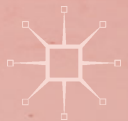


EIRINI KARTSAKI

REPETITION IN
PERFORMANCE

returns and invisible forces



Repetition in Performance

Eirini Kartsaki

Repetition in Performance

Returns and Invisible Forces

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For my parents, Antonis and Konstantina

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Introduction: Invisible Forces

This is neither a sofa nor a bench. If there was ever a mattress, it now seems to be missing. Instead, there is a thin layer of a cushioned structure, a soft divan of some kind. A pale khaki pillow lies on the right hand side. There is a figure on this divan, looking at us. It is not clear whether the figure is male or female. What is most striking about the figure is its posture. The pelvis seems pressed against the back of the divan, which rests on the wall, with one leg sticking up, taking over the picture. The right arm is extended and the head tilted back towards us. This could be a bedroom or a living room. There is also a red-orange semicircle at the bottom of the painting, which could be a table, with soft edges. This is not a very comfortable posture: it looks like the awkward position one would assume only if one had a broken leg, or a pulled muscle, or some kind of neck problem. It looks like an uncomfortable posture, but a necessary one. The figure is naked apart from what looks like a faint sandal on one foot. The leg that is sticking up is swollen, perhaps cooling against the wall. This figure is trying something out, or is waiting for something to happen. We know nothing about this scene. What is at stake here? A sense of anticipation, perhaps, or the body crumbling into itself. The body protesting, the body wanting to come first. The body ignoring everything else and taking over. The naked, swollen, uncomfortable, reclining body.

The second figure is standing on a precarious structure of some undefined furniture, perhaps an armchair; a really flat armchair. The figure is bending forward as if to reach something. Or to look for something. We

do not know whether this precarious armchair rests against the wall, but if it does, the figure has mounted the armchair to look for something behind it; perhaps a hairpin or the television remote. The brush strokes do not reveal the gender, which is not important anyway. What seems important is the bending, the going down, the looking for something. Everything else in the room fades away. Head goes down first, at the level of the pelvis, knees bent, arm reaching. A careful balance is required; the muscles are really working. This does not seem like a momentary action (pick up the hairpin and go), but rather a prolonged act of bending.

The third figure is sitting on a chair: this is a more relaxed posture, one leg on top of the other. Something weird is going on however; the right leg, on top of which rests the left, seems to be melting away. Looking closely, there is no leg to be seen but a pool of flesh on the floor, trying to escape through the black door opening. If there is no right leg, then the left is not quite resting; it is rather held in mid-air, pretending to be resting. A lot of effort has to be made in order for this to happen; the tummy muscles must be working, some pain on the side of the neck perhaps, and a faint smile. This is difficult but enjoyable: holding the posture, working hard to hold the posture, allowing the leg to melt away.

OF REPETITION AND INVISIBLE FORCES

What interests Francis Bacon in his paintings, Gilles Deleuze tells us, is bodies: bodies that sit on a stool for many hours; bodies trying to escape the scene, fleeing through a tip or a hole; sleeping bodies with one arm raised; ordinary bodies in ordinary situations of discomfort or constraint.¹ Bacon's figures seem to be doing something, perhaps something subtle, or they seem to be having something done to them, as if some kind of force is being exerted upon them. This force may have to do with the effort to hold a specific posture, to stretch on the divan with one leg extended, to bend down and look behind the armchair for a hairpin. What is happening with these figures is something to do with their bodies. The force at work seems to have an effect on these bodies and their flesh, which is swollen or melting away. This force is not visible initially, but is rendered visible through the effect on the body. Bacon's concern here is 'not to render the visible, but to render visible',² which may happen like this: 'A man ordered to sit still for hours on a narrow stool is bound to assume contorted postures'.³ The figures in

Bacon's paintings are still, in a prolonged bending posture, or frozen in the middle of a stroll, but at the same time something is moving within them. They contract and dilate, expand and stretch. This forceful movement becomes visible through the body, and at its ultimate moment it becomes a spasm; a movement in place, Deleuze suggests, which reveals what is at stake in Bacon's work: 'the action of invisible forces on the body'.⁴ What occurs between two spasms, two movements of contraction in Bacon's figures is the result of capturing these invisible forces and rendering them visible: 'in art, and in painting as in music, it is not a matter of reproducing or inventing forms, but of capturing forces'.⁵ This is also what Paul Cézanne attempts to do through his work: 'rendering visible the folding force of mountains, the germinative force of a seed, the thermic force of a landscape'.⁶ Van Gogh, we are told, goes further than that to invent unknown, unheard-of forces; the force of a sunflower seed, for example.⁷

So, the question that Bacon considers in his work is this: 'How can one make invisible forces visible?'⁸ His figures seem agitated, on the edge of their seat. They are awkward, uncomfortable at times, holding a contorted posture, waiting for something to take place. This extraordinary agitation, Deleuze suggests, is derived from 'the forces of pressure, dilation, contraction, flattening, and elongation' exerted on these immobile bodies. It is as if these invisible forces were striking the body from many different angles. The head of some of these figures looks distorted, deformed, melted or wiped away, marking 'the zone where the force is in the process of striking'.⁹ The deformation of the heads and bodies therefore becomes important; a deformation, which is bodily, static, happening in one place, or rather in-place, subordinating movement to force.¹⁰ These deformed bodies are not tortured bodies. Their postures 'are the most natural postures of a body that has been reorganised by the simple force being exerted upon it: the desire to sleep, to vomit, to turn over, to remain seated as long as possible'.¹¹ Such a deformation is both static and in movement; it happens to the body that seems to hold a posture for a long time, longer than usual, while the environment around it begins to stir: 'walls twitch and slide, chairs bend or rear up a little, clothes curl like burning paper'.¹²

There is a moment in Karen Christopher and Sophie Grodin's performance *Control Signal* by the company Haranczak/Navarre where both performers start to shake, to vibrate, to move with control from side to side (Fig. 1.1). Grodin and Christopher shake their arms from



Fig. 1.1 Karen Christopher and Sophie Grodin in *Control Signal* by Haranczak/Navarre, image Jemima Yong

side to side, moving as if they do not know that they are moving. They both look ahead. Christopher's shoulders are relaxed, arms shaking by her side. Grodin's right arm is stiff, shaking. This feels like a farewell, or a tired hand that is waving goodbye. It feels like someone asleep with one arm still raised. It is a signal in a traffic light, or trying to encourage the crabs to escape the fire. Go, go, go, now, while you still can. It's also perhaps the smell of something rotten and the attempt to create an air current. I watch this with fascination (Lilian Baylis Studio, Sadler's Wells, 2014). I lean in, sitting on the edge of my seat. The bodies in front of me are ordinary bodies in an ordinary situation of constraint; they are doing something, or they seem to be having something done to them, as if some kind of force is being exerted upon them. Something is moving within them, but they make an effort to hold a specific posture. What is happening to these figures is to do with some kind of force that affects their bodies, an invisible force that models the flesh or shakes it, that causes a spasm. Something is rendered visible here through the assumed posture of the two bodies on stage.¹³ But there is one more body here,

one more body that is waiting for something to happen. One more body that wants to come first, to be taken into account, to take over. One more body that feels like it is standing on a precarious structure of some undefined furniture. A body that is holding a prolonged posture on the edge of its seat, one leg on top of the other, not quite resting.

That body is mine. Mine, watching. I am watching Grodin and Christopher standing still, holding their bodies, shaking their arms. I am watching them do that, and while this is taking place I am also watching myself do things, having things done to me. I make an effort: to watch, to stand still, to hold my body. The perpetual shaking acts on my body, it makes it assume a contorted posture. I seem to want something from this scene, yet I do not yet know what that is, and the force of wanting does things to me and my body.¹⁴

In his discussion of forces, Deleuze draws an interesting example from a different painter. This time, he directs his attention to French painter Jean Millet, who was criticised for painting peasants carrying an offertory like a sack of potatoes. Responding to the criticism, Millet suggested that he was not interested in painting the offertory, or a sack of potatoes, but rather the force of the weight.¹⁵ In the instance of *Control Signal* I experience the force of the weight of the bodies in front of me, but also that of my own body; I experience its contours, how the body folds into itself and expands again while I am watching. The scene is a scene of repetition in which the two performers of *Control Signal* repeat the same movement, the shaking of the arms, but also a scene where they repeat each other. They are standing there, wearing the same working dress, the same socks, the same shoes. As time passes, I can feel the force of the weight, like carrying a sack of potatoes, more intensely with time. My body bows under the weight, crumbles, folds into itself, and then opens up again. I experience a force exerted on my body, the force of the desire to see, to be part of, to take in.

I offer the above examples of Bacon's work alongside the performance *Control Signal* because I want to consider how these examples create a specific type of experience for me as a viewer. What I discuss in this book is the experience of repetition in performance. I find that describing such an experience is difficult. Therefore, pointing towards different examples of experience and articulating what these may have in common is perhaps a more helpful way to consider experiences of repetition. Bacon's paintings and *Control Signal* have something in common: they make my body feel a certain way. Moreover, they make my body assume

a contorted posture that is a similar posture to the ones Bacon depicts in his work. The scene of shaking in *Control Signal* might be a helpful instance of performance to use in identifying what is at stake in the viewer's experience of repetition more generally. The shaking, which is difficult to describe, functions perhaps as an appropriate example of how difficult it is to account for repetition. The shaking may also function as a metaphor for the unrepresentability of repetition, the difficulty of writing about it. Repetition seems to perform a demand upon the viewer to come to terms with this unrepresentability. The movement of shaking escapes us; it is difficult to pin down. This book asks, amongst other questions: How do we account for difficult, evasive experiences of performance? The shaking bodies in *Control Signal* are like bodies trying to escape, flow out of themselves, disgorge through a tip or a hole. This is also, perhaps, how I experience repetition: I feel unsettled, ready to flee, on the verge of something, on the verge of what is about to happen. The body assumes a particular shape under such circumstances, experiencing what may resemble 'the violence of a hiccup, of the urge to vomit, but also of a hysterical, involuntary smile'.¹⁶ The experience of repetition in theatre, I suggest here, may resemble the experience of holding a contorted posture. Through that posture, the invisible forces of repetition become visible, revealing their effects on the body of the viewer.

When encountering repetition in performance, it is sometimes hard to explain what is happening to me. My experience feels on the verge of language. I experience the same type of thing when engaging with some other artworks. It is difficult to know exactly what to say, how to describe the work, or to fully come to terms with what it does to me. (And I consider that as a sign of work that will stay with me for a little while.) Something happens which is difficult to recount as it does not have to do with a story; in fact, it 'avoids the detour or boredom of conveying a story'; it is, as Paul Valéry puts it, a sensation.¹⁷ Sensation is embodied, transmitted directly and goes beyond the illustrative and figurative, Bacon suggests in an interview.¹⁸ There is a link here between sensation and forces: 'for a sensation to exist, a force must be exerted on the body'.¹⁹ Holding a contorted posture, which is what repetition seems to be doing in certain instances, is such a sensation. Sensation seems to be useful in terms of describing the experience of repetition and foregrounding some of the key ways in which I articulate what repetition does to me as a viewer. I have turned to Bacon and Deleuze to create a vocabulary, in order to think about repetition and its difficulty.

Although Bacon's paintings have, at first glance, nothing to do with repetition, certain modes of experience and ways of describing these modes are made available through his work. I draw on three scenes of bodies: Bacon's paintings, Christopher and Grodin's shaking, and myself watching. In all of these scenes, the body is doing things or has things done to it. The body seems to assume a specific, if subtle, posture. If repetition invites the viewer to assume a specific posture, then that posture seems to resemble the ones in Bacon's paintings described above.

So, the question arises: What kind of forces does repetition in performance capture and make visible, or felt in the body? What kind of force does repetition put forward? Deleuze has discussed elementary forces like pressure, inertia, weight, attraction, gravitation. Cézanne has tried to make visible the folding force of mountains, the germinative force of a seed, the thermic force of landscape. Van Gogh has gone further to invent unknown, un-heard of forces, such as the force of a sunflower seed. Bacon has made visible in his figures the force of desire 'to sleep, to vomit, to turn over, to remain seated as long as possible'.²⁰ Repetition holds such forces, too; it holds the unheard-of, invented forces of repetition, of wanting more, of perpetually desiring. Repetition's force is the force of desire for more; such force may do things to the viewer's body, make it assume a specific posture. Leaning in or sitting on the edge of my seat is one such contorted posture; it reveals a desire to take in, to be part of, to move closer to what is happening on stage. My body assumes that posture when I watch repetition, but also, after a while the contorted posture may turn into something else, a vibration of sorts, a shaking or a spasm. Repetition's force, I will show, is an erotic one: one that establishes a sense of anticipation, that recognises resemblances, that remembers. It is a force that thrusts the viewer into an experience of repetition, again and again. It is also a force that drives this writing project forward, that wants to account for certain experiences of performance, that keeps me going. In doing so, I do no more than follow repetition and its force. I am captivated by its power to lead me through its reiterations, to know where to begin and where to stop. Sometimes this force may dissipate, so we have to wait, Gertrude Stein suggests, until repetition becomes forceful, and then we begin again. Repetition's force invites me to participate in it, to experience its radical potential of recycling words, phrases and movement. I go to the theatre looking for the moment when something, even something subtle, is repeated. I take pleasure in it and revisit this experience many times after. I love

repetition. I long for it. Clearly, I am addicted to repetition: I am not sure what to do with myself when repetition ends, so I return to it, again and again; or I go looking for it. My love for repetition is such a force; also the force that drives this project forward; writing makes this force visible.

Yet there is something to be said about viewers who do not love or long for repetition. This book makes a case for these viewers too. It accounts for the difficulty of repetition and what shape that difficulty may take, while acknowledging that the experience of repetition is and can only be subjective. This book invites a consideration of repetition in relation to specific types of experience that may be helpful in thinking about the pleasures we derive from the theatre, and the difficulty that arises from durational work, but also the ways in which we choose to account for such experiences. All examples discussed in this book function in three distinct ways: they use repetition as a compositional principle; they also draw attention to the way they use repetition, inviting viewers to experience repetition as ever-changing and non-ending; they finally invite the viewer to return to these experiences in order to resolve their difficulty or complexity. As the author of this book, I have chosen these specific examples, or rather, these examples have chosen me. These performances enable me to speak of the pleasures I have found in repetition, but these are not necessarily examples that the reader of this book ‘has to know about’ in order to engage with the considerations of repetition I put forward. The reader may feel compelled to bring in other examples of performances that repeat; my aim here is to discuss ways of experiencing, making sense of, taking pleasure in and writing about repetition.

Not all types of repetition are equally interesting or significant for me. In this book, I point towards the types of functions arising from repetition that I consider important or worth consideration. There are also boring types of repetition; bad, insignificant repetitions. I am not interested in these. I am only interested in the ones that affect my body, that vibrate, that move, and move me from side to side. Repetition’s force invites me closer, but also pushes me away. Such a force may work in two ways: creating a continuity within the work, but also pushing against it; causing chaos, going against the current, muddying the waters, revealing that repetition’s force may have to do with fear and hope; the hope that repetition will keep going, and the fear that it may end. I will discuss such forces throughout this book. These may not be directly visible