

## Repetition, Difference, and the ‘Minimal’ in Minimalism

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To critics and apologists alike, repetition is the most salient feature and the “problematic nexus”<sup>1</sup> of minimalist music. For critics, repetition in minimalism is responsible for its static, banal, and regressive character.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, local

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<sup>1</sup> 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

<sup>2</sup> 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

<sup>3</sup> 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)

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*<sup>4</sup> Robert Fink defines minimalism as that “maximally repetitive” music which came to flourish in American “postindustrial, mass-mediated consumer society.”<sup>5</sup> 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...”<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> Repetition refers to the action of producing something over again. It is an event with substance and form.

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

<sup>5</sup> (Fink, pg. x)

<sup>6</sup> (Fink, pg. xi)

<sup>7</sup> 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)