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On and On: Repetition
as Process and
Pleasure in
Electronic Dance
Music

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ABSTRACT: Repetition has often been cast in a negative light, associated with immature or regressive states. This view is reflected in music criticism and pedagogy, recast in aesthetic terms and it also reappears in cultural criticism, attacking repetition as a dangerous tool for social control. Defenses that have been mounted in favor of repetition seem inadequate in that they tend to recategorize certain repetitive practices as not-quite-repetition, rather than defend repetition *tout court*. This article uses examples from Electronic Dance Music (EDM) to provide an alternate approach to repetition that focuses on the experience of pleasure instead of a static attribution of aesthetic or ethical value. In particular, this is explored through three concepts: repetition as process, repetition as prolongation of pleasure, and process itself as pleasurable. Underlying these concepts is a formulation of pleasure first coined as *Funktionslust*, or "function pleasure," reconceived here as "process pleasure."

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[1] "I LIKE THE TUNE, BUT IT'S SO REPETITIVE." ⁽¹⁾

[1.1] Why does this sentence make intuitive sense, even though the adjective "repetitive" has no modifier indicating a positive or negative evaluation? Much like adjectives such as "monotonous," "boring," and "unoriginal," "repetitive" seems to come with a negative connotation built-in. Outside the realm of aesthetic criticism, however, repetitiveness can play seemingly positive roles. For example, it is central to memory formation as well as to redundant error-checking in data transfer protocols, and it plays a large role in pedagogy, childhood development, and pattern recognition in general. ⁽²⁾ This connection to childhood learning, however, has at times worked against repetition,

associating it with childlike behavior, underdeveloped consciousness, and regression.

[1.2] Returning to the humanities and social sciences, this interplay of developmental necessity and psychopathology surfaces in discourse as anything from unease to suspicion to outright hostility and, in turn, many attempts to rehabilitate repetition read like an apology or an awkward change of subject. It is my intention here to offer another rehabilitation—or, rather, a reevaluation—of repetition, which reads neither as apology nor sidestep. Rather than ponder whether repetition can be good and/or beautiful, I will focus on how repetition can generate pleasure—a question of performance and practice rather than ontology. To illustrate these practices of pleasurable repetition, I will turn to a number of musical examples taken from a genre most explicitly associated with repetitiveness: Electronic Dance Music (hereafter: EDM).

[2] THE REPUTATION OF REPETITION

[2.1] The reputation of repetition in various disciplines and discourses is far more complex than I had first let on; this complexity requires a return to history before moving on with my own theorizing. My work responds to the contributions of many previous writers and it will be easier to explicate my own positions after having reviewed those of other prominent figures in discourses on repetition. I use the plural form of discourse here because, as will soon become apparent, there are several discursive streams that address repetition, not all of which are in constant dialogue with the others. This discursive diversity, along with the broad scope of a concept such as repetition, makes a comprehensive and exhaustive recounting next to impossible; the following review is therefore necessarily selective and merely serves to briefly historicize repetition.

[2.2] Although I intend to foreground practice and experience in this paper, most discourse on repetition in the past has been keenly ontological. One salient exception to this trend is the work of Benjamin in his consideration of art and reproduction. In his essay, he argues that the aura of authenticity attached to a work of art is destroyed or liquidated when it can be easily and precisely reproduced. He argues that “authenticity is outside technical...reproducibility” and thus it is dependent on the failure of technology.⁽³⁾ (As a side note: this puts an interesting spin on post-digital or ‘glitch’ music, where failing technology is part of the aesthetic.) From the perspective of a Marxist critique of cultural value, the liquidation of authenticity—or, rather, *bourgeois* authenticity—is not necessarily negative, and his stance on repetition is correspondingly ambiguous.

[2.3] Admittedly, Benjamin and I are not frying the same proverbial fish. He is more concerned with the duplication of complete works and the impact that has on their exchange value, while I am more concerned with repetition internal to musical performances and their aesthetic value. Nonetheless--if I can run with the metaphor--these fish swim in the same pond; the fields of inquiry overlap and writers publishing in spaces closer to mine have drawn on his arguments. Moreover, they often rely on an active re-interpretation (misreading?) of his argument: the threat to authenticity is no longer the repeatable artwork, but the *repeating* one (and the stakes appear to run beyond authenticity).

[2.4] After Benjamin, one of the most often cited and recited critiques of repetition comes from the realm of psychology and psychoanalysis. The work of developmental psychologists often considers repetition as a learning behavior essential to childhood development. However, this has become a liability for repetition as some writers have made this connection into a rigid one-to-one mapping. Proceeding from this logic, repetition is only suited for didactic situations; in any other context it becomes childish, immature and regressive. This idea is perhaps best summarized in a quote by Susan McClary, who is paraphrasing Adorno paraphrasing Schoenberg interpreting Freud: "if we understand a piece of music as an allegory of personal development, then any reiteration registers as regression--as a failure or even a refusal to keep up the unending struggle for continual growth demanded for successful self-actualization".⁽⁴⁾

[2.5] This particular chain of writers is quite apt, as Schoenberg's writings on repetition seem to be informed at some level by Freud's interpretation of repetitive behavior; in turn, Adorno seems to take his view of musical repetition from Schoenberg and that of the psychological implications from Freud. Although the foregoing quote from McClary neatly summarizes his most widely circulated position, I shall trace Freud's work on both pleasure and repetition in some detail. This is not only because many of the scholars mentioned below draw on his work, but also because I will be drawing on the work of one of his contemporary critics for a model of repetition and pleasure in the following section (see [3.3]).

[2.6] Although Freud's theories are often dealt with as a synchronic whole, they in fact developed and changed over time; for our purposes, the most important of these changes was the "turning of 1920".⁽⁵⁾ Before writing *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud had believed that all human behavior could be explained by the "pleasure principle": that all actions were set in motion by an initial "unpleasurable tension" and that these actions tended toward relaxing this tension through a production of pleasure or

a reduction of unpleasure.⁽⁶⁾ In this book, however, Freud rejected this as too simplistic; it did not explain why humans sometimes subjected themselves to unpleasure—whether voluntarily or compulsively. He then added a second principle, the “reality principle”: the postponement of immediate pleasure (or the toleration of immediate unpleasure) as a step towards a more distant and indirect pleasure. However, this principle did not explain what Freud called “repetition compulsion,” which came from the observation of repetitive children’s games such as *Fort-Da* (similar to “Peek-a-boo”). Freud rejected the theory that such games aimed at a mastery over the mother’s absence, instead preferring a mastery of a different kind. By his interpretation, repetition was related to an ego instinct that sought to restore an earlier state of inertia—a pre-organic state of stillness that can only be truly fulfilled in death. Freud named this instinct *Thanatos*, the death instinct, against which he also erected its antagonist *Eros*, the life instinct; this division of instincts came to replace his previous ego/sexual division. It was this connection between repetition and the death instinct that enabled Freud to explain why some of his patients felt compelled to repeat past traumas in their current lives (i. e. repetition compulsion). The “regressive” or “retrograde” character that Freud saw in the death instinct made repetition not a process of psychological development, but the mark of an immature or underdeveloped ego.⁽⁷⁾

[2.7] Apparently drawing on Freud, Schoenberg often depicts his ideal listener as a ‘wakeful and trained’ mind; one that has no wish to be insulted by having the same musical idea presented to him repeatedly.⁽⁸⁾ However, Schoenberg also acknowledges in *Die Grundlagen der musikalischen Komposition* that “comprehensibility in music seems to be impossible without repetition”.⁽⁹⁾ As Andreas Jacob has noted in his paper on this issue, Schoenberg displays a certain unease or conflictedness with regards to repetition most likely arising from this collision of philosophical ideals and compositional practicalities.⁽¹⁰⁾

[2.8] While Schoenberg’s concerns about repetition resided mostly in its effect on the individual listener, Adorno also placed repetition in the broader context of culture (industry) and society. Although Adorno’s commentary on repetition is scattered among his writings and somewhat inchoate we can organize them around issues of standardization and regression. Generally speaking, Adorno’s standardization-critiques tended to focus (like Benjamin) on the repetition of entire art objects, while his regression-critiques tended to focus on repetition as a formal, intra-opus process. Adorno identifies a process of standardization in repetitive cultural forms through a twofold mapping of (capitalist) industrial production and marketing onto artistic production: *part*

interchangeability (or *modular design*) and *pseudo-individuality*.⁽¹¹⁾ This latter term refers to the superficial details of a commodity, such as racing stripes on a car, that cause a consumer to prefer one over the other, even though they are essentially identical. In one instance, Adorno provides an example of how the culture industry enforces standardization and passive listening by using repetition to create a feeling of recognition, which eventually transmutes into the acceptance of a cultural object that would have otherwise been rejected.⁽¹²⁾ Continuing in this same vein, Adorno critiques "traditional" art music for its repetitive use of *topoi* (part-interchangeability), which composers covered with a patina of variation (pseudo-individuality).⁽¹³⁾ In this same passage, Adorno imagines the driving force behind such compositional standardization to be a stubborn, "regressive repetition," which leads us to Adorno's second set of criticisms against repetition.

[2.9] As the term "regressive repetition" implies, Adorno's notion of repetition as regression is informed by a Freudian psychoanalytic tradition. Although this regression sometimes seemed to imply a reactionary view of history as circular and thus foreclosing on rupture and revolution,⁽¹⁴⁾ his lengthier use of repetition as regression in his critique of Stravinsky's work is psychoanalytically inflected.⁽¹⁵⁾ This psychoanalytic register is reinforced by the other vocabulary he uses to critique Stravinsky: catatonia, hebephrenia, infantilism, psychosis, fetishism, depersonalization, dissociation. Indeed, it appears that Adorno's strategy was to throw the entire psychoanalytic arsenal at Stravinsky's music, in the hope that something would stick; the result of this strategy is that each psychopathological term (including regressive repetition) appears briefly and without a great deal of elaboration on how he understands these disorders to work.

[2.10] In addition to Adorno's explicit reasons, Ingrid Monson suggests that his own life experiences under the burgeoning Third Reich might have led to a more immediate and emotional response to repetition. Perhaps he associated musical repetition with the rhythms of marching, and thus with militarism and fascism?⁽¹⁶⁾ While I like the idea that Adorno was, indeed, a human with his own share of fears and neuroses, I do not think that his view of repetition arises purely from transference. In other words, we should not dismiss Adorno's critique simply because his tone of voice sometimes approaches panic. Rather, the explanatory power of Adorno's critiques rest on two points:

1. as regards standardization, the degree of power and causality one affords to the structural homology Adorno traces from musical form to social organization and the psyche;⁽¹⁷⁾ and

2. as regards regression, the ability of Freudian-influenced models of repetition and infantilism to comprehend pleasure-generating musical repetition (see [3.2-3]). Monson nonetheless bolsters her argument with the suggestion that, in the shadows cast by Stalin and Hitler, the sort of participation and collectivity often implied by repetitive musical practices is itself suspect. For Adorno, joining into a system also perpetuates it, where the system is implied to be fascist or otherwise oppressive.

[2.11] As we will soon see, this view of collectivity runs counter to those frequently found in anthropology and ethnomusicology. Nonetheless, Adorno's arguments are still used to great effect in popular music criticism, often employed by popular music critics themselves. Phrases such as "It's all just the same song over and over," or "It's not songwriting anymore, just studio production," echo these same Adornian critiques and fears of industrialization and mass mediation.

[2.12] To a greater degree than the preceding discursive streams of cultural studies, critical theory and art criticism, music theory and analysis have historically aimed for objectivity, tending to avoid evaluative claims. While this statement is less tenable now as the landscape of theory changes, the ethical and evaluative questions asked of repetition still tend to be avoided in this field in favor of descriptive typologies.⁽¹⁸⁾ Despite this overt avoidance of value statements, these typologies still offer some cultural commentary, even if indirectly. For example, Rebecca Leydon's typology of minimalist tropes includes six very interpretive types: Maternal, Mantric, Kinetic, Totalitarian, Motoric and Aphasic. While limits of space (and time) preclude a closer examination of these categories, it is worth noting that, according to Leydon's explication, most of these terms rely on an allegorical connection between repetition as a loss of musical syntax, and repetition as a loss of the musical subject (imagined here as the listener).⁽¹⁹⁾ Since, in a postmodern context, the loss of the subject may not necessarily be a failure, her view is not as explicitly negative as that of others. Repetition remains a loss, however: a destructive rather than generative force.

[2.13] Nonetheless, this emphasis on how repetition works rather than what it is or how valuable it is informs my own intended focus on practice and performance rather than ontology. Although I still intend to address issues of politics and cultural value, music theory's focus on process is crucial to an effective reevaluation of repetition. Also crucial to this reevaluation is a consideration of more positive perspectives on repetition—views that can contrast the pessimistic and suspicious tone

of much of the foregoing discourse. Ethnomusicology, through its anthropological lens, has provided some of the most cogent arguments for repetition, especially in the study of African and African-Diasporic expressive culture.

[2.14] John Miller Chernoff's 1979 examination of West African music-making provides one of the earliest comprehensive explorations of repetition to be published under the ethnomusicological banner. He takes a largely optimistic approach, arguing that repetition allows for a more participatory mode of music-making and, in turn, that the interlocking layers of West African percussion use repetition to 'lock' its participants into a musical instantiation of social relationships.⁽²⁰⁾ Like Adorno, Chernoff sees collectivity in repetitive music, but instead maps this to a more benign *communitas*, whence individuality can arise without being alienated. This positive spin on participation has been furthered by the work of Charles Keil most notably, whose notion of 'participatory discrepancies' relies on the ability of individuals to make personalized but compatible contributions to a communal, egalitarian groove.⁽²¹⁾

[2.15] This homology between musical structure and social structure is a common trope in ethnomusicology, and it is not without its weaknesses. Steven Feld's essay, entitled "Sound Structure as Social Structure," considers how the relatively egalitarian and classless features of Kaluli society may find resonance and rearticulation in their musical practice. While his argumentation remains largely in favor of this structural homology, he does address inequalities in both social and musical practice largely revolving around gender.⁽²²⁾ Ingrid Monson points this out when she uses the example of James Brown's band to show how a seemingly egalitarian musical practice nonetheless involves a division of labor and a corresponding division of power, money and prestige.⁽²³⁾ Thus two useful insights can be taken from ethnomusicology:

1. that the collectivity often read into repetition can have positive possibilities as well as negative; and
2. that the apparent structure of musical sounds does not always translate into social, political and economic realities.

[2.16] From the earliest reports of the colonial encounter, rhythm and repetition have had a racial valence, doing "work" as a difference-making calculus of ethnic and racial others. It is little surprise, then, that questions of repetition surface frequently in studies of the African diaspora. This is especially appropriate for this literature review, which precedes an engagement with examples of Electronic Dance Music, since the African diaspora has played a significant role in the development of EDM genres. Disco emerged in the 60s and 70s in New York

at predominantly black and Puerto Rican gay clubs as a mix of gospel, R&B and funk. Similarly, predominantly black, Puerto-Rican and gay communities served as crucibles for early house (Chicago), garage (New York) and techno (Detroit). It is with particular interest, then, that I turn to Veit Erlmann's contribution to Monson's book on the African diaspora. In an essay that lies somewhere between ethnomusicology and popular music studies, Erlmann uses the commonly-assumed connection of repetition to black expressive culture to bring up the concept of Signifyin(g).⁽²⁴⁾ Using Henry Louis Gates's formulation as a starting point,⁽²⁵⁾ Erlmann defines Signifyin(g) as a discursive strategy common in nearly all African-diasporic expressive culture. This strategy entails the use, reuse and misuse of pre-existing cultural forms and artifacts in contexts that often bring out ironic, unexpected or subversive meanings. Erlmann goes on to suggest that, in the context of Signifyin(g), repetition foregrounds style and manner over the presentation of novel content. Thus, if the communication of content is not a priority, Rebecca Leydon's mapping of loss of musical syntax to a loss of the musical subject does not hold for musics of the African Diaspora. As Erlmann argues, repetition does not aim at a reflection of reality, but a ritualization of reality.⁽²⁶⁾

[2.17] However, Erlmann's interpretation of how repetition functions has not—to my knowledge—been taken up in the mainstream of popular music studies/criticism. Contributions from popular music discourses have generally fallen into both positive and negative categories. For the most part, those popular music scholars who do directly address repetition either rearticulate Adorno's critiques or lionize repetition by characterizing repetitive music as essentially transgressive and oppositional. In this latter case, repetitive music is radicalized as the mortal enemy of the dominant discourse of Western art music, heroically disrupting narrative and denying meaning. In this manner, one might map repetition to cultural rebellion and social rupture. However, the same could be argued for radically disjunct and abstract non-repetitive music, and certainly not all production of repetitive music occurs in oppositional, transgressive contexts. A great many things may offend narrowly imagined notions of Western art music traditions, and thus repetition gains no special distinction in this respect.

[2.18] Richard Middleton, in his essay on repetition and popular music, touches upon an important issue for Electronic Dance Music. He considers Kiparski's continuum of variability and formula for oral poetry, encompassing three categories on this continuum, from 'fixed' to 'flexible' to 'free', where 'fixed' represents the most repetitive and unvaried forms.⁽²⁷⁾ Kiparski then correlates the two extremes of this

continuum to a parallel continuum of function from 'ritual' to 'entertainment.' Middleton suggests a corresponding musical continuum, with disco at one end and Jimi Hendrix at the other.⁽²⁸⁾ Although he stops just short of raising the issue, he nonetheless provides a path to identifying an underlying evaluation of unvaried repetition that reduces it to a purely functional and non-aesthetic object. Following from his example, disco as the "entertainment" end of the spectrum risks being dismissed as merely a soundtrack for an oft-derided and primitivized ritual of sexual sociality. This point has also been made with regards to Electronic Dance Music in the work of Mark Butler.⁽²⁹⁾

[2.19] Middleton also tries to explain the seemingly common-sense criticisms of repetition in popular music, even from within popular music discourses. Phrases such as "It's all the same" make sense because of a slippage in evaluative logic. There is an implied and/or ideological sense in which "a particular conventionalized proportion of repetition to non-repetition is naturalized".⁽³⁰⁾ Consequently, popular music is often judged to exceed this proportion and thus to be in bad taste.

[2.20] This line of thought brings me to the essay that essentially started this whole project: Russel Potter's defense of black cultural forms with regards to repetition.⁽³¹⁾ Entitled "Not the Same," Potter clearly resents what he considers a racial essentialism connecting black expressive culture to repetition. He takes Tricia Rose to task for her monograph, *Black Noise*,⁽³²⁾ accusing her of just this sort of essentialism, then proceeds to argue that the repetition so prominent in black-influenced popular music is not really repetition. He bases his defense on the distinction between blank repetition and repetition with difference—that is, Signifyin(g). However, he establishes this distinction by shifting Middleton's conventional boundary of acceptable repetition to a position that rescues jazz, blues and rap, but at the expense of disco, techno and other dance music genres. The problem with Signifyin(g) as a defense for repetition is that it relies on the continuing devaluation of it's own Other: exact duplication or repetition *tout court*.

[2.21] It is these last two issues that not only inform, but also motivate my work on repetition. As I had mentioned in my introduction, defenses of repetition tend to apologize or sidestep the issue altogether. Those that sidestep do so by reducing repetition to pure function, describing how repetition functions without addressing meaning or value. Those that apologize do so by defending their own localized practice of repetition at the expense of repetition as a larger concept—often identifying another genre as unacceptably repetitive in a sort of sacrificial substitution. Also, although the detractors of repetition tend to be too

cynical and pessimistic, its defenders in cultural studies such as Deleuze and Lyotard, often place their discourses at a great remove from musical practice.⁽³³⁾ In the "pan-media" approach of cultural studies, music tends to get passed over for careful analysis, and thus cultural theorists often fail to ground their argumentation in the analysis or close reading of cultural (musical) artifacts--an aporia that I shall begin to fill in the second section of this essay.

[3] THEORIZING PLEASURE IN AND OF REPETITION

[3.1] The choice of Electronic Dance Music (EDM hereafter) to illustrate the process and pleasure of repetition seemed perfectly obvious to me at the beginning of the research process. Not only did I see EDM as the most unapologetically repetitive of popular music meta-genres, but its electronic mediation seemed to fulfill Benjamin's prophecy that, "To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility".⁽³⁴⁾

[3.2] Nevertheless, there remains some groundwork to take care of before I can proceed to issues of pleasure and repetition in EDM. In particular, I need to address the ontology of pleasure itself, as well as seek out a theory for the engendering and experience of pleasure that is compatible with repetition. To this end, I would like to return to Freud's theories of pleasure and repetition and also introduce an alternate and dissenting voice. In my view, there are two main problems underlying Freud's conception of pleasure (and, consequently, repetition compulsion): the *a priori* pathology of repetition and the failure to imagine pleasure arising from something other than satiation. This first issue is relatively straightforward; for Freud, repetition was always already pathological. Being grounded in a clinical discourse, Freud was interested in explaining a phenomenon (repetition compulsion) that he already knew to be harmful. Thus his task was not to question its positive or negative effects, but to explicate why and how some of his subjects repeated past traumas.

[3.3] As a "positive" theory of repetition and pleasure, then, Freud's notion of repetition compulsion (and its connections to the death instinct) is already a non-starter. It remains, however, as a "negative" or critical interpretation; in other words, it does not comprehend repetition and repetitive behaviors in their totality, but identifies potential problems. Freud's categories of both pleasure and repetition are thus too narrow, which possibly explains why he found that the latter was "beyond" the former. Writing only seven years after Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Karl Böhler strongly criticized Freud's interpretation of

pleasure and repetition compulsion, suggesting that Freud's connection of repetitive children's games to a death instinct reflected the despair of Schopenhauer's pessimism.⁽³⁵⁾ In the place of *Thanatos* and a return to primordial stillness, Bühler proposes a tripartite system of pleasure: satiation pleasure (*Lust der Befriedigung*), function pleasure (*Funktionslust*), and the pleasure of creative mastery (*Shaffensfreude, Schaffenslust, Schöpferfreude*).⁽³⁶⁾ The first of these terms, satiation pleasure, Bühler considers to be the only form of pleasure that Freud recognizes: desire is engendered by drives or the recognition of a lack, pleasure is generated by (incompletely) fulfilling it. Given that Bühler's word for satiation (*Befriedigung*) can mean both "fulfillment" and "pacification," one can imagine that Freud's interpretive move to "death" was not so distant. Notably, satiation pleasure places the subject in a receptive, passive position; however much one actively seeks it out, fulfillment is always partially dependent on circumstance. Also, satiation pleasure is committed to a teleology (desire-->pursuit/anticipation-->satiation-->desire?), which makes the temporality of pleasure arising from satiation uncertain: how long does pleasure last during and after fulfillment? To give a musical example, if one considers the audition of an arch-form piece, how long does pleasure last after the climactic *Höhepunkt*? How long does the memory of climactic fulfillment generate pleasure?

[3.4] In contrast to satiation pleasure, function pleasure arises from process itself, rather than the process's results. In this case, the subject is in an active position, not merely pursuing but generating his/her own pleasure. Again in contrast to satiation pleasure, function pleasure is *coextensive* with the activity that generates it, guaranteeing that pleasure continues at least as long as one is engaged in the process. A paradigmatic example would be that function pleasure arises from baking a cake (provided, of course, that one enjoys baking), while satiation pleasure arises from eating it. However, this example is somewhat misleading in that it implies that one form of pleasure necessarily precedes and results in another one--function pleasure is simply "bonus" pleasure awarded to one who actively pursues his/her own satiation. My understanding of function pleasure, however, extends also to activities that do not necessarily produce desire-fulfilling objects, such as dance and musical performance,⁽³⁷⁾ and thus function pleasure arises properly from process. For this reason, I would like to replace the term "function"--which unhelpfully implies teleology and production--with "process pleasure." The distinction between production pleasure and Bühler's third category of pleasure arising from "creative mastery" is less clear, and those who have followed Bühler have generally collapsed this last category into the preceding one: the experience of creative

mastery is what generates *Funktionslust*--the pleasure of a job well done.⁽³⁸⁾ However, I would like to retain this division and redraw the bounding line between these categories in a new fashion. Changing the more cumbersome "pleasure of creative mastery" to "creation pleasure," I would see the difference between creation pleasure and process pleasure as a matter of productivity: the first arises from the satisfaction of productive achievement, while the latter arises from activity itself. If satiation pleasure arises from receiving and creation pleasure arises from making, process pleasure arises from *doing*.⁽³⁹⁾ Also, I would like to borrow the notion of "mastery" from Bühler's third category to help explain how "doing" can itself generate pleasure. Much like the pleasure of creative mastery arises from a task/product well done, the pleasure in process arises from doing *well*--mastery over an activity and the objects involved in it. Dancing, for example, is an opportunity to take pleasure in manifesting capacity, control and proficiency in dance as an activity and over the body as its medium.

[3.5] Before tracing my way back to repetition, I should provide some clarification and a few caveats. Bühler and his theoretical inheritors were clearly interested in promoting their versions of process pleasure and creation pleasure as non-pathological, healthy paths to pleasure. I am not as interested in promoting one form of pleasure over the other; I can easily envision "positive" and "negative" instances of each category. Neither do I wish to suggest that process is naturally or necessarily pleasurable; as any survivor of severe obsessive-compulsive disorder will attest, process is by no means pleasurable if one cannot stop. As we will soon see, I also do not view these categories of pleasure as operating independently from one another. Nevertheless, I will be paying greater attention to process pleasure because it is the most difficult to explain, the most difficult to justify and--as a strange form of pleasure that neither consumes (satiation) nor produces (creation)--offers the most potential for novel explications of pleasure.

[3.6] It is also through process pleasure that I see a connection back to repetition. As Bühler argues, in response to Freud, repetition is not beyond the pleasure principle, but a prime bearer of process pleasure.⁽⁴⁰⁾ As I will argue below, repetition functions as a sort of process, structuring activity in a manner that optimizes opportunities to exercise mastery of listening/dancing.

[3.7] In addition to issues of pleasure, EDM presents some challenges with respect to previous theories of repetition. In particular, Keil's notion of 'participatory discrepancies' relies on live, communal performances where an individual's contributions can vary from moment to moment and

in contrast to other individuals. While this ethos of communality and *communitas* can still be imagined through the interplay of dancers and DJ, the degree to which this is 'live' in the same manner as Keil's examples makes it difficult to draw close parallels. Nonetheless, this particular challenge also makes the case of EDM especially appropriate for this paper. Since I intend to avoid defending one form of repetition by imagining a more repetitive Other form of repetition, EDM's potential to repeat with digital precision will force me to deal with repetition in its most problematic form, much in the same way that Linda Williams' seminal work on pornography passes over the less objectionable "soft" porn and "couples films" and focuses directly on hard-core and BDSM forms of pornography. ⁽⁴¹⁾

[3.8] Similar motivations also inform my choice of examples from the styles and sub-genres within EDM. The three tracks⁽⁴²⁾ from which the following examples will be drawn are not a representative cross-section of EDM, but rather a sampling of those sub-genres that make the most explicit and extended use of repetition. In particular, these three tracks will represent two sub-genres of techno (itself only one genre/category within the realm of EDM): its more austere branch of "minimal" techno, and tech-house, which is a hybrid of house and techno styles. ⁽⁴³⁾

[3.9] To aid in this consideration of repetition—particularly that of practice rather than ontology—I would like to make a shift away from the term 'repetition'. Following Christopher Hasty's notion of meter as process, Eugene Montague has forwarded the concept of repetition as an ongoing and open process, which he identifies with the gerundive form, 'repeating'. ⁽⁴⁴⁾ Within the context of EDM, I will parallel this formulation by employing the noun 'loop' and the gerund 'looping.' These terms come from two complementary sources: Mark Spicer's recent article on accumulative form, and Mark Butler's work on rhythm and meter in EDM. Spicer defines accumulative form as the "technique of building up a groove gradually from its constituent parts". ⁽⁴⁵⁾ In turn, he defines 'groove' as "a tapestry of riffs", and defines 'riffs' as atomic musical ideas that normally repeat. This is the point of contact with my notion of loops and looping. Effectively, loops are riffs of modular length that one strongly expects to repeat, and looping is the practice of layering, adding and subtracting loops, allowing for the seemingly paradoxical effect of an ever-changing same. ⁽⁴⁶⁾

[3.10] This notion gains support from Mark Butler, who defines the loop as the fundamental unit of musical structure for EDM. ⁽⁴⁷⁾ Also, he underlines the importance of looping by arguing that cyclical repetition, and thus repeated listening, allows for the perceptual separation of EDM's complex timbral and rhythmic layers. ⁽⁴⁸⁾ To further this, I would also add that my notion of looping in EDM as an ongoing and open process is crucial

to an understanding of a musical genre that is not normally recorded in a visual form of notation. Thus, the structural perception of EDM tracks and sets almost always occurs over time, with a fading memory of past events and a growing expectation of future ones.

[4] LOOPING AS PROCESS

[4.1] I would like to begin with this idea of looping as an open process and explore how this is manifested in EDM. This is best approached through Mark Spicer's recent work on accumulative form. Spicer begins from Peter J. Burkholder's analysis of Charles Ives' work, wherein Burkholder defines 'cumulative form' as Ives' idiosyncratic practice of reversing the order of thematic development.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Rather than present a theme or idea and then proceed to fragment and develop it, a 'cumulative' work gradually presents thematic fragments, which then, as Spicer puts it, "crystallize into a full-fledged presentation of the main theme in a climactic pay-off at the end of the piece".⁽⁵⁰⁾ Spicer modifies this idea in his definition of 'accumulative form,' replacing the climactic presentation of *the* main theme with the climactic accumulation of riffs into a texturally thick groove.

[4.2] I believe that Spicer's version of accumulative form (substituting loops for riffs in this case) is one of the most widely used prototypical forms in EDM, and I did not need to look far to find examples. The first track that we will consider is an especially clear but exceedingly extended example, so I can offer only fragments from various points in this accumulative process. The recording is a track entitled "ethnik," taken from the 1994 'minimal' techno album *musik* by Plastikman, also known as Richie Hawtin.⁽⁵¹⁾

[4.3] In the partial transcription that I have provided ([Figure 1 \[PDF\]](#)), one can find a graphic representation of this accumulative form in the accumulation of layers over time; what I could not convey with this transcription is the corresponding accumulation of intensity, although I hope it will be clearly audible in the audio excerpts provided. The three audio excerpts show the process of accumulation at three points: Excerpt A shows the slow fading in of a rhythmically flexible flute line over a metrically ambiguous bassline; B is both a local accumulative climax and the midpoint in the larger accumulation towards C. All three of these excerpts also show differing ways of employing looping to articulate a point or period of change, and make use of the common expectation in EDM that structural changes occur on multiples of 4--whether four beats, four bars, eight bars or more. Excerpt A ([Audio 1A](#)) fades in a 4-bar flute line gradually, so that it is not at first clear when the loop started and thus when one can expect another change in texture. B ([Audio 1B](#)) makes use of

a similar strategy with a loop of congas, which makes the sudden appearance of the three-part drum loop surprising but all the more emphatic as a structural downbeat. On the other hand, C ([Audio 1C](#)) forecasts its high point of accumulation by applying an EQ filter-shift to the drum loop—marked by a shift in shades of gray—then removing the triangle loop four bars beforehand and the drum loop one bar beforehand.

[4.4] In a fashion similar to that of Plastikman/Hawtin, many EDM producers do not only employ accumulative form, but also provide a vocabulary of aural signposts to signal various stages of arrival or accumulation. The introduction of the kick drum, the sudden removal of several layers only to return with more force, and the play of metric ambiguity all provide listeners of EDM with aural cues. I will defer issues of process pleasure until our final example (see [6]), but I would like to take a moment to consider how the experience of mastery—which provides the ground for process pleasure—works in looping as process. These aural cues and signposts optimize EDM for listening mastery; they provide opportunities for listeners to insert themselves into the looping process and manifest their proficiency with these massive hypermetrical structures. Although it is difficult to generalize, listeners can and often do take these opportunities to manifest their mastery in physical ways—whether by marking points of accumulation with punctuating gestures (hand claps, shouts, “drops”, spins, etc.) and changes of dancing style, or by finding ways to bodily articulate the processes of looping, demonstrating their capacity to grasp and “ride” the loop.

[5] LOOPING AS PROLONGATION OF PLEASURE

[5.1] Before continuing to a consideration of looping-as-process as pleasure, I would like to explore how pleasure may arise from looping outside the operation of pre-determined structure. As I had mentioned earlier, Mark Butler has proposed that the precise and extended repetition idiomatic to EDM benefits the listener in allowing him or her to perceptually separate textural layers. Butler further developed this idea in his paper read at the 2003 annual meeting of the Society for Music Theory (Madison, WI), wherein he suggests that the use of unresolved grouping dissonances in EDM does not necessarily pose an irresolvable perceptual problem for the listener. ⁽⁵²⁾ Instead, he forwards a mode of listening whereby a listener can shift focus between dissonant layers, granting perceptual primacy to one grouping at one moment, and to another at the next.

[5.2] I think that this begins to explain how the repetition of seemingly short musical units can generate pleasure over extended periods. Using

my taxonomy of pleasures, this aspect of looping provides a sort of creation pleasure grounded in the creation of process. A persistently-looping, dense collection of riffs provides a dense layering of textures without pre-determining the listener's path of focus. In this manner, a listener is able to construct his/her own process(es) of attention, creating a unique sonic pathway and manifesting a form of mastery over the ordering of these looping elements. This contingent and improvised process is then made available to process pleasure. In other words, the listener can imagine the structure that provides the process that engenders process pleasure. Although Butler's model focuses primarily on grouping dissonance, I would also like to extend his model to include the multiplicities of timbre, pitch or approximate register and the interplay between interlocking riffs. I believe that most EDM tracks offer many perceptual 'points of attention,' whether implied in minimalist textures or fully fleshed out in thicker ones. Thus, looping allows the listener to plot pathways between these points of attention, mapping out a landscape of shifting creation pleasure while prolonging the process pleasure of an ever-changing same.

[5.3] To illustrate this idea, we turn to a track by Tony Rohr called "Baile Conmigo" (or 'dance with me').⁽⁵³⁾ ([Audio 2](#)) This track is texturally quite thick for a techno track, and offers a number of points of attention. Among these, I would draw attention to the lower frequency range and the manner in which the kick drum's pitch is inflected slightly after each attack: is that indeed inflection, or the interference of a higher-pitched synth line? Also, in the middle and treble range, note the interplay between interlocking patterns of similar, but distinct timbres. Finally, I suggest following the trajectory of the constant stream of sixteenth-note 'clicks', the frequency profile of which shifts gradually upward and downward over a period of 4 measures of 4 quarter notes or every 16 beats.

[6] PROCESS AS PLEASURE

[6.1] The idea that process could be pleasurable first came to me while listening to Steve Reich's *Piano Phase*. To me, there is something uniquely satisfying in the friction between the two out-of-phase pianists followed by the 'locking' effect when their pulse layers align. I then had further direction from the work of Mark Butler, who characterizes the artistic production of techno as "emphasiz[ing] process more than the construction of particular musical objects".⁽⁵⁴⁾ Most recently, I found in the work of Karl Bühler a means of articulating this pleasure in the concept of process pleasure (and creation pleasure) explicated above. This is one path around the problem of functionalism--of the view that process is pleasurable only insofar as it produces a desire-fulfilling object (satiation pleasure).

Repetitive processes such as looping may serve pragmatic, extra-musical functions such as providing a reasonably predictable framework for dancing or providing a particular sort of feel that brings a crowd of dancers together at a club. However, they may also emerge from and relate back to an aesthetic of process, thus generating pleasure in addition to channeling the pleasures of dancing and socializing.

[6.2] With this concept in our minds, we can now turn to our next and last example: a selection from Akufen's 2002 album, *My Way*.⁽⁵⁵⁾ The track, "Deck the House," ([Audio 3](#)) and the entire album exhibit a unique compositional style, which requires a moment of explanation. Montréal-based Akufen, also known as Marc Leclair, gathered his musical materials for this album with a shortwave radio and a *lot* of time. Rather than sample complete hooks of songs or radio broadcasters, which would be illegal in almost any country, he uses brief slivers of songs, commercials, DJs' banter and static—most often less than a second long.⁽⁵⁶⁾ In "Deck the House," he weaves these microsamples together into a dizzying collage that illustrates my earlier notion of looping as prolongation of pleasure by its thick, multilayered texture and metric ambiguity (try locating the downbeat as this excerpt progresses). In addition to this, consider what I had argued earlier about process, accumulative form and the aural cues that help structure hearing and dancing. Imagine what opportunities arise for mastery and pleasure as the listener waits for the kick drum that signals the first complete 'arrival' or accumulation of the groove. For me, as one listener among many, a large part of the pleasure derived from listening to "Deck the House" stems directly from the pleasure of attending to the unfolding of a process both anticipated and unpredictable; inasmuch as process provides an opportunity for the manifestation of mastery that generates pleasure, challenging and surprising processes raise the stakes of mastery and offer higher "rewards."⁽⁵⁷⁾ Although Akufen/Leclair's taste for asymmetrical sequencing and metric ambiguity mirrors this unpredictability at the level of detailed surface, the fundamentally underdetermined nature of this structural unfolding permeates all EDM genres. As the process of looping creates this feeling of an ever-changing same, the question constantly arises: when will it change next, and how will it still remain the same?

[7] BEYOND ELECTRONIC DANCE MUSIC

[7.1] I imagine the overall shape of this essay to be one of diffusion-->focus-->expansion. As I introduced the topic of repetition, we found the discourse to be not only fraught, but also widely dispersed and disarticulated. Indeed, there was and is no singular discourse of repetition, no singular forum where all parties meet. Rather, the

discourse and criticism on repetition is a general and largely synthetic category for what is in fact a vast constellation of discursive acts: solitary declarations, debate between peers, and responses to imaginary interlocutors--and, much like a constellation, I have endeavored to connect these "dots" of discourse into a larger picture.

[7.2] Discourse on repetition, both positive and negative, has largely relied on some form of a reflection theory, looking for the strengths and weaknesses of collective society or the individual psyche in repetitive structures. What I have attempted to offer in its place is a model of what repetition *does*, for whom and how. For these purposes I have revisited Karl Bühler's alternative to Freud's repetition compulsion and adjusted them to better engage with the experience of EDM: satiation pleasure, process pleasure, creation pleasure; getting, doing, making. Although these categories of pleasure remain provisional at most and their application to EDM is only exploratory, I hope to have provided a preliminary vocabulary of tools for repetition that do not rely so much on a metaphysics of ontology and identity.

[7.3] Of course, one does not need a kick drum to generate pleasure from process, and I believe that one does not necessarily need to stay within the confines of EDM, either. As my reference to Steve Reich's *Piano Phase* would suggest, this approach to repetition and repetitive processes may also help to explicate the manifold pleasures of listening to other musical traditions that rely heavily on repetition, including minimalist art music, non-electronic dance music, non-western classical traditions and a large proportion of folk traditions. Indeed, Reich's essay on music as a "gradual process" articulates similar emphases on process, process-oriented listening and control--but for the minimalist art music of the late 60s and early 70s.⁽⁵⁸⁾ Also, I have restricted my work here to the pleasures of listening, without much more than cursory consideration of dancing. Although this artificial division and disembodiment of listening from dancing greatly reduced the size of this essay, further work in this direction is sorely needed.

[7.4] Furthermore, what I hope to offer here is not merely a broadly applicable model for repetition as an aesthetic practice. I am also striving to offer a rehabilitation and reevaluation of repetition that will hopefully rescue it from the categories of infantile regression, pathological compulsion, artlessness or a disproportionately dystopian/utopian allegory for social relations. If there is a beauty in the New, then there is also the question of a beautiful Same and, like repetition itself, the answer may be in the process of asking.