



Juan Carlos Ramos Guadix*

Repetition. A journey to the limits of the matrix

Powtórzenie. Podróż do granic matrycy

*It is quite true what Philosophy says: that Life must be understood backwards.
But that makes one forget the other saying: that it must be lived forwards.*
S. Kierkegaard, *Diary* [1, p. 161]

Introduction

This essay presents Søren Kierkegaard's concept of repetition and the analogy that can be drawn between it and intaglio printmaking. The concept, thanks to its productive capacity, serves as an articulation with other concepts and thus can be considered a "hinge" concept. In the concept of repetition many types of knowledge come together, ranging from structural anthropology to mathematical logic to linguistics. It can therefore be considered effective and novel. Our intention is to put forward a code, or a dialogue, between intaglio printmaking and philosophy. These subjects clearly have an interest in the concept of repetition. Both of them, each from its particular field of theory, proposes things that appear to be in conflict with each other and many other things that appear to have an analogous point of view. Besides the debate that may arise around these questions, dialogue between them is not just fitting, it is necessary. The advances made in these two disciplines have underlined the pertinence of establishing contact in order to refine concepts and ideas and it would be ridiculous to suggest that the problem they have before them does not create a certain correspondence among them. This article establishes links of communication that reveal the true nature of human activity, preserving at all

times the spirit of what Plato pointed out in *The Republic* (395b) when he said that human nature is coined into small pieces.

And human nature, Adeimantus, appears to have been coined into yet smaller pieces, and to be as incapable of imitating many things well as of performing well the actions of which the imitations are copies [2, p. 249].

For this reason it is impossible for just one branch of knowledge to have the only truth about the entirety of all that is human.

So I will try to extract, without conflict, that which is helpful in building a dialogue, a dialogue based on an analogy between Kierkegaard's concept of repetition and intaglio and printmaking systems as empirical phenomena. Keeping this purpose in mind, the analogy will be presented with regard to three well-differentiated moments. They are: the matrix as a unique thing, printing as the progress and process of transfer and, finally, the print as the process of appropriating a story.

The matrix as a unique thing

The first moment is its location in the context of the line of memory, matrix. Here matrix refers to a unique and individual instrument in which the origin is founded and revealed. If in Kierkegaard repetition is defined in the context of individual existence, in intaglio repetition is found in the existence of the matrix, which in turn finds in the print a new departure, a new understanding, a repetition.

* ORCID: 0000-0002-4081-1516. Faculty of Fine Arts, Drawing Department, University of Granada (Spain).

We can therefore say that the matrix, conceived as a palimpsest, [...] is a decisive expression of what “recollection” was for the Greeks. Just as they taught that all knowledge is recollection, thus will modern philosophy teach that life itself is a repetition [3, p. 9]. So, if all knowledge is recollection and all life is a repetition, all matrixes are also repetition. Because in the matrix knowledge is built like a palimpsest. It is that indestructible outfit that adapts perfectly and delicately to our shape. As Kierkegaard said with regard to repetition, the matrix is: *Repetition is a beloved wife of whom one never tires because it is only the new of which one tires. One never tires of the old, and when one has it before oneself one is happy, and only a person who does not delude himself that repetition ought to be something new, for then he tires of it, is genuinely happy* [3, p. 10].

The matrix is where we put our courage and energy so as to achieve a clear idea of the meaning and transcendence of our work. In line with the foregoing, the matrix gives us that immanent characteristic of existence which is the ability to make current the states of things past, but without going back in time. Moreover, the idea of repetition sustained by Kierkegaard has absolutely no hint of involution. Repetition, said the philosopher with total conviction, *is and always will be a transcendence*. In other words, repetition carries with it the idea that repetition will enable us to go beyond.

Having reached this point it should be noted that there is a possible meeting place for the philosophical conception of repetition in Kierkegaard, psychoanalysis and intaglio. In all of them, repetition always implies the wish to go beyond and transcend the limits of the established. For Kierkegaard each repetition makes us transcend towards something new, towards something that we had not considered and that now becomes evident due to the return of the past in the present. However, repetition is not just that, because Kierkegaard also speaks of repetition as transcendence inasmuch as it takes us to new stages along the path towards perfection. In psychoanalysis, when the subject is said to be “repeating”, it does not mean that the subject is remembering past events. “Repetition” means that the subject is moving beyond the pleasure principle. With each new return, the subject gets nearer to an experience of fullness similar to what she/he had experienced at the dawn of his/her existence.

In intaglio the very term matrix comes from the idea of gestation, from an idea that generates, is full of life and has a wish to go beyond. The matrix-memory revises the course of existence as a heterogeneous and fertile field of unexpected possibilities, full of small accidents that are far from negligible, suspending any relationship of command and obedience between the subject and the represented, adding mystery and surprise, risk and expectation, initiative and observation.

In the time of memory, it happens that every impediment was a mere attempt, every project was decision, vehemence, desire. That which arises from failure, deviation, interruption, that which appeared to be antinomy, or a logical or antisystematic contradiction, which should be corrected or deleted, the matrix as a source of strategies,

as an existential impasse, which can inspire by challenging one’s intelligence with new points of view [4, p. 43].

Just as in the writings of Kierkegaard, in the process of printing from the matrix there is access to a new order and it finds the barrier of its memories, of its recollections. Printing is somewhere between what one believes the work of art will be and what one knows it can never become. The same way as when, in Kierkegaard, it is all about fulfilling the experience of repetition. If Kierkegaard returns to Berlin where he had felt infinite pleasure, we also retrace our steps and it will be printing that leads us along the path of our problem. That is, how and why does everything that means essential progress have to involve an obstinate repetition that carries within itself the character of the adverse? Both in philosophy and in intaglio, all repetition carries within it the possibility of a transcendence that progresses towards the best stages of existence.

The dialectics of repetition in intaglio are the same as what Kierkegaard reveals when he says: [...] *the dialectic of repetition is easy, because that which is repeated has been, otherwise it could not be repeated; but precisely this, that it has been, makes repetition something new* [3, p. 26].

Similarly, repetition in intaglio, the print as a multiple original, demands something new; everything in repetition can vary and be diverse each time it is repeated – that is why we can speak of a print as a multiple original – but one thing that always stays the same is its meaning: the béance, the idea of the other, towards which the subject is moving, the matrix. The subject is always created from the perspective of the other and when it is not created it is because there is a flaw in the encounter with the other. For Jacques Lacan, sameness always comes from otherness [5, p. 68]. So we can state, categorically, the object, the print, comes from the encounter with the subject, the matrix.

Printing as progress and process of transfer

The printing process is a dialectical synthesis in which the transfer or transposition of an element – *matrix* – enables an *object* to be created. The object thus created becomes part of a Cartesian analysis which presents itself not just as a purpose or for knowledge of the real, but as much more than that; it can be manipulated. The object, that is, that synthesis between subjective reality and external reality, is presented as something that we can manipulate through our perception. This process of transfer allows us to extract data about the reality, hopes and projects deposited in the matrix. We complete what we see with what we know, lending stability to something that *a priori* has none. We interpret the data and give them meaning.

So, one might think that a huge gap lies between the matrix as a creative act and the process of printing. However, the said process, if we analyse it in its most elemental manifestations, is also an act of creation. Through this process artists make the most of the information and the knowledge that is transferred to them, allowing an

anticipated future to guide them toward the search for a final project, the print.

According to Kierkegaard, the true meaning of repetition is *transcendence*, albeit a transcendence experienced in the *deceptive* and concrete existence. An experience that we ourselves sometimes provoke. To this perspective there is something that must be added: when artists begin to listen to the signs of their porous and relational inner world – when they begin to be aware of the sensorial and corporeal states they experience while interacting with the *material environment* of the intaglio studio – they have the opportunity to submerge themselves in the repetition that leads to an emergent meaning, in a moment of rupture with the experimental and creative process. To submerge themselves in the reconfigurations and rematerializations that the matrix may incite in them, whether in the successive prints made during the process leading to an edition or to a particular result, and also, during the course of this reproducibility, the transfer acquires another meaning. It becomes a mingling of the different essential moments (proven facts, sensorial and material experiences) of the motion that is repetition in the broad and *transcendent* sense.

This second moment is when repetition appears as a demand. An object of desire and simultaneously of duty. At the same time, the self becomes aware of the situation of failure it faces. The self sees itself with the task of searching for the freedom it does not have. When it finds itself there, feeling incapable, repetition becomes an instantaneous demand, a vindication, a plea to God. As a final recourse, Kierkegaard gives the example of Job, from the Old Testament. It is Job, in the second part of the text, who will provide the idea of what a repetition is. Job regains, in duplicate, what he had before: *When everything has ground to a halt, when thought ceases and speech is silenced, when explanation retreats in despair – then a thunderstorm is necessary* [3, p. 80]. Kierkegaard tries to distinguish a repetition that would be real. The same repetition that occurs when we finish working on the matrix and are no longer capable of understanding, or even imagining, any other type of plastic solution for the idea we have. It is at that exact moment that all certainties and all conceivable possibilities cease to offer – as is logical – any sort of explanation. In this sense of immediacy everything is lost, everything is done. Just like Job, the only thing left is to hope for a superabundant repetition.

So, printing can be understood as a possibility of movement in the existential sense, since it involves *progress*. With printing it can be said that there is a notion of movement – *kinesis* – which corresponds to the modern category of *transition* and this category, Kierkegaard says, deserves maximum attention. For one thing, this will be the moment to try to repeat the first experience and see if it has ended in failure or, instead, has run into some type of impossibility. And another thing: this will be the moment to ask oneself if it is desirable to repeat and what is the meaning of repetition. By repeating, do we win or lose? In this stage, repetition has a nature more like that of a *project* than a work of art with its pre-given conceptual elaborations.

Printing appears as a possibility for *subjective freedom* in each one of the beginnings of the edition. Each print of the edition takes the form of a new beginning. As in Kierkegaard, in the printing process also contains *irony*. The print does not have the power of something new but it does have, to a certain extent, the enthusiasm associated with the annihilation of the old, which inspires and feeds it. In one way or another, the print annihilates that which inspired and feeds it, the matrix. An elastic link is always formed when the incommensurability of the relationship between the matrix and the print is experienced.

The repeated – that is, the reassumed, retaken, reduplicated or well-reflected internally – is a reality as old as it is new; something that already existed but starts to be again. It is in this sense that printing is a repetition. It is a process of progress, of transcendence, the absolute beginning of which requires having absolute knowledge, through the total reflection of the subjectivity possible in the current and necessary affirmation of itself. This is how the creative universe will be fully transformed.

In consonance with this idea, the printing process can be explained as the movement by which the original creative process subjects its possibilities to an internal need. In this way it escapes fatalistic determinism and ensures a presence that sustains the real order.

If Kierkegaard sustains that *repetition is and always will be transcendence* [3, p. 142], it is reasonable to say that printing is a process of progress, of transcendence. This process is a model of individual freedom by which to express a new reality that begins with an absolute decision. The work done by the artist during the printing process is, in the first place, the concrete realization of something that has been thought: in other words, a repetition. As Kierkegaard would say: *if God Himself had not willed repetition, there would never have been a world* [3, p. 29]. If we did not want to create a print, we would not create a *matrix*. That which was intellectual representation in the matrix is subsequently repeated as the exemplary cause of action and form, immanent and inherent of that which is created in printmaking. It is through *repetition* that during the printing process we discover our mistakes in relation to the original and ideal integrity manifested in the matrix. At the same time an initial internal reflection takes place. In it we notice the negative element that contradicts its being while at the same time pushing it towards a possible recovery.

This first reflection breaks the immediate relationship between subjectivity and the real world, setting the matrix against the emptiness of its own nothingness. However, such a situation is nothing but the *sine qua non* condition of a second reflection, one that responds to the principle of the inversion of opposites. According to this principle, the positive coincides with the negation. Depending on this inverse meaning and reflection we can say that a dialectical relationship is generated. It begins with nothingness and only in a second moment, through appropriation, does it enable the presence of our final objective, the print.

In this same regard we can speak of the specific nature of the process of printing, with its sole objective of transcending the creative act performed on the matrix.

This means finally considering repetition, through the print, as an event within the existence of the matrix itself. A glance back at the unique and individual instrument.

The print as the process of appropriating a story

In a third moment, repetition in Kierkegaard takes place as a life event in which the *self* receives freedom. From that point onwards, the *self* can continue living, taking up its past again as something acquired, capturing the density of the present and opening up toward the future. This is how the repetition event is connected to a text from the Old Testament such as the Book of Job. Here ideas are in constant motion. In view of this, Kierkegaard asks: *What is Philoctetes' situation compared to Job's, where the idea is in constant motion?* [3, p. 10]. This dependence on the written past is no coincidence in repetition. The idea of repetition in Kierkegaard takes all of its strength from Greek philosophy. More specifically from the pre-Socratic philosophers, whose points of views often conflicted with one another. Some thought that there is no motion in the world – Parmenides and the Eleatics – while others, such as Heraclitus, believed that motion is the essence of the world, where everything takes place in a continual flux. So, we ponder whether repetition should be understood as the *appropriation of a meaning transmitted through a story*, of a meaning assigned long ago and that is seen to be revealing for the

individual's present. This final aspect will be what holds our attention, the *print*.

In this same sense, the tasks of the memory, the matrix, stimulate our attention. They guide us with enthusiasm and a suspicious gaze towards the future, from the symbolic and processual springs of the past, understanding them as an uncovering of the matrix. The print – *attentive gaze* – awakens looking toward the past, enjoying and identifying itself in the images from another time, evoked in the materials, in the alternation of successive, superimposed bites as elements constituting a three-dimensional object impregnated like a palimpsest – matrix – which, far from acting as a nostalgic impediment, sets up an imbalance in relation to the present, lived and represented as a print [4, p. 42]. A print that appears as *the appropriation of a meaning transmitted by the story, as a recollection*.

All of the foregoing allows us to draw an analogy between the concept of repetition in Kierkegaard and the concept of repetition in the two completely opposing realities that make up the natural reality of intaglio printing and printmaking systems; the matrix and the print. The two items form a totality or a single indissoluble being, although from an ontological point of view they do present differences.

*Translated by
Judith Alexia Weninger*

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Abstract

This paper presents Søren Kierkegaard's concept of repetition and attempts to draw an analogy between it and intaglio printmaking, in relation to three well-differentiated moments. The first moment is the location of repetition in the context of individual existence and its relationship with the matrix as a unique thing. The second, its demanding nature, its search for freedom, where the question of printing is understood as the progress and process of transfer. In this stage repetition becomes an instantaneous demand and vindication. Thirdly, the paper analyses the relationship between repetition as a life event and the print as the process of appropriating a story by means of a graphic act. Here the analogy is drawn between the concept of repetition by Kierkegaard and the concept of repetition in the two completely opposing realities that comprise the natural reality of intaglio printmaking; the matrix and the print.

Key words: Kierkegaard, repetition, matrix, print, intaglio printmaking, mimesis

Streszczenie

Autor artykułu przedstawia koncepcje powtórzenia Sorena Kierkegaarda, próbując nakreślić analogię między nią a grafiką intaglio (grafiką wklęsłodrukową) w odniesieniu do trzech różniących się od siebie momentów. Pierwszym z nich jest relacja powtórzenia wobec układu odniesienia, jakim jest indywidualna egzystencja i jej związek z matrycą jako bytem wyjątkowym. Po drugie, ponieważ w jego charakterze leży kategoryczny postulat wolności, który porusza kwestie drukowania jako procesu postępu i przekazu. Na tym etapie powtórzenie jest natychmiastowym żądaniem i realizacją. Na koniec analizowany jest związek między powtórzeniem jako wydarzeniem istnienia a drukiem jako procesem zawłaszczenia historii przez istnienie aktu graficznego. W tym kontekście autor zamierza ustanowić analogię między koncepcją powtórzenia Kierkegaarda a koncepcją powtórzenia dwóch całkowicie przeciwnych rzeczywistości, które składają się na naturalną rzeczywistość miedziorytu i systemów drukowania, takich jak matryca i druk.

Słowa kluczowe: Kierkegaard, powtórzenie, matryca, druk, intaglio, mimesis