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Repetition, Pattern, and the Domestic: Notes on the Relationship between Pattern and Home-making



Abstract

Repetition constitutes the very essence of pattern. Repetition is also the basis of our most ordinary actions. Repetitive gestures are usually so integrated in our lives that we tend to take them for granted. It is only when repetition is excessive or absent that we become aware of its importance to us. Not least because of their everyday properties, pattern and repetition are also closely related to the domain of the domestic. On the one hand, patterned artifacts, such as wallpapers, rugs, latticed curtains, and other fabrics seem to operate naturally as signifiers of an idea of domesticity, denoting privacy, comfort and, eventually, also seclusion and confinement. On the other hand, the repetitive rituals of pattern fabrication bear strong resonance with the traditional routines of household

maintenance—cleaning, sorting, laundering, and so on. Not only are both dependent on a logic of continuous reiteration, but they also tend to be considered equally mindless and prosaic, as their processes are often rated inferior in comparison to less repetitive forms of production. In “Repetition, Pattern, and the Domestic” I investigate the foundations and implications of the identification between pattern and the home, drawing on material from historical, mythological, and psychological sources. This investigation aims to show how the repetitive mechanisms of pattern-making integrate the very dynamics of inhabitation, being essentially entangled, if sometimes inconspicuously, with the practice of spatial design.

Keywords: pattern, repetition, domesticity, spatial design

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Crafting

Step on treadle a, which raises harnesses 1 and 3; slide the shuttle through the shed, from right to left and close to the reed ... Turn the yard end around the outside warp end and back into the shed. Release the treadle, hold the beater in the center, and pull it towards you firmly. Step on treadle b, raising harnesses 2 and 4, “throw” the shuttle as before, release the treadle, and beat. Repeat these two picks, or rows, a few more times, then check the heading carefully for errors. (Todd 1902: 126)

Pattern originates in the repetitive rhythms of textile fabrication. It circumscribes a regular ritual of making, conventionally characterized as excessively laborious and repetitive, and normally stereotyped as uncreative: “traditional and non-innovatory” (Chave 1992: 148). Historically and allegorically, pattern connects to the home.¹ In *Socrates’ Ancestor*, McEwen shows how weaving—perhaps the most emblematic pattern-based activity—was in Greek society essential in securing the stability of the household and constructing the identity of the

prototype housewife. As she explains:

As essential a constituent of the Greek household (*oikos*) as its hearth (*hestia*) was its loom (*histon*). The extremely time-consuming process of hand weaving makes the loom an emblem of the *oikos*’s stability as well as of its self-sufficiency ... Every household had a loom ... If one of the first things a Greek child saw, when he began to see at all, was his mother, one of the very next things he saw would almost certainly have been the loom at which his mother worked. Weaving, it has been remarked, is one of the few activities compatible with simultaneous child watching. Mothers, weaving, watched their children. Small children watched their mothers ceaselessly weaving in upright looms that must, to them, have seemed monumental, as big as houses. (McEwen 1993: 109)

Weaving was at the center of the house, physically and figuratively. In the Greek legend of the Odyssey (c.700 B.C.E.), the exemplary housewife Penelope appears as a weaver who takes full advantage of the recurrent and time-consuming

implications of her task. She is expected to remarry according to tradition, as her husband Odysseus is thought dead. However, in an attempt to delay her remarriage and allow more time for Odysseus to return, she engages in the endless task of weaving her father-in-law's burial shroud, which she secretly unpicks at night as a means "to win time from her scrupulous suitors and preserve the integrity of her household against their persistent onslaughts" (McEwen 1993: 107–9). As McEwen points out, if Odysseus could still find a welcoming home when after twenty years he came back from his adventurous voyage, it was "largely thanks to Penelope's loom" (McEwen 1993: 109). The Greek tradition of hand-weaving emphasizes the regular and disciplined aspects of patterning, using it as an emblem for the ordering of the household and, by extension, for the ordering of the city and the disciplining of society. The loom constituted an important symbol of this order, sharing identity with the home and, according to McEwen, even influencing the architecture of Greece's most emblematic public edifices. As she claims:

The Greeks, when they built the temples without which the polis could not come to be, were setting up looms ... The vertical, warp-weighted loom is about the simplest example imaginable of post-and-beam or trabeated structure. For the Greeks, it was certainly the most familiar one. The structure was not significant in itself. That it had been, since time immemorial, the structure of

a loom, made it so. (McEwen 1993: 111, 110)

Because of its association with the regular action of weaving, the loom came to be correlated with order, a concept that in archaic Greece was expressed by the word *kosmos*. *Kosmos* related to pattern in its translation of a notion of order that was inseparable from the practice of craft. McEwen observes that craft was in ancient Greece practiced with the very intent of making *kosmos* appear. As Vesely defines, the rhythmic process of (pattern-) making denoted a way to "come to terms with the universal order of reality" (Vesely 2004: 288). Such an order was materially expressed in the regular pattern of the crafted artifact. To craft was to produce, through the regular movements of making, a visual pattern that invoked the *kosmic* order of things. It is important to point out that this Greek idea of *kosmos* was mutating and elusive rather than fixed and clear-cut. Since it manifested differently in each fabrication or ritual in which it was invoked, *kosmos* didn't have a permanent form. It was perceived subtly, rather than intensely. For McEwen, this faint association between pattern and *kosmos* still pervades, if inconspicuously, present routines of skillful fabrication. As she writes:

The discovery of a pattern seems to me to be an inherent feature of the human experience of making. Whether he or she thinks about it or not, or is even aware of it, a person who makes something implicitly assumes the existence of an order or standard or rightness that transcends all recipes

and rules of composition: a standard, a pattern or—to use the Greek word—a *paradeigma* which both measures the work and is measured by it. This pattern can be thought of as a single, immutable template to be traced or copied ... or it can be thought of as a mutable rhythm governing a pattern of movement, like the figure of a dance: a rhythm or order (*kosmos*) that is rediscovered with each new tracing of the figure. (McEwen 1993: 41–42)

Kosmos is also the origin of the word cosmetic, meaning adornment—feminine adornment, especially. In the book *Kosmos: Essays in Order, Conflict and Community in Classical Athens*, Paul Cartledge addresses this double signification of *kosmos*, explaining that, in ancient Greece, because "order was considered beautiful, *kosmos* came next to mean adornment, as in our cosmetic" (Cartledge 1998: 3). *Kosmos* was a far-ranging concept. It related to functions as diverse as that of embellishing the body, that of integrating a graceful dance ritual, and that of morally ruling the city. As the basis of all those diverse functions of *kosmos* was the activity of patterning, as emblematically translated in the process of weaving, in particular, and in other similar craft-based techniques, such as carpentry, pottery, and masonry, in general.² In ancient Greece, as Vesely states, "the making of order and the making of things" belonged together, the latter playing a primary role in the achievement of the former (Vesely 2004: 288) (see Figure 1).



Figure 1

"Golden embroidery." By Ana Araujo.
Photograph: Dirk Lellau.

Housekeeping

The above-exposed values of Greek culture strongly reverberate with the nineteenth-century cult of the home in the West and with the meanings that were in its context associated to pattern-based crafts. First, there was an increased concern with filling up the domestic space with pattern-based adornments produced in the home: fabrications such as woven rugs, lace curtains, embroidered antimacassars, pillows, and doilies, among others (Figures 2 and 3). As Margaret Ponsonby observes, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the use of textiles in homes increased ..., adding colour and

texture to interiors, increasing their comfort by excluding drafts, and providing padded seating. Textiles such as carpets and window curtains also "softened" the architectural features of rooms. This tendency has been described as the feminization of interiors. (Ponsonby 2003: 206)

In a similar guise, in *As Long as It's Pink*, Sparke observes that the housewives of the nineteenth century often

devoted considerable effort in making ... items in needlepoint, adding crocheted and macramed details to them ... The intensity of detail and the level of craft

Figure 2
"Housewifery (1): door stocking." By Jenny Wynness. Photograph: Dirk Lellau.



Figure 3
"Housewifery (2): chair cosy." By Jenny Wynness. Photograph: Dirk Lellau.



that went into decorative interior arrangement was remarkable. Women also made small assemblages of birds' feathers and other natural objects, which were positioned in shelves already festooned with needlework lambrequins. (Sparke 1995: 40–1)

Second, as illustrated in Penelope's myth, the home was also at this time regarded as an emblem of familial order. This was testified, for example, by the increased appearance of etiquette books, which, besides teaching the conventions of polite behavior in society, also sought to control and institutionalize the regular and laborious rituals of household maintenance.³ In "The Pattern of Work," Judith Flanders explains one such laborious routine as she describes the Victorian ritual of cleaning the front doorsteps of the house: according to her, one of the "totemic signs" of a "pattern" (proper, ordered) household. As she reports:

The housewife (or the servant) used soap and water to scrub down the stairs leading to the front door. She then applied a layer of white, chalky, paste-like substance and buffed it up. This was not a weekly task, but one that had to be performed daily. When it was finished, the steps were spotless, gleaming—but only until someone walked up them. Then they were irretrievably marked. By lunchtime each day the whiteness was scuffed to nothingness, stepped into the surrounding dust. Yet it is

important to remember that the whiteness was only a symbol: it was soap and water that actually made the steps clean, and that was invisible. The whiteness was a way of indicating that the soap and water had been used, a marker or sign of cleanliness: it was not cleanliness itself. (Flanders 2005: 45)

Whiteness was, in this case, the pattern: an order that was made visible through the repetitive actions of cleaning. And cleaning was, therefore, also patterning, just like the other domestic tasks—the ones that ordered, and the ones that adorned. The same rhythmical movements that commanded the continuous twisting and untwisting of Penelope's weaving were echoed in the Victorian housewife's obsessive and perfectionist actions of cleaning, washing, ironing, baking, sorting, disposing, gardening, storing, sewing, crocheting, lacing, embroidering, knitting, tatting. They all aimed at order and/or embellishment, they all required a good deal of persistence and patience, and they were all to be performed repetitively but delicately. And they all set up a vicious circle of endless duration, following a pattern, which, like all patterns, was potentially inexhaustible.

Pattern became all-pervading in the context of the Western nineteenth-century home.⁴ It fabricated the domestic in terms of its ordering routines and in terms of its decorative taste. It shaped its working duties and its leisure activities. And, as in Greek culture, it also had a decisive

impact in defining social roles and influencing public life. Nineteenth-century domestic patterns engendered the private and the communal domain. As Sparke argues:

The Cult of Domesticity resided at the intersection of religious belief, politics, commercial activity and family life, serving to bring together all these facets of existence by making the family, and within it the idealized image of woman, a vital component not only of the moral community but also of successful business practice and national prestige. (Sparke 1995: 17)

The extent to which this “idealized image of woman” liberated or oppressed real women is, however, debatable. There are historians who sustain that domesticity oppressed rather than promoted the expression of femininity, isolating women from society. Other scholars, on the contrary, argue that the values of domesticity, although often overlooked, were subliminally far more influential than is often acknowledged, empowering the woman and encouraging her to shape an identity that would counterbalance the supremacy of the masculine in the public arena. Lastly, there are authors who argue that the values that we identify with domesticity and femininity were in fact imposed on women by patriarchy, there being no justification for them claiming those values as their own. In any case, as Sparke argues, consensus “reigns ... over the view that nineteenth-century Cult

of Domesticity was a gendered ideology and that the creator of domesticity was female” (Sparke 1995: 6, 22). Whether regarded as liberating or oppressive, the cult of domesticity was, as we’ve seen, entirely reliant on the pattern-based gestures of the nineteenth-century housewife, promoting her idealized figure as a mistress on matters of order and taste.⁶ Pattern-based activities shaped the domestic, and the domestic defined the social, in a fashion similar to that seen in ancient Greek culture.⁷ However, as suggested by the contested debate exposed above, this productive logic of pattern, reminiscent of an older state of affairs, could no longer be so easily absorbed by the new conditions of modern life.

(Self-)Assuring

Mastering and patterning were in the experience of the nineteenth-century housewife totally interconnected. Peculiar to this experience, as we’ve seen, was its dependency upon constant reiteration. As Flanders’s description of Victorian rituals of cleaning poignantly demonstrates, it was only through maintenance work that order and discipline were provisionally conquered. As she formulates, the domestic routine of the nineteenth-century housewife constituted “an endless, cyclical grind, a constant repetition of the same ... demanding chores” (Flanders 2005: 46). And there was no hope of bringing those cycles to an end—patterning was a persistent, never-ending process. Persistence and everlastingness are in fact typical features of pattern-based processes of fabrication.

As Plant remarks, in the logic of patterning, “nothing stops when a particular piece of work has been finished off ... the finished cloth ... is almost incidental in relation to the processes of its production. The only incentive to cast off seems to be the chance completion provides to start again” (Plant 1998: 67). Pattern-based rituals characteristically define a practice where ends—or aims—get confused with processes. And where processes, being ultimately unending, are often derided as aimless.

The pursuit of provisional mastery through continuous reiteration is addressed in Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytical theory as a typical pattern of childhood behavior. Freud observes that children are compelled to repeat owing to their innate will to command: children like playing the same games, being told the same stories; they like reenacting the pleasant as well as the unpleasant, for repetition is what provides them with the psychological tools both for learning and for dealing with their frustrations. Through repeating, the child finds reassurance, going from a passive position to an active one, Freud remarks. In the child’s experience, repetition is a source of pleasure in itself, regardless of the nature of the original action that it replicates:

It is clear that in their play children repeat everything that has made a great impression on them in real life, and in doing so they abreact the strength of the impression and, as one might put it, make themselves master of the situation ... Each fresh repetition seems to strengthen

the mastery they are in search of. (Freud 1920: 17)

Freud's understanding of repetitive actions as a means of obtaining self-assurance finds full resonance in the nineteenth-century domestic routines of patterning. First, there was the sense of pleasure and mastery that was associated with pattern-based repetitive movements. "The actual physical processes of spinning and weaving are rhythmic, soothing, and enjoyable," we read, for instance, in a handicraft manual, "and the thrill of creating fabric that is both functional and lovely is hard to describe" (Todd 1902: 69). Second, this pleasure was further intensified by the sense of comfort and softness that pattern-based fabrications promoted, turning the nineteenth-century home into an emblem of comfort, safety, and security: a "sanctuary and haven," as Sparke defines it.

The idea of physical comfort could be expressed, for instance, by cushioning, soft textures and surfaces, and soft blends of colour, by gentle curved forms and patterns rather than harsh, geometric ones, by visual references to the natural world rather than to the man-made world of technology. (Sparke 1995: 27)

Physical and psychological comfort was essential to the nineteenth-century conception of domesticity—something to be pursued through repetitive actions and pattern-based fabrications. However, those practices also proved to be inherently treacherous. In "On the Psychological Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena,"

Freud observes that constant needlework renders "women particularly prone to hysteria," as it encourages daydreaming and induces "dispositional hypnoid states."⁸ Elsewhere he warns about the dangers of the "housewife's psychosis," provoked by her repetitive ordering of the house.⁹ While repetitive behaviors are considered by Freud to be normal and healthy in childhood, they are regarded as triggers of mental disorder in adults. The nineteenth-century idea of domesticity, being entirely shaped by repetition, seemed to contribute actively to the development of such disorders.

(Self-)Enclosing

Although Freud does not make this connection explicitly, his theory suggests that both the "housewife psychosis" and the "needlework hysteria" are linked to a psychical anomaly that he diagnoses under the label of narcissism.¹⁰ The myth of Narcissus tells the story of a young man who falls in love with his own reflection, neglecting the love of others. As a punishment for his selfishness, his soul is seized and he is turned into a spring flower.¹¹ The nineteenth-century housewife who was excessively committed to practices of ordering, or who overindulged in craft-based rituals, was prone, according to Freud, to develop a similar inclination toward disproportionate self-identification. Given the repetitive and captivating nature of these tasks, he suggests, she could be easily detached from the world, concentrating only on her own domestic affairs. Locked up in her hermetic clutter, surrounded by her patterned fabrications, and absorbed in her repetitive routines,

the nineteenth-century housewife was bound to end up like Narcissus: an impervious flower, oblivious to others, incapacitated by her own capriciousness.

As a matter of fact, the nineteenth-century stereotypical housewife was indeed conventionally thought of as a flower. “Women were also identified with the objects of their creations,” Graves remarks. “They too were flowers” (Graves 2002: 50). Graves observes that implicit in the flower motif is an ideology that infantilizes and oppresses the woman, depriving her of her sexuality and diminishing her. This infantilizing ideal links again with Freud’s account of narcissism, a symptom that he considers typical of a childish attitude. As he claims, the “charm of a child lies to a great extent in his narcissism, in his self-contentment and inaccessibility, just as does the charm of certain animals which seem not to concern themselves about us, such as cats and the large beasts of prey” (Freud 1914: 89). Freud observes that narcissism also manifests in characters such as criminals and humorists, and is a recurrent trait of women, especially the good-looking ones, whose needs, he argues, point not “in the direction of loving but of being loved” (Freud 1914: 88–9).

The anxiety around such a trait wasn’t only Freud’s concern. It actually preceded the formulation of his theory, being noticeable, for example, in the codes of behavior formulated in the already mentioned mid- to late-nineteenth-century etiquette books, such as Isabella Beeton’s *The Book of Household Management* (1861) and J. P. Faunthorpe’s *Household*

Science: Readings in Necessary Knowledge for Girls and Young Women (1881). These prescriptive manuals, very popular at the time, repeatedly advise housewives to balance their domestic duties with social activities, in order to avoid getting over-absorbed in their ever-recurring routines. Likewise, they insistently emphasize the fact that domestic tasks should be directed at promoting the well-being of the family, and not aimed at the housewife’s own pleasure, unknowingly anticipating Freud’s more articulated apprehension toward the dangers of narcissism.

Another remarkable account of around the same period linking repetitive tasks to narcissism is the one given by the French writer Colette in her literary confessions, where she spells out her anxiety around her young daughter’s over-attachment to sewing—an activity that renders her inaccessible and locked away. As Colette reports:

I shall speak the truth: I don’t much like my daughter sewing. When she reads, she returns all bewildered and with flaming cheeks ... If she draws, or colours pictures, a semi-articulate song issues from her ... But Bel-Gazou is silent when she sews, silent for hours on end, with her mouth firmly closed concealing her large, new-cut incisors that bite into the moist heart of a fruit—like little saw-edged blades ... it would seem that with this needle play she has discovered the perfect means of adventuring, stitch by stitch, point by point, along a road of risks and temptations. (Colette 1966: 215–16)

Graves attributes the power and pleasure of Bel-Gazou’s sewing to the “joy of privacy” that this activity promotes: a sense of privacy that is independent from actual physical seclusion, she states (Graves 2003: 237). Perhaps because they engender domesticity materially, through the practices of ordering and adorning, pattern-based gestures seem to be in themselves sufficient to promote a sense of psychical domesticity, as if building an invisible, imaginary enclosure that inconspicuously isolates and protects the pattern-maker from the world outside her.¹² Graves’s and Colette’s accounts suggest that pattern actions operate architecturally—creating a homely, enclosed ambience—even before their fabrications start to effectively produce material enclosure. The provisional and elusive space they create bears resemblance to the Greek *choros*, where pattern-based rituals were equally believed to precede and determine architectural construction. As McEwen reports:

Before Daedalus made Ariadne’s dancing floor ... there was no thought given to the place for the dance ... the measure of the dancing floor was the measure of the dance itself. The place appeared with the dance and disappeared when the dance was over. Its independent status was not even an issue ... Homer says that on Achilles’ shield Hephaestus poikille (wove) a dancing floor like the one Daedalus made for Ariadne, but he does not say that the dancing floor was made first and that only then did the dance take place. In fact, he says nothing

about the dancing floor at all; the description is devoted entirely to the dance. The dancing floor seems to emerge with the dancing of the youths and maidens, who, it should be noted, are very *kosmètai* in all their finery and with the pattern of their movement. (McEwen 1993: 62–3)

In the Greek *choros* it was the dancing ritual that provided the precedent model—the pattern—for the physical development of architecture.

Notably, spatial enclosure was in the Greek language designated by the word *chora*, the feminine form of *choros*. In *Socrates' Ancestor*, McEwen notices that both *choros* and *chora* were in Greek culture conventionally used to designate what we today define as space. However, while the masculine *choros* generally “denotes a space that is somewhat more defined,” either in terms of dimension, or in terms of use, the feminine *chora* usually defines a “territory made to appear through a continual remaking, or reweaving of its encompassing surface” (McEwen 1993: 82). In *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz defines *chora* as “the condition of genesis of the material world ... the space onto which the Form’s duplicate or copy is cast, providing the point of entry ... into material existence” (Grosz 1995: 115). *Chora* denotes, in Grosz’s definition, a vessel, a mould, or a space for casting: in other words, a space for making patterns—moulds, casts—literally and materially. For Grosz, the enclosed space of the vessel—*chora*—constitutes the very

space from which architecture as a material practice derives. As she summarizes:

Chora ... is the space in which place is made possible, the chasm for the passage of spaceless Forms into a spatialized reality, a dimensionless tunnel opening itself to spatialization ... While *chora* cannot be identified with the womb ... it does seem to borrow many of the paradoxical attributes of pregnancy and maternity. (Grosz 1995: 116–17)

In another passage, Grosz describes *chora* as the space of “formless incubation provided by the mother” (ibid.: 115). In Grosz’s formulation, the notion of spatial enclosure in which architecture is grounded derives from the place where a living organism is first conceived and nurtured. Like the nineteenth-century domestic interior, such a place is reliant on a condition of softness and comfort—like the one provided by pattern-based fabrications—because it is dependent on repetitive cycles of maintenance—like the ones secured by pattern-based gestures. Rather than being a practice to be performed within the space of the home, pattern-based production seems to produce a sense of homeliness. Rather than being an activity to be contained in an enclosed architectural space, pattern-fabrication seems to launch architectural enclosure.

If the sense of enclosure and privacy propitiated by an engagement with pattern rituals is on one level comforting and reassuring, it may also, on

another level, provoke a feeling of suffocation, imprisonment, isolation. Echoing Grosz's correspondence of the space of the *chora* to the space of the womb, Julia Kristeva identifies enclosure with the experience of pregnancy. As she reminds, the word for pregnancy in French is *enceinte*, meaning "walled in," confined, "surrounded by an enclosure." The pregnant woman is, according to Kristeva, "within an 'enceinte' separating her from the world of everyone else. Enclosed in this 'elsewhere,' an 'enceinte' woman loses communal meaning, which suddenly appears to her as worthless, absurd, or at best, comic ..." (Kristeva 1980: 239–40). In a similar guise, in *The Textile Book*, Colin Gale and Jasbir Kaur argue that the spatiality defined by pattern gestures fosters a condition where "the 'speaking' part of our mind for a while has no useful role, and wanders unhindered yet in parallel, measuring, fretting, musing or calm" (Gale and Kaur 2002: 11). Such a dimension feels all the more isolated, for, in its confined territory, conventional language seems to have no currency. In the very act of launching a sense of reserved domesticity, pattern activities appear to also institute a language that is proper to their peculiar architecture. Acknowledging such a condition of incommunicability, Plant defines pattern mechanisms as conveyors of unspeakable messages: like "Proust's madeleines," she observes, they evoke "memories of an intensity which completely escapes the written world" (Plant 1998: 66).

(Self-)Reflecting

If mysterious and undecipherable, pattern rituals are nonetheless capable of exerting some strange fascination. Take, for example, the following account of Rose, an embroiderer, taken from a story published in 1981 in an issue of *Cosmopolitan* magazine: "...you never saw a woman sit so still ... Day after day she sat in a basket chair on the stones beneath the pretty white iron spiral staircase, sewing among her roses ... Rose's hands seemed usually to be still, though her needle was always threaded. She drove men demented" (Parker 1984: 10). The movements of Rose's repetitive gestures seem to have a somewhat hypnotizing effect, affecting not only herself but also all those who watch her performing her skillful actions. Interestingly, such an effect seems to also impregnate the fabrications that result from the ever-recurring movements of patterning. In *Women's Work*, Elizabeth Barber refers, for example, to an ancient tradition of weaving cloth to "invoke magic—to protect, to secure fertility and riches, to divine the future, perhaps even to curse" (Plant 1998: 62). She describes a traditional custom from Southeast Asia, which determines that when "a girl is pregnant for the first time, her parents give her a cloth made specially for her. Called her soul cloth, it is covered with tiny designs that are used to foretell her future (yet another use of magic). She will rely on this cloth throughout her life 'as a guardian of her well being'" (Barber 1994: 161).

As the above-cited examples suggest, the enthralling effects

of pattern are inseparable from its repetitive rituals of making. Fundamentally based on repetition, such rituals encompass both a mechanism of duplication and a process of reproduction. Resonating with Grosz's identification of pattern-making with casting, repetition-as-duplication suggests a link between patterns and the realm of simulation and/or illusion. In *Zeros + Ones*, Plant recalls that it was the Greek philosopher Plato who first established such a link, which became immortalized in the renowned myth of the cave. Plato's cave, where prisoners presumably watch "images which dance in the firelight, reflecting a world which exists both beyond the cave and their own knowledge," has also been compared to the inner space of the womb—the space where humans are duplicated, or cast (Plant 1998: 178).

The second enthralling procedure that pattern rituals entail is one related to indefinite reproduction, as suggested by the ever-recurring quality of Rose's gestures and also by the previously discussed compulsive actions of cleaning and organizing the home. Such an ever-recurring logic seems similarly to propitiate the creation of an elusive atmosphere, as if triggering some resonating effect in our brains and switching them to another tune. Referring to this ever-recurring aspect of repetition, Plant speaks, for instance, of "an obsessive, addictive quality" proper "to the spinning of yarn and the weaving of cloth; a temptation to get fixated and locked in to processes that run away with themselves and those drawn into



Figure 4

“Reproduction.” By Ana Araujo.
Photograph: Dirk Lellau.

them (ibid.: 62). Elsewhere she connects weaving to daydreaming, as if the pulsating beats of the loom would induce a state of trance, also promising to transport the daydreamer into the domain of illusion and fantasy launched by the duplicating movements of pattern production (ibid.: 23).

Reverberating with the function of repetition-as-duplication is the figure of the mirror, which, like textiles and other pattern fabrications, has frequently been attributed a somewhat magical connotation. As Barbara Walker reports, various ancient civilizations

attributed mystic powers to any reflective surface ... because the

reflection was considered part of the soul. Heavy taboos were laid on the act of disturbing water into which a person was gazing, because shattering the image meant danger to the soul. Hence the similar taboo on breaking a mirror, now said to bring seven years’ bad luck. (Walker 1983: 660)

Resounding with the previously mentioned “soul cloth,” mirrors, as Marina Warner interestingly recalls, are in French designated *psyché*, meaning soul, or vital sigh (Warner 2000: 29). This connection between the mirror and the soul recurs in many fairytales, where reflections appear repeatedly associated with

the inner spirit of a character. This happens, for instance, in legendary stories of soulless vampires, who cast no shadows and make no reflections; and also in Romantic fairy tales, where innocent creatures who unwarily sell their soul to the devil cease to appear in mirrors.¹³ And there is also the *Beauty and the Beast* fairy tale, where Beauty's enchanted mirror reflects no beauty, showing instead the heroine's most monstrous psychological conflicts.¹⁴ "Mirrors can be seen as vanity, but that is not all their meaning," the artist Louise Bourgeois claims. "The act of looking *into* a mirror is really

about having the courage it takes to look at yourself and really face yourself" (Warner 2000: 30). The previously mentioned myth of Narcissus, equally constructed around the figure of the mirror, suggests a similar expedition into the depths of the *psyché*. As Walker alleges, "damage to the reflection-soul was the real basis of the myth of Narcissus, usually misinterpreted as a fable of excessive self-love" (Walker 1983: 660). She explains that an earlier version of the myth links it to the legend of Echo, also known as the goddess of death-by-water. In this version, the reflexive lake where Narcissus dies turns out

to be in fact Echo's magic pool, a mirrored device maliciously devised to capture souls. Following from this account, Narcissus' dive into the lake constituted not a futile submersion into the province of self-pride, but instead a deadly attempt to retrieve his soul. Playing with repetition as duplication, mirrors seem to evoke a self-reflecting condition, which, for its incommunicable and isolated qualities, calls upon the obscure dimension of death.

In a similar guise, ever-recurring repetition has been in the world of myth and fairy tales frequently associated with an unfathomable



Figure 5

"Duplication." Photograph: Dirk Lellau.

dimension. In the story of *The Sleeping Beauty*, for example, the incessant movements of a twisting spindle prick the finger of the heroine, taking her into a 100-year-long sleep. As narrated in the tale, “whether the Princess in her eagerness to seize the spindle grasped it too roughly, or whether it was just because the fairy had ordained that it should be so ... the sharp iron point pricked her hand, and immediately she fell backward on to the couch in a deep sleep” (Evans 1993: 69). As in Narcissus’ myth, the sleep of Sleeping Beauty—triggered this time not by an effect of reflection or duplication but by the ever-recurring movement of the spinning wheel—symbolizes an enclosed, and eventually irreversible incursion into the deep interior of the soul. It is important to remember that such incursion coincides with the heroine’s entrance into puberty, which implies not only that from this moment on she is apt to conceive—that is, to “cast” and nurture a “duplicate” within her own body—but also that her life is bound to be ruled by a recurring pattern of bleeding. From the moment her finger touches the spindle, the Sleeping Beauty is irreversibly tied up with the inescapable curse of repetition. And such curse, like Narcissus’ curse, invokes the inscrutable dimension of death. As Bruno Bettelheim summarizes:

Bleeding, as in menstruation, is for the young girl ... an overwhelming experience ... Overcome by the experience of sudden bleeding, the princess falls into a long sleep ... The long sleep of the

beautiful maiden has also other connotations ... The alteration of the original curse, which threatened death, to one of prolonged sleep suggests that the two are not all that different ... During their sleep the heroines’ beauty is a frigid one; theirs is the isolation of narcissism ... Narcissistic withdrawal is a tempting reaction to the stresses of adolescence, but ... it leads to a dangerous deathlike existence ... The entire world then becomes dead to the person; this is the symbolic meaning, and warning, of the deathlike sleep into which everybody surrounding Sleeping Beauty falls. (Bettelheim 1976: 233–4)

It is a fear of this deathlike condition that leads thinkers like Freud to relate repetitive mechanisms to mental anomaly, and to condemn pattern-based gestures, which, in his view, encourage an over-attachment to repetition—and, consequentially, also to this “deathlike” dimension of existence. However, rather than being strange to human nature, repetitive processes are an intrinsic part of it, encompassing aspects of our beings we can’t possibly detach from. In the following paragraphs, I will investigate various psychological connotations that, according to Freud’s own theory, are implicated in the idea of repetition. Instead of avoiding the discomfort that our internal repetitive mechanisms might provoke, I will argue, pattern rituals promise to open ways for successfully coming to terms with them.

Oscillating

Repetition is interpreted in Freud's theory as an inherently ambiguous human function, for it works, simultaneously, in two apparently opposite directions. First, repetition cultivates the maintenance of life, manifesting, for instance, in bodily mechanisms such as heartbeats, breathing, blood circulation, muscular contractions, and menstrual discharges. When working in this mode, Freud says, repetition expresses "the inertia inherent in organic life": its intrinsic tendency to perpetuate itself, endlessly (Freud 1920: 36). Repetition determines, in this first mode, that things should never change. As Freud puts it, the "elementary living entity would from its very beginning have had no wish to change; if conditions remained the same, it would do no more than constantly repeat the same course of life" (ibid.: 38). Nevertheless, as Freud also notices, embedded in this conservative function of repetition there lies a tendency that points toward the reverse direction: "if we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for internal reasons—becomes inorganic once again—then we shall be compelled to say that *'the aim of all life is death,'* and, looking backward, *'inanimate things existed before living ones'*" (ibid.). Perplexingly, the same repetitive movements that safeguard the continuation of life also determine that all living cycles must at some point come to an end. This tendency toward death is, all the same, still ultimately oriented toward conservation, for, as we may

conclude from observing nature, the death of an individual organism constitutes a *sine qua non* condition for the general maintenance of life cycles. As Freud explains:

On the basis of theoretical considerations, supported by biology, we put forward the hypothesis of a death instinct, the task of which is to lead organic life back into the inanimate state; on the other hand, we supposed that Eros ... aims at complicating life and at the same time, of course, at preserving it. Acting this way, both instincts would be conservative in the strictest sense of the word, since both would be endeavouring to re-establish a state of things that was disturbed by the emergence of life. The emergence of life would thus be the cause of the continuance of life and also at the same time of the striving towards death. (Freud 1923: 40–1)

By continuously pointing toward self-perpetuation, the repetitive life instincts, which Freud also calls Eros, end by pointing toward death. Life and death drives are, in the end, based on the same principle: both are rooted in repetition and both aim at restoring to "an earlier state of things" (Freud 1920: 36).

Drawing from Freud's understanding, it is as if the death and life instincts would correspond to two slightly different looping circuits. The first conforms to a very brief temporal interval, constantly reiterating the current state of affairs, and therefore promoting

the continuation of life. The second aims at the completion of a larger circular span, forcing in the direction of an earlier condition, and consequently pointing toward the remoter state of the inorganic. Although apparently conflicting, as Freud realizes, those two tendencies are in fact interdependent.

Being rooted in the oscillating mechanisms of repetition, the logic of Freud's life and death instincts reverberates with the previously analyzed routines of patterning. On the one hand, the reiterating movements of the life instincts bear comparison to the ever-recurring gestures of weaving, sewing, knitting, embroidering, lace-making, and also to the domestic rituals of cleaning, disposing, storing, laundering. On the other hand, those same reiterating movements may also lead, eventually, to a condition of regression, as evoked, for instance, in the deathlike dimension of the *Sleeping Beauty* fairy tale, in the impassive gestures of Collette's daughter Bel-Gazou, and in the myth of Penelope. The same productive routines that motivate the pattern maker also debilitate her. In Penelope's case, for example, while weaving helps her safeguard control over her household, it also paralyzes her, rendering her melancholic and nostalgic. As the critic Peter Jones remarks, the heroine of the *Odyssey* is, above anything else, "a woman who hangs grimly on to the past, and finds solace and comfort only in the world of sleeps and dreams, though even these can be painful for her" (Jones 2006: xxiii).

A prototypical pattern-maker, Penelope becomes unthinkingly enveloped in the lethargic dimension launched by her process of weaving: a practice of lagging effects, a technique of “working backwards,” as Plant defines it (Plant 1998: 26).

The sense behind this oscillating and regressive dynamics of repetitive gestures is, as Freud elucidates, in some way clarified by an understanding of the mechanisms of breast-feeding. As he maintains, breast-sucking is, in principle, a life-motivating function—like breathing, heart-beating, and so on. For not only does it feed, but it also allies to feeding a feeling of intense gratification. However, Freud also realizes that such a feeling of satisfaction is not simply tied up with nourishment. Rather, it constitutes a mechanism fostered by the instincts of maintenance for the sake of their own perpetuation. An evidence of this, Freud alleges, is the fact that other objects may replace the breast of the mother, offering the baby the gratification of repetitive sucking but providing no nutritional fulfillment. As he exemplifies:

Thumb sucking appears already in early infancy and may continue into maturity, or even persist all through life. It consists in the rhythmic repetition of a sucking contact by the mouth (or lips). *There is no question of the purpose of this procedure being the taking of nourishment.* A portion of the lip itself, the tongue, or any other part of the skin within reach—even the big toe—may be taken as the object upon

which this sucking is carried out. (Freud 1905: 179)

Like Penelope’s emblematic gesture of (un)twisting her father-in-law’s shroud, sucking is not oriented toward an end but toward unending repetition. As Rosalind Krauss explains:

The baby sucks out of a need of sustenance, and in the course of gratifying that need receives pleasure as well. And desire occurs at this second moment, as the longing to repeat the first one understood not as milk but as pleasure, understood, that is, as the satisfaction of desire. Thus it searches for an object of original satisfaction where there is none. There is only milk, which can satisfy the need, but cannot satisfy the desire, since it has become something that the little hiccup of substitution will always produce as insufficient. (Krauss 1998: 140)

Breast-sucking, like other forms of repetition, is partially motivated by a deceptive search. For the pleasure that is searched for is, by its very nature, ultimately unachievable. Total satisfaction would provoke an interruption of the repetitive cycles of maintenance. Only frustration can keep repetition at work. Alluding to this disconcerting mechanism, Griselda Pollock defines desire as a “psychic engine of repetition.” What it searches for, she says, “only exists within the psyche in its aching lostness, like a shadow without its cause, that then generates as its effect an impulse to refind it, an impulse that is paradoxically an originating repetition” (Pollock

2006: 160). Resounding with what has been previously acknowledged in regard to the organic foundations of repetition and to the unending gestures of pattern-making, Pollock's "psychic engine of repetition" is, from the beginning, also committed to the economy of regression. For the nurturing of its eluding mechanisms is itself dependent on an idea of retrieval: the retrieval of an illusory moment of fulfillment deceptively located in the past. The first feed symbolizes this idealized moment, compelling our instinctual mechanisms to keep trying to rescue its imaginary state of ecstatic satisfaction. As emblematically reflected in the mechanisms of patterning, breast-sucking reveals our instinctual nature to be inherently repetitive and therefore essentially regressive. What propels it is not the prospect of bringing things to an end, or a wish to move forward, but, on the contrary, the endeavor to keep repetition at work, based on a perpetual search for an impossible (lost) instant of supreme delight.

Although Freud acknowledges that the ever-recurring and regressive functions of repetition are inherent in our nature, he still attempts to resist them. As he claims, when locked in the vicious cycles of repetition, humans perform unwillingly: like babies, they become victims of their instincts. Freud's psychoanalytical endeavor is therefore, to an extent, devised as a means to control the repetitive machinery of desire. As such, it attunes to what Vesely defines as the instrumental project of modernity, which, as we've seen, is equally motivated by the intent to subject all aspects of life to the human will (Vesely 2004).

(Self-)Controlling

In Freud's view, the overpowering threat posed by our repetitive instinctual mechanisms is caused by their propensity to trigger unmediated action. As he describes, when commanded by those mechanisms, "the patient does not *remember* anything of what he has forgotten, but *acts it out*. He reproduces it not as a memory but *as an action*; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it" (Freud 1914: 150–1). In the face of this pathological condition, Freud maintains, it is the endeavor of the psychoanalyst to help the patient "force as much as possible into the channel of memory and allow as little as possible to emerge as repetition" (Freud 1920: 19, 35). Memory is devised as a means to master repetition, as a way to neutralize its impulses, preventing them from coming back in an active form. Memory works against our instincts, for its final aim is to bring their vicious circles to an end—to combat their stubborn and regressive pulsations. Freud delineates a psychoanalytical cure in terms of a detainment of those pulsations, achieved through their displacement from the realm of action to the realm of thought. What threatens to become operational in the "motor sphere" needs to be redirected to the "psychical sphere," he postulates, implying that once it has been subjected to the control of the mind, the dimension of the instinctual gets tamed, ceasing to threaten taking over human existence (Freud 1914: 153).

Underpinning this psychoanalytical effort to stagnate

the throbbing machinery of the instinctual is a general anxiety around repetitive mechanisms and their power to take full control over our lives. Contemporary with Freud, the modernist architect Le Corbusier spells out a similar feeling of anxiety in an emphatic condemnation of pattern-based fabrications. As he states:

Every citizen is required to replace his hangings, his damasks, his wall-papers, his stencils, with a plain coat of white ripolin ... His home is made clean. There are no more dirty, dark corners ... Then comes inner cleanness, for the course adopted leads to refusal to allow anything at all which is not correct, authorised, intended, desired, thought-out: *no action before thought* ... Once you have put ripolin on your walls you will be master of yourself. And you will want to be precise, to be accurate, to think clearly. (Le Corbusier 1925: 188)

"No action before thought" is the leitmotif of modernist design, in the name of inner cleanliness, correctness, precision, accuracy, and clarity of thought. In Freud's terminology, this could read as no activation of the "motor sphere" before the mediation of the "psychical sphere." And in terms of the productive routines of fabrication, no making before thinking. Pattern-based procedures, as we've learned, promulgate the opposite: no thought before action, or, to put it more accurately, thought only

through action. For, as the Greek tradition of crafting reveals, *kosmos* can only emerge *through*, and never before, repetitive production.

The modernist project of purging repetitive production from architectural constructions had a decisive impact on the culture of domesticity. As Anthony Vidler defines in *The Architectural Uncanny* (1992):

It was in an attempt to free culture from what Henry James called this overburdening “sense of the past” that modernist architects, formed by futurism, attempted to erase its traces from their architecture. This urge to escape history was joined to a therapeutic program, dedicated to the erasure of nineteenth-century squalor in all its forms, that proposed an alliance between the hygienists and the architects that would be reinforced on every level by design ... An open, fresh-air existence would finally address the causes of those pathologies so painstakingly treated on post-Freudian couches, purging society of its totems, taboos, and discontents. If houses were no longer haunted by the weight of tradition and the imbrications of generations of family drama, if no cranny was left for the storage of the bric-a-brac once deposited in damp cellars and musty attics, then memory would be released from its unhealthy preoccupations to live in the present. Side by side with the ubiquitous image of the modern bureaucrat as athlete ... was the vision of biological functions cleanly

subsuming psychological traumas. (Vidler 1992: 64)

Modernism was a project oriented toward well-thought, definitive, pattern-free solutions. However, in its attempt to eradicate pattern-based rituals and productions, modernism created a fundamental lack. As Vidler observes, the “housecleaning operation” of modernism “produced its own ghosts, the nostalgic shadows of all the ‘houses’ now condemned to history or the demolition site” (ibid.). If on some level modernism achieved perfect cleanliness and purity, on another, its constructions failed to attain the feeling of domesticity commonly attributed to nineteenth-century interiors. Vidler lists a number of complaints against the “uninhabitability” of the twentieth-century “geometric cube”: a condition that, as he also notices, did not seem to improve with more recent attempts toward a nostalgic retrieval of an image of “houseness,” typical of late-twentieth-century architecture (ibid.: 65–6). And it couldn’t be otherwise. For “houseness,” as I hope to have argued throughout this article, is not a condition produced by a clear-cut, conclusive design action, but a rather complex state engendered and cultivated by an ongoing, repetitive, unending commitment with different instances of patterning.

Notes

1. This connection actually dates from prehistorical times, as discussed in Barber 1994: 29–41.

2. For a more detailed account of this matter, see McEwen 1993: 41–54.
3. See for example Beeton: 1861. For a more general account of etiquette books and their increased commitment with order, see Sparke 1995: 73–96.
4. For a detailed account of the various tendencies defining the idea of homeliness in the nineteenth-century West, see for example Forty 2000: 94–119. Interestingly, Forty ties nineteenth-century domesticity with the increased use of the sewing machine, a pattern-making device, in the home.
5. For a more detailed account of this problem, see for instance Sparke 1995: 5–12; and Parker 1984: 1–16.
6. See for instance Sparke 1995: 3–32; Tiersten 1996: 18–20; and Keeble 2005: 85–97.
7. The nineteenth-century cult of domesticity has another precedent in seventeenth-century Dutch culture, although here more emphasis was placed on the ordering and cleaning functions of patterning and less on its adorning properties. For a discussion of the seventeenth-century Dutch practices of household maintenance and of the impact they had on Dutch social life, see Schama 1991: 375–480. Schama argues that Dutch culture oppressed, rather than promoted, the figure of the housewife. However, he also acknowledges the strong impact that the Dutch domestic patterns, to a great extent dictated by the housewife's routines, had in disciplining the society. For a discussion on this topic, see Hill 2006: 14.
8. As quoted in Parker 1984: 11. Freud's statement reads as follows: "We have nothing new to say on the question of the origin of these dispositional hypnoid states. They often ... grow out of daydreams which are so common even in healthy people and to which needlework and similar occupations render women especially prone" (Freud 1893: 13). See also Graves 2003: 236.
9. When introducing the clinical picture of the hysterical patient Dora, Freud presents her mother as a typical case of what he designates the "housewife psychosis." His account reads as follows: "From the accounts given me by the girl and her father I was led to imagine her as an uncultivated woman and above all as a foolish one, who had concentrated all her interests upon domestic affairs ... She presented the picture, in fact, of what might be called the 'housewife psychosis.' She had no understanding of her children's more active interests, and was occupied all day long in cleaning the house with its furniture and utensils and in *keeping them clean ...*" (Freud 1905: 20; emphasis mine).
10. This is also suggested in Parker 1984: 14.
11. For an account of the Greek myth, see Walker 1983: 718; and Graves 1981: 80–1.
12. As McEwen interestingly remarks, the loom constitutes an essential symbol of such a sense of psychological enclosure, for it materially duplicates domesticity in its physical constitution of a loom/room within a room, a space within a space – a home within a home, as it were. See McEwen 1993: 110.
13. See Warner 2000: 29. For another account of the mystic powers of mirrors, see Hollander 1993: 391–418; and Warner 2006: 169–77.
14. See Bettelheim 1976: 303–9; and Graves 2003: 239–40.

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