

**Julien O. and Levaux C. (eds., 2018) *Over and Over: Exploring Repetition in Popular Music*, New York, Bloomsbury Academic.**

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*Abstract*

*Over and Over*, edited by Olivier Julien and Christophe Levaux, is an important musicological collection that addresses repetition head-on. It focuses upon musical repetition not as a parameter to employ in analytical readings, but as a significant topic of study in itself. Rather than a single theme or overarching argument, the book provides a concise review of varied research perspectives on this ubiquitous musical phenomenon. The methodological diversity of these essays is particularly notable. The book's strongest contributions, such as those by Fink, Danielsen, and Rietveld, substantially draw from the established literature on repetition. Historical accounts are helpfully provided in the chapters by Levaux and Julien, and de Clercq and Margulis' chapter informs the topic with approaches from music cognition. The editors are to be commended for opening (perhaps reopening) the debate on repetition, directing attention to this matter most intricate and integral to so much music.

It is easy to argue for the significance of research on a principle which potentially underpins all music, musical creation, and musical consumption. It is surprisingly difficult, however, to do so persuasively. If scholars were concerned only with repetition in electronic dance music [Jowers 1999], for instance, they could point to the lack of research on this thriving musical culture, and call for closer attention to this structuring principle of the music. What *Over and Over* brings into focus, then, is the importance of music analysis, history, and criticism to understanding repetition in various kinds of music: not only musical sounds and structures, but also patterns of consumption and modes of human perception. Similar recent efforts adopt a theoretical focus on gesture [Godøy and Leman 2010], record production [Frith and Zagorski-Thomas 2012], and rhythm [Danielsen 2010]. This edition by Julien and Levaux is the first

collection that addresses repetition head-on, offering a concise review of the major research perspectives on this ubiquitous musical phenomenon.

The editors divide their foci on repetition into three broad categories: repetition in aesthetic contexts and histories; repetition in perception; and repetition in formal design. Although the disciplinary and methodological diversity of these essays make them difficult to group into a tripartite system, Julien and Levaux arrange them neatly. The book emphasises the variety of approaches to repetition rather than attempting to present either a unifying theme or (as might be germane to the topic) a recurring, large-scale argument that ties the edition together. Some readers might find this miscellany of views productive, even necessary. Others, such as undergraduate students, may be unlikely to find more than one chapter pertinent to their current topic of study. Nonetheless, the introduction places *Over and Over* firmly in the context of Middleton's work, and numerous chapters indicate their shared debt to Margulis' [2014] *On Repeat*.

In the introduction, the editors swiftly rebut the Adornian conceptualisation of musical repetition as little more than mirroring the repetitive machinations of capitalist societies [p. 3]. While they give a clear outline of each individual essay, Julien and Levaux choose not to provide any alternative overarching argument, at least not explicitly, or none that furthers the conclusions of Fink [2005] and Margulis [2014]. Nor do they argue for the wider significance of this project, perhaps to avoid accusations of essentialism or universalist generalising. The closest that the editors come to openly answering the "so what?" question is the brief claim that repetition is an important, interesting, or fruitful area of study [9]. Although this thrust may be difficult to uncover, it is persuasively argued by the chapters that follow.

In a climate of popular music where repetition is normalised, Fink searches for that which currently seems "too" repetitive, and finds the digital stutter edit, or just «stutter» [15]. Rather than attempting to diagnose reasons for musical stuttering, he draws upon the medical literature and work by speech researchers to examine some symptoms of musical stuttering gestures. This develops into something of a history of stuttering in electronic dance music and production technology from the 1980s onward. With a thorough and engaging comparison between speech disfluencies and musical stutter effects, Fink's chapter serves as a useful development of the approach taken in his [2005] *Repeating Ourselves*, especially the chapter on disco.

In general, the book's strongest contributions substantially draw from the established literature on repetition. For Danielsen and Rietveld, this usually means extending their own previous research: both of their compelling chapters are based firmly in each author's well-known work [Danielsen 2006; Rietveld 2004]. Danielsen argues that repetition based in African-American cultural traditions continually produces a "changing same". The listener may therefore adopt a particular emphasis upon what is different within repeated material. Her chapter is effectively a defence of groove-based music against claims of formlessness [46, 48], and those familiar with Danielsen's writing will recognise persuasive arguments to this end. Rietveld studies the affective relationships between repetitive beats in electronic dance music culture and the wider technoculture (i.e., digitally-enhanced modern capitalism). She focuses upon how DJ-led techno performance events offer participants the potential for a breakdown of subjectivity through dance and possession trance.

Though the middle section of the book addresses «Issues of Perception» [65], its omission of the scholarly literature on music perception invites some criticism. Trottier's case for the relevance of repetition to sonic anaphones is not entirely effective, and Cutler's «negative» [67] take on repetitive popular music effectively reiterates the tired criticism that «late disco, techno, house, rave, hip-hop, and their endless variations and tributaries» [72] are merely «noise» [Walser 1995, 197]. The latter chapter is perhaps the least constructive contribution to the study of repetition, starting from Cutler's own admission that he finds repetitive music «not only intellectually but viscerally bothersome» [72]. It is an odd inclusion in the edition, not for its aesthetically disinterested stance, but its broad dismissal of repetitive music: reading the book in order, when one arrives at the sweeping claim that «simple repetition [...] forms the basis of most jazz, rock, and popular music» [72], it has already been disproven by Danielsen's deep and rigorous work on these complex musical worlds. Indeed, it is valuable to consider the potential dangers of listener entrainment in the study of repetition, and so it is unfortunate that the chapter's imprecision instead makes Cutler, in his own words, «come over all Luddite» [71].

Trottier asks how musical structures relate to listeners' general sonic experiences of the world, which are usually repetitive. This yields several interesting insights on how blues, hard rock, and heavy metal tracks imitate trains and gunshots (using Tagg's semiotic theory of anaphones). However, the outworn dualism of «intrinsic referring and the extrinsic referring» [90] leads to prescriptive claims about musical meaning. While it is perhaps pedantic to chafe

at assertions about my own experience as a listener, statements such as «the listener experiences kinetic and tactile anaphones until the chorus» [96] and «the song's message cannot be misinterpreted by the viewer/listener» [100] become rather suspect in the light of discussing listener experience without recourse to perception, embodiment, or music cognition.

Although the book overlooks relevant perspectives on the phenomenal experience of repetition, such as Herbert [2011] and – perhaps its most striking omission – Ockelford's [2005] *Repetition In Music*, the chapter by de Clercq and Margulis aptly applies theories from psycholinguistics, neuroscience, and cognitive psychology to popular music. The authors consider three kinds of repetition in popular music through psychological studies of attention, aesthetics, and expectation. I was particularly struck by the interesting speculation that, as well as occurring on various formal levels, «the AAB(X) pattern may also simply be a generic perceptual preference, whether found in music or in other art forms. For instance, the AAB(X) structure can be seen as akin to the “rule of three” found in comedy». Furthermore, music cognition reveals that an inverted-U relationship between preference and familiarity appears as a near-universal of popular (and other) music listening tastes.

The chapters by Levaux, Julien, and Salley and Shanahan comprise an assortment of productive approaches for the study of repetition. Levaux presents a fresh history of repetitive audio technologies which starts far earlier than Schaeffer's 1948 Paris experiments and frequently proceeds outside of musical practices. Julien reviews the popular music theory literature to historicise the development of AABA form in pop and jazz, from Tin Pan Alley (and contemporary UK music) through the “age of rock”. Salley and Shanahan analyse a corpus of 688 jazz standards, identifying how pieces violate «hypermetric constraint» [126]. These enriching takes on the theme of repetition provide useful, varied insights on the cyclic nature of musical structures since at least the ninth century [53].

The considerable diversity of perspectives gathered in *Over and Over* can be conveyed by the assortment of tables, figures, and diagrams placed throughout the book. Readers are offered lead sheet notation [124-139], samples of the International Phonetic Alphabet [20], a notation and lyric transcription [23] which is reprinted (either erroneously or for dramatic effect) [32], score notation [44], a YouTube screenshot [26], lyrics [29, 115], a patent [30], an audio plugin interface [p. 30], waveforms [41, 46], tabulated formal schemes [109, 159], and line graphs [154, 155]. These representations helpfully illustrate the topic at hand and, although no key to

reading them is provided, taken as a whole, they demonstrate quite how differently the same phenomenon can be investigated.

How, how, how can repetition be studied? The work collected here provides multiple promising ways. Without a unifying argument to the book, the scholars seem to talk slightly at odds with one another rather than engaging in discussion. At several points this freedom is electrifying, allowing the reader to draw rich interpretive comparisons and contrasts, but sometimes the writers emulate their topic, separately looping their own well-recited arguments over and over. Nonetheless, the editors are to be commended for opening (perhaps reopening) the debate on repetition, directing attention to this matter most intricate and integral to so much music. As Hennion notes in the preface, the great achievement of this book is how it breaks an established cycle of music scholarship, viewing repetition no longer as a merely conceptual parameter to employ for the purpose of analysis, but as a significant topic of study in itself.

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