

INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

Autumn 2020 Edition, ISSN 2611-5166, ISBN 9788857570020, DOI 10.7413/18258630101

FORMLESS

By Gregorio Tenti

(First published November 30, 2020)

It. *Informe*; Fr. *Informe*; Germ. *Formlos*; Span. *Informe*. The notion of *formless* refers to what negates form as a principle of stable order and harmonic continuity. The concept is of utmost importance in the field of aesthetics, insofar as it indicates the vitality of finite shapes and configurations, of bordered territories of knowledge and of isolated faculties – a vitality which can be better described as an act rather than as a datum. In this notion, an ‘ontological uneasiness’ meets an energetical intonation, often binding with a particular emphasis on the role of negativity and materiality. The formless negates in principle the inadequate concept of form that excludes its material becoming; it is therefore employed to specify the morphological view through the ideas of ‘force’ and ‘difference’, as well as to open a narrow concept of art towards a non-representative dimension. The formless can be associated with the moment of both form’s destitution and form’s genesis, but also with the autonomous meaningfulness of pre-symbolic materials.

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

During the 20th century, the fortunes of the notion of formless are mainly tied to French philosophy. In the seventh volume of *Documents* (1929), Georges Bataille defines formless as “a term that serves to bring things down in the world”, to affirm that “the universe resembles nothing” (Bataille 1985: 31). The anastatic reprint of that volume, wanted by Michel Leiris in 1990, re-opened a dispute on the argument, which involved contributions such as *Le Mouvement de l’informe* by Pierre Fedida (1994), *La ressemblance informe, ou Le gai savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille* by Georges Didi-Huberman (1995), the exhibition *L’informe. Mode d’emploi* (1997) organized by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, and the 85th volume of “Littérature”. In his work on Bataille, Didi-Huberman argues that the results of the act of formal deposition must still come to figuration; it is in fact the understanding of formless that opens the possibility of any morphological approach (Didi-Huberman 1995: 195). The type of representation that can be ‘haunted’ by its negativity is a non-substantial, mobilized form, which exactly as such comes to meaningfulness and

makes an "image". To 'put something into image' (or 'into form') means here to evoke figures that carry in themselves what cannot be figured. Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois strongly reacted to these claims from a radically materialistic perspective, arguing that an "image" cannot re-absorb the formless: the disruptive act stays beyond objectivation and generates, if anything, "bad forms" as residues and not as results. Taking the words of Didi-Huberman, "the term *informe* would cover so large a realm as to no longer have any bite. This is the risk one runs in wanting to measure the formless against resemblance or unlikeness at any price, instead of being aware that 'resembles nothing' is neither to be unlike something in particular, nor to resemble something that turns out to be nothing" (Bois, Krauss 1997: 80). The formless serves then to understand art as a positive manifestation of *dissemblance*.

At the center of the debate is the question of whether a form can or cannot make the formless visible, or – in normative terms – if the formless should bind to a form. From a morphological viewpoint, the will of abolition must still result in a genetical redemption of the excess. Figures are not decomposed, but bent; representation does not dissolve, rather it is forced, perverted, as in Surrealist art. The veil of the symbolic must remain intact: it all finally comes no less than to a moral imperative (see Clair 2004). From a materialist viewpoint, instead, the formless must avoid the dialectical dynamic and must not lead to homological expression. Once the perspective centered on subjective form and representation is fully abandoned, the heterogeneous will be taken in itself as the "overflowing immanence of the negative" (Perniola 1977: 11). All this goes against the idea of art as sublimation of the artist's composition, in favor of a sort of participation in what lies beyond the symbolic order through material experimentation; therefore, it does not refer necessarily to an operation of disfigurement or deformation of a preexisting form, but rather to an act of prolongation of material rhythmicity, as in Abstract Expressionism and Informalism.

The materialist perspective as just described persists in contemporary currents of thought such as accelerationist aesthetics, speculative aesthetics and anti-humanism, where Bataille's thought meets the flavors of "weird fiction" (Land 1992, Woodard 2011). In Nietzschean and Bataillean fashion, Nick Land (2011: 153) suggests reframing art according to a "ferocious exteriority"; an idea ascribable to the framework of a "visceral empiricism" (Grant 2012), where creative expression is a recreation of nature through material experimentation and deposition of the I (Legrand 2012). A "non-standard aesthetics" (Beech 2014) as part of a larger "complicity with anonymous materials" (Negarestani 2008), perhaps as a theory of "inorganic sensibility" (Perniola 2004), is thus evoked. Fundamental to this understanding of formlessness is Deleuze's aesthetic thought, where concepts such as that of "refrain", "heterogenesis" and "assemblage" are employed to conceive the composition of a non-formal "figure" as a zone of rhythmic formation by non-recursive pulsation. To "capture forces" into new materials here means to creatively establish a germinal domain of non-resemblance (see Massumi 2011, 2019).

THE PLACE OF NEGATIVITY IN AESTHETICS

Taken as a general aesthetic notion, formlessness hints at the disruptive action (be it of an 'ideal' or of a 'real' nature) on a cosmic principle, thus echoing the most varied concepts in the history of aesthetics, such as irony (F. Schlegel), Dionysian (Nietzsche), tragic (Simmel), negative dialectics (Adorno). In a narrower

sense, formlessness is tied to brutal vitality and materiality, and can be related to the aesthetics of ugliness (Rosenkranz's "amorphous"), of decay (see Trigg 2006), of cruelty (Artaud), of chaotic forces and deformation (Deleuze 2003), of "anarchitectural" (Alliez 2016), of abjection (Kristeva 1982, see also Arya 2014), of "sublime trash" (Žižek 2000: 21-40). In Bataille's aesthetic thought, the notion of formless specifically refers to what cannot be absorbed through symbolical transposition by virtue of forces of perpetual transformation. This residue corresponds to concrete materials, rather than to an abstract principle of materiality: suffice it to browse through the pages of the magazine *Documents* – where Boiffard's photographs of body parts stand beside illustrations of Aztec human sacrifices and 1930s advertisements – to see how Bataille makes use of concrete strategies of visual *déplacements* to advance the statement that "the universe resembles nothing". The place where a form ceases to be familiar and resembling, then, is always very precise. Without leaving behind this original meaning, the Bataillean category can legitimately be extended to numerous artistic expressions, from Viennese Actionism to cave art (given Bataille's particularly limited observation of coeval artistic phenomena).

More broadly, the strategy of formlessness can be seen put to use in Theodor Adorno's reflections on informal music (1961), or in Jean-François Lyotard's theories in *Discourse, figure* (1971). Both these examples indicate the philosophical need to rethink the traditional concept of form through an understanding of form's becoming, just as they both show a certain reluctance to abandon the notion of form itself. Adorno argues that at the core of artistic expressions like "informal music" lies a fundamental paradox in creative praxis: the more a form dispenses with universality and cohesion, the more it will let universal schemes and *clichés* surface from its inner recesses; and conversely, the more a form emphasizes its own necessity, the more it acquires the contingent and the material. The attempt of breaking out of this double bind results in the necessity for a "material theory" (Adorno 1962: 282), a new problematization of the dialectical entanglement between materials and ideal composition, that truly included the shock of otherness in the formula. The purpose of "doing justice to the material" (Adorno 1962: 288) leads to the idea of an intrinsically processual form that overcomes the false alternatives between organization and spontaneity, determination and chance. Adorno's goal is to describe the terms of a genuinely experimental composition, whose result is impossible to foresee, and that takes place "through the subject" instead of going "towards the subject" (Adorno 1962: 320), but remains – at least to some extent – subjective in order to be expressive.

The relevance of the role of formlessness in a renewed understanding of form is also evident in Lyotard's aesthetic theory. Differently from the Surrealist interpretation of the unconscious as imaginative oneirism and place of the symbolic, Lyotard describes the subterranean work of desire as an "insistence", which represents the empty "thickness" and inner deferment of every figure. Expressiveness corresponds here to the figure's differential conditions of visibility: "a difference, that is, a form", states Lyotard (2011: 9). Just like Didi-Huberman in *La ressemblance informe*, Lyotard saves the form casting light on the action of its forces, on its metamorphic nature. And it is after all an ancient morphological argument, that besides a *vis centripeta* the form is constituted by a *vis centrifuga*, which makes the idea of metamorphosis «a most

dangerous gift from above» (Goethe 1995: 43). From this natural component of expenditure stems the aesthetic category of “ugliness” (as shown by Rosenkranz’s extensive use of Alexander von Humboldt’s descriptions of natural formlessness, for which see Schumann 2011). The formless seems necessary to the life of nature as factor of morphogenesis as the ugly is necessary to artistic expression – just like, in the mystic and neo-platonic tradition, the fall of the soul in the body or the dissolution of the elements in chaos coincides, through *enantiodromia*, with the beginning of life: the origin of the form is also its completion. It is in this sense that Gilbert Simondon (1960: 557) made a distinction between “disadaptation” (the loss of specific characters internal to one domain) and “degradation”, the former corresponding to the energetic condition of an increase in significance, comparable to the alchemic moment of *nigrefatio*. All these motifs are reactivated from time to time throughout the history of thought, bringing to light different aspects and developments of the same idea.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- É. Alliez, *Gordon Matta-Clark: 'Somewhere Outside the Law'*, “Journal of Visual Culture”, 15 (2016): 317-333.
- R. Arya, *Abjection and Representation: An Exploration of Abjection in Visual Arts, Film and Literature*, London-New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- T.W. Adorno, *Vers une musique informelle*, in T.W. Adorno, *Quasi una fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, London, Verso, 1962: 269-322 (orig. ed. 1961).
- G. Bataille, *Formless*, in G. Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1985 (orig. ed. 1929).
- A. Beech, *Art and its 'Science'*, in R. Mackay, L. Pendrell, J. Trafford (eds.), *Speculative Aesthetics*, Falmouth, Urbanomic, 2014: 9-19.
- Y.-A. Bois, R. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide*, New York, Zone Books, 1997 (orig. ed. 1996).
- J. Clair, *De Immundo*, Paris, Galilée, 2004.
- G. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon. The Logic of Sensation*, London-New York, Continuum, 2003 (orig. ed. 1981).
- G. Didi-Huberman, *La ressemblance informe, ou Le gai savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille*, Paris, Macula, 1995.
- P. Fédida, *Le Mouvement de l'informe*, “La Part de l'Œil”, 10 (1994): 21-27.
- J.W. Goethe, *Problems*, in J.W. Goethe, *Scientific Studies*, ed. by D.E. Miller, New York, Suhrkamp, 1995 (orig. ed. 1823).
- I.H. Grant, *The Chemical Paradigm: Interview with Iain Hamilton Grant*, “Collapse”, 7 (2012): 39-82.
- J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1982 (orig. ed. 1980).
- N. Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism*, London, Routledge, 1992.

- *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007*, ed. by R. Mackay and R. Brassier, Falmouth, Urbanomic, 2011.
- D. Legrand, *Ex-Nihilo: Forming a Body Out of Nothing*, "Collapse", 7 (2012): 499-558.
- J.-F. Lyotard, *Discours, figure*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1971; Eng. trans.: *Discours, Figure*, Minneapolis-London, University of Minnesota Press, 2011 (orig. ed. 1971).
- B. Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Current Arts*, Cambridge (Mass.), The MIT Press, 2011.
- *Architectures of the Unforeseen: Essays in the Current Arts*, Minneapolis-London, University of Minnesota Press, 2019.
- R. Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials*, Melbourne, re.press, 2008.
- M. Perniola, *Georges Bataille e il negativo*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1977.
- *The Sex-Appeal of the Inorganic*, London-New York, Continuum, 2004 (orig. ed. 2000).
- C. Schumann, *Humboldt's Dirty Nature*, "Colloquia Germanica", 44/2 (2011): 133-147.
- G. Simondon, *Forme, information, potentiels* (1960), in G. Simondon., *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*, Grenoble, Millon, 2005.
- D. Trigg, *The Aesthetics of Decay: Nothingness, Nostalgia, and the Absence of Reason*, New York, Peter Lang, 2006.
- B. Woodard, *Mad Speculation and Absolute Inhumanism: Lovecraft, Ligotti and the Weirding of Philosophy*, "Continent", 1/1 (2011): 3-13.
- S. Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, or, Why the Christian Legacy is Worth Fighting For*, London-New York, Verso, 2000.

HOW TO QUOTE THIS ENTRY

G. Tenti, *Formless*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Autumn 2020 Edition, URL = <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2020/autumn/Formless.pdf>, DOI: 10.7413/18258630101.

Please note that this URL is fixed, since it belongs to *ILAe's* archived edition. This allows readers to quote a stable document for academic purposes.

This entry also belongs to the first volume of *ILAe's* printed edition. Each issue of this edition collects *ILAe's* Spring and the Autumn online editions per year. The proper reference of the printed edition is:

G. Tenti, *Formless*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Vol. 3, Milano, Mimesis, 2021.