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Sublime Imperfections

Annotated Reading List

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Sublime Imperfections

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As advanced digital, media, and production technologies increasingly allow us to perfect everyday life, a logic and aesthetics of imperfection thrive across multiple social domains. In fields as varying as design, architecture, literature, (audio-)visual arts, genetics, marketing, psychology, and spatial planning, experts and practitioners today emphatically glorify the non-perfected. They project varying roles and functions onto the imperfect across different domains: for designers of purportedly rickety-looking furniture, the non-perfected signals a craft-based authenticity in hi-tech times; for glitch composers, digital imperfections guarantee humanness in an era of machine-led production; for authors of love-your-imperfections manuals, tolerating flaws equals mental wellbeing in hypermediatized times. The imperfect's manifold advocates harbour a shared credo, however: they envision imperfection as asset rather than taboo in the face of digitisation, mediation, and other drastic social shifts.

In the [Sublime Imperfections](#) research project, two PhD students and I use new readings of 'the sublime' to theorize the present-day lure and logic of the imperfect. Underpinning this logic, so we argue, is a present-day preoccupation with the sublime. We build on assessments of our times as an era of 'digital sublime' (Vincent Mosco), 'media sublime' (Robert Fink), and other studies that ask us to reconsider the category of the sublime in the twenty-first century. And we agree with philosophers and cultural analysts like Emily Brady, Cornelia Klinger, and Luke White that, in our age of economic and ecological crises, digitisation, and other radical social and technological transitions, the sublime is all but obsolete. Even if the average glitch music fan or 'love-your-imperfection' book reader does not use the word sublime, they do utilise such notions as 'vast,' 'awe-inspiring beauty,' or 'the uncontrollable' to make sense of our relationship to contemporary life and to nature. In other words, they revisit and revise ingredients from the classic discourse of the sublime.

We critically assess the present-day infatuation with the sublime and the imperfect with the aim to understand where this infatuation comes from, and how we can use it in times of economic and ecological crises. In this reading list, I share thoughts on scholars and journalists from which the Sublime Imperfections project takes its inspiration. The authors of the texts below ponder the nexus between the imperfect and the sublime, they rethink repair and breakdown, they critically interrogate and historically contextualize imperfection and ruin fetishism, and they ask why 'getting it wrong' is the new right in design. Together, they can help us understand how the contemporary infatuation with imperfection works and what creative professionals across different disciplines seek in the non-polished.

The Glitch Moment(um)

Glitches galore in this beautifully designed and densely theorized study of glitch art, noise artefacts, and other present-day 'fingerprints of imperfection' and of the complex nexus between imperfection, art, and the sublime.



Rosa Menkman

Cracked Media: The Sound of Malfunction

More glitches, plus cracks, breaks, and other sounds of malfunction. In *Cracked Media*, Caleb Kelly develops a level-headed, sophisticated argument on ‘deliberate utilization[s] of the normally undesirable’ in productive and artistic creation from the mid-twentieth century onward.

Beauty and the East

Why do we believe that some world regions are more imperfect than others? And why do we fetishize foreign rags and ravages? In this wonderfully raging analysis, Jamie Rann ponders ‘the marriage of trendy, post-industrial “ruin porn” with the on-going “othering” of Russia and Eastern Europe.’



Sports hall, Russia. Image: Rebecca Bathory

in *Soviet Ghosts*

The Triumph of Imperfection: The Silver Age of Sociocultural Moderation in Europe, 1815–1848

Creative professionals may turn to imperfection as gateway to the good today, but the concept has been instrumental to intellectuals long before now. Virgil Nemoianu studies imperfection rhetoric as a tool that 'moderates' pressing social concerns in this rich study of Romantic-era Western and Central European fiction and non-fiction.

Why Getting It Wrong Is the Future of Design

As light as it is lush, this Wired article unpacks Wrong Theory, 'designerly "fuck you's" and their aims, aesthetics, and antecedents'.

The Mistakist Declaration

A cult classic among imperfection adepts in especially film and film theory, this short manifesto of mistakism by film director Harmony Korine.

Repair Manifesto

In this manifesto, curator and creative director Joanna van der Zanden and designer Gabriele Oropallo's message is clear: products should live longer, DIY objects survive fashion, even a plastic bag can be repaired – and, no, repairing has nothing to do with recession.

Rethinking Repair

Tad coquettish, but nuanced and productive, this thought experiment in 'broken world thinking'. 'What happens,' Steven Jackson asks, 'when we take erosion, breakdown, and decay, rather than novelty, growth, and progress, as our starting points in thinking through nature, use, and the effects of information technology and new media?'



Burtynsky, Shipbreaking #4

The Stones of Venice

No theory of imperfection is complete without a reference to good old John Ruskin. To understand why and when we started framing the imperfect as a guarantee for humanness, as aesthetic merit, and as a route to the sublime, you have to revisit his book *The Stones of Venice*.

[Ellen Rутten](#)