

Literary and  
Cultural Theory



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Wojciech Kalaga  
Marzena Kubisz  
Jacek Mydla  
(eds.)

# A Culture of Recycling / Recycling Culture?

PETER LANG

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## Preface

*The purpose of this volume is to address the notion of cultural recycling by assessing its applicability to various modes of cultural and theoretical discourse. The word “recycling” is here used, collectively to denote phenomena such as cyclicity, repetition, recurrence, renewal, reuse, reproduction, etc., etc., which seem to be inalienable from basic cultural processes.*

*From the Platonic ideals of the circle and circular movement, the idea of the wheels of Fortune and their ongoing applications in the artistic representations of the human condition, through that of the Nietzschean eternal recurrence and the Freudian return of the repressed right down to William B. Yeats’ apocalyptic visions of the gyres – cyclicity and circularity seem to have predetermined the ways in which the Western mind represented itself. T. S. Eliot’s conviction that “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists,” famously abolished the romantic belief in the self-standing, all-creating, auto-legislating prerogatives of the Poet. Walter Benjamin’s conception of the “mechanical reproduction” and Harold Bloom’s hypothesis of the anxiety of influence and the “return of the dead” have diagnosed a state of cultural exhaustion. The idea of recycling conceived as a cultural necessity administers what seems to be a lethal stab to conceptions of creativity prefigured at the dawn of modern times, as in Edward Young’s praise of the Original Genius, opposed to mere imitators and propped up ideologically by dedication to the Novel at the birth of contemporary ideas of fiction, and legally, by copyright laws.*

*Is the idea of originality, for so long regarded as an author’s lifeblood, as sole justification of literary production and Prime Mover of cultural circulation, dead and buried? Is contemporary culture fated to belabour What Once Was? Is it doomed to remain stuck upon a treadmill of recycling or caught in a vicious circle of repetition and reuse, if not crass reproduction? The contemporary anxiety over cultural exhaustion, simulation practices, plagiarism, and piracy makes us wish to revisit questions concerning the production and circulation of meaning in the conditions marked by, to borrow Salman Rushdie’s phrase, “the bogey of authenticity.” But then, are recurrence and repetition something to run away from? Should we shun, fear and despise the merry-go-round of cultural production? Should it cause disenchantment and frustration?*

*Part of our purpose in proposing this theme is a desire to trace, confront, interrogate, and theorise the surviving phantoms of newness and paradigms of creativity or dreams of originality and to consider the need, a necessity perhaps, to overcome or sustain them, and, further, to estimate the possibility of cultural survival if it turns out, as it may, that culture is forever to remain an endless recurrence of the same.*

*Editors*