

## **Warholian repetition and the viewer's affective response to artworks from his *Death and Disaster Series***

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### **Abstract**

In his *Death and Disaster Series*, Andy Warhol repeated gruesome images of suicides and car crashes. The artist's use of repetition has been discussed extensively but not in terms of the direct impact on the viewer's perceptual and cognitive processing. This paper considers the viewer's affective experience resulting from repeated exposure to negative images in artworks from the series. We put forward an account of the potential affective experience of Warholian repetition based on existing experimental findings and by way of the artist's own remarks on the relationship between repetition and affect.

Keywords: Andy Warhol, repetition, affect, mere exposure effect, negative images

### **Introduction**

When Andy Warhol remarked that “the more you look at the same exact thing...the better and emptier you feel” [1] he was making a comment on the repetitious nature of popular culture. His belief about the emotional benefits of repeated viewing led him to repeat images in his own artworks. Warhol’s frequent use of repetition has been studied in cultural and art historical terms [2, 3, 4, 5] and through the lens of psychoanalysis [6]. However, it has not been explored with reference to the direct

impact of repetition on the perceptual and cognitive processing in those viewing his artworks.

This paper has two goals. First, to determine if experimental findings on repetition and affect can tell us anything about the affective experience of Warholian repetition. Second, and subsequent to the first, to consider if additional studies might be useful to extend our existing understanding of Warholian repetition. Our attention is on a subset of his artworks from the *Death and Disaster Series* that are unique due to the negative nature of the images they depict. Though focused on artworks from fifty years ago, our study maintains contemporary relevance and urgency in light of the increasing availability and circulation of negative images through traditional and new media sources.

## **Warhol and Repetition**

The work of Andy Warhol has been discussed via Marxism [7], in relation to Queer Theory [8] and informed by Modernist pictorial conventions [9]. The artist's contributions to art history and the cult status of the artist have been explored in-depth [10, 11, 12, 13], even by the artist himself [14, 15]. One aspect of Warhol's output that has received significant attention in most accounts is his distinctive method of repeating images within his artworks.

Warhol began working with repetition in the early 1960's when he painted his notorious *Campbell's Soup Cans* comprising thirty-two individual canvases of all the available flavours. When he adopted the silkscreen process shortly thereafter, allowing for the quick and easy application of image to canvas, repetition became a key feature of what has been called the "Warhol Aesthetic" [16]. Almost immediately, he began appropriating images from popular culture and printing them in grids across brightly coloured canvases.

The structure of repetition within these works is generally consistent. A single image is repeated anywhere from two to over fifty times usually on a single canvas (when a second canvas is present it is often left blank for dramatic effect). In most instances, the image is silkscreened in black ink against a white or painted background of a

single colour: red, green, orange, blue and frequently silver. Although the silkscreen process can be quite exacting, either due to lack of skill or artistic intention, Warhol and/or his assistants typically applied the image in a sloppy manner and with inconsistent amounts of ink [17].

The structure of Warholian repetition inhibits the viewer from accessing meaning or forming a gist of whole artworks. Rather, viewers must attend sequentially to the repeating component images. By this we mean that the structured arrangement of the sets of repeating images forces a spatiotemporal inspection of his artworks to ensure spectators perceive repetition of individual images rather than each artwork as a single image. The limits of component images are typically set by sharp boundaries formed from discontinuities of colour and form. While we know of no eye movement studies of spectators viewing Warhol's artworks, experimental studies of eye movements shows they tend to be made within rather than between objects [18]. The spatial and pictorial layout of the repeating images seems designed to support a serial visual inspection where component images are inspected in turn. In effect, Warhol has structured these images so that spectators must engage with the individual instances.

Serial inspection in which the variance across broadly similar images is highlighted, may even allow the viewer to form enhanced (robust) mental representations of the (sometimes obscured) source images that Warhol used [19]. In doing so, the increasing robustness of mental representations enhances the meaning of the artworks. Crow articulated this when he stated “the viewer [of repetition in Warhol's pictures] works to draw the separate elements into a whole. The compositional choices are artful enough to invite that kind of attention” [20].

An early series that consistently engaged this formal approach strayed from the artist's more uplifting and playful works by repeating images of death and disaster. We distinguish between two broad classes of artworks in the *Death and Disaster Series*. Some artworks subtly and indirectly refer to death as with portraits of Marilyn Monroe and Jackie Kennedy. These artworks require contextual knowledge in order to understand their reference to death, for example the fact that Monroe committed suicide just weeks before Warhol produced her portrait. Other artworks explicitly show death related imagery directly through depictions of tragedies such as fatal car

crashes (Fig 1.). In these artworks, the horror of death is unavoidable, as exemplified by the image of a woman who took her own life by jumping from a Manhattan skyscraper. It is the effect of repetition in these images that forms the focus of the present discussion.

*Figure 1 about here*

### **Repetition and Affect**

Warhol stated “when you see a gruesome picture over and over again it doesn’t really have any effect” [21]. He presumed that repeated exposure to an upsetting image results in a ‘deactivating’ of the negative affect. In other words, according to Warhol, once-disturbing images become banal and affectless after repeated exposure. This is an essential feature of his *Death and Disaster Series*. Fundamentally, the question we consider is whether the effect of repetition on such negative death-related imagery is to leave it devoid of affective meaning, as Warhol supposed. The alternatives being that repetition either has no impact on the affective response to these images or that it sharpens the negative affective response to their presentation.

There is a significant body of research showing that positive affect increases through repetition, at least with images of positive or neutral valence. This increasing affect is not based on positive reinforcement or reward bias (i.e. there is nothing to gain from liking the stimulus). Zajonc’s [22] influential paper on the subject prompted a large number of experiments on the attitudinal effects of mere repeated exposure to a stimulus. Bornstein’s [23] meta-analysis of these experiments found that repeated exposure effects are robust. There is widespread agreement that repetition leads to increased positive affect despite continued study of the exact mechanisms and nuances of the effects.

Mere exposure effects have also been tested in the realm of art appreciation. In support of Zajonc’s thesis and Bornstein’s review, Leder [24] and Cutting [25, 26, 27] demonstrated that repeated exposure influences preference judgments of representational artworks. Leder’s experiment used reproductions of Van Gogh paintings and the results revealed a positive correlation between familiarity and

liking. Cutting explored the diffuse effects of repetition over time on the maintenance of the Impressionist canon (the culturally sanctioned collections of important artworks) and confirmed a positive correlation between prior exposure and preference. These results add more weight to the accepted view that repeated exposure to positive or neutral stimuli will result in increasingly positive affective response and evaluative judgement. They also reveal the value of considering mere exposure effects in art appreciation.

The interesting question that remains (and for us in relation to the *Death and Disaster Series*) is what kind of affective response results from repeated exposure to negative stimuli? The effect of mere exposure on negative stimuli is studied less frequently. The few pertinent findings that exist have provided mixed results [28]. Some studies show repeated exposure to negative stimuli leaves images to be evaluated more positively while on others the opposite has been true.

Reber [29] explains these mixed results in terms of his processing fluency model of aesthetic experience and his previous work on the effects of fluency on affective judgements [30]. In this model, preference for a stimulus is contingent upon the ease with which a stimulus can be identified and understood, such that fluent processing results in positive affect [31, 32, 33]

In the case of initially negative stimuli, Reber states that fluency manipulations through repetition operate on a number of levels and to different ends. Largely, repetition affords more efficient perceptual and cognitive processing which leads to a positive affective response. However, repeated exposure to exemplars of a stimulus also increases the strength of its mental representation and understanding of semantic content. He uses the example of the repetition of an image of a rotting carcass and explains the affective shift that will occur after the reward of processing ease is replaced with “access to the item’s negativity” [34].

Reber’s explanation provides a framework in which to reflect on affective responses to artworks from the *Death and Disaster Series*. Any neutralising of negative affect based on fluency that repetition of imagery in the series engenders will be short lived for the viewer. The strengthening of the mental representation of negative images, and

the increased access to semantic (and presumably) affective memory, will act to increase negative affective response. The resulting intensity and valence of affective response will be a resolution (e.g. perhaps a simple sum) of these two conflicting sources of information. Foster anticipated this interplay of effects when he stated that “[s]omehow in these repetitions, then, several contradictory things occur at the same time: a warding away of traumatic significance and an opening out to it, a defending against [negative] affect *and* a producing of it” [35].

According to this account, where Warhol was right is that repetition provides a source of information (perceptual fluency) that tends to increase positive affect. However, Warhol failed to acknowledge the importance of the sources of information enhancing access to semantic content and affective memory. Warhol did not account for the additional perceptual and cognitive processes that exist alongside the high of repeated exposure.

In many cases these processes do not confound exposure effects, as with symmetry and other objective stimulus features that can actually enhance processing fluency and positive affect [36]. Unfortunately for negative images the robust mental representation and affective memory formed by consulting discrete but related exemplars moderate and perhaps overcome fluency-based mere exposure effects. Importantly, this does not mean that initially negative stimuli become more negative but rather that their negativity becomes more apparent.

We can see a similar interaction (i.e. competing processes) between stimulus novelty and complexity. Novelty is experienced positively for simple stimuli but can be experienced negatively when complexity is increased [37]. The dual-process approach to pleasure and interest in fluency based aesthetics recently put forth by Graph et al [38] also considers a hierarchy of related processes leading to pleasure and interest. All of these findings make clear that even robust processes cannot be taken in isolation.

We are left with questions that may only be answered through experimentation. Reber [39] recently asked whether empirical psychology is useful in assessing artistic value. His answer is that empirical psychology should be used to measure the actual

experience of artworks against the anticipated experience. This model has been practiced in recent empirical research around the actual experience of artworks in relation to art theory [40, 41, 42]. With respect to the *Death and Disaster Series*, definitive determination of whether Warhol achieved neutrality from negative images is perhaps a form of *Gedankenexperiment* or ‘thought experiment’.

We have provided the theoretical groundwork for this Gedankenexperiment. Going beyond a thought experiment to a real one would require an understanding of how the overall affective experience of repeating images shifts in response to repetition, image similarity and variation, as well as the initial magnitude of negativity. Such a parametric exploration is beyond the limits of the present essay.

Of course, the application of psychological principles to art appreciation has been met with mixed response both historically and to the present day. Dickie [43] passionately questioned the relevance of psychology to aesthetics, claiming that the problem of aesthetics “is a philosophical activity and not be confused with science” [44]. Whether or not we or other researchers choose to take up such experiments ultimately speaks to fundamental questions about interdisciplinary art-science research.

## Conclusion

In the account presented, perception of repeated negative images in Warhol’s *Death and Disaster Series* prompts two simultaneous and competing cognitive processes for the viewer. On the one hand, repetition leads to increased processing fluency which is affectively positive. Conversely, the repeated exposure also leads to identification of variance across exemplars towards the formation of a robust mental representation. In the case of initially negative images this provides improved access to an image’s negativity. Fundamentally, the issue is one of time course of viewing and the observation that the baseline experience of a viewer of repetition is subject to a number of simultaneous processes.

Warhol made several claims about the effects of repetition on affective experience. In our view, he was right in one sense and wrong in another. He correctly observed that, in general, repeated exposure to an image leads to positive feelings for the viewer. He

failed to acknowledge, however, that for negative images the effect is short lived due to enhanced recognition of the negative semantic content also due to repetition of individual instances.

At the start of the paper we stated two related goals. The first was to determine if existing experimental findings on repetition and affect can tell us anything about the affective experience of Warholian repetition. The second was to consider if further studies might be necessary to extend existing knowledge. Focusing on Warhol's *Death and Disaster Series* we discovered that existing experimental findings can inform an understanding of the affective experience of repetition in Warhol's artworks. Our study also revealed that final determination of the accuracy of our stated view may in fact be more of a thought experiment rather than one that need be performed. At the same time, Warhol's *Death and Disaster Series* anticipated the present era where repeated exposure to negative images is commonplace. As such, further understanding of the affective significance of repeated exposure to negative images may be worthwhile.

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## Figure Captions

Figure 1. Andy Warhol, *Silver Car Crash*, 1963, synthetic polymer paint and silkscreen on canvas, 103 3/4 x 80 1/4 inches. © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / DACS.

## Figures

Figure 1

