

A Deleuzian Take on Repetition, Difference, and the 'Minimal' in Minimalism

**Brian Hulse
Department of Music
College of William & Mary
Williamsburg, VA 23185
757-221-1044
bchuls@wm.edu**

To critics and apologists alike, repetition is the most salient feature and the “problematic nexus”¹ of minimalist music. For critics, repetition in minimalism is responsible for its static, banal, and regressive character.² Supporters find that it challenges conventional hermeneutic or analytic modes that interpret and legitimize “canonic” music. But there is a tendency on both sides to begin from a common assumption: that minimalist repetition corresponds with a pervasive sameness or a lack of difference. This lack is often the point of departure for sympathetic scholars who examine minimalism as a problem.

Conventionally, repetition is opposed to measurable or determinate change: the *opposite* of difference. Difference is thought in opposition to a general sameness or identity, a “0” factor or horizontal axis along which only non-difference, or repetition, can occur.³ Consequently, local repetition takes on a generic function which tends to negate any musical significance or particularity, participating instead in a general repetition. Thus, the diversity of musical situations in which minimalist repetition manifests itself becomes lumped together as a transcendent “minimal-ness” for which scholars seek a comprehensive hermeneutic solution.

In his book *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice*⁴ Robert Fink defines minimalism as that “maximally repetitive” music which came to flourish in American “postindustrial, mass-mediated consumer society.”⁵ He argues that minimalism’s “excess of repetition” makes it inseparable from the “colorful repetitive excess” of consumerism: “...repetitive music implicates creators, performers, and auditors in repetitive commercial culture like advertising and television...”⁶

The conventional meaning of repetition enables Fink to make the interpretive leap that he makes. If repetition is a return of the same, then each particular repetition comes to signify the “same” action of returning. Repetition becomes a single activity that can bring a variety of media or content under one umbrella (in this case, allowing repetition in different media to manifest the same excess). But if we adopt the view that repetition is difference, rather than sameness or identity, the notion of a hollowed-out quantity of repetition goes by the board.⁷ Repetition refers to the action of producing something over again. It is an event with substance and form. Repetition in minimalism cannot be thought independent of the content that is repeated. The same holds true for the repetitions of Burger Kings and Coke ads. Claiming that the two worlds implicate each other would seem to discard the contents that are repeated, holding up the pure repetitions themselves. But there is no repetition in itself.⁸

Furthermore, if repetition is thought of as a statistical quantity, we lose a sense of how repetition is manifested in time, or the fact that repetition could be used in different ways and produce different effects. In minimalist pieces, repetition tends to be successive and continuous. But repetition in consumer culture tends to be discontinuous and random in presentation. There is no reason why one commercial might be followed by another, or why the Burger King is here and the Walmart over there. Repetition in minimalism unfolds through sustained attention. In consumer culture repetition is erratic and (notoriously) disrupts attention. In presupposing the conventional notion of repetition Fink fails to recognize that repetition in actuality is the recurrence of a unique content, not the recurrence of a general repetition; and there is an endless variety to the manner in which repetition is presented and to the qualitative, textural, and rhythmic effects it creates.

Ian Quinn's article *Minimal Challenges: Process Music and the Use of Formalist Analysis* makes similar assumptions. Quinn concludes that theory's tools are inadequate to deal with minimalism because it "provides so maddeningly little for theorists to grab onto."⁹ Rather than consider the possibility that this inadequacy exposes a defect in theory's tools, Quinn argues that minimalism belongs to a special category called "process music."¹⁰ But if the pervasiveness of repetition in minimalism is what "maddeningly" reduces the production of theoretic tools, then the appropriate question (although less convenient) is why theory's tools are unprepared to "see" repetition in the first place. Repetition is hardly unique to minimalism, after all.

No doubt, relocating minimalism to a category called "process music" is an improved situation for minimalism. *Process* has the ring of movement, of a temporal conception where repetition is seen rather than factored out. But there are serious questions raised by the very idea that process music could be proposed as *separate* musical category. If music is essentially the unfolding movement of sound in time, how can it be considered as anything *but* process?

Quinn's difficulty with minimalist repetition betrays a somewhat troubling institutional legacy. The concepts through which Quinn situates the problem suggest the influence of musical modernism – a movement well known for its express hostility towards repetition.¹¹ Judy Lochhead has recently argued that the values and outlook of modern theory reflect the ideological preoccupations of modernist composers who founded the American academic institution of music theory:

“As both analysis and theory became self-standing forms of inquiry, the specific link to compositional practice was severed, but the methodologies and conceptual underpinnings...retained this conflation of the speculative and the practical which grew out of a high modern epistemological context.”¹²

One aspect of this inheritance is the conceptual procedure of quantifying all difference in analogies to spatial distance, and to find in these distances their reduction to some unifying rational principle. Quinn reveals this legacy quite vividly, when he states:

“Rather than writing music with low redundancy and high information content, they (minimalist composers) began writing music with high redundancy and low information content.”¹³

Quinn formulates the reaction-against-modernism trope using terms and sensibilities strikingly similar to those of a modernist composer of the 1950's. We needn't look any farther than Milton Babbitt's infamous manifesto *The Composer as Specialist* for a resonance. In it, Babbitt claims the historical superiority of modernist music. Weirdly, his evidence is not its positive quality, but the negative achievement of having reduced its redundancy: “This music employs a tonal vocabulary which is more ‘efficient’ than that of the music of the past, or its derivatives... This increase in efficiency necessarily reduces the ‘redundancy’ of the language.”¹⁴ So, what might be described historically as a colloquial aesthetic ideology appears to inhabit Quinn's ostensibly objective estimation of minimalism's low “information content” and high “redundancy.”¹⁵

Fink's and Quinn's treatments of minimalism demonstrate the common perception that repetition amounts to sameness or redundancy. In both cases this presumed redundancy appears to lack any content. For Fink, this translates into implicating repetition in one domain with

repetition in another, despite their contents or their presentation. For Quinn, minimalist repetition is read through a system that exchanges musical content for quantified “information.” This information resembles the composition techniques and ideologies of modernism: calculable distance and the negation of repetition.

Let’s turn now to the problem of repetition in a philosophical sense. I will briefly focus on a philosopher who is well-known for questioning the notion that repetition equals sameness or a lack of difference, Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze rejects the opposition between repetition and difference outright. Instead, repetition belongs fully to difference itself, which is an absolute, positive condition that cannot be captured or represented in terms of volume or scale (there is no “identity” of difference that manifests as calculable degrees or amounts).¹⁶ It is at this absolute level of difference, or perhaps just above it, that Deleuze begins to speak of repetition. Repetition becomes the shape of difference, the differing of difference, wherever difference is developed in space and time. It is a profoundly creative concept belonging wholly to difference. Peter Hallward describes Deleuze’s philosophy of repetition this way: “Creative repetition can only be thought as the repetition of difference itself... True repetition must involve the intuition of fully singular occurrences, of differences that cannot be exchanged or substituted.”¹⁷ In repetition we find a kind of self-identification of difference to be distinguished positively, prior to the mediation of any concept, symbol, sign, or external identity.

For music theory, stasis or non-movement is absolute in the immediate repetition of an event, while the greatest opposition or contrast is achieved in the maximum of relational difference (the greatest “distance” reached between one thing and another). This is why

minimalism appears to consist of less difference. Deleuze has it the other way: “Real opposition is not a maximum of difference, but a minimum of repetition – a repetition reduced to two, echoing and returning on itself; a repetition which has found the means to define itself.”¹⁸ What Deleuze is saying is that opposition, the dynamic effect of a contrariety, reaches its extreme point in the immediate repetition of an event. Immediate repetition is the positive action of an event that definitively distinguishes itself from what it repeats. Focusing on this point is paramount to grasping the idea that repetition is difference. Seeing repetition as dynamic, as “springing” or “pushing away” from what it repeats, abandons established wisdom that such dynamisms are created in the amount of “distance” between one difference and another. This means replacing “same as...” with “different from...”

Even the few roles repetition could play under conventional analytic lights, such as extending a harmony or confirming an identity are assignments that immediately reduce to the identity or function that it services. Deleuze disagrees that repetition exists in art to play a duplicative role, as a symbol or marker of sameness: “(Artists) do not juxtapose instances of the figure, but rather each time combine an element of one instance with another element of a following instance. They introduce a disequilibrium into the dynamic process of construction, an instability, dissymmetry or gap of some kind which disappears only in the overall effect.”¹⁹ I believe that the ubiquity and kaleidoscopic particularity of musical repetition regardless of style or practice bears Deleuze out. Truly seeing repetition at work in music reveals a colorful play of idea and variety of uses and effects; not just as the most opposed (immediate) repetitions, but as shifting lines crossing and combining musical dimensions in the immanent unfolding of dynamic

creation. The positive, creative power of repetition puts an unlimited array of musical effects into play:

“Repetition is everywhere, as much in what is actualized as in its actualization. It is in the Idea to begin with, and it runs through the varieties of relations and the distribution of singular points. It also determines the reproductions of space and time, as it does the reprises of consciousness. In every case, repetition is the power of difference and differentiation: because it condenses the singularities, or because it accelerates or decelerates time, or because it alters spaces.”²⁰

Dislodging the habit of thinking repetition as sameness or a lack of difference leads to a view of music that comprehends only difference relative to itself and not in relation to anything identical or the same. The implications immediately lead beyond minimalism; indeed, beyond the conventional definition of repetition itself. Ultimately, repetition as a movement of difference belongs first to the duration of tone. Duration is the repetition of tone unfolding its difference in time. Rather than thinking tones as different from other tones in “space,” under this view tones are different from *themselves* in time. It is no coincidence that the theoretic systems which cancel out repetition *also* reduce away duration. Duration and repetition are simply different levels of a primary process of repetition.

Deleuze describes the broader action of repetition as nomadic, “without property, enclosure or measure.” It is “no longer a division of that which is distributed but rather a division among those who distribute themselves in an open space...”²¹ An analytic practice attuned to nomadic organization would hold to the priority of difference to give itself or to distribute itself. It would be interested in the difference of difference, rather than the discovery of unity. As Deleuze puts it, “difference must be shown differing.”²² Thinking in terms of positive difference

reverses the conventional procedure that uncovers the same in what is different. Hallward describes the process this way: “The idea of difference, which is to say the idea of differing ideas, will allow us to think distinct creative trajectories, subtracted from the stability of any created or constituted identity and without any reference to anything other than the being or creating of this trajectory itself.”²³ Rather than bringing to musical experience a preconception of anything normative, a Deleuzian perspective situates the process of discovery on a higher plane, where difference reveals its singularity and individuates its experience. Such a “radical” orientation means only to align the purpose of thought with the “highest object” of music, which Deleuze thinks is “to bring into play simultaneously all these repetitions, with their differences in kind and in rhythm, their respective displaces and disguises, their divergences and decenterings; to embed them in one another and to envelop one or the other in illusions the ‘effect’ of which varies in each case.”²⁴

Though we may affirm the principle of repetition as difference, and therefore abandon the depreciation of minimalist expressive content in principle, its evident embrace of repetition does not mean that all minimalism is good or that more repetition equates with better music. In fact, there is no real basis for thinking of repetition in terms of amount at all. The only question is the creative use to which repetition is mobilized, which has no relative sense – it is the qualitative singularity of musical process as an unfolding, experienced phenomenon. Consequently, *modernist music should not be downgraded categorically for the philosophical hostility to repetition of its practitioners*. All music has duration, and so modernist music can be seen, in the end, to consist of nothing but repetition. But just as with minimalism, the musical question is the creative use to which repetition is directed. Though there are composers who managed, through a

systematic effort, to eliminate any effective action of repetition above the ground of duration, there are many others who simply found more subtle ways to make repetition work. One of the most outspoken modernist critics of minimalist repetition is Elliot Carter.²⁵ But a careful examination of his music finds repetition etched in every corner, inhabiting and spreading across his music like vines. Repetition is a non-denominational resource.

In the end, I can hardly expect that philosophical argument will result in abandoning the “minimal” in the word minimalism. But I do think that there is an opportunity here to examine the underlying assumptions and habits of thought which would give the term its sense. Though we may summarily reject the idea that repetition is the return of the same or the lack of difference, we can also be content to let minimalism be called minimalism. Genres stand for difference, not identity. When we use the term minimalism, we think of the music we know, in all its variety, its madness, its novelty, and its truth. For a genre which seems to have been intellectualized in terms of non-difference and lack of content, there is certainly a wealth of difference and content here to force us to question our premises and to experiment with new ways of thinking musical difference.

¹ Kyle Gann writes that repetition “is perhaps the most stereotypical aspect of minimalist music...” Gann doesn’t attribute repetition to all minimalism because some of the earliest pieces were based on “static” chords or drones. However, under the definition of repetition I lay out here, pure duration would be understood as the repetition of a tone in time. Kyle Gann, *Thankless Attempts at a Definition of Minimalism*, Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music, Continuum, 2006, pg. 300

² Ian Quinn discusses some commentators who have made minimalism out to be banal or regressive (he describes Peter Kivy’s description of minimalism as bordering on a “(self-) parody of the academic fuddy-duddy...”.) Quinn quotes Pierre Boulez who opines that minimalism appeals to “an extremely primitive perception...” Ian Quinn, *Minimal Challenges: Process Music and the Uses of Formalist Analysis*, Contemporary Music Review, Vol. 25, No. 3, June 2006, pg. 284-285

³ Jeffrey Bell explores Deleuze’s project to think difference, analyzing Deleuze’s critique of Aristotle’s philosophy of difference: “Aristotle is quite straightforward...in holding to the position that difference can only be thought in terms of identity.” Jeffrey Bell, *Philosophy at the Edge of Chaos: Gilles Deleuze and the Philosophy of Difference*, University of Toronto Press, 2006, pg. 125 “Rather than developing a concept of difference which gives credit to its productive nature...rather than thinking difference as difference, this task of thinking becomes confused with developing a concept of difference in terms of its inscription within the identity of an undetermined concept, such as genus or the analogy within judgment in the case of Aristotle.” (pg. 134)

⁴ Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice*; University of California Press, 2005

⁵ (Fink, pg. x)

⁶ (Fink, pg. xi)

⁷ Fink advances this argument: “...counterintuitive as it may seem, the more relentlessly abstract and repetitious the music, the better its structures and effects model those underlying advertising.” Properly speaking, no music, as sound in time, can be intrinsically “abstract.” It is Fink who has made all repetition abstract and therefore reducible to what underlies consumerism. (Fink, pg. 75)

⁸ The assumption I’m relying on here is that every repetition is a haecceity – that is, it is *this* repetition of *this* content in *this* context.

⁹ (Quinn, pg. 293)

¹⁰ Quinn does not use “process music” interchangeably with minimalism; rather, process music is the minimalism he is “most interested” in, which is all of Steve Reich, early Phillip Glass, Arvo Part’s “tintinnabuli” music, and some music by Rzewski, Riley, Adams, Torke, Lang, Gordon, and others (see pg. 287).

¹¹ The reader will note that I take “modernism” in the (usefully vague) sense that includes not only a loose set of musical tendencies (such as avoidance of pulse, avoidance of tonal centers, etc) but also a general set of ideological, cultural, and political structures which shapes them. It is this latter set of structures that the bulk of my critique is directed to, rather than modernist music in general. Like any other genre, modernist music runs the gamut from bad music to great music, and everything in-between.

¹² Judy Lochhead, “Modern” *Musical Analysis*, paper presented at the AMS/SMT Annual Conference, 2006, pg. 16

¹³ Quinn, pg. 292

¹⁴ Milton Babbitt, “The Composer as Specialist” from *The Collected Essays of Milton Babbitt*, Princeton University Press, 2003, pg. 49

¹⁵ Babbitt’s derisive attitude towards “redundancy” is evidence of the modernist ideological hostility towards repetition in general – repetition that would produce, for example, tonal centers and pulses. It is in this sense that we may say that ideology could inhabit a musical practice. It isn’t literally *in* the music, but its influence *elsewhere* (during the composition process, for example) may be inferred.

¹⁶ Peter Hallward sums up Deleuze’s basic position on the absolute condition of difference: “Deleuze’s ontology is meant to revitalize or re-energize being, to endow it with a primary and irreducible dynamism... What grounds or causes these processes... is simply the affirmation of an unconditionally self-causing power as such. What differs is a power of absolute self-differing.” Peter Hallward, *Out of this World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation*; Verso, 2006, pg. 13; “Against Aristotle and the whole Aristotelian legacy, Deleuze sets out to free the concept of difference from any external mediation, any subjection to the normalizing channels of generality, identity, opposition, analogy, and resemblance.” pg. 14

¹⁷ (Hallward, pg. 71)

¹⁸ (Deleuze, D&R, pg. 13)

¹⁹ (Deleuze, D&R, pg. 19)

²⁰ (Deleuze, D&R pg. 220)

²¹ (Deleuze, D&R, pg. 36)

²² (Deleuze, D&R, pg. 56)

²³ (Hallward, pg. 13)

²⁴ (Deleuze, D&R, pg. 293) Deleuze actually says this is the highest object of art; obviously this would apply to music, so long as we do not limit the application to what is sometimes distinguished categorically as “art music.”

²⁵ Elliot Carter: “About one minute of minimalism is a lot, because it is all the same.” Quoted by Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimalist Music as Cultural Practice*, University of California Press, 2005, pg. 63