin as Fast As I Can* (1967-1968), involve slight variations in repetition, evoking Robbe-Grillet's narrative style and Deleuze's concept of 'clothed' repetition. This variation involves the spectator to a great degree, in trying to anticipate these subtle changes. The sheer repetition in the looping of *Clown Torture* may still involve the spectator's active engagement in the repeated action; however, by foreclosing on any real sense of change, it retards that search for slight variation, stifling our yearning for variety. Connor illustrates the participatory nature of reading Beckett's work by comparing it to a circus act with the performer trying to juggle myriad objects at once while the reader is also thoroughly caught up in this balancing act:

Writer and reader are in the position of the circus performer who, in order to keep all the plates spinning on the tops of their poles, must keep returning to them to impart more speed to the individual plates.... We are forced to participate imaginatively in the repetitions which repel and alienate us in Beckett's work.¹⁶

The same can be said of Nauman's artworks, which often repel the audience. One of the characters in *Clown Torture*, who finds himself in the predicament of attempting to balance a goldfish bowl atop a broom handle, provides a fitting parallel to the precarious position of the audience.

Connor examines two types of repetition in Beckett's famous play *Waiting for Godot*: circular and linear. Linear repetition more thoroughly involves time and seems to suggest an eventual end to the series,¹⁷ prompting a sense of anticipation in the audience, as mentioned above, in the attempt to figure out a pattern. Of circular repetition, Connor notes its lack of progression. Although Connor is ambivalent about which type of repetition is more 'corrosive of an audience's sense of presence,'¹⁸ it seems clear that circular repetition may be more anxiety-producing in its seeming to never end, nor ever offering the audience a moment's relief.

In describing Beckett's novel *Watt* as being very difficult to get through, Connor refers to a particular section of repetition:

The ordinary person eats a meal, then rests from eating for a space, then eats again, then rests again, then eats again, then rests again, then eats again, then rests again, then eats again, then rests again, then eats again, then rests again, and, in this way, now eating, and now resting, and now resting from eating, he deals with

¹⁶ Connor, p. 36.

¹⁷ Connor, p. 135.

¹⁸ Connor, p. 135.

Regarding the shift between live video footage of the viewer and that of recorded footage of the drummer in Nauman's *Learned Helplessness in Rats (Rock and Roll Drummer)* (1988), Chiong asserts that 'with every shift Nauman strips away the moorings of past-present, leaving a series of spaced "at onces" that tremble in between.'²³ This may make the viewer feel more aware of the present moment, more in the moment, and, therefore, more present. Nauman's video is a representation of an event that is already in the past, and the ultimate effect of the looping is a slowing down or interruption of that presentation. Just as the looping icon that pops up on the computer screen while waiting for a website to load can be agonizing, the feeling of being held in suspense can be difficult one to endure; the installation space could be said to be located in this suspended no man's land. At one point in his analysis, Connor focuses on the phrase 'in no time' that comes at the end of one of Beckett's plays:

The words may also suggest that the audience has participated in a stretch of 'no-time', that is, the 'non-time' of dramatic representation, in which there is no real before or after, or even present tense, but only the representation of them. If we feel ourselves about to be restored to the real time of habitual experience, we may also feel for a moment the anxiety that this theatrical 'no-time' is more like our own lived time....²⁴

Regarding the immersive feel of a Nauman installation, viewers may feel as if suspended in this liminal space that could be said to be located apart from, or outside of, time.

Conclusion

Clown Torture featured prominently at a recent Nauman exhibition at Tate Modern in London before moving on to the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. The exhibition is now at the M Woods Museum in Beijing, the artist's first show in China, before reaching its final stop later this year at the Pirelli HangarBicocca museum in Milan. The announcement for Nauman's show at the Pirelli HangarBicocca venue notes how the exhibit will "explore his diverse experimentation in the areas of spatial experience and architectural scale, as well as the use of light, sound, language and video in this corpus of work." It notes how Nauman's oeuvre "is distinguished by an interest in understanding the human experience...as well as the inner workings of the psyche, which he investigates through the perception of the body, and interactions with space, time, and language." A consideration of the role of repetition in Beckett's work as it relates to Nauman's artworks can shed light on discussions concerning signification, temporality, and the spectator's experience in Nauman's immersive art installations.

²³ Chiong, p. 86.

²⁴ Connor, p. 154.

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