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Introduction

Ellen Rutten

The trend to present the notion of imperfection as benefit rather than bother resonates today across a range of social disciplines and a wealth of world regions. As digital tools allow media users to share cheery selfies and success stories, psychologists promote “the gifts of imperfections” and point to perfectionism as a catalyst for rising depression and suicide rates among millennials.¹ As technologies increasingly permit composers and artists to polish their work, they, in turn, increasingly celebrate glitches, noise, and cracks.² As genetic engineering upgrades with swift speed, philosophers and physicians plea “against perfection,” and supermarkets successfully advertise “perfectly imperfect” vegetables.³ Meanwhile, cultural

The research for this introduction I conducted as part of the project Sublime Imperfections, which I introduce in more detail below. I thank both the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), which funded the project, and the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies in Amsterdam (NIAS), where I worked on this volume, for generous support. I thank Caleb Kelly and Jakko Kemper for helpful comments on a draft version of the text.

¹ Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City: Hazelden, 2010); Martin M. Smith, Simon B. Sherry, Vanja Vidovic, Donald H. Saklofske, Joachim Stoeber, Aryn Benoit, “Perfectionism and the Five-Factor Model of Personality: A Meta-Analytic Review,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, January 6 (2019): 367–90; Paul L. Hewitt, Gordon L. Flett, Samuel F. Mikail, *Perfectionism: A Relational Approach to Conceptualization, Assessment, and Treatment* (New York: Guilford Press, 2017).

² On this trend see, among others, Kim Cascone, “The Aesthetics of Failure: ‘Post-Digital’ Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music,” *Computer Music Journal* 24, no. 4 (2000): 12–18; Caleb Kelly, *Cracked Media: The Sound of Malfunction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009); Carolyn L. Kane, *High-Tech Trash: Glitch, Noise, and Aesthetic Failure* (Berkeley, CA: Luminos Press, 2019).

³ For the citations see, respectively, Michael J. Sandel, *The Case against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Engineering* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), and Tesco, “Our Perfectly Imperfect Range,” April 14, 2016, <https://www.ourtesco.com/2016/04/14/our-perfectly-imperfect-range/>, accessed March 9, 2020. See also, among others, Cheshire Calhoun, “On Being Content with Imperfection,” *Ethics* 127, no. 2 (2017): 327–52; Ilona E. de Hooge, Marije Oostindier, Jessica Aschemann-Witzel Anne Normann, Simone Mueller Loose, Valérie Lengard Almli, “This Apple Is Too Ugly for Me! Consumer

analysts point at skewed perspectives, blurry images, and other “deliberate imperfections” and “effective mistakes” in new and historical cinema, painting, photography, and literature.⁴ In less positive terms, scholars in fields ranging from disability studies to tourism critique a trend to fetishize imperfection and poverty. They warn against projecting privileged and, often, Western-biased feel-good stories onto the less privileged or frail.⁵ As Yuriko Saito—a scholar in the philosophy of design and contributor to this volume—puts it, “there is something morally problematic about deriving an aesthetic pleasure” from “imperfections [that] indicate people’s suffering and social injustice.”⁶

Where does this growing critical interest in failures, flaws, mistakes, and other “imperfections” come from? Why do we witness it across so many different domains and disciplines? And how does praise for the imperfect “work,” today and in earlier historical periods? In this book, we study these questions by synthesizing existing scholarship about aesthetics and logics of imperfection. We integrate the briskly growing but fragmented existing scholarship into the first transdisciplinary, transnational framework of imperfection studies.

Our volume is a spin-off of *Sublime Imperfections*—a research project that I coordinated at the University of Amsterdam between 2015 and 2020.⁷ For this project, Ph.D students Jakko Kemper (a media theorist and coeditor of this volume), Fabienne Rachmadiev (an art theorist), and I studied and compared cultural and social practices in which the imperfect is praised. As part of our research, we invited experts from different scholarly and creative

Preferences for Suboptimal Food Products in the Supermarket and At Home,” *Food Quality and Preference* 56 (2017): 80–92; N.a. (editorial), “Perfectly Imperfect: Defects in Nanostructures Have Their Advantages,” *Nature Nanotechnology* 5, no. 311 (2010), <https://www.nature.com/articles/nnano.2010.102>.

⁴ For the citations, see Nicholas Rombes’s *Cinema in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 27, and Mieke Bal’s chapter in this volume, respectively. See also, among others, the research devoted to “imperfectionist aesthetics” by Peter Cheyne and James Kirwan as presented in <https://imperfectionistaesthetics.wordpress.com/> (n.d.), accessed March 9, 2020; Virgil Nemoianu, *The Triumph of Imperfection: The Silver Age of Sociocultural Moderation in Europe, 1815–1848* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006); Bernd Stiegler, “1. Imperfection,” *Still Searching ...*, January 11, 2012, https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/explore/still-searching/articles/26907_imperfection.

⁵ Yuriko Saito and Domnica Radulescu do so in this book; see also Saito, “The Role of Imperfection in Everyday Aesthetics,” *Contemporary Aesthetics*, July 27, 2017, <https://contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=797>, accessed March 9, 2020; Siobhan Lyons (ed.), *Ruin Porn and the Obsession with Decay* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2018).

⁶ Saito, “The Role.”

⁷ For details on the project, news, and the project blog, see www.sublimeimperfections.org, accessed March 9, 2020.

disciplines to conceptualize their take on imperfection. On the pages that follow, they share their ideas in twelve chapters, an essay, and an epilogue. Each author offers the reader tools to craft more historically grounded and critically better informed conceptualizations of the imperfect.

In this introduction, I set the stage by doing three things. First, I map existing studies of imperfections and outline how we expand their findings. Next, I explain how we define and theorize the concept of imperfection in this book. I conclude with a short book overview, aimed at helping readers find their way through the chapters. This last bit matters: our publication is targeted at advanced scholars *and* junior students, as well as any reader interested in the disciplines that we bring together, from cultural analysis (of music, literature, fashion, art, design, and media) to marketing studies, and from history and philosophy to anthropology. With this broad audience in mind, the authors maintain a nontechnical narrative style—and although *Imperfections* works well as A-to-Z read, readers should have no problem in reading separate chapters as stand-alone pieces.

Studies of Imperfection: What There Is and What We Add

In case, so far, you both read and consulted the references in this introduction, you will have followed a lush underwater story of relevant research. This story is no more than a sneak peek: in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, research on imperfection as a productive category swiftly accumulated in fields as varying as design, (audio-)visual arts, literature, marketing, psychology, and genetics. In 2001, literary historian Ann Rigney presented “imperfection and chronic dissatisfaction” as formative components to historiographic thinking in *Imperfect Histories*.⁸ In 2006, cultural historian Virgil Nemoianu envisioned a Romanticist “acceptance of imperfection” in science, psychology, and literature—and offered it as a useful lesson for the here and now—in *The Triumph of Imperfection*.⁹ In 2007, philosopher Michael Sandel advocated a move away from perfectionist reasoning in bioengineering in *The Case against Perfection*.¹⁰ In 2010, social work professor Brené Brown told readers of her best seller *The Gifts of Imperfection*: in times of media overload, we must accept our shortcomings to

⁸ Ann Rigney, *Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 11.

⁹ Nemoianu, *The Triumph*.

¹⁰ Sandel, *The Case*.

lead wholesome lives.¹¹ In 2012, the journal *Nature Nanotechnology* devoted a volume to “perfectly imperfect” nanostructures, while cultural critic Patrick Grant unpacked, in *Imperfection*, how the nonperfect transpires as a “condition of our ... human solidarity” across religion, ethnic conflict, and the arts.¹² And finally, between 2017 and 2020, psychologist Paul Hewitt and others outlined the downsides of perfectionist reasoning in *Perfectionism*; disabilities scholar and activist Eli Clare critiqued ideals of cure and ableism in *Brilliant Imperfection*; and philosopher Heather Widdows critically interrogated “the demand to be beautiful” in *Perfect Me*.¹³

This list of book titles forms a mere tip of a swiftly growing iceberg of scholarly work that critiques perfectionist ideals and theorizes imperfection as a productive category. Valorizations of the imperfect are resonant (but underresearched), too, in increasingly loud debates on repair as answer to material deficit and sustainability issues; on craft in high-tech times; on the interrelated domains of glitch, noise, and *postdigital* studies (a scholarly subfield that unpacks the inextricable interlacing of off- and online in “our newly computational everyday lives”); on failure (ranging from Jack Halberstam’s critique on “conventional understandings of success in a heteronormative, capitalist society” to costly research initiatives that, paradoxically, promise to “turn failure into success”); and on ecology and Anthropocene.¹⁴

In critical reflection on these and other poignant social concerns, the notion of imperfection is implicated and often mentioned—but what is lacking is a systematic theoretical framework. At the moment, conceptualizations of the imperfect as an affirmative category are resonant, but dispersed across disciplines and publications.

¹¹ Brown, *The Gifts*. For Brown’s vision on media see, for instance, *ibid.*, p. 67.

¹² N.a. (editorial), “Perfectly Imperfect”; Patrick Grant, *Imperfection* (Athabasca: Athabasca University Press, 2012), 223.

¹³ Hewitt, Flett, Mikail, *Perfectionism*; Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Heather Widdows, *Perfect Me: Beauty as An Ethic Ideal* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), cover text.

¹⁴ For helpful discussions to these debates, see, respectively, Steven J. Jackson, “Rethinking Repair,” in *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality and Society*, ed. Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski and Kirsten A. Foot (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 221–40; Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); Michael Betancourt, *Glitch Art in Theory and Practice: Critical Failures and Post-Digital Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Kane, *High-Tech Trash*; Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). For the citations, see, respectively, David M. Berry and Michael Dieter, *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, Computation and Design* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), cover text; Halberstam, *The Queer Art*, cover text; and Isabel Fattal, “The Value of Failing,” *The Atlantic*, April 25, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/04/the-value-of-failing/558848/>, accessed March 23, 2020.

This is where our book makes a difference. In this volume, we synthesize the growing but fragmented critical reflection on the notion into a transdisciplinary, transnational conceptual tool kit. Unlike existing relevant studies, this volume is concept- rather than discipline- or region-focused: it brings together contributions by experts in music, art, media, cultural analysis, literature, marketing, anthropology, philosophy, design, and area studies from the United States, Western and Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Australia. To optimally integrate theoretical and more practical considerations—a crucial aim for our topic, which resonates loudly in museums, shops, and on work floors—we paired scholarly analyses to work by curators, artists, and other practitioners in relevant fields. What the outcoming transdisciplinary and transnational approach looks like in practice and what its benefits are: to these questions we turn now.

What Are Imperfections and How Do We Study Them?

In this book we do not depart from one overarching, stable definition of the term “imperfection.” Dictionaries do suggest that the word boasts cleanly delineated meanings: across different languages, they tell us that it stands for incompleteness, defectiveness, for a shortcoming, or for the state of being faulty, flawed, blemished, or unfinished.¹⁵ Dictionaries offer equally clear descriptions of its antonym (and the word from which the term “imperfection” derives): *perfection*, they say, is all that is complete, fault- or flawless, intact, or blemish- and deficiency-free.¹⁶

¹⁵ This definition I base on dictionary definitions in Dutch, German, English, and Russian (the four languages that I know best), complemented with Chinese and Japanese; for input about these last languages, I thank my student assistant Dong Xia. We used these dictionaries: N.a., *Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, n.p., online at <https://www.dwds.de/>, accessed November 12, 2019; Ton den Boon et al. (ed.), *Van Dale groot woordenboek van de Nederlandse taal* (Utrecht: Van Dale Lexicografie, 2005); Henry Watson Fowler, Francis George Fowler, and Della Thompson (eds.), *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Kirill Sergeevich Gorbachevich, *Bol'shoi akademicheskii slovar' russkogo iazyka. Izdanie 3* (Moscow: Nauka, 2004–); Xiandai Hanyu Cidian, *现代汉语词典 (Contemporary Chinese Dictionary). Edition 7* (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2016); and Shogakukan, *大辞泉 (Daijisen)*, online at <https://daijisen.jp/>, accessed March 9, 2020.

¹⁶ See, apart from the same dictionaries, on the word *perfection* and its meaning in Western, Asian, Pacific, and African languages: Shameem Black, Matt Tomlinson, Jack Fenner, “Perfection: An Introduction,” *Australian National University*, April 24, 2017, <https://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/perfection/perfection-introduction>, accessed March 23, 2020; Martin Foss, *The Idea of Perfection in the Western World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton

The dictionary definitions are, however, silent on the question: who defines what is perfect and what not? Who decides what strays from set norms and standards? And who sets these standards in the first place? The answers to these questions vary for each situation where the term is used. They differ depending on whom you ask, too: the torn designer jeans that feel imperfect to some can strike others as sternly polished.

The same is true for the terms *failure*, *flaw*, and *mistake*: each refers to a state or quality that ranks as a deviation from a given norm—but their exact meaning is always in the eye of the beholder. Definitions of imperfection are especially tricky where the apparently opposing poles of perfection and imperfection flip-flop. Throughout the history of human thinking, perfect<>imperfect binaries have been reversed, and the traditionally negative term *imperfection* has morphed into a hallmark of positive values in domains ranging from politics to ethics and aesthetics.¹⁷ A famous example from that last field is the claim by philosopher Karl Rosenkranz, in the 1850s, that “the concept of imperfection is relative” and that it can “outrank what according to reality” is “more perfect.” “The flower,” Rosenkranz clarified, “is counted imperfect in a botanical ... register”—but “ranks higher than the fruit aesthetically.”¹⁸

As the notion of imperfection is, just as its semantic equivalents “flaw,” “failure,” and “mistake,” so fluid, in this book we refrain from asking what these concepts “really” mean. We concur with historians Steven King and Steven Taylor, who warn against “using an imperfect/perfect dichotomy as an analytical prism”: rather than a fixed entity, they write, “the concept of imperfection and its construction has been an ever-present historical narrative in the broadly defined modern period.”¹⁹ This narrative is no

University Press, 1946); and Władysław Tatarkiewicz, “On Perfection,” *Dialectics and Humanities* 8, no. 2 (1981): 11–12.

¹⁷ For the history of this trend from Plato onward (and in different world regions), see my book chapters “On Imperfection” (forthcoming; draft can be shared upon request) and “Affirmative Rhetoric and Aesthetics of Imperfection: A Genealogy,” in *Miscommunications: Errors, Mistakes and the Media*, ed. Maria Korolkova and Timothy Barker (London: Bloomsbury, in print); see also Saito’s claim in this volume that “even those who advocate imperfectionism often point out the complementarity of perfection and imperfection.”

¹⁸ Karl Rosenkranz, *Aesthetics of Ugliness* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 35.

¹⁹ Steven King and Steven Taylor, “Imperfect Children’ in Historical Perspective,” *Social History of Medicine* 30, no. 4 (2017): 718–26; 720, 723. See also Clyde Taylor, who promotes “imperfection as a strategy of cultural resistance,” but flags the unease and stigma that the notion can evoke in critiques of power (*The Mask of Art: Breaking the Aesthetic Contract—Film and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 272).

monolithic story, out there waiting for us to be unpacked: as our authors demonstrate, its outlines vary from one place and time to another.

In what we see as a more fruitful approach, our contributors explore how various historical and recent debates about imperfection (hence the plural “imperfections” in the book title) intertwine and feed each other. Rather than imperfection as such, they unpack *discourses of imperfection*—that is, the ways in which filmmakers, tea masters, marketeers, composers, social media users, farmers, and other social and professional groups talk about and valorize imperfection. Together the chapters unpack a web of four interrelated discursive motifs—*normativity, control, purity, and temporality*—that disclose how pleas for imperfection resonate and travel across different social practices.²⁰ This web of intertwining motifs also helpfully reveals paradoxes: after all, just as any rhetoric, imperfection-is-good talk is far from contradiction free.

Before I turn to a chapter overview, let me introduce the four motifs.

Normativity

Affirmative talk about imperfection tends to mark *norm* negations. As cultural historian and Russianist Andy Byford puts it, “categorisations of ‘imperfection’” are inevitably “framed” by “normative regimes.”²¹ Praise for the imperfect brings to light—and, not seldomly, critically interrogates—conventions that otherwise might go unnoticed. “Mistakes,” writes cultural theorist and video artist Mieke Bal in her chapter in this volume, “alert us to the ease with which we assume and endorse different kinds of norms.” A skewed leg in a painting, a clumsily cropped face in a film shot: formal mistakes like these mark a “clash with conventions”; as such, Bal says, they emblemize “the productive effect imperfection can have.” This effect is not unique for our age: Saito argues in her chapter that *imperfektionist aesthetics* arise when “an accepted norm of aesthetic perfection” is subverted—an aesthetic subversion that she already observes in fourteenth-century Japan, where Buddhist monk Kenkō admired a silk scroll wrapper that “has frayed at top and bottom.”²²

²⁰ For the conceptualization of the four motifs, I am grateful to Jakko Kemper, who first distilled (and offered brief characterizations of) the four red lines during our joint editorial work on this book.

²¹ Andy Byford, “The Imperfect Child in Early Twentieth-Century Russia,” *Journal of the History of Education Society* 46, no. 5 (2017): 595–617; 595.

²² Kenkō Yoshida, *Essays in Idleness: The Tsurezuregusa of Kenkō*, trans. Donald Keene (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 70.

Discourses of imperfection question standards, but they also boast their own norms and standards. In her chapter on product marketing, Ilona de Hooge dissects the effectivity of such slogans as: “Naturally imperfect: Apples the way they actually look!” These slogans work, she argues, because they “focus ... on the positive sides of imperfect products, such as their uniqueness or authenticity”—but consumers only buy an “imperfect” apple as long as it meets “intrinsic quality” standards. And they only want that “ugly” apple as long as it complies with beauty norms, as the hyperstylized visual language of “imperfect-food” marketing betrays.²³

Control

Positive takes on the imperfect are tightly interwoven with notions of *control*. This relationship seems straightforward: pleas for imperfection promote openness to contingency or chance. Media theorist and artist Rosa Menkman sees *glitches* (electronic bugs), for instance, as the unforeseen-but-welcome “fingerprints of imperfection” that each medium boasts. A glitch, in her words, “represents a loss of control,” akin to “th[e] ‘nature’-generated sublime”: “The ‘world’ or the interface does the unexpected.”²⁴ Menkman’s claim matches a longer list of pleas for imperfection that say: to enjoy beauty, freedom, or to otherwise live meaningfully, we must embrace control loss.²⁵

Upon closer inspection, advocates of imperfection of course rarely truly abandon control. Curator, noise art scholar, and coeditor of this volume Caleb Kelly writes in his chapter that contemporary media artists embrace contingency *and* build self-made instruments to regain “control ... to their tools” in reply to a “loss of access to the media in the digital studio.” Poet and fashion theorist Linor Goralik observes a similar paradox in her chapter on jewel design. In “the new visual culture,” she writes, wearers of face-distorting designs do two conflicting things simultaneously: they release “perfect control” over their facial expressions *and* they “pass” the same “control ... to an inanimate object.”

²³ For examples see the sophisticated photo design of Berlin-based catering collective Culinary Misfits (whose initiators “rejoice over the unperfect, every newly discovered misfit”), <http://www.culinarymisfits.de/en/misfits/>; or the online marketing of Portuguese coop Fruta Feia (Ugly Fruits). To promote their produce, Fruta Feia uses a cartoon in soft green and orange/purple hues and the slogan “Beautiful People Eat Ugly Fruit,” <https://frutafeia.pt/en/the-project>. Both links accessed March 9, 2020.

²⁴ Rosa Menkman, *The Glitch Moment(um)* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2011), 11, 30–1.

²⁵ For two other examples, see Sandel, *The Case*, 72–83, and Brown, *The Gifts*, 120–3.

Menkman also spots paradoxes in glitch art and music. With time, as she puts it, glitch morphed from “machine ‘spontaneity’” via “conceptual glitching” to “glitch design”—that is, “a controlled, consumed and established effect.”²⁶ The cases that we explore in this book often boast a similar friction between spontaneity and (at times, deeply commodified) conscious effects.

Purity and Perfectibility

Advocates of the imperfect problematize *ideals of purity and perfectibility*. They challenge populist and other political, religious, and aesthetic manifestations of these ideals and unearth the power relations that render some bodies imperfect and expendable, others perfect and worthy of preservation.²⁷ Feminist thinker Joan Rothschild has conducted helpful studies of these power relations. In a comparative study of Enlightenment-era odes to “the perfectibility of man,” eugenicist “concept[s] of ‘pure races,’” and perfectionist rhetoric in genetic counseling, she writes: “the dream of human perfectibility masks a darker motivation to eliminate all that does not meet its increasingly heightened standards.”²⁸ Our authors map critical discussions of this dream of perfectible humans—and other animals. Anthropologist Oscar Verkaaik, for instance, studies historical *regimes of perfection* and protests to these regimes in “purebred” cow farming.

Pleas *against* purist reasoning are not always as inclusive as they seem, however. Take *Misfit* (2017), a high school comedy around popular Dutch vlogger Djamila. Protagonist Julia is a schoolgirl who bravely rejects groupthink and the pressure to look and live perfectly. At first sight, Julia’s story warns children for what media theorist Patricia Pisters, in her chapter in this book, calls *cruel perfectionism*—that is, the “impossible-to-live-up-standard” that “the perfect life” and “the perfect body” represent, especially

²⁶ Menkman, *The Glitch Moment(um)*, 55, 65.

²⁷ On ideals of perfection and perfect bodies in politics, religion, and/or the arts, see, among others, Foss, *The Idea*; Joan Rothschild, *The Dream of the Perfect Child* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Widdows, *Perfect Me*. For studies of the same topics that foreground the concept of imperfection, see Grant, *Imperfection*; Leela Gandhi, *Common Cause: Postcolonial Ethics and the Practice of Democracy, 1900–1955* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Sandel, *The Case*; and Alexis Shotwell, “A Politics of Imperfection, a Politics of Responsibility,” April 25, 2017, <https://alexissotwell.com/2017/04/25/a-politics-of-imperfection-a-politics-of-responsibility/>, accessed March 11, 2020.

²⁸ Rothschild, *The Dream of the Perfect Child*, 5, 53, and cover text. The first citation is a phrase coined by French Enlightenment philosopher and mathematician Marquis de Condorcet, who argued in a treatise “that the perfectibility of man is absolutely indefinite” (Antoine-Nicholas Condorcet, *Outlines of a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, Chicago: G. Langer, 2009, 4).

for young women, in the social media age.²⁹ “Do you want perfect pics on Instagram or ... a snapchat? Be a misfit,” Julia and her friends tell peers, in a social media post that oozes empowerment and body positivity.³⁰ The same Julia is, however, impeccably dressed, impressively pretty, and slim to the point of gauntness. The film ends with her (and her equally good-looking boyfriend’s) uncontested victory at a talent show.

Misfit illustrates a point that several authors of this volume drive home: in some cases, valorizations of imperfection consolidate rather than undermine ideals of immaculate success.³¹ In those cases, critiques of the pure and perfect sooner hurt than help vulnerable social groups.

Temporality

Saito distinguishes between two narratives of perfection and imperfection: *atemporal* (in which, say, “a deformed body ... is deemed imperfect”) and *temporal* (in which a “prime state of an object ... is considered perfect,” to then deteriorate) *narratives*.³² Our contributors explore both types, and the temporal imperfection narratives that they study—in, say, talk about worn clothes—tell us much about the workings of time. These narratives reveal that, rather than mere problems to be tackled, processes of entropy and decay are inherent to material and life cycles. Kemper theorizes this situation in his chapter by introducing the notion of *chronolibido*—a concept that philosopher Martin Hägglund uses to unpack a temporal ambivalence in human desire. “Desire,” Hägglund says, “is *chronophobic* since whatever we are bound to or aspire for can ... be taken away from or be rejected by us” and “desire is *chronophilic*, since it is because we are bound to or aspire for something that can be lost that we care about it.” *Chronolibido* is a useful conceptual tool for unpacking imperfection rhetoric, which, in Kemper’s words, “is indexical to time’s passing and all that it ushers in (finitude, decay, degradation, contingency).” Praise for imperfection can also build on the opposite of decay, as when artists celebrate childlike immaturity; art theorist Tingting Hui discusses this strategy in detail in her chapter.

²⁹ In introducing the term *cruel perfectionism*, Pisters relies on thinking by cultural theorist Laurent Berlant and critical feminist Angela McRobbie; see her chapter for details.

³⁰ Erwin van den Eshof, *Misfit*, NewBe, 2017, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80994162>, accessed March 11, 2020.

³¹ Kane makes a similar point on professed versus actual failure tolerance when she discusses “the largely superficial messages from Silicon Valley and self-help cultures—to embrace weaknesses and defect” (*High-Tech Trash*, 3).

³² Saito, “The Role.”

Discourses of imperfection can, in short, reconcile us with the passing of time (and, by implication, with the threat of death). They are not problem free though. Scholars of *ruin porn*, as the trend to aestheticize urban ruins and rundown buildings is called, know this well. In media theorist Siobhan Lyons's words, ruin porn "allows us to view, as if in a museum, something uncompromisingly real and consequential, but without having to engage completely with the dire consequences it realistically provokes."³³ The same is true for the related phenomenon of *poverty porn*, which literary scholar and writer Domnica Radulescu studies in her contribution to this book. Radulescu highlights the "dangers of idealizing imperfection" by critiquing the quasi-bohemian, *faux*-deteriorated looks of "authentic" Flamenco bars and other tourist projects that romanticize Roma precarity. As she illustrates, Flamenco tourism uses a "voyeuristic" aesthetics of decay to commodify products "by oppressed communities ... suffering abject poverty."

Normativity, control, purity, temporality: our author's studies of these recurrent motifs offer readers tools to make sense of contemporary discourses of imperfection-as-bonus; to historically contextualize these discourses; and to understand their internal frictions.

By pointing at these frictions, we by no means aim to dismiss pleas for imperfection. The trend to hail the non-perfected, if far from unprecedented, understandably gains momentum today, in a period that scholars define as *mediatized*, *digitized*, or even, as we saw, *postdigital*.³⁴ At a time when, as one imperfection adept calls it, we are "bombarded" with ongoing media messages that tell us "exactly what we should look like, how much we should weigh, how often we should have sex, how we should parent, how we should decorate our houses, and which car we should drive," it is not surprising that tendencies to perfect lives and looks are under growing suspicion.³⁵ The preoccupation with imperfection makes sense, too, in the economic reality of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Specialists call this age an era of "experience economy," "aesthetic economy," or "emotional capitalism."³⁶

³³ Lyons, *Ruin Porn*, 3.

³⁴ Thomas De Zengotita, *Mediated* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005); Thomas Reed, *Digitized Lives: Culture, Power and Social Change in the Internet Era* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Berry and Dieter, *Postdigital Aesthetics*.

³⁵ Brown, *The Gifts*, 67. On mediatization and the public "economy of suspicion" (15), see also Boris Groys, *Under Suspicion: A Phenomenology of Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

³⁶ Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre & Every Business a Stage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Oxford: Polity, 2007); David Michalski, *The Dialectic of Taste: On the Rise and Fall Tuscanization and Other Crises in the Aesthetic Economy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

To each of these economic paradigms, aesthetic and affective experiences are formative. It is not hard to understand why experience- and emotion-focused consumers and producers are interested in imperfect looks and shapes: in the words of one influential marketing study, “flaws,” “rawness,” and the “imperfect” act as “hallmark for authenticity,” and authenticity is “what consumers really want” today.³⁷ In Ilona de Hooge’s chapter, we return to this market-driven preoccupation with authenticity in more detail.

Pleas for imperfection, in short, emerge for good reasons. Commodified or not, they can and have, moreover, facilitated important ecological, economic, and political interventions. In what follows, we take this societal potential seriously by defying hardboiled critique in favor of what philosopher Bruno Latour calls a more “cavalier attitude” to relevant texts and claims.³⁸ Part of this book’s value lies in our authors’ ability to read between lines and uncover hidden assumptions; but our contributors ask *not*: What is right or wrong about the habit of lauding imperfection? But rather: What is the story behind that habit?

One thing is certain: in this story, technology plays a lead role. Discourses of imperfection often arise in response to drastic socio-technological shifts—from nineteenth-century industrialization to the digitization of our age. Social and media historians have demonstrated that major technological shifts of this type inevitably actuate collective dreams, fantasies, and fears.³⁹ These collective emotions, they say, merit close attention today: in the words of sociologist Adi Kuntsman, in a “time of constantly changing digital communication technologies,” there is a “need to think about feelings, technologies and politics *together*” rather than as isolated paradigms.⁴⁰

This is what such a concerted thinking exercise teaches us about discourses of imperfection: when cultural producers and consumers face new communication technologies, they rethink and worry about existential values—especially values which, in their eyes, technological acceleration puts at stake. Technological transitions trigger dreams about perfecting life and art *and* phobias for the downsides of these dreams. Throughout the history of technology, they have sparked fears that what critical theorist Michael Betancourt has called the “idealized/supposed perfection” of new technologies

³⁷ Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 54.

³⁸ Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 241.

³⁹ For relevant studies see, among others, William Boddy, *New Media and Popular Imagination; Launching Radio, Television, and Digital Media in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); José van Dijck and Sonja Neef (eds.), *Sign Here! Handwriting in the Age of New Media* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).

⁴⁰ Adi Kuntsman, *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 2.

will obliterate self-expression, authenticity, humanness, and mental well-being.⁴¹ These core human values are what advocates for imperfection seek and find in the non-polished and flawed. Not coincidentally, the same values resonate throughout the debates about norms, control, purity, and time that we study here.

Chapter Outline

The contributions to *Imperfections* are grouped into three parts, devoted to, respectively, imperfect shapes, imperfect sounds and systems, and imperfect selves.

The chapters in Part I explore the lure of *imperfect shapes*. More than one plea for imperfection boils down to a plea for non-perfected forms—in art, film, or food design, for instance. Which analytical tools and concepts are most helpful for the study of imperfect shapes—and of those who promote these shapes?

In our opening chapter, Yuriko Saito studies the role that notions of imperfection play as criteria for aesthetic judgment in everyday life. Saito sees in *perfectionist aesthetics* a dominant but environmentally, morally, and socially problematic aesthetic paradigm. *Imperfectionist aesthetics* is her proposal to promote, instead, the values of imperfection—an open-minded attitude, for instance, ethically grounded interaction with the material world, and a critical stance toward social ills. Saito does not reject perfectionist aesthetics altogether, however: she uses a comparative analysis of US-based, British, and Japanese social practices to advocate an *inclusive aesthetics*, in which both forms of aesthetics coexist in cautious balance.

In Chapter 2, Mieke Bal uses the word ‘mistake’ to denote an act of revolt against the requirement of perfection. As she demonstrates, in specific, often small incidences, mistakes inspire us to reflect on what a medium affords. Moving between literature, painting, and film, Bal explains how such *effective mistakes* can travel across media—not as a one-sided translation of one work or artistic language into another, but in an *intermedial conversation*. Within this dynamic, mistakes act as transgressions: they draw attention both to interactions between media and to the social norms against which they sin. To Bal, mistakes thus enforce an active attitude—one to which audience participation is crucial.

Cultural historian and Russianist Yngvar Steinholt also studies the nexus between imperfection and audience engagement. The crack in the cup,

⁴¹ Betancourt, *Glitch Art*, 8.

smear on the painting, stain on the fabric: Steinholt conceptualizes these as *imperfectionist approaches*—that is, artistic strategies that invite viewers to “complet[e] the incomplete.” What happens, he asks in Chapter 3, when these approaches play first fiddle, as they do in the work of Russian art activists Aleksandr Brener, Oleg Kulik, and the Voiná group? Steinholt analyzes the *dirt aesthetics* of these artists, who, rather than entering their local art canon, confront it to this day.⁴² In his view, they critique perfection not by praising flaw as artistic method but by idealizing the dirty, filthy, or object— notions that, in post-Soviet Russia, rank as direct opposites of the canonized art object.

In Chapter 4 we move from arts to supermarkets. As marketing scholar Ilona de Hooge points out, about a third to one-half of all produced food is wasted, in part because supply chains and consumers refuse to produce or buy *imperfect foods*. She uses this term for products that stray from perfect standards not on the basis of main defining product aspects (quality, safety) but on such peripheral product aspects as shape or date labeling. De Hooge’s interview studies reveal that effective marketing can tweak producer and consumer willingness to produce, sell, or purchase imperfect foods. She sees promising venues especially for attempts to frame flaws as a plus—as hallmarks of authenticity, for instance, or of uniqueness.

Part II of this book is devoted to *imperfect sounds and systems*. Its contributors compare flaws in noise art, music, games, archives, and language models. To these and other acoustic, linguistic, and referential systems, contingencies and decay are default, not deviation. How do composers, game developers, archivists, and other system designers deal with imperfections? How do they conceptualize the nonideal? And which analytical tools help us in studying sounds and systems where these categories turn from taboo into asset?

In Chapter 5, sound historian Melle Kromhout zooms in on electronic compositions from the 1950s by influential Belgian composer Karel Goeyvaerts. Kromhout demonstrates that electronic sound technology triggered visions of sonic purity and perfection *and* confronted musicians with the physical limitations of technological mediation. His analysis reveals a paradox: if electronic media initially seemed to allow ever greater control over sound, the physical processes that occur inside a medium’s black box always entail contingencies that frustrate this control. Ultimately, however, it was exactly this impossibility to obtain perfect sonic control

⁴² In employing the notion of dirt aesthetics, Steinholt was inspired by the concept of *dirt[y] media* as introduced by Caleb Kelly in a lecture “Dirt[y] Media” at Goldsmith’s College, April 17, 2015, <https://www.gold.ac.uk/calendar/?id=8528>, accessed March 23, 2020.

that inspired Goeysvaerts and others to embrace chance as resource for sonic exploration.

In Chapter 6, Caleb Kelly investigates instruments quite unlike the carefully perfected instruments that audiences typically expect. The traditional violin, for example, is built to exacting craft standards; the violinist diligently rehearses until they can play a piece precisely as the composer wants, without error. Contrary to these and other traditions of perfection, the Australian, (South and North) American, and European experimental instrument builders and performers whose work Kelly studies defy faultlessness. Their instruments—handmade, cracked, and structurally rickety—are built to allow for contingent, unexpected outcomes. Kelly unravels the logic behind these, as he calls them, sonic *imperfection strategies*.

The Dutch video game *GlitchHiker* (2011) was programmed to expire; it is now no longer playable. In Chapter 7, Jakko Kemper examines how its makers used a glitch aesthetics that more than one expert frames as “imperfect.” By linking *GlitchHiker*’s glitch-based accent on finitude and fragility to Hägglund’s notion of *chronolibido* (introduced above) and to scholarship on repair, Kemper reveals how the game fostered a sense of care and empathy in its audience.

GlitchHiker’s imperfection- and finitude-oriented ethos, Kemper concludes, is really a plea for sustainable modes of relating to technology, and a critique on Silicon Valley’s commercial philosophy of frictionless design.

If Kromhout, Kelly, and Kemper deal with visual-acoustic systems, the last two chapters in Part II ask: what role can imperfections play in archival and linguistic systems? Literary historian Ernst van Alphen takes us to a pitch-dark archive—that of the Holocaust. In a comparative reading of Dutch and French on- and offline Holocaust exhibitions and (art) books, Van Alphen points to the *functional imperfections* of memorial lists. These lists are frequently messy; they lack the perfect information that archival systems promise; and their compilers continually have to remove or add names. Van Alphen endorses rather than solves this archival failure. He also endorses another, more fundamental, type of archival imperfection. Over time, the referentiality that legitimizes the lists’ productiveness vanishes. Van Alphen pleads for welcoming this *referential imperfection*: it gives a new function to memorials that otherwise become obsolete.

In Chapter 10, Tingting Hui revisits a biblical drama. The Tower of Babel is traditionally seen as a traumatic disunion of humans from the perfect language of God. In Western readings of the Babel story—which inspired linguists, philosophers, and artists to search for a primal divine language—multilingualism and translation are unwanted results of the tower’s fall. Hui studies Chinese artist Xu Bing’s more positive take on the tale. Xu’s

installations prompt viewers to ponder questions like: What is a perfect language? What is perfect language use? In Hui's view, Xu probes the idea of an *imperfect language* at two levels: he shuns views of language as perfect communication tool *and* ideals of perfect language users.

In our final book section, four authors analyze *imperfect selves*. In Grant's words, "ideas about perfection and about the self are closely bound up with one another": the sense of an autonomous self "develops in the gap between people's actual imperfections and the ideals to which they aspire."⁴³ Which strategies do we employ in mediating the breach between personal shortcomings and ideal standards—with photos, fashion, or the stories we tell about ourselves, our bodies, and our homes? How do writers and designers critique classic norms of perfect, pure selves? And which problems arise when ideals of a perfect self are projected on other animals than humans?

Our inquiry into imperfection and selfhood starts with a study of selfies by Patricia Pisters. As she demonstrates, the habit of mediating and picturing selves is age-old, but the *cruel perfectionism* that resonates in selfie practices (and that I discussed earlier in this introduction) is unique for the context of present-day capitalism. Pisters uses findings in cognitive neuroscience and critical feminist thinking to theorize the selfie as *pharmakon*—that is, as both a poison (which spawns distorted self-images and obsessive compulsive behavior) and remedy (which is conducive to healthy rather than perfectionist self-perceptions) for our quest to know our selves.

Chapter 11 is an essay on body normativity by Linor Goralik. She explores such face-distorting wearables as Li's *Perfectly Imperfect* mouthpieces (for a photo of the jewels, see Chapter 11). In Goralik's view, their wearers cross what she calls the *third line of body control*. During socialization, she argues, children learn to control, respectively, bowel movements and urination (body-control line one), gestures and poses (two), and facial impressions (three). By perfecting these skills, individuals perfect the crucial art of performing emotions, so as to communicate thoughts, feelings, and gender or class parameters. Wearers of face-distorting art, as we saw earlier, lose perfect facial control, but at the same time, they pass this control to inanimate objects.

Loss of control is also central to the trauma of exile. In Chapter 12, Domnica Radulescu pairs research to personal testimony to study the question: how do exile experiences transform into artistic products? Her study of drama and literature by exile artists from Eastern Europe, herself included, demonstrates that traumatic experiences can spark innovative aesthetics of loss. But

⁴³ Grant, *Imperfection*, 1 and 5.

Radulescu warns against idealizing the pain of migration and poverty, and against appropriating cultural production by Roma minorities in particular. Instead, she flags the importance of personal stories in the creation of survival strategies and *imperfect spaces of belonging*.

If Radulescu unravels the nexus between imperfection and belonging, our last chapter interrogates the relationship between imperfection and love. Oskar Verkaaik juxtaposes Dutch strivings to create perfect dairy cows and efforts to preserve “imperfect” breeds. He examines praise for the so-called Polder Panda—a local cow breed whose productivity ranks as substandard—within debates on sustainable farming. Critics of rural capitalism say that the dairy farm infrastructure favors cows that are alienated from their original biology, whereas the Polder Panda is imperfect in terms of milk output but more in tune with its environment. Verkaaik unpacks the historical roots of the debate. He demonstrates that, throughout cattle breeding history, we witness recurring regimes of perfection *and* praise for “imperfect” cows in terms of admiration and love.

In the epilogue, curator Joanna van der Zanden examines and compares the languages of imperfection that meet and intersect in the different chapters.

Conclusion

Our work offers a valuable step but not, of course, a final word in the study of imperfections. With case studies from China, Peru, the United States, Russia, Rumania, Germany, and other locations, we offer a broad empirical gaze; but a yet more inclusive research scope—one that includes, say, Zambian or other African cases—is bound to nuance our findings. The same is true for disciplinary width. We crafted a broad disciplinary menu; but in future research, our insights could be thickened with the conclusions that immunologists, legal scholars, and other experts have drawn in studies that valorize the flawed and imperfect.⁴⁴

In spite of this need for further inquiry, our authors expand existing scholarship in two important ways. One: in combining a plethora of transdisciplinary practices, they broaden the empirical horizon of existing, mostly monodisciplinary studies of imperfections. Two: they offer a useful theoretical tool kit for students and scholars in cultural studies, psychology,

⁴⁴ See, for instance, Alberto Mantovani, “Reflections on Immunological Nomenclature: In Praise of Imperfection,” *Nature Immunology* 17, no. 3 (2016): 215–16; and Sanford Levinson (ed.), *Responding to Imperfection: The Theory and Practice of Constitutional Amendment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

bioengineering, and the other domains in which imperfection theorizing quickly gains critical mass.

With this introduction, I opened the floor by introducing imperfection studies as a field of scholarly inquiry; by sharing our take on imperfections in this book; and by mapping our authors' main theses. I hope that their efforts help readers to historically contextualize and understand the pervasive present-day interest in imperfections.

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