

SANDRINE ROSE SCHILLER HANSEN

A GLITCH IN TRANSCENDENTAL REPETITION

On the Freudian Uncanny and the Ambiguity of Repeating¹

In *Analysis Terminable and Interminable*, Freud envisages the unconscious material looping with compulsive rigidity in transference neurosis as “small fragments of necrotic bone.”² Although Freud here addresses the particular problem of residual portions of the analytical transference continually disrupting the subject after ended analysis, the image he uses evokes something beyond post-therapeutic complications. A necrotic bone rigidly recurring on the horizon of the unfolding future. It is as if the image was taken out of Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In the first act, “the Dawn of Man,” the birth of Homo Faber coincides with the first act of killing—one ape killing another with a bone. The simultaneity of destruction and creation lingers throughout the film as this bone is tossed into intergalactic circulation. The metaphor of a necrotic bone arrested in a compulsive loop touches on the very core of Freudian metaphysics. A necrotic bone is a dead bone. In medical terms it can refer to osteonecrosis and avascular necrosis characterized as bone death due to deficient blood supply.³ In Stanley Kubrick’s film this bone is Death put into production. It is the inorganic remains of another life and it is a tool to kill. Thrown from the timeless origin of man to an unseen future it is replaced and substituted by the pinnacle of sublimation, a spaceship.⁴ We hear the Hegelian echo “the *being of Spirit is a bone*.”⁵

In the clinic Freud made himself the witness to the exceptional ingenuity with which people repeat themselves juggling the necrotic bone.⁶ This compulsive repetition is according to Freud the dumb machinery underlying the mythologized compulsion of human destiny.⁷

It is well known that in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud examines different forms of compulsive repetition that appear to challenge the presumed dominance of the pleasure principle which posits that psychic life should be ruled by a tendency to evacuate excitation or, at least, to keep excitation at a constant level.⁸ But Freud is not only interested in the exceptional and pathological compulsive repetitions disrupting the smooth operation of the coherent ego, he is interested in the

mysterious nature of the repetition at work behind the uniformity and conservatism of our character. Freud writes:

This 'perpetual recurrence of the same thing' causes us no astonishment when it relates to *active* behavior on the part of the person concerned and when we discern in him an essential character-trait which always remains the same and which is compelled to find expression in a repetition of the same experiences.⁹

Freud's observation is accompanied with a silent bewilderment. How come, Freud implicitly asks, are we only astonished by the passive or involuntary repetitions, whereas the repetitions that are experienced as integral to our person are determined as character-traits and seen as healthy markers of continuity and individuation. This throws us directly into the ontological intricacy of repetition, and to the problem of the conceptual rift between voluntary and involuntary repetition. What is the difference between a tic and character-trait? Beneath or *beyond* this question is a problem that emerges with Deleuze's paradigmatic reading of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in *Coldness and Cruelty*, namely, how to distinguish between the constitutive and productive repetition of Eros and the repetition which in the name of the death instinct erases? Another way to formulate this question is to ask: *where*, or maybe better, *what* is the threshold between individuating repetition and the enclosing claustrophobia of compulsive repetition? One could investigate instances of pathological compulsive repetition and from that point delimit a threshold between healthy individuating repetition and inhibiting compulsion. Trailing along already accepted categories for adaptive and social behavior such an approach however risks jeopardizing the critical potential of the question.¹⁰ My point of departure is the glitch itself—the moment where an overdetermined recurrence shakes our habitual expectation. Within the non-pathologized everydayness this instance is in the Freudian oeuvre best known as the uncanny. Exploring the link Freud establishes between the experience of the uncanny and compulsive repetition, I will show how certain experiences of the uncanny can be seen as the paralyzing concurrence between the temporality of consciousness and the timeless instantaneousness of the unconscious, as such marking a glitch in what Deleuze defines as the transcendental work of repetition.¹¹

Uncanny recurrences and the caged animal

In his exposé of the uncanny, Freud writes about a visit to Italy. During a hot afternoon stroll in a provincial town, Freud is surprised to find himself in a red-light district. Eager to leave he turns down the first street, only to find himself shortly after in the same place. When this situation is repeated a third time, Freud reportedly was overcome by an uncanny feeling.¹²

Giving rise to a claustrophobic or inescapable sense of fate he describes this feeling of the uncanny as something similar to "the sense of helplessness experienced in some dream-states."¹³ In his rejection of the idea that the uncanny has its roots in

an intellectual uncertainty Freud draws attention to different cases that provoke an uncanny feeling—the idea of the *Doppelgänger*, the living doll, the dread of damaging one’s eyes—all of which serve as evidence for his conclusion that “an uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed.”¹⁴

Reflecting on his personal experience, Freud notes that the uncanny feeling of this episode, like others related to repetition or recurrence, is rooted in the experience of “an unintended recurrence of the same situation.”¹⁵ Having noted already that people are not disturbed by repetitions pertaining to character-traits, which hardly can be defined as strictly voluntary or intentional phenomena, we need a more precise characterization of the kinds of repetition that evokes the uncanny. Whereas some forms of anxiety can be understood as a phenomenon where the indifference of the material universe encroaches on our meaningful existence, it is a sense of over-determination that snaps in the case of the uncanny. In the instances where repetition gives rise to an uncanny feeling, elements that are usually experienced as causally unconnected suddenly appear to be connected. Although Freud does not elaborate on this, he observes that events which otherwise would not have stood out, become uncanny if they occur with a temporal proximity at odds with our expectations or rhythm. Freud uses the example of one specific number recurring over and over again within a short time frame. Imagine that you are on a train with the number 5757, your allocated seat is 57 and you notice that you have 57 unread emails, later you are celebrating your friends 57th birthday. These instances are unrelated and in themselves unremarkable, yet the obstinate recurrence of the same number will according to Freud in most people stir an uncanny feeling.¹⁶

Instead of explaining how the uncanny effect of these kinds of repetition are grounded in infantile psychology, Freud refers his readers to another text, stating:

It is possible to recognize the dominance in the unconscious mind of a ‘compulsion to repeat’ proceeding from the instinctual impulses and probably inherent in the very nature of the instincts—a compulsion powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle, lending to certain aspects of the mind their daemonic character [...] All these considerations prepare us for the discovery that whatever reminds us of this inner ‘compulsion to repeat’ is perceived as uncanny.¹⁷

The text Freud refers to in this passage is *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Here Freud writes, a bit more tentatively, that “manifestations of a compulsion to repeat [...] exhibit to a high degree an instinctual [*triebhaft*] character and, when they act in opposition to the pleasure principle, give the appearance of some ‘daemonic’ force at work.”¹⁸ Although the concept of fate or destiny,¹⁹ usually serves to bracket the involvement of the individual, Freud nonetheless ties the impression of “being pursued by malignant fate” to the defiant daemonic force opposing the pleasure principle, rooting both in the compulsion to repeat.²⁰ Whether or not it is service-

able to conflate what appears to be on the one side an active force, and on the other a passive experience as Freud does in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, it is for our purposes crucial to note the link he establishes between the work of the compulsion to repeat and that of fate. Exemplifying this one could turn to an array of fictive tragic characters, repeatedly falling prey to the same misfortunes, but Freud points out that we find similar instances in “the lives of normal people.”²¹ Love relations terminating in the same predicament, another wrecked friendship, the long overdue promotion postponed yet again, another missed deadline. This compulsive repetition is according to Freud not simply the unfortunate “fate” of neurotics, nor the mysterious work of a divine faculty, but in fact what we rationally must understand as the “intelligible” mechanism operating beneath the culturally edified concept of destiny.²²

The painful circuitousness of life evidently challenges the presumed rule of the pleasure principle, but it also complicates and obscures the idea of a proper (with this I mean smooth) functioning of the psyche, hence, Freud finds that enough is left unexplained to break the question: “how is the predicate ‘instinctual’ related to the compulsion to repeat?”²³ On the basis of his observations Freud reply with a radical hypothesis:

*It seems, then, that an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces; that is, it is a kind of organic elasticity, or, to put it another way, the expression of the inertia inherent in organic life.*²⁴

Traditionally, instincts are understood as inherent impulses pushing the organism towards change and development. Seeing instincts²⁵ rather as conservative in nature, Freud reverses that view. Repetition is by definition the re-occurrence of something, from this perspective it is not difficult to see why Freud conceptualizes the instincts behind this tendency to fall back upon oneself repeating earlier reactions as rearward rather than progressive. Yet, it is not all together clear what Freud writes—the question is how the concept of inertia can be understood as a drive or an urge. Is it possible to understand “elasticity,” the tendency to retract back into an original form when external pressure is relived, as an urge or an impetus? One way of postponing the question (steering clear seems impossible) concerning this inherent tension in the drivenness of drives, or instincts, is to first look at this tension through the dualistic split between two classes of instinct: the instincts of life and the death instincts, respectively named Eros and Thanatos.²⁶ Mirroring the bi-polar division life unfurls in the tension between the urge of Eros and the elasticity of the death instinct—on the one side rushing ahead into ever larger libidinal networks and on the other harking back or short-circuiting the system of libidinal engagement.²⁷

In this idealized form the split between Eros and Thanatos has been subject to much critique. The critique central to our question concerns the ambiguity of repetition—

is compulsive repetition a manifestation of the death instinct? Catherine Malabou formulates the problem in the following way:

The profound ambiguity of repetition [...] inheres in its binding power. Certainly, in an essential respect, this power is mortiferous: it immobilizes, freezes, or leads to inertia and to the inorganic state. Compulsion—as has been said and resaid—has the spectral character of a death machine. At the same time—something said less often—this ‘mechanicity’ is a *binding agent*: it disciplines, flattens, and tames as it immobilizes.²⁸

To understand Malabou’s critique we must turn to Freud’s idea of binding. As one instantiation of compulsive repetition, Freud attempts to come to terms with the repetition of unpleasurable experiences in child’s play? With the infamous *Fort-Da* game at the center of this question Freud asks, why children make repeated games out of frightening and unpleasurable experiences, for instance a doctors visit?²⁹ Freud uncovers two motivations that can be aligned with the pleasure principle: through repetition the child makes herself the active master of the events to which she was initially the passive victim, secondly the repetition offers the possibility of taking revenge on another subject.³⁰ From an economic viewpoint both of these repetitions are forms of abreaction that can be linked to the idea of binding excessive amounts of stimuli. Relying on the distinction between bound or quiescent energy and unbound energy which Freud attributes to Josef Breuer, Freud suggests that binding is the process through which unbound energy, which in its nature is aimless and undirected, is woven into a libidinal network and thus transformed into quiescent energy.³¹ The key example often used to explain the relation between binding and the pleasure principle is the case of trauma. When an external force pierces the protective shield safeguarding the equilibrium of the psyche, Freud writes that the pleasure principle is momentarily put out of action.³² The primary task of the organism is in this case “mastering the amounts of stimulus which have broken in and of binding them, in the psychical sense, so that they can be disposed of.”³³ Contrary to what one should expect, unbound energy has no way out—it is stuck as the silent scream framed in Edvard Munch’s painting.³⁴ This is where the functional understanding of repetition as binding comes in. One way of understanding what Freud meant with psychic binding is thus to see it as the laying down of libidinal circuits conducting excitation or energy, thus allowing the energy to find an outlet through motor actions or associative activity.³⁵ Prior to binding there is an overvoltage captivating the organism in a tormenting tension like a caged animal immobilized by bars. Focusing only on the traumatic effect of external forces is however misleading. In *Studies on Hysteria* written together with Freud, Breuer at one point writes that “[l]ack of sensory stimuli, darkness and complete silence become a torture; mental repose, lack of perceptions, ideas and associative activity produce the torment of boredom.”³⁶ The torment of boredom Breuer writes about is the result of an unchecked charge stirring from within the organism.³⁷

In her analysis of the Freudian oeuvre Malabou concludes that compulsive repetition understood in perspective of its binding capacity remains nothing but a preface to pleasure.³⁸ Hereby she rejects Freud's proposition that different forms of compulsive repetition, in Freud's words, "afford us a view of a function of the mental apparatus which, though it does not contradict the pleasure principle, is nevertheless independent of it and seems to be more primitive than the purpose of gaining pleasure or avoiding unpleasure."³⁹ Deleuze agrees with Malabou, that exceptions to the pleasure principle do not exist in Freud's writings, nevertheless he accepts with Freud that binding is more "primary" than the operation of the pleasure principle. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud arrives at this formulation in the last chapter:

One of the earliest and most important functions of the mental apparatus is to bind the instinctual impulses which impinge on it, to replace the primary process prevailing in them by a secondary process and convert their freely mobile energy into mainly quiescent (tonic) cathexis.⁴⁰

Deleuze grasps the radical potential of this statement when he pushes the mechanism of binding beyond both Freud's relative positioning and an etiological temporality determining binding as the transcendental principle constituting pleasure as an empirical principle ruling over the psyche.⁴¹

The bipolarity of repetition

If there is a beyond the pleasure principle—something that cannot be accounted for by the principle—it is, according to Deleuze, the imperative principle governing life. Pleasure and pain in themselves have no systematic value. It is the systematic binding achieved through repetition that makes excitation resolvable as pleasure and it is repetition that bestows the experience with a systematic value that will direct our behavior, binding is therefore by Deleuze positioned as a transcendental principle.⁴² Deleuze writes:

The 'binding' action of Eros, which is constitutive of the pleasure principle may, and indeed must, be characterized as 'repetition'—repetition in respect of excitation, and repetition of the *moment* of life, and the necessary union.⁴³

In the constructive work of binding, or Eros, Deleuze sees a double movement, the energetic binding of excitation and "the biological which binds cells."⁴⁴ One could find the key to this passage in *Difference and Repetition* where Deleuze's theory on the passive synthesis culminates with the words: "all is contemplation!" That is: *all* is made "of contemplated and contracted water, nitrogen, carbon, chlorides and sulphates."⁴⁵ All organic beings are composed of a multitude of passive syntheses which is the origin of everything from organs to the association of ideas, thus, the *moment* of life is the primary organic contraction of excitation upon which the perceptual synthesis of excitation must be based.⁴⁶

It appears to be a very similar point Deleuze wishes to make about the psychoanalytic concept of binding in his earlier analysis of Freud in *Coldness and Cruelty* where he characterizes the process of binding as “repetition of the very moment of the emergence of life.”⁴⁷ This moment, the emergence of life, marks a speculative threshold for Freud, how and why life was roused in inorganic material is a cosmological problem. Nonetheless, Freud insists, that life cannot be understood as the manifestation of an inherent vital force nor can change and apparent progress be understood as an original tendency of living organisms. If anything, evolution and change is the result of contingent external disturbances introjected and repeated by the conservative instincts. Freud writes:

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. In the last resort, what has left its mark on the development of organisms must be the history of the earth we live in and of its relation to the sun. Every modification which is thus imposed upon the course of the organism's life is accepted by the conservative organic instincts and stored up for further repetition.⁴⁸

Life and its development on this planet is not the expression of an inner vital force, nor does it harbor a teleological meaning in itself, it is merely the effect of the constructive work of the conservative instincts that bind obtrusive and undirected excitations into libidinal circuits that are more or less coherent and stable.

But the repetitive contraction at the heart of living matter beats in counterpoint—Deleuze writes: “inseparable from this form of repetition we must conceive of another which in its turn repeats *what was before the instant*—before excitation disturbed the indifference of the inexcitable and life stirred the inanimate from its sleep.”⁴⁹ We are back at Freud's ambiguous definition of the drives and the ambivalent effect of repetition, it binds excitation into a system, but it also eliminates excitation. Thus, Deleuze continues, “[b]eyond Eros we encounter Thanatos; beyond the ground, the abyss of the groundless; beyond repetition that links, the repetition that erases and destroys.”⁵⁰ Although Deleuze refers to binding as the work of Eros, it is clear that in binding, Eros and Thanatos are fused, inconspicuously balancing somewhere between the primary gasp for air and the terminal exhalation. Framing the complex relationship between the death drive and Eros in view of the bipolar mechanism of repetition Deleuze introduces the concept of time, stating that “repetition as conceived by Freud's genius is in and of itself a synthesis of time—a ‘transcendental’ synthesis.”⁵¹

In *The Economic Principle of Masochism* Freud suggests that rather than a strict causal relation between an increase of tension and unpleasure there might also be a qualitative factor at play which perhaps has something to do with the rhythm of the changes in the quantity of stimuli.⁵² This idea is tentatively repeated in *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis*,⁵³ but also in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* it is present. Here Freud asks if perhaps “pleasure and unpleasure series indicates a change in

the magnitude of the cathexis *within a given time unit?*⁵⁴ Introducing time as a unit we move from a one-dimensional plane to a two-dimensional chart on which the intensity of change emerge from the unconceivable flatness of sheer quantity. If we compare the experience of a loud monotone noise produced by an engine, and equally loud rhythmic music where the noise is cut in breaks and flows, the qualitative factor of rhythm is evident. In one case, the noise unbearable in the other it is pleasurable. Nonetheless we must be attentive to Freud's understanding of the role of time in relation to conscious and unconscious processes:

As a result of certain psycho-analytic discoveries, we are today in a position to embark on a discussion of the Kantian theorem that time and space are 'necessary forms of thought.' We have learnt that unconscious mental processes are in themselves 'timeless.' This means in the first place that they are not ordered temporally, that time does not change them in any way and that the idea of time cannot be applied to them.⁵⁵

Freud does not dismiss the Kantian theorem, but he delimits it to a smaller functional region of the mind stating that the "abstract idea of time" is a reflection of the peculiarities of the system of mental processes where consciousness occurs as an effect. Time, consequently is not originally given, but a secondary effect of certain mechanisms of the psyche.

Consciousness is, by Freud's definition, the perception of external excitations and feelings of pleasure and displeasure arising from within.⁵⁶ In contrast to the other systems of mental processes, what is in the system of perceptual-consciousness [*Pcpt.-Cs.*], as Freud names it, expires, it passes away. In all other systems excitatory processes must overcome a resistance, this struggle with the inherent inertia of the organism leaves marks or traces. These permanent traces must be understood negatively as the gradual erasure of resistance, they are wires of excitability in fallow land. But the system of perceptual-consciousness is different, this system has been exposed to currents of excitation so strong that there is no more resistance to be overcome.⁵⁷ Consequently, the excitations passes through or expires without any trace.⁵⁸ The fact that this system should undergo no further change, makes it according to Freud the most favorable for receiving stimuli.⁵⁹ Taken together with the statement that "*protection against stimuli* is an almost more important function for the living organism than *reception of stimuli*,"⁶⁰ this tells us something about the metaphysical core of Freudian thinking. Suspended in a universe of inexorable forces the organism would be shredded into pieces if it did not have a protective enclosing barrier marking inside and outside. This stands in stark contrast to Deleuze's related statement: "all is contemplation!"⁶¹—affirming the vigorous and productive capacity of excitation as the locus where life conjures and persists in an open co-continuance. While Freud envisions the skull as the physical barrier protecting the system of mental processes from external forces, the *modus operandi* of the system of perceptual-consciousness is itself set up only to receive appropriate excitation in small quantities, the system of perceptual-consciousness merely "samples" the external world. Freud illustrates his point by comparing the sense organs to feelers

tentatively stretching out into the world, only to retract when hit upon.⁶² In addition to the transient quality of consciousness, the peculiar functioning of this system is by Freud associated with the temporality unique to consciousness. In *A Note Upon the "Mystic Writing Pad"* Freud elaborates what is only hinted at in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*:

My theory was that cathectic innervations are sent out and withdrawn in rapid periodic impulses from within into the completely pervious system *Pcpt.-Cs.* So long as that system is cathected in this manner, it receives perceptions (which are accompanied by consciousness) and passes excitation on to the unconscious mnemonic systems; but as soon as the cathexis is withdrawn, consciousness is extinguished and the functioning of the system comes to a standstill.⁶³

According to this theory consciousness works in periodic flashes following the currents of energy shot through the system. Reflecting on this Freud continues, "I further had a suspicion that this discontinuous method of functioning of the system *Pcpt.-Cs.* lies at the bottom of the origin of time."⁶⁴

Freud clearly states that these ideas and hypotheses are the result of speculation, even "far-fetched speculation."⁶⁵ Determining this a transcendental inquiry and not an empirical study, Deleuze encourages us to explore the connection between Freud's different metapsychological or transcendental suggestions⁶⁶. As a derivative effect of the intermittent operation of consciousness the unfolding of time discloses itself as another means of protection, unravelling and ordering the sheer force of the external bombardment in a temporal sequence. In a roundabout way we are back at Deleuze's point that repetition as conceived by Freud is a transcendental synthesis of time. Repetition, Deleuze writes, is:

[A]t once repetition of *before*, *during* and *after*, that is to say it is a constitution in time of the past, the present and even the future. From a transcendental viewpoint, past, present and future are constituted in time *simultaneously*, even though, from the natural standpoint, there is between them a qualitative difference, the past following upon the present and the present upon the future.⁶⁷

From the natural standpoint, which means in our conscious experience, time unfolds with a past weighing in on the present and a present opened up by the expectation of the future. The threefold dimension of time is from a transcendental perspective however just a qualitative difference contracted within simultaneity. Just as repetition constitutes pleasure as the empirical principle governing life, repetition contracts within an un-moving simultaneity, a qualitative difference experienced as the movement of time.

Repetition is two-dimensional—it is in Deleuze's reading of Freud the repetition of *before* and *during*, i.e. the bipolarity of inertia and excitation—but it opens up a three-dimensional time because the future is the inevitable outcome of the two

correlative structures of past and present.⁶⁸ Again it might help our understanding to take a look at *Difference and Repetition* where Deleuze characterizes the passive synthesis of repetition as the foundation of time.⁶⁹ Defined as a recurrence, the paradox of repetition is that it must disappear before it re-occurs. The key to this paradox, or the condition of possibility for repetition, is the difference between the cases recorded or contracted by the being that contemplates repetition.⁷⁰ This difference or change in the mind that contemplates can be conceptualized both as a tendency to renew earlier actions and as a weight of expectation determined according to the number of repeated instances. It is in this sentiment that David Hume grounds the relationship of cause and effect. The difference in sentiment produced by repeated instances is by Hume, and later Deleuze, named habit. Fixing the very possibility of drawing inferences from earlier experiences, habit is understood as the principle which gives the human mind its particular nature to move beyond the given, projecting itself in the expectation of a future that resembles the past.⁷¹ The operations of customary conjunction which grounds both expectation and belief, is in Hume's words "a species of natural instincts, which no reasoning or process of the thought and understanding is able, either to produce, or to prevent."⁷² Making the very ability to predict events and to adjust actions accordingly depend on this species of natural instinct, Hume severs the neat distinction between instinct and understanding, consequently also blurring the conceptual division between voluntary and involuntary repetition.

A glitch in the transcendental clockwork

What emerges at the end of Jacques Derrida's analysis of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, is not a thesis as much as a theme: *rhythmos*.⁷³ While this primarily is a commentary on what Derrida considers Freud's speculative limping,⁷⁴ shuffling between more or less radical compulsive repetition, this theme of rhythm also occurs in our reading. Habit or custom as Paul Ricœur's proposes fixates the quality and quantity of our needs, but also their rhythm.⁷⁵ Manifested in our habits and character-traits, binding makes pleasure attainable on a systemic level, and as such it sets the rhythmic organization of excitation and its release. A time unit is not simply a metrical cut-out of some flat homogenous reality of quantity, it is a varying intensive interplay between excitations and inertia characteristic to the idiosyncratic organization of the individual.⁷⁶ Repeated excitation, for instance the alarm clock going off at 7, contracts an expectation according to Deleuze and Hume and with that we catch a rhythm. With such a rhythm, among so many others contracted in our being, the recurrence of excitation is hardly ever recognized—"and there is nothing new under the sun"⁷⁷—unless of course it fails to appear, in which case something will be experienced as being off. In *Analysis Terminable and Interminable* Freud writes:

The adult's ego, with its increased strength, continues to defend itself against dangers which no longer exist in reality; indeed, it finds itself compelled to seek out those situations in reality which can serve as an approximate sub-

stitute for the original danger, so as to be able to justify, in relation to them, its maintaining its habitual modes of reaction.⁷⁸

In this passage Freud reverses the dominating idea that in fixing our behavior it is habit that ties us to an environment. What Freud sees is that we cling to situations and places to justify and maintain our habits. This throws light on the puzzling statement with which we began: character-traits that remain the same are “compelled to *find expression* in a repetition of the same experiences.”⁷⁹ Like habits or habitual modes of reaction, character-traits are not merely reactionary phenomena spurred by recurrent situations or experiences, but inconspicuous accomplices of these events. The adult ego is fortified (in the literal sense) through a contraction of defense mechanisms that serves to make agitation tolerable for the ego, and eventually these become, as Freud says, “regular modes of reaction of his character,”⁸⁰ even if redundant or dangerous. “What has come to life” Freud writes “clings tenaciously to its existence.”⁸¹ Both inherent excitations and external agitations are through a process of binding woven around objects and people to make up this fabric of reactions that enfold our ego and invest our being in social dynamics and quotidian rituals. Reality, it seems, is woven by repetition and reified by the conservative nature of the instincts.

But suddenly this reality is tinged, there is a fissure, something isn't right and one feels, as Freud says: “pursued by malignant fate.”⁸² What marks the threshold between coincidence and fate? Is it where enlightened rationality collides with self-appointed myth or the instant where gods manifests their existence? Relying on the traditional conception of fate or destiny, as a predetermined and inescapable trajectory devised by some form of divine faculty, the metaphysical split between the sphere of fate and that of coincidence is clear. For Freud, the threshold between chance coincidences and fate is marked by the experience of the uncanny. Freud writes, as we have seen, that it is what *reminds* of an inherent compulsion to repeat that is experienced as the uncanny. In this paper I have focused on the constructive work, as Deleuze would phrase it, of compulsive repetition. Characterized by Deleuze as a transcendental principle, binding is by its nature not only hidden from our experience, but constitutional for our experience. This means that the threshold between chance and fate has its locus in the moment where the work of compulsive repetition is exposed, when, for some reason, there is a deficiency in the transcendental clock-work of repetition.

According to Henri Bergson, consciousness reflects the leeway of indetermination where the individual can cut through the perfect determination of matter in an open moment of spontaneous activity. Whereas any unconscious material point or atom is, in its instantaneousness,⁸³ always already affected by the overwhelming force of all other atoms in the material universe, consciousness is the negative flicker of the actuality of these forces.⁸⁴ Rather than registering every excitation, consciousness functions as shield reducing the overwhelming influx to that which the organism can act upon. Although Bergson and Freud differ on crucial points, we can see an overlap in their conceptualization of consciousness as a kind of re-

duced reception of stimuli or temporal apperception protecting the being from the actual and overwhelming forces of the material universe. For Freud, however, it can also be seen, I will argue, as a protection from instantaneousness of the unconscious mental processes. “In the deepest strata of our minds, made up of instinctual impulses,” Freud writes, “contradictions coincide,”⁸⁵ here succession involves co-existence.⁸⁶ This might give us an idea of the peculiar psychic materiality which in Freud’s psychoanalytical practice present itself as indifferent to progress, but it also gives us an indication of what Freud means when he says that time is only an effect peculiar to conscious mental processes. It is this unconceivable simultaneity of before and after—the co-existence of being and non-being—the process of binding unravels and weaves into a temporal sequence. Before this, or rather beyond, cause and effect coincide in an over-determined tension too forceful for the organism to endure.

In *Dostoevsky and Parricide*, Freud characterizes epilepsy as an “uncanny disease.”⁸⁷ The character is pierced by convulsions, cut in fractions or bracketed for a space of time that disappears.⁸⁸ From the violent and sudden convulsive attacks to brief periods of absence, it looks as though the patient is controlled by her unconscious.⁸⁹ The moment of the epileptic attack never existed, as Paul Virilio points out,⁹⁰ it is cut out of the temporal extension the individual circumscribes. But rather than a void this absence is the mark of an excess. Freud suggests that we should understand the epileptic attack functionally as an instinctual discharge of abnormal proportion put in place to relieve the organism in situations of imbalance or when there is a critical overload or “crisis-pitch” in the energy operating the mind.⁹¹ Reflecting on this Freud wonders if the epileptic attack can be seen as a product and indication of instinctual de-fusion.⁹² Could it be that the violent convulsions pulling the subject out of time marks the appearance of the otherwise silent death instinct? If the death instinct were about to appear, it would be in an instantaneous leap, Deleuze claims. Although Deleuze conceptualizes Thanatos as absolute groundlessness of repetition, this absolute cannot emerge alone—destruction is always the opposite of construction.⁹³ From the perspective of binding the epileptic attack appears as a systemic failure imprisoning the organism in a frenzy simultaneity of the unconscious without a future or a past (pleasure). It is along similar lines that Deleuze explains sadism and masochism. These perverse phenomena are cases in which the transcendental work of repetition and its constitutive relationship to pleasure as the empirical principle governing life is obscured or even reversed. Cut loose from the empirical ground of pleasure, repetition would spin around its own empty core dragging pleasure around as secondary gain subsumed by the gravitational force of repetition. In this light the difference between a tic and the character-trait emerge as a question concerning the transcendental capacity of repetition. As the nemesis of the character-trait, the tic occurs as a compulsive repetition that has failed its transcendental promise.⁹⁴ A metronome interrupting the rhythm of the song.

Fated—in conclusion

The uncanny does not mark a perversion, nor is it directly pathologized. It is a quotidian glitch in the transcendental work of repetition. The rhythm of reality is upset, events do not follow our habitual expectations, chance coincidences follow too closely upon one another, causal relations are unstable. For a split second the absolute instantaneousness of the unconscious pierces the conscious ego and time collapses together with the leeway of action. Confronted with the groundless delirium of our psyche, the quintessential capacity to constrain the overdetermination, our nature, is unveiled as the effect of a dumb machinery of repetition which fails us—suddenly, the spaceship is a necrotic bone, tossed into orbit, without purpose or direction.

There is a hiatus in Penelope's work of fidelity; neither weaving nor undoing it, neither binding nor unbinding, in this instant she doubts her love of Odysseus.⁹⁵

Notes

1. This research is made possible by The Research Foundation—Flanders (FWO).
2. Freud, Sigmund, "Analysis Terminable and Interminable." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XXIII, trans. J. Strachey (London: Vintage Press, 2001) 218. Henceforth *Standard Edition*.
3. Cristina Fondi and Alessandro Franchi, "Definition of Bone Necrosis by the Pathologist," *Clinical Cases in Mineral and Bone Metabolism* 4.1 (2007): 21–26. <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2781178/>> [accessed April 11, 2018].
4. Although the future, year 2001, which Kubrick portrays is now passed, it remains at once futuristic and indicative of our human (all too human) way of relating to this planet. Sloterdijk's comment that the space station (which is what we see in Kubrick's film after the spaceship) "represents a model for being in a world condemned to artificiality" underscores this as both the past and the future in an age that have been deemed the Anthropocene. Peter Sloterdijk, "Forward to the Theory of Spheres," *Cosmograms*, ed. M. Ohanian and J. C. Royaux (Berlin & New York: Lukas and Sternberg, 2005) 236.
5. Hegel, G. W. F., *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) 208.
6. Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," *Standard Edition*, vol. XVIII, 21.
7. Freud, "Beyond," 23.
8. Freud, "Beyond," 7.
9. Freud, "Beyond," 22.
10. In accordance with current tendencies, one could assess this question from the perspective of the concept of plasticity, answering that the individuating repetition (or habit), must neither be too rigid, nor too loose. In the infamous words of William James, organic plasticity is defined as having a structure weak enough to "yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once" (William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol.1. Macmillan and Co, 1891, 105). One could argue that the concept of plasticity has today become the ontological reply to problems of evolutionary adaptation. Inbuilt in this idea is

consequently not only the idea of adaptation, but also the idea of progress. Even if the idea of plasticity can be said to replace the essentialist notion of teleology it is still founded on a particular notion of time in which Freud could not fit the workings of the psyche. Defined as the capacity to receive, maintain and give form, organic plasticity, is devised within an unfolding temporality, where it is not, as Catherine Malabou stresses, possible to return to an earlier form. The temporality of plasticity is irreversible, if a material has been shaped in a particular way, it cannot return to the earlier form. Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* trans. S. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008) 1-14; *Ontology of the Accident*. trans. C. Shread (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012) 36; "Plasticity and Elasticity in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*," *Diacritics* 37.4 (2007): 78-86; 82, 84.

11. A paper on the nature of repetition in Freud's work is of course also indirectly a paper about resistances. Repetition is a way of stalling analysis, both in its rigidity and its great ingenuity. Writing about resistances and repetition together would however require an analysis focused also on the threefold division between the Id, the ego and the super-ego which I have not included in this paper. I have chosen to focus more narrowly on what Deleuze terms the transcendental work of repetition. As such this paper does not consider the hermeneutic unveiling aspect of psychoanalysis, but focusses on the pragmatic 'energetic' aspect of working-through.

12. Freud, Sigmund, "The 'Uncanny,'" *Standard Edition*, vol. XVII, 237.

13. Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" 237.

14. Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" 249.

15. Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" 237.

16. Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" 237-238.

17. Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" 238.

18. Freud, "Beyond," 35.

19. I use them interchangeably.

20. Freud, "Beyond," 21.

21. Freud, "Beyond," 21.

22. Freud, "Beyond," 22-23.

23. Freud, "Beyond," 36.

24. Freud, "Beyond," 36. Original italics.

25. Or drives, which would be the more appropriate translation of Freud's *triebe*. In this text, however, I will use the term instinct, in accordance with the *Standard Edition* terminology.

26. Freud, "Beyond," 39, 44, 60-61 n1; See also Sigmund Freud, "The Ego and the Id," *Standard Edition*, vol. XIX, 40-41.

27. Freud, "Beyond," 38-39, 43, 53; "The Ego," 40.

28. Malabou, Catherine, *The New Wounded*. trans. Steven Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012) 197.
29. Freud, "Beyond," 15-17.
30. Freud, "Beyond," 16-17.
31. Freud, "Beyond," 26-27, 31.
32. Freud, "Beyond," 29. Later in the text Freud nuances this conclusion stating: "While this transformation [of freely mobile cathectic energy into bound energy] is taking place no attention can be paid to the development of unpleasure; but this does not imply the suspension of the pleasure principle. On the contrary, the transformation occurs on *behalf* of the pleasure principle; binding is the preparatory act which introduces and assures the dominance of the pleasure principle" (Freud, "Beyond," 62).
33. Freud, "Beyond," 30.
34. Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, 1893.
35. Freud, "Beyond," 62. In this context it could be interesting to discuss the idea that the organism is in need of some form of conjunctive relation to liberate excitation, either to an object x or to some eidetic content that can be manipulated in thought.
36. Breuer, Josef and Sigmund Freud, "Studies on Hysteria," *Standard Edition*, vol. II, 197.
37. Breuer & Freud, "Studies on Hysteria," 196. It is remarkable to note that Freud, in "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through" describes the transference neurosis instituted through analysis as a playground where the compulsion to repeat can play itself out and "display [...] everything in the way of pathogenic instincts that is hidden in the patient's mind." From "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through" *Standard Edition*, vol. XII, 154. Whereas one would normally associate a playground with the jolly jubilation of excited children, the playground Freud refers to is not directly associated with pleasure, but rather understood as a delimited space where the force of compulsive repetition is unleashed (Freud, "Remembering," 154; "Beyond," 20). But as such it is also the playground where the work of binding must be played out, working quotas of anarchic energy into the established and accepted libidinal circuit constituting the preferences of the coherent ego. In this respect psychoanalysis is not only, as Rebecca Comay writes, analysis in the sense of untying or unbinding the psychic knots of punishment and desire but also the designated space for binding anarchistic energies into the libidinal network. See Rebecca Comay, "Resistance and Repetition: Freud and Hegel," *Research in Phenomenology* 45 (2015): 237-266; 254.
38. Malabou, *The New Wounded*, 195-198.
39. Freud, "Beyond," 32.
40. Freud, "Beyond," 62.
41. Gilles Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty," in *Masochism* (New York & Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books, 1989) 111-112. At this point we are at crossroads, how should we understand the originality binding? In one way it can be seen as a mere preparation, a preface to the rule of pleasure, and thus functionally subsumed by what follows i.e. the pleasure principle, or it can be understood as conditional and independent of the pleasure principle, in which sense it is not understood as functionally subsumed pleasure, but independent

of it. Where Malabou represents the first stance, I follow the second route via the help of Deleuze. In *The Postcard*, Jacques Derrida opens up this discussion in consideration of the concept of mastering, which he finally brings back to the singularity of the drive, a drive to dominate, also to assure its own mastery, as such power is posited as the transcendental predicate of the drive. See Derrida, Jacques, *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987) 387-405.

42. Deleuze, "Coldness," 112-113.

43. Deleuze, "Coldness," 113.

44. Deleuze, "Coldness," 113.

45. Deleuze, Gilles, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. P. Patton (London & New York: Continuum) 1994, 96.

46. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 93-95. For more on Deleuze and the three syntheses I recommend Henry Somers-Hall, "Deleuze, Freud and the Three Syntheses," *Deleuze Studies* 11, no. 3 (2017), 297-327.

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47. Deleuze, "Coldness," 114.

48. Freud, "Beyond," 38.

49. Deleuze, "Coldness," 114.

50. Deleuze, "Coldness," 114.

51. Deleuze, "Coldness," 115.

52. Freud, Sigmund, "The Economic Principle of Masochism," *Standard Edition*, vol. XIX, 160.

53. Freud, Sigmund, "An Outline of Psycho-Analysis," *Standard Edition*, vol. XXIII, 146.

54. Freud, "Beyond," 63. This is a repetition of a point presented already in the first chapter of this work (8). While Freud had already developed some of these points in the "Project for a Scientific Psychology," I will not go into the development of this idea here.

55. Freud, "Beyond," 28.

56. Freud, "Beyond," 24.

57. Freud, "Beyond," 26.

58. It is interesting to note that Freud here draws the opposite conclusion of William James and Felix Ravaisson who also engage directly with ideas concerning repetition, facilitation and consciousness. While James and Ravaisson propose that facilitation due to repeated excitation is connected to a lessening of conscious awareness, Freud here seem to understand it as a condition for consciousness. See Felix Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, trans. C. Carlisle and M. Sinclair (London & New York: Continuum, 2008) 43, 47.

59. Freud, "Beyond," 26.

60. Freud, "Beyond," 27.

61. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 96.
62. Freud, "Beyond," 27-28.
63. Freud, Sigmund, "A Note Upon the 'Mystic Writing Pad.'" *Standard Edition* vol. XIX, 231.
64. Freud, "Mystic," 231.
65. Freud, "Beyond," 24.
66. Deleuze, "Coldness," 111.
67. Deleuze, "Coldness," 115.
68. Deleuze, "Coldness," 115.
69. For an account of the first synthesis as the foundation of time see for instance: Jay Lampert, "Living the Contracted Present—the First Synthesis of Time," *Deleuze and Guattari's Philosophy of History* (London & New York: Continuum, 2006) 12-30. See also: Somers-Hall, "Deleuze, Freud and the Three Syntheses," 297-327.
70. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 94.
71. Hume, David, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 120-123; Deleuze, Gilles, *Empiricism and Subjectivity*, trans. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) 23-25.
72. Hume, *Enquiry*, 124.
73. Derrida, *Postcard*, 405-406.
74. Derrida takes the image of limping from the quote with which Freud brings *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to its end: "What we cannot reach flying we must reach limping. The book tells us it is no sin to limp" (Freud, "Beyond," 64).
75. Ricœur, Paul, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, trans. Erazim V. Kohák (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966) 298. It has been stressed innumerable times that there is a difference between "need" and the Freudian concept "pleasure." While "need" by definition marks a lack, "pleasure" is by Freud understood as a lowering or release of tension. That I allow myself to take a cue from Ricœur is due both to his own clause "custom fixates our needs (in the broadest sense)" and more importantly that the release of tension through binding is bound up, and is thus in need of certain triggers and excitations.
76. Derrida hints toward this idea, opening up the problem for further exploration (*Postcard*, 407-408).
77. Ecclesiastes 1:4-11.
78. Freud, "Analysis," 238.
79. Freud, "Beyond," 22, my emphasis.
80. Freud, "Analysis," 237.
81. Freud, "Analysis," 229.
82. Freud, "Beyond," 21.

83. In material and unconscious points or atoms the future is perfectly contained in the present. See Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004) 1.
84. Bergson, *Matter & Memory*, 30-31.
85. Freud, Sigmund, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death." *Standard Edition*, vol. XIV, 296.
86. Freud, "Thoughts," 285.
87. Freud, Sigmund, "Dostoevsky and Parricide." *Standard Edition*, vol. XXI, 179. In "The 'Uncanny'" Freud also refers to the uncanny effect of epilepsy (242).
88. Here the flickering existence of K's holographic girlfriend Joi, in *Blade Runner 2049* comes to mind.
89. Freud, "Dostoevsky," 179-180.
90. Virilio, Paul, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, trans. P. Beitchman (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009) 19.
91. Freud, "Dostoevsky," 180. This, according to Freud, gives us a glimpse of the underlying mechanism of instinctual discharge. To support this hypothesis Freud draws attention to the early medical description of coitus as a kind of minor epileptic discharge (180-181).
92. Freud, "The Ego," 41.
93. Deleuze, "Coldness," 116, 120.
94. Here it is instructive to remember how the neurotic patient appears to be haunted by material that refuse to assume a position in time (Freud, "Beyond," 13, 18).
95. In Homer's *Odyssey* Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, weaves all day only to undo the work at night. Always unfinished, she defers courtship and guards her fidelity. It was Rebecca Comay's beautiful article, "Resistance and Repetition: Freud and Hegel" that allowed me to see the Penelopean character of the process of Binding (254, 256).