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## The Role of Imperfection in Everyday Aesthetics

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## The Role of Imperfection in Everyday Aesthetics

Yuriko Saito

### Abstract

The notions of perfection and imperfection do not have the same prominent presence they once occupied in earlier aesthetics discourse. However, they still play an important role as criteria for aesthetic judgments today in our everyday life. The wide-spread and easily accepted aesthetic appeal of objects with perfection tends to overshadow the potential aesthetic value of imperfect objects that are considered to be defective or deficient. This not only impoverishes our aesthetic lives but also leads to some serious environmental and social consequences. I first argue for the need to cultivate an aesthetic sensibility to appreciate imperfection in our everyday experience. However, I also argue that such an aesthetic sensibility should not be applied indiscriminately. As newly emerging negative aesthetics indicates, in some cases it is critically important to maintain the negative assessment of imperfection, as it may indicate a need for corrective actions.

### Key Words

everyday aesthetics, imperfection, negative aesthetics, perfection, the picturesque, *wabi* aesthetics

### 1. Introduction

The notions of perfection and imperfection frequently appear in eighteenth-century European aesthetic theories. Writers ranging from Joseph Addison and Francis Hutcheson to Joshua Reynolds and Arthur Schopenhauer address the role that these concepts play in aesthetics, and Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant dedicate whole sections of their influential works to arguments that perfection is not a cause of beauty.<sup>[1]</sup> Sometimes the discussion revolves around the aesthetic value or disvalue of deformed creatures, such as "a monster," "imperfections of nature," and "accidental blemishes and excrescences."<sup>[2]</sup> Other times artifacts are judged by the criteria of perfection/imperfection based upon their success or failure in fulfilling their functions. Finally, the grand narrative of degeneration of perfection into imperfection underlies Thomas Burnett's *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1681-9), which created a controversy in its time. According to Burnett's theory, the earth, originally a perfectly smooth and beautifully proportioned "Mundane Egg," was subsequently ruined by the Deluge, caused by humanity's sin, that created mountains, valleys, and other distortions, warts, and blemishes that destroyed the once beautiful surfaces.<sup>[3]</sup>

It appears that in today's aesthetics discourse we don't have the same kind of lively discussion surrounding the notions of perfection and imperfection, possibly with the exception of music.<sup>[4]</sup> However, as I shall argue in this paper, the aesthetics of perfection and imperfection govern various aspects of our everyday life, ranging from green lawns and perfectly-shaped fruits and vegetables to fast fashion and the sculpted human body. As such, it is still a worthwhile subject matter to explore, particularly because, as with other matters in everyday aesthetics, our aesthetic judgments based upon perfection and imperfection almost invariably have consequences that affect the quality of life, the social and political climate of a society, and the state of the world.

I will limit my discussion to material objects, although the aesthetics of perfection and imperfection can be applied to non-material entities like music, systems, and ideas. Furthermore, for the purpose of my discussion here, I am going to suppose that perfection is generally considered aesthetically positive and that anything falling short of perfection is aesthetically inferior or downright negative. For brevity's sake, I shall call this aesthetically favorable view of perfection 'perfectionism.' This supposition is challenged by much of eighteenth-century European aesthetics and also by Japanese *wabi* aesthetics, both of which inform my subsequent discussion.

I am also going to work with the following two common narratives of perfectionism. One invokes a temporal framework by setting an optimal or prime state of an object when it is considered perfect, after which it deteriorates or declines due to weathering, aging, wear and tear, or destruction. If the object is a manufactured item, the optimal state is usually when it is brand new, except for those objects that need to be broken in or seasoned, such as carpenter's tools. If the object is a living entity, the optimal state is when it is flourishing, such as flowers in full bloom and humans as adults before middle age sets in.

The other narrative is atemporal and based upon the norm for perfection of kind. For example, a deformed body of a living creature, including and especially humans, is deemed imperfect. An artifact that fails to fulfill its design, perhaps because of a mishap in the manufacturing process, will be considered imperfect. Such factory rejects are often sold at a discount with a tag specifying "slight imperfections."

In what follows, I will first explore some negative consequences of perfectionism and argue for developing an aesthetic capacity for appreciating imperfection, which I shall call imperfectionism. However, in the second part, I will argue against indiscriminate imperfectionism.

## 2. Aesthetic argument for imperfectionism

### 2.1. Sensuous qualities

Perfectionism impoverishes our aesthetic lives because it limits the range of sensuous qualities for appreciation. Imperfect objects are usually characterized by irregularity, disorder, complexity, and rough surfaces. Appreciation of imperfection is part of the eighteenth-century British notion of the picturesque, most prominently exemplified by architectural ruins. William Gilpin, for example, acknowledges the beauty and elegance of Palladian architecture with its symmetry and orderly design, but recommends that "should we wish to give it picturesque beauty, we must use the mallet instead of the chisel, we must beat down one half of it, deface the other, and throw the mutilated members around in heaps. In short, from a smooth building we must turn it into a rough ruin."<sup>[5]</sup> The aesthetics of ruins requires a sophisticated aesthetic sensibility that appreciates the complex, irregular, and asymmetrical shape, the interplay of interior and exterior spaces, and rough surfaces caused by destruction, weathering, and plants growing in crevices.

The same aesthetics applies to gardens. Alexander Pope criticizes the symmetry and order of a formal garden because one half is repeated by the other half and "no pleasing Intricacies intervene, No artful Wilderness to perplex the Scene."<sup>[6]</sup> In the same spirit, Richard Payne Knight, another picturesque advocate, praises gardens that are overgrown with ivy, moss, and weeds.<sup>[7]</sup>

Another well-known example of imperfectionism is Japanese *wabi* aesthetics, established with the tea ceremony in the sixteenth century. Initially introduced as an alternative to the prevailing taste for opulence and luxury, *wabi* aesthetics also celebrates irregularity, rough surface, asymmetry, and defects in tea bowls, other implements, and tea huts. These qualities often appear in the aging process or result from happenstance during the creative process, such as an unexpected run of glaze or adherence of ashes and bits of straw on the pottery surface. At other times, these effects are deliberately brought about by a destructive act of a tea master, such as breaking one handle of a vase.<sup>[8]</sup>

Today, many artists' works and writings are full of detailed depictions and descriptions of the beauty of imperfection caused by unevenness, accident, or wear and tear. For example, Aaron Siskind's close-up photographs of the façade of dilapidated houses and streets call attention to a rich lode of aesthetic gems. The complexity of the surface engages a more involved and layered visual experience.<sup>[9]</sup> A sensibility that is sharpened this way will enable us to develop an "eye for peeling paint," according to one writer.<sup>[10]</sup> Furthermore, not surprisingly, many artists working with textile, ceramics, and metal also express similar praise of imperfections, defects, signs of repair, and the like, and create their artworks accordingly.<sup>[11]</sup>

For quite some time, Americans have been obsessed with creating a perfect lawn, which is a velvety smooth green carpet bordered by well-manicured bushes. One book on this American obsession is subtitled, "the Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Lawn."<sup>[12]</sup> In contrast, gardens consisting of wildflowers and community gardens growing vegetables in urban areas often arouse objections for their messy, disorderly, and unkempt appearance. The monoculture of the green lawn is considered aesthetically superior to the profusion of colors, shapes, and textures provided by the mixture of wildflowers and vegetable and fruit plants in those alternative gardens. In contrast, Piet Oudolf, the Dutch designer of New York City's Highline and Chicago Millennium Park's Lurie Garden, articulates how these gardens offer a new landscape aesthetic: "I think it's the journey in your life to find out what real beauty is, of course, but also discover beauty in things that are at first sight not beautiful."<sup>[13]</sup> Thus, purely on the sensuous level, denying the aesthetic value of imperfection considerably limits one's aesthetic palette.

### 2.2 Imagination

Imperfectionism also enriches imagination. Joseph Addison characterizes our aesthetic experience as "the pleasures of the imagination," and identifies the great, the uncommon, and the beautiful as the sources of such pleasures. Among them, the uncommon stimulates our mind, and "it is this that bestows charms on a monster and makes even the imperfections of nature to please us."<sup>[14]</sup> Furthermore, he claims it is the imagination that "makes the most rude, uncultivated parts of nature administer to his pleasures" and helps him discover "a multitude of charms that conceal themselves from the generality of mankind."<sup>[15]</sup> Richard Payne Knight also claims that "as all the pleasures of intellect arise from the association of ideas, the more the materials of association are multiplied, the more will the sphere of these pleasures be enlarged."<sup>[16]</sup>

Specifically, Addison complains that the "neatness and elegancy" of English

(formal) gardens are “not so entertaining to the fancy” because “the imagination immediately runs them over and requires something else to gratify her.”<sup>[17]</sup> For the same reason, Immanuel Kant prefers the free beauties of nature to an orderly garden because a thing “with which imagination can play in an unstudied and purposive manner is always new to us, and one does not get tired of looking at it.”<sup>[18]</sup> Ruins again serve as the prime example of imperfect beauty. The imagination becomes engaged as we contemplate their original state, the cause of transformation, and the parallel transience of human life.

Activation of imagination also informs imperfectionism advocated by Yoshida Kenkō, a retired Buddhist monk in medieval Japan (1283-1350). Whether regarding the cherry blossoms or the moon, he celebrates the less-than-the-optimal state of these objects, including their complete invisibility. He declares “how much more evocative and pleasing it is to think about the spring without stirring from the house, to dream of the moonlit night though we remain in our room!”<sup>[19]</sup> The same point is made by Kamo no Chōmei, another medieval Japanese writer (1153-1216): “The limitless vista created in imagination far surpasses anything one can see more clearly.”<sup>[20]</sup> For the same reason, Sen no Rikyū (1522-1591), the tea master who established *wabi* tea, criticizes those who lament a landscape devoid of flowers and colorful foliage because they “are merely capable of taking pleasure in the colorful sights which appear to their physical eyes alone.”<sup>[21]</sup> Finally, Tanizaki Junichirō, a noted twentieth-century writer, states that he loves “things that bear the marks of grime, soot, and weather, and we love the colors and the sheen *that call to mind the past that made them*,” in particular “a polish that comes of being touched over and over again, a sheen produced by the oils that naturally permeate an object over long years of handling.”<sup>[22]</sup>

In short, if beauty consists only of a perfectly maintained Palladian architecture, cherry blossoms at the height of their bloom, an unimpeded view of the moon, and the monoculture of a green lawn, it makes for a rather impoverished aesthetic life. Aesthetically appreciating imperfection, incompleteness, and defects may be more challenging and taxing. However, developing such aesthetic capacity encourages open-mindedness and receptivity in appreciating something on its own terms while enhancing the power of imagination. Rather than imposing a predetermined idea of what beauty has to be, we are letting the object in various forms speak to us, even if at first it may defy our usual expectations of beauty. Thus, strictly from the aesthetic point of view, imperfectionism is beneficial.

### 3. Moral/existential argument for imperfectionism

This open-mindedness underlying imperfectionism also has a moral dimension. One of the necessary ingredients of our moral life is that we do not impose our ideas on others but rather become a good listener and respect the other’s reality, dignity, and integrity. As such, the capacity to appreciate diverse kinds of beauty shares the same attitude of humility and respect required in our moral life.

This willingness to relinquish the urge to exert control over others also leads to a certain attitude toward life. One of the greatest challenges to humanity is the limitation of human control over things. Transience of material objects in this world, including our own bodies, is the law of nature from which nothing can escape. Furthermore, despite the scientific and technological advancement in the modern world, things happen beyond our control.

In the aesthetic sphere, this urge to create and keep a timeless ideal is most prominent among architects. As Rumiko Handa documents, architects tend to exert what she calls “authorial authority” that prohibits any modifications once the building is completed.<sup>[23]</sup> At the time of completion, the structure is deemed perfect, and any change, whether intentionally inflicted or naturally developed, is considered to be deterioration, a fall from grace. Some architects even dictate the activities and objects used within their designed space, regardless of the life style and wishes of the residents or users. For example, Frank Lloyd Wright was notorious for designing everything within the space of his buildings, including furniture and even plates, to create an overall harmony. In Philip Johnson’s Glass House, “even table-top bric-a-brac are discretely marked with indications of their correct location,” making the space “unlivable as a domestic space,” according to one critic.<sup>[24]</sup> Architects’ attempts to freeze the building and things in it at the time of completion reflect an unrealistic expectation that defies the reality of the life world.

Instead of the ultimately vain effort to fight against transience and other challenges of this world, the Japanese aesthetic tradition of imperfectionism offers a strategy for accepting them. By finding beauty in the ephemerality of life, such as falling cherry blossoms and signs of aging, we reconcile ourselves to our own impermanence through aestheticization. *Wabi* aesthetics, in particular, offers a proactive affirmation of transience and the limitation of human control over things rather than the more passive resignation prominently expressed in many Heian period (794-1185) court poems that lament the transience of youth, beauty, love, and wealth.

Today we are becoming increasingly aware of and concerned with the legacy of the Enlightenment agenda that equates good life with a life free

from the constraints of nature. We question the wonders of the Baconian utopia detailed in *New Atlantis* that can be taken as a blue print for technological advancement, most of which has been accomplished: airplane, submarine, genetic engineering, and holography, to name a few. Particularly in light of the environmental harm caused by humanity's effort to control and utilize nature, we are pressed with a paradigm change that would view our inability to control nature and the march of time as an opportunity to work with it or to recognize and accept the limitation of human agency. The aesthetics of imperfectionism offers one strategy for developing a capacity to appreciate what is otherwise considered a deficiency and inadequacy.

#### 4. Environmental, social, and political arguments for imperfectionism

So far I have offered aesthetic, moral, and existential arguments for imperfectionism. Let me add another layer of considerations that particularly affect our lives today.

First, there are a number of negative environmental consequences of perfectionism. Let us go back to the ideal of residential gardens in the United States. Their creation and maintenance incur a considerable environmental cost: heavy use of water, chemicals like fertilizer, herbicide, fungicide, and insecticide, and fuel for lawn-care machinery. Such landscaping is hostile to living creatures, such as birds and butterflies, and it poses risks to human health and safety.

The effect of perfectionist aesthetics reaches the supermarket shelves as well. The "apparent perfection" of "strangely uniform and incredibly shiny red tomatoes and picture-perfect peaches" results from discarding deformed and ugly fruits and vegetables, such as two-legged carrots, cucumbers that are too curvy, and green peppers with an extra lump.<sup>[25]</sup> According to one estimate, the process of weeding out imperfect fruits and vegetables by both farmers and supermarkets wastes one third of the total fresh produce grown in the United States.

Another consequence of perfectionist aesthetics is the accelerated pace of the perceived obsolescence of manufactured goods, ranging from clothing to hi-tech gadgets, that encourages fast fashion. This economic system entices consumers continually to seek more fashionable, stylish, and up-to-date goods. Furthermore, when an object starts showing signs of wear and tear, even if the object still functions well, we are compelled to discard it and purchase a new one. Quoting a shopper, one writer points out that, in today's economy, "aesthetics, whether people admit it or not, is why you buy something."<sup>[26]</sup> This consumer action fueled by perfectionist aesthetics is responsible for resource depletion, environmental degradation, mounting garbage, not to mention human rights violation in those developing nations where many goods are manufactured and where developed nations' garbage gets dumped.

Imperfectionist aesthetics is helpful in responding to these environmental consequences of perfectionism. As mentioned before, wildflower gardens and community gardens establish a different landscape aesthetic guided by their environmental stewardship and community spirit. An art project termed Edible Estates, which replaces a front yard with vegetable gardens and community gardens where area residents grow fruits and vegetables, develops imperfectionist aesthetics based upon fecundity, liveliness, vibrancy, and communal pride and neighborliness.<sup>[27]</sup>

As for imperfectly shaped fresh produce, one French supermarket chain launched a successful campaign extolling the virtue of "Inglorious Fruits and Vegetables," followed by an American supermarket chain's campaign for "Produce with Personality." Both campaigns promote imperfectionist aesthetics by featuring deformed fruits and vegetables, with strategic placement and favorable lighting to showcase their unique beauty. They can even receive an artistic treatment, such as Uli Westphal's photographic project, *Mutatoes*.<sup>[28]</sup>

In the matter of consumer goods, there has been a growing interest in repair. Under perfectionism, repair has a negative connotation because it is associated with damage. However, in the apparel industry, which is notorious for promoting fast fashion, some designers are starting to incorporate signs and potentials for repair in their designs. They often derive inspirations from the Japanese *boro* (rag), and quilts that were originally created in places like the American South, such as Gee's Bend, by the slave women who had to make do with limited resources. Both are now widely exhibited in art museums. In the field of ceramics, there is a growing interest in the traditional Japanese art of *kintsugi* (repair with gold) that not only repairs damaged objects but also provides aesthetically appealing ornamental elements.

Another set of problematic consequences of perfectionism concerns the human body. There are many health issues involved in various efforts to achieve an ideal physique, such as anorexia, extreme dieting, cosmetic surgery, use of steroids, and tanning booths, among others. The demand on a female fashion model to be tall and skinny drove one French model to die from malnutrition, prompting the French government to enact a law prohibiting fashion companies from using a model whose body mass index

is below a certain level.

Furthermore, humans suffer from various forms of discrimination based upon physical appearance. Deborah Rhode compiled compelling evidence that obesity, deformity, and unattractive facial features work against employment, acceptance to certain groups, and interpersonal relationships, not only damaging one's self-esteem and quality of life but also adding another kind of injustice in today's society, already laden with various forms of injustice and discrimination.<sup>[29]</sup>

In response, there is a growing movement to include various body types and differently abled bodies as dancers, stage performers, and fashion models to promote public awareness and respect for diverse types of bodies. One example is the Swiss campaign called, "Because Who Is Perfect?," that featured five imperfect bodies for mannequins.<sup>[30]</sup> This kind of inclusiveness and celebration of diversity is a welcome antidote to perfectionism regarding the human body because its extreme version can imply, however inadvertently, a kind of aesthetic white supremacism.

## 5. Arguments against indiscriminate imperfectionism

So far I have been advocating imperfectionist aesthetics. But my promotion of imperfectionism does not entail a rejection of perfect beauty. Neither do I share some imperfectionist advocates' elevation of imperfection above perfection. For example, the picturesque advocates' praise for imperfection in architecture, gardens, other artifacts, and even human appearance is always accompanied by their criticism of perfection. Yoshida Kenkō also claims that "branches about to blossom or gardens strewn with faded flowers are *worthier* of our admiration" and "only an exceptionally insensitive man" would find beauty only in flowers in full bloom.<sup>[31]</sup> Furthermore, "it is *typical* of the *unintelligent* man to insist on assembling complete sets of everything. Imperfect sets are better."<sup>[32]</sup> *Wabi* aesthetics also elevates the aesthetic value of defective objects over perfect beauty. Tanizaki's imperfectionism cited in Section 2.2 is largely motivated by his dissatisfaction with Japan's rapid Westernization, but it is clear that imperfectionism is also his aesthetic preference.

The imperfectionists' tendency to elevate imperfection above perfection is understandable, given that perfectionism is more prevalent and imperfectionism is aesthetically more challenging and requires a more sophisticated and cultured sensibility and imagination. However, I now offer aesthetic and social/political considerations against the indiscriminate promotion of imperfectionism.

### 5.1. Co-existence of perfectionism and imperfectionism

First, if one of the reasons to support imperfectionism is to promote inclusive and multi-faceted aesthetics, perfectionist aesthetics should retain a place in aesthetic discourse. After all, even those who advocate imperfect beauty caused by damage, wear and tear, and the effects of aging would most likely appreciate the perfectly smooth and lustrous appearance of a lacquerware piece when it is finished by the craftsman, an apple with a perfectly round shape, and the smooth skin of a youthful body. Different aesthetic appeals of a lacquerware with a faded surface, an apple with an asymmetrical shape, and the wrinkles marking the aged face do not negate the respective beauty of perfection.

Second, even those who advocate imperfectionism often point out the complementarity of perfection and imperfection. For example, it is instructive that the picturesque movement appeared during the eighteenth century in Britain, when the land was being rapidly marked by the checkerboard-patterned hedgerows as a result of the enclosure movement. The geometrical monotony of enclosed fields is best broken by landscaping that utilizes picturesque aesthetics. Conversely, William Marsden praises the regularity and order of a pepper garden after walking through a jungle in Sumatra, while admitting that "a pepper garden cultivated in England would not ... be considered as an object of extraordinary beauty; and would be particularly found fault with for its uniformity."<sup>[33]</sup>

It is also instructive that the advocates of *wabi* aesthetics often point out the aesthetic effect created by a contrast between perfection and imperfection. For example, tea master Murata Shukō (d. 1502) illustrates this contrast by a poem: "A prize horse looks best hitched to a thatched hut."<sup>[34]</sup> While the *wabi* tea champions the aesthetics of imperfection embodied in an irregularly shaped tea bowl, a cracked vase, and a crooked wooden pillar for a *tokonoma* alcove, all of these irregular and misshapen objects are placed against the geometrical pattern of *tatami* mats. If everything, including the floor, in the tea hut is irregular and misshapen, most likely the overall effect would be more grotesque than the *wabi* appeal. On the other hand, if a perfectionist aesthetic pervades everything, as in Philip Johnson's Glass House, the effect will most likely be too stiff and rigid, not allowing much free play of the imagination. Thus, the ideal aesthetics can be interpreted as a judicious juxtaposition of perfection and imperfection, rather than an indiscriminate promotion of everything perfect or everything imperfect.

### 5.2. Negative aesthetics

Imperfectionist aesthetics turns what is commonly regarded as aesthetically

negative into aesthetically positive. This follows a rather typical trajectory of aesthetics discourse, such as the contribution made by ugliness to the overall value of a work of art and the positive aesthetic value accorded to unattractive objects of nature. In comparison, there has not been sufficient attention to those that are aesthetically negative with no redeeming aesthetic value. The problem is particularly acute in everyday life. I don't think anybody would believe that we live in an aesthetic utopia with no need for improvement. Unfortunately, aesthetically negative objects, environments, and situations exist in today's world and in our lives.

Katya Mandoki devotes a considerable portion of her book, *Everyday Aesthetics*, to negative aesthetic qualities that permeate our daily lives with what she calls aesthetic poisoning, such as "the disgusting, the obscene, the coarse, the insignificant, the banal, the ugly, the sordid."<sup>[35]</sup> Arnold Berleant also calls attention to occasions and environments where their sensory experience "offends, distresses, or has harmful or damaging consequences."<sup>[36]</sup> By carefully analyzing many cases that involve different relationships between the aesthetic and the moral, including pollution, commercial enterprise, political propaganda, and urban planning, he stresses the importance of developing an awareness of "aesthetic deprivation," "aesthetic harm," and "aesthetic damage."<sup>[37]</sup> Such aesthetic negativity dulls, numbs, or assaults our sensibility, stifles creativity, and compromises our well-being and quality of life. He thus calls for the need to acknowledge the existence of negative aesthetics.

Let us recall some examples of imperfection that I have discussed: peeling paint, a dilapidated house with broken windows, sidewalks strewn with litter and weeds growing in the crevices, and tattered clothes worn by homeless people. I previously argued in support of the imperfectionist aesthetics regarding these objects but now want to argue for the importance of developing negative aesthetic judgments regarding them. These examples of imperfection often indicate social ills and injustice, and the negative aesthetics associated with them is the best means of signaling that something is amiss and change or improvement is in order. These aesthetic manifestations communicate social problems more powerfully and effectively than things like statistics regarding the poverty rate. Our sensibility assaulted by these negative aesthetic experiences affects us immediately and viscerally, and I believe that it is important that they affect us this way.

There is something morally problematic about deriving an aesthetic pleasure from the sign of social ills suffered by others. Indeed, both picturesque aesthetics and *wabi* aesthetics were criticized for this reason. For example, Mary Wollstonecraft was critical of the picturesque estate where "every thing...is cherished but man," and "the eye...had wandered indignant from the stately palace to the pestiferous hovel."<sup>[38]</sup> John Ruskin was also critical of "the heartless 'lower picturesque' delight in 'the look that an old laborer has, not knowing that there is anything pathetic in his grey hair, and withered arms, and sunburnt breast.'"<sup>[39]</sup> In a similar vein, *wabi* aesthetics of tea became the target of pointed criticism by Dazai Shundai (1680-1747), an Edo period Confucian scholar:

Whatever tea dilettantes do is a copy of the poor and humble. It may be that the rich and noble have a reason to find pleasure in copying the poor and humble. But what should those who are, from the outset, poor and humble find pleasure in further copying the poor and humble? All that tea dilettante does is to copy everything which looks poor and shabby.<sup>[40]</sup>

Today, many instances of imperfectionist aesthetics, such as shabby chic, grunge, and the distressed look, invoke charges of elitism, classism, and dilettantism. Wearing an expensive pair of jeans sporting rips, tears, frays, patches, and faded color, essentially an imitation of a homeless person's tattered clothes, cannot but remind us of Marie Antoinette playing at being a milkmaid. The façade of shabby houses of the residents of Gee's Bend certainly offer inspirations for quilt patterns but I doubt that the residents there have a positive aesthetic appreciation toward the expression of poverty they are suffering.

Previously I suggested an existential support for imperfectionism by arguing that there is a kind of wisdom in accepting and developing a positive attitude toward difficulties in life, such as transience and lack of power and control over things. However, there are cases where imperfectionism becomes problematic. Consider the following claim by Sōtaku Jakuan, an Edo-period tea master:

Always bear in mind that *wabi* involves not regarding incapacities as incapacitating, not feeling that lacking something is deprivation, not thinking that what is not provided is deficiency. To regard incapacity as incapacitating, to feel that lack is deprivation, or to believe that not being provided for is poverty is not *wabi* but rather the spirit of a pauper.<sup>[41]</sup>

The same view is utilized to endorse the status quo of a feudal society by Ii Naosuke (1815-1860), in his *Essay on the Tea Cult as an Aid to*

#### Government:

If pleasure is not gratification accompanied by a sense of contentment, it is not real pleasure...if each individual is satisfied with his lot and is not envious, he will enjoy life because he knows contentment and will be contented because of enjoying his lot...if the art of drinking tea were widely practiced through the country...both high and low would be content with their lots, would enjoy but not grieve, and would do no wrong...the country would become peaceful and tranquil spontaneously.[42]

*Wabi* aesthetics, with its acceptance and affirmation of imperfection, can be a powerful, effective, and wise strategy for coping with life's contingencies that are beyond human control. However, when applied to societal and political situations, we must pause, for we are glad that people like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela did not subscribe to the imperfectionism advocated by *wabi* aesthetics.

Developing negative aesthetics tends to encourage an activist attitude. This is in contrast with the traditionally held characterization of aesthetic attitude that is disinterested, typically adopted by a spectator. Reversing the Kantian notion of beauty that is appreciated regardless of its actual existence, a spectator with a disinterested attitude toward aesthetically negative objects would also remain indifferent to their existence. If an interested attitude toward aesthetically positive objects implies our interest in their existence, the same attitude toward aesthetically negative objects implies our interest in their non-existence. Particularly in relation to everyday aesthetic matters, we should argue against disinterestedness. That is, the existence and creation of those objects, environments, and social interactions that affect our everyday life in an aesthetically positive way should be encouraged, while the opposite should hold for those that are aesthetically negative.

Does my argument against imperfectionism developed in this section mean that we should never derive a positive aesthetic experience from a cracked bowl, peeling paint, dilapidated house, and tattered clothes? No. As I argued in Section 2, excluding these things from the aesthetic arena will certainly impoverish our aesthetic life. Just as it is often worthwhile appreciating a representational painting without regard to its content, appreciating imperfection without regard to its origin and consequences helps sharpen our perceptual sophistication. However, when these imperfections indicate people's suffering and social injustice, I believe it is ultimately morally problematic to derive a disinterested pleasure based upon imperfectionism. The appropriate response should be to experience them as aesthetically negative and take them as a call for an action to change and improve the condition that gives rise to those imperfections.

I have presented several benefits, aesthetic or otherwise, for developing an imperfectionist aesthetics. However, I have also argued against the indiscriminate application of imperfectionist aesthetics. Particularly when it comes to everyday aesthetics, it is difficult, and also unwise, to separate aesthetic concerns from moral, social, political, environmental, and practical concerns. The aesthetic can be a strong ally in our collective effort to improve the quality of life and create a good society by promoting aesthetically positive artifacts, environments, and social interactions. However, it is equally important to keep a vigilant attitude against that which is aesthetically negative because it signals problems and calls for changes and solutions. Enrichment of our aesthetic life should not come at the cost of ignoring aesthetics' important role in the world-making project.[43]

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#### Endnotes

[1] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), Part III, Section IX: "Perfection not the cause of Beauty," p. 100. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, tr. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1974), Section 15: "The Judgment of Taste is Quite Independent of the Concept of Perfection," pp. 62-5.

[2] The first two phrases come from Joseph Addison, "Pleasures of the Imagination," (1712) in *Essays in Criticism and Literary Theory*, ed. John Loftis (Northbrook: AHM Publishing, 1975), #412, p. 143. The last one is from Joshua Reynolds, *Idler* #82 (Nov. 10, 1759), p. 166 of <https://archive.org/stream/idlerintwovolum00langgoog#page/n174/mode/2up>



[3] For Burnett Controversy, see Basil Willey's *The Eighteenth Century Background: Studies on the Idea of Nature in the Thought of the Period* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), Chap. II. The subsequent development of the aesthetics of mountains, see Marjorie Hope Nicolson's *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1963).

[4] Contemporary debates surrounding music invoking the notions of perfection and imperfection often revolve around jazz and recording vs. live performance.

[5] William Gilpin, *Three Essays on picturesque beauty; on picturesque travel; and on sketching landscape: to which is added a poem, on landscape painting* (1792) at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ecco/004863369.0001.0001.4?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>, p. 7.

[6] Alexander Pope, "An Epistle to Lord Burlington" (1731), in *The Genius of the Place: the English Landscape Garden 1620-1820*, eds. John Dixon Hunt and Peter Willis (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990), p. 213.

[7] See Richard Payne Knight's *The Landscape, A Didactic Poem* (1794), in Hunt and Willis, pp. 342-8.

[8] I explored this subject in "The Japanese Aesthetics of Imperfection and Insufficiency," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 55,4 (Fall 1997): 377-85.

[9] See visual images at <http://ccp-emuseum.catnet.arizona.edu/view/objects/asimages/search@/32/title-asc?t:state:flow=9ab38fb9-b0cd-4712-9f39-0432fe8476e0>.

[10] Gay Leonhardt, "An Eye for Peeling Paint," *Landscape*, 28,2 (1985): 23-5.

[11] See, for example, Kiff Slemmons, "On Imperfection," *Metalsmith*, 28, 1 (2008), 26-29; Allen S. Weiss, "The Toilet Bowl and the Tea Bowl," *ArtUS*, 27 (2009), 80-85; Allen S. Weiss, "Cracks," *ArtUS*, 29 (2010), 62-67; Lois Martin, "Patina of Cloth," *Surface Design Journal*, 28, 4 (Summer 2004), 16-21.

[12] Ted Steinberg, *American Green: The Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Lawn* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007). See also Virginia Scott Jenkins, *The Lawn: A History of an American Obsession* (Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994) and Georges Teyssot, "The American Green: Surface of Everyday Life," in *The American Lawn*, ed. Georges Teyssot (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), pp. 1-39.

[13] *Fall, Winter, Spring, Summer, Fall*, Thomas Piper, dir. (2014) at YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eb8LoJyuIC8>.

[14] Addison, "Pleasures," #412, p. 142.

[15] Addison, "Pleasures," #411, p. 140.

[16] Richard Payne Knight, *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (1805), in Hunt and Willis, p. 181.

[17] Addison, "Pleasures," #414, p. 151 and p. 149.

[18] Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p. 80.

[19] Kenkō Yoshida, *Essays in Idleness: The Tsurezuregusa of Kenkō*, tr. Donald Keene (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), p. 118. I retain the name order as it is published, even if it is the reverse of the Japanese order, which in this case is Yoshida (family name) Kenkō (given name).

[20] Kamo no Chōmei, *Mumyōshō*, cited by Kōshirō Haga, "The Wabi Aesthetic," in *Tea in Japan: Essays in the History of Chanoyū* eds. Paul Varley and Isao Kumakura (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), p. 204.

[21] Sōkei Nanbō, "Record of Nanbō" (Sen no Rikyū's teaching recorded by his disciple, Sōkei Nanbō), in *The Theory of Beauty in the Classical Aesthetics of Japan*, ed. and tr. Toshihiko and Toyo Izutsu (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981), p. 156-7.

[22] Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, tr. Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seidensticker (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1977), pp. 11-12, emphasis added.

[23] Rumiko Handa, *Allure of the Incomplete, Imperfect, and Impermanent: Designing and Appreciating Architecture as Nature* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2015).

[24] Kevin Melchionne, "Living in Glass Houses: Domesticity, Interior Decoration, and Environmental Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 56, 2 (1998), p. 191.

[25] Harvey Blatt, *America's Food: What You Don't Know About What You Eat* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), p. vii. The following estimate regarding food waste also comes from this work.

[26] Virginia Postrel, *The Substance of Style: How the Rise of Aesthetic Value is Remaking Commerce, Culture, and Consciousness* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), p. 8.

[27] Fritz Haeg, *Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn*, 2nd ed. (New York: Metropolis Books, 2010). The descriptions and examples of Edible Estates are available at <http://www.fritzhaeg.com/garden/initiatives/edibleestates/main.html>.

[28] See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8a4GqSaQcU>, as well as <http://www.ulivestphal.de/mutatoes/index.html>.

[29] Deborah Rhode, *The Beauty Bias: The Injustice of Appearance in Life and Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[30] See this project at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8umFV69fNg>.

[31] Kenkō, *Essays*, p. 115, emphasis added.

[32] Kenkō, *Essays*, p. 70, emphasis added.

[33] William Marsden, *The History of Sumatra* (1783) cited by Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: A History of the Modern Sensibility* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), p. 263.

[34] Cited by Haga, "The Wabi Aesthetic," p. 196.

[35] Katya Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics: Prosaics, the Play of Culture and Social Identities* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), p. 38.

[36] Arnold Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010), p. 155.

[37] Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense*, "aesthetic deprivation" and "aesthetic harm" on p. 169, and "aesthetic damage" on p. 164.

[38] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, cited by Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 166.

[39] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, cited by David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 166.

[40] Dazai Shundai, *Dokugo* (1816), cited by Hiroshi Minami, *Psychology of the Japanese People*, tr. Albert R. Ikoma (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), p. 90.

[41] Sōtaku Jakuan, *Zencharoku*, cited by Haga, "The Wabi Aesthetic," pp. 195-6.

[42] Ii Naosuke, *An Essay on the Tea Cult as an Aid to Government* (19th century), cited by Minami, *Psychology*, p. 88.

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