Resisting some of the negative connotations that repetition can attract, this book illustrates how it has been used as a catalyst for creative expression across a range of television genres.

Divided into two parts, the first three chapters contextualise repetition within related media and critical debates, before locating it as an important facet of television that is worth exploring in detail. The final three chapters discuss specific television shows that incorporate repetition creatively within their narrative structure and aesthetic composition, ranging from *The Royle Family* and *Doctor Who* to *I May Destroy You* and *This is Going to Hurt*. In each case, James Walters argues that repetition emerges as crucial to the expression of key themes and ideas, thus becoming a structural and compositional element itself.

Exploring the ways in which repetition has featured in the work of figures such as Umberto Eco, Raymond Bellour and Bruce Kawin, and has influenced the approaches of television scholars like Raymond Williams, Roger Silverstone and John Ellis, this book is essential reading for scholars and students of film, television and media studies.

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Television and Repetition

James Walters
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Introduction

There are countless themes and interests that can find a place within the study of television. This book takes repetition as its central focus and, in doing so, aims to look at this aspect in a little more detail than might previously have been afforded. That could be interpreted as a suggestion that repetition has been unfairly overlooked or neglected. However, I would not want to suggest that there is any special reason why repetition might be explored above and beyond other important areas in television studies that have received attention. Indeed, I can think of reasons why repetition might be overlooked or perhaps even avoided. Repetition carries with it certain negative associations: tedium, monotony, limitation, a lack of invention or originality, for example. Before publishing his seminal text, *TV: The Most Popular Art* (1974), Horace Newcomb wrote another paper entitled: ‘The Problem of Repetition in Television.’ Newcomb summarises his argument by explaining that: ‘I essentially said that I didn’t like these stories that repeat themselves all the time’ (McPherson 2007). It is intriguing that a figure like Newcomb’s starting point in television studies should concern something he didn’t favour, and it is significant that he should so readily and overtly identify repetition as fundamentally problematic. The paper was delivered as a spoken text and never published, with Newcomb finding encouragement to pursue a different direction (soap opera, at the time). I suspect his view of repetition would not have been uncommon (although the decision to address the topic directly self-evidently was) and, had it been disseminated more widely, might have elicited favourable, perhaps even widespread, agreement. Perceptions may not have shifted dramatically since. Writing at the end of the 1960s, Newcomb is concerned with television content and his assertion is that shows offer the same thing again and again, but we might easily couple this with adverse responses to repeated programming within television schedules more broadly (which chapter two of this books attends to in greater detail). I would suggest that neither view is extinct today and that viewers are still resistant to the

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idea of sameness, even when we seek out repeated content for pleasure or comfort, as many did when revisiting familiar television shows during the pandemic-enforced lockdowns of 2020 (Bryan 2020).

This is not to say that repetition is unequivocally cherished in other media. Writing about cinema at the turn of the century, David Sanjek remarks that: ‘The profusion of sequels, remakes, and narratives that amalgamate familiar elements into various forms of pastiche results perhaps not in contempt on the part of consumers, but a weariness bred of sensory overload and intellectual understimulation’ (Sanjek 2000, 111). Clearly, for Sanjek, the very fact that a film might be viewed as a repetition of pre-existing content would associate it with a lack of quality and ambition. This opinion is not uncommon and arguably intensified in the twenty-first century as the proliferation of titles in series such as Star Wars, Harry Potter, Transformers, and Marvel coincided with the birth of social media critique. Indeed, the first chapter of this book will touch briefly upon film franchises, which are often discussed in this manner and certainly offer instances of elaborate repetition. Yet, television seems notable for the way in which repetition can infuse its content very specifically and its form more broadly, with neither type necessarily offering a cause for celebration among audiences. Perhaps this unfavourable view of repetition in television has been reinforced inadvertently in academic debate as scholarship on television has quite understandably tended to praise works that embody innovation and originality. As critical writing has, throughout the twenty-first century, placed greater emphasis on quality and achievement in television, it is hardly surprising that repetition should not have become a guiding concern. And, of course, television has hardly enjoyed an unblemished reputation. Charlotte Brunsdon has reflected insightfully upon a transition in language from the ‘widespread characterisation of regular [television] viewing as an addiction’ to the ‘emergence of the somatic metaphor of “bingeing” to describe the domestic viewing of multiple episodes sequentially’ that effectively replaces the view of ‘an involuntary, non-cerebral relation to the medium, an out of control habit’ with ‘connotations of an uncontrollable, excessive consumption’ (Brunsdon 2010, 64–65). Consequently, the move from ‘addiction’ to ‘bingeing’ retains similarly negative appraisals of the fundamental act of television viewing, regardless of the type of content these terms tend to be associated with (soap opera and prestige drama, respectively, in Brunsdon’s argument). The combination of repetition and television might therefore represent a somewhat unappealing prospect.

This book exists partially in response to the rather negative perceptions of repetition and television and, perhaps relatedly, the relative neglect those two subjects have received in combination. The first three chapters will consider these topics more broadly, with the aim of contextualising repetition within related media and critical debates, before locating it as an
important facet of television that is worth exploring in detail. The final three chapters will seek to discuss specific television shows that incorporate repetition creatively within their narrative structure and aesthetic composition. In each case, I suggest, repetition emerges as crucial to the expression of key themes and ideas, thus becoming a structural and compositional element itself. There is no attempt, I hope, to propose an overarching theory of repetition in television or to suggest that the shows discussed are most usefully defined by their resemblance to one another within a wider framework. Rather, I intend to emphasise each show’s particular employment of repetition so that, even when they are grouped together within a shared thematic focus (as two examples are in each of the final three chapters), they should nevertheless retain their distinctiveness and individuality. This might go some way to countering Newcomb’s original suggestion that television offers the same stories, told in the same way, and proposes implicitly that, rather than being regarded only as a problem, repetition in television might instead be appreciated and valued.

Note

1 Jason Jacobs and Steve Peacock’s 2013 collection, *Television Aesthetics and Style*, is representative of this trend, and brings together several writers that have contributed to its growth.
This book’s central concern will be the relationship between television and ideas of repetition. As a consequence, this interest occupies the majority of the work. However, there are also advantages in thinking across boundaries, taking in different art forms, as a means of potentially drawing out and crystallising certain notions relating to repetition that will help to inform some of the directions and perspectives this book will adopt. At one level, this simply reinforces an obvious point that no theme is restricted to any one medium, and that making something like television a main focus is not to implicitly recommend its elevated relevance. Even when one path is chosen, a myriad of legitimate alternatives may equally remain. Moreover, approaching a theme or interest from different angles at the outset might also open out a useful space to think through some aspects of its form and nature, thus keeping the boundaries of debate fairly wide before a stronger emphasis is placed on a specific area (in this case, television).

**Repetition and Playing**

The screen is dark but, already, a coloured geometric shape made of blocks is falling steadily on its vertical path. At the touch of a button, the shape can be rotated or moved from left to right, but nothing will stop or slow its progress. Finally, it lands at the bottom of the screen, now motionless, rooted into its final resting position. The moment it settles, however, a new geometric shape appears at the top of the screen and begins its own gradual descent. The form of this shape is different from the first but shares the same right-angled block construction. It, too, can be rotated or moved. When it nears the completion of its descent, it can be set apart from the original block, placed alongside it, or fitted against it in tessellation. As its own journey completes, a new shape appears at the top of the screen and begins to fall. When the shapes accumulate and combine at the foot of the screen, they occasionally form complete horizontal lines of blocks, which disappear, creating space for yet more geometric shapes as they continue to fall.