

ABOUT IMPERFECT
SYMMETRY



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In the western culture the symmetry has always been associated to the concept of order, that inherently brings the idea of purity, calmness and beauty. "Anyhow even if symmetry as a concept is seductive, there is evidence that not only asymmetry, is present in the physics subatomic world, and at any level in the biological world, from biochemistry to brains, but also that asymmetry is used and developed in the pure arts".*1

An awareness of a different symmetry is born, thanks to a vision of nature where imperfection has an important role. Kant states: "All the rigid regularities (as the mathematical lines) are inherently revolting to the taste, because their observation do not offer lasting pleasures ... and you get tired almost immediately."

The art historian, Ernst Gombrich, explains the banality implied in the symmetry: "Once we have seized the order principle, we are able to learn things by heart. [...] We have easily seen enough because it does not surprise us anymore."*2

It is interesting to notice as Kant associate the idea of order, rigid regularities, to concepts as "taste" and "pleasure", while Gombrich associates it to memory matters, it is not about pure aesthetic values, but about perception through the senses: it is a change of the neuronal state due to the contact of our senses with the environment.

The symmetry is "inside" ourselves, [...] The reason can only be one: the physic and psychic constitution of man and universe. The same "rules" that control some of the most evident physiological, physic, cosmic situations answer to this essential principle [...].*3 For this reason we are able to appreciate and understand it. If it was incomplete we would be able to complete it, or to provide to the lacking parts in order to define the perceived object. If we imagine a symmetric object, for example a dish or a bottle, darkening one half, our brain will be able to complete the lacking part, imaging the complete object. William Bateson stated that the lack of information is compensated by the symmetry, in this case related to visual perception.*4

If the lacking part is revealed and a defect or imperfection, such as a chipping or a malformation appears, this creates a failure, a disequilibrium. We do not accept the defect, and almost moved by the need to complete the object in its perfection we observe it being aware of its presence, trying to understand its existence. Perceptually we pause on that detail, morbidly attracted but strongly upset, we scan it in order to try to recreate a stability that has been shaken: we already know the rest even if we do not look at all its centimeters.

This is due to our way of perception through the sight, when we look at an object, a painting, an image or something else, we are not able to have an overall instant vision. Our eye can only put into focus each time just a little part of the visual field, so the image is built by the brain thanks to continuous analysis of the single parts. The eye movement, during this exploring phase, is characterized by rapid movements (saccade) in which the eye moves from one point to another (fixation) pausing for about 15 msec. The points on which the eye pauses are not casual: they are the areas of the object rich of particulars, where there is more information, in the less interesting areas the eye gives a "quick glance".

The fact of moving quickly on the general shape and blocking whenever an anomaly occurs triggers a kind of loop that does not accept the mistake because it disturbs the symmetry and the perception's quiet; for this we look in an almost obsessive way that imperfection.

This unsteadiness transforms the detail in an attraction element.

"According to Plato if we look for pure pleasure, we need to address not to great but little pleasures, [...] These are the ones that comes from the contemplation of a geometric figure, clear and uniform sounds that produce a homogeneous melody..."*5 This is the reason why we feel a state of peace in the symmetric figures or in the music symmetry, for example in the uniform composition (ABAB), but to feel "great pleasures", the ones underlined by a savage excitement, they not only come with the "simple pleasures", but they are also related to the experience of lack. A lack that we can understand as deterioration of the symmetry, arriving to concepts such as degeneration, malformation, disgust.

So "the great pleasure", shows itself in what we call "imperfect symmetry", in which the perception of a pure object, or a geometric figure, is disfigured by a lack, by an addition or by an imperfection.

The imperfect symmetry is not an asymmetry, which is its denial, but the lack of correspondence, the imperfect symmetry is a condition of partial symmetry or faulty symmetry. The mistake, damaging the quiet, creates an attractive unsteadiness.

The predictability inherent to the symmetry is able to make a shape, a musical composition or an image, immediately reassuring. The proportion, the repetition, the equilibrium are conditions that the man finds comforting, because he is able to know "what will happen next".

In the musical field, the symmetry shows itself as

specific aspect of repetition. This can happen in two ways: parts or sections that are repeated inside the same arrangement; or the specular reflection of micro or macro parts.

If the symmetry is broken or partially changed, the sound will be immediately heard as disturbing, but what "disturbs" it is not the sound itself, but the impossibility to be predicted. The equilibrium on which the symmetry is based is hold as long as the purity is maintained: every little change creates an immediate unsteadiness which is physically deviant.

If we transfer the idea of repetition from the musical field to the formal one, by developing it in a recursive way, this will create complex systems, symmetrically imperfect, formally superabundant and redundant, arriving to the extreme of monstrosity. Ribeiroia ondatrae *6, this is the name of a parasite that infects different kind of frogs while they are developing the limbs, This create several defects, from the lack of the legs to their multiplication.

This last aspect is the expression of a real symmetric deterioration, the parasite changes the information related to the limbs development, causing a redundancy in the system that takes to monstrosity, that is something unrepeatable and unique.

This does not mean that our eyes can, want or are able to bear the sight of such unpleasant details.

Anyhow we have to acknowledge to the imperfection and to the intentional body ugliness the gift of significance, other than an enormous semantic effect.*7

There is also another condition where extremely complex figures, if structured in a symmetric way lose their intensity. If we want to use the complexity in order to define an articulate and interesting system, this will not be improved by the use of symmetry, but it will gain the values of immovability and quiet that the complexity of its part should break

In very complex symmetry situations, our mind tends to simplify what is perceived, for this reason it will shift the perception in another way, by changing everything in a kind of background noise, excluding all the useful information that are defined from the detail.

Man is attracted by objects that have a symmetric base, but at the same time he looks for imperfection, one vision does not dominates the other, but on the contrary they live together creating something involving.

The imperfect symmetry is the mistake inside a symmetric system, a mistake that is due to the



1 -- Corpus 2.0
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addition of information, in fact as Arnheim states more data are needed in order to define, specify an imperfection or "asymmetry" *8; Gus Van Sant directs this principle in one of the cinema masterpiece: Psycho by Alfred Hitchcock. Van Sant, faithfully reproduces Hitchcock's work in every shot, in every sequence and in each stylistic choice: we can easily say that Van Sant's movie is a clone. It takes the visual DNA of its hitchcockian model and it makes another living body. *9 Van Sant makes his "corruption" by adding some disturbing elements such as a fly (this element is shown by Hitchcock on Norman Bates hand in the final scene, while Van Sant inserts it in two other parts: in the beginning scene and in the one before the shower murder), Norman's masturbation while he spies Marion from the hole in the wall, the cuts on the woman's back after she's stabbed, but also the introduction of color in a movie that was originally in black and white. So the movie is slowly changed, sequence after

sequence, from the inside: Van Sant even "interrupts" the main movie sequences (Marion's murder under the shower, and the detective Argobast's murder) with the insertion of some "subliminal" images (a naked woman, a cow, clouds in the sky) that are a visionary reaction or "defensive counter-attack" to the untouchable perfection of Hitchcock's model. *10 In front of the idea of "perfection" we often have a sensation of a clear visceral splitting that divide between the self-preservation instinct and the destruction one. In fact the contemplation of beauty is often followed by a desire to alter it. The change is the first germ of a formal and carnal degeneration toward which the man is moved, attracted and seduced. The desire of the perfection's alteration or the search of the corruption is part of the double identity of mankind: the rational and logical one and the instinctive-emotional one. The instinctive-emo-

tional part predominates, together with a kind of primeval pleasure (which is enclosed in an organized rules' system) which is hidden in our subconscious, as shown in the Ken Russell movie Altered States (1980). In this movie we see the hallucinated experiences of Eddie Jessup (William Hurt), who finds out that "the other state of consciousness are real like the waking status and that they can materialize." He experiences the potentialities of hallucination until reaching a primitive ego, from which he is seduced and fascinated: "I entered a very primitive state of consciousness... It was the most sublime and satisfying moment of my life".

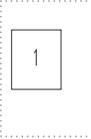
This last sentence could have also been pronounced by Eric Parker, main charter of Cosmopolis the last David Cronenberg's movie. In this film the Canadian director shows the route covered with his limousine by a young multimillionaire financier who is going to have his hair cut .

Along the way Eric undergoes an essential change: in the same day that he understands he has committed a big financial mistake causing to his company a million dollar loss, he discovers to have an asymmetric prostate. The discovery of a physical imperfection causes a series of chain reactions in the protagonist that bring him to interrupt his way of life, looking for a change in its distortion. This degeneration is caused by his obsession for the order and the symmetry, because he is not able to give value to the imperfection, to the chaotic elements, to what is out of his control.

Eric Parker is so obsessed by his health that he pretends daily check ups by his doctor, but at the same time he feels "free as he has never been" in front of a death menace. If the minimum symmetry change produces a total different effect in comparison to the original pureness, the Eric asymmetric prostate becomes the imperfection on a white dish, something that totally changes the overall image.

Once the protagonist is introduced to the fascination of asymmetry he begins to look for it in everything he does (he tells his bodyguard with whom he has sex to shift to the left, he changes position on the limousine laying on the side seats, he has his hair cut only on one side) until gradually reaching to the extreme act to shoot one of his hand in order to further change the symmetry of his body.

The incompleteness (of his cut, of his marriage, of all the narrative events that in the movie are always



1 -- Corpus 2.0
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and only words) and the degenerating transformation (even the white limousine at the end of the route will be disfigured by dents and graffiti) are for Eric the steps of a Way of the Cross that leads him and the audience to a universal cynicism where there is no space for anything not even for death ("the violence needs a cause") The strong contrast between Eric obsessive control and at the same time his degenerating desire to escape reminds of Patrick Bateman in American Psycho
Bateman, more than Parker, is the perfect model of a total control of the form: every part of his life is organized and corresponds to high standards (physic, working, social) that are useless in front of the impossibility to manage a change a diversity, something unforeseen (that can be a more sophisticated card or a missed booking in the most exclusive restaurant).
In Bateman's (and Eric's) world the symmetry does not allow half measures, every mistake is a contamination that immediately distorts the whole meaning.

Every change is felt as a mutation and accepting it is extremely difficult. They have to pass through a kind of "destructive catharsis" that ends in the extreme (violence, loss of identity, nihilism, madness...). It is interesting to notice how the sense of suffocation is in some way mixed to the concept of symmetry, predictability, and the repetitiveness of the symmetric form determines a pureness which is pushed to a certain level, as something alienating. When the American Psycho scene where the morning routine of Patrick Bateman is shown is seen a first time it conveys a sensation of equilibrium and accuracy, but when it is seen more times in a continuous way it is grotesque and it gives a sense of anxiety.

Note

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- 4 //William Bateson , Materials for the study of variation: treated with special regard to discontinuity in the origin of species, Kessinger Publishing, 2009.
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- 6//<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2011/08/pictures/110803-frog-parasites-deformed-malformations-legs-animals-science/>
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- 10 //Gianni Canova, L'alieno e il pipistrello. La crisi della forma nel cinema contemporaneo, Bompiani, Milano 2000.

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