

SERENDIPITY AND (IN)VOLUNTARY POVERTY

[or the Palais de Tokyo and Cocorico Monsieur Poulet]



'Cocorico Monsieur Poulet' Dir. Jean Rouch (1974). Image from the DVD Ed. Montparnasse

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Serendipity: [coined by Horace Walpole, from the Persian fairytale *The Three Princes of Serendip*]
1. The faculty of making fortunate discoveries by accident.

Voluntary: [from Lat. *voluntarius*, from *voluntās* will, from *velle*, to wish]
1. Performed, undertaken, or brought about by free choice, willingly.
2. Serving or acting in a specified function of one's own accord and without compulsion or promise of remuneration.
3. Arising from natural impulse.

Poverty: [from Old French *poverté*, from Lat. *paupertās* restricted means, from *pauper* poor]
1. The condition of being without adequate food, money, etc.
2. Scarcity or dearth.
3. A lack of elements conducive to fertility in land or soil.

Collins English Dictionary - Complete and Unabridged 6th Edition 2003.

When referred to creative and artistic processes, both luck and lack (of resources) have been traditionally identified as indicators of a predictable low quality of the results. The involvement of these factors is perceived as a weakness, as an impurity of the final product as it reflects a serious defect on the integrity of the object that the creator wanted to transmit us. Any process without a clear 'cause-effect' structure is suspiciously scrutinized and, most of the times, dismissed. This horror towards randomness and the fortuitous, arises from our communal conception of the traditional role of the creator, considered as a sort of demiurge that perfectly masters the secrets of creativity, and whose success is measured according to the degree of sophistication and mystery that he is able to handle.

This suspicion towards the unforeseen is specially evident in the domain of architecture, where architects often resort to dialectic acrobatics in order to justify their positions. Intuition is completely canceled as a method of analysis since it is considered biased, contaminated with an excessive amount of subjectivity. On the other hand, this kind of processes, where the accidental plays a very important role, have been perfectly assimilated in other domains considered as more aseptic and mechanically driven in their procedures. The proof is that a term like serendipity -which describes the capacity of finding things that you were not looking for- is generally used to explain some of the most important discoveries of the last century, while it has been barely used in the arts.

The origin of this distrust probably lies on the incapacity that architects have shown to provide our cities and buildings with a new meaning according to the time we live in. All the architectural content that surround us seem to fall into a constant categorization that fluctuates according to the ideals of that precise time. In order to reevaluate our

communal assumptions, we need to be able to overcome this continuous dichotomy in which we have converted the space we live in: a cultural construction based on pairs of opposites (beautiful-ugly, true-false, good-evil). It is at this point where the reference to the notion of poverty becomes relevant as a poetic strategy¹.

The idea of poverty is full of connotations in western society, but most of them historically refer to the negative aspects of this condition. It is a category applied to objects and experiences that fulfill a certain lack of material resource which, by opposition to a society organized around massive consumption, represents a certain state of degradation. However, this is not the case in other cultures, such as some communities in Western Africa or Japan. For example, in the traditional Japanese folk art, the term 'shibusa'² covers a set of qualities of objects and experiences that do not necessarily imply a value judgment:

“[...] Things that are 'shibui' (the adjective of 'shibusa') are refined in the sense of not being gaudy. There is another use of “elegance” that gets somewhat nearer to “shibusa”, however: Proofs in mathematics and logic, as well as scientific theories, are sometimes called “elegant” if they are conspicuously economical [...] 'Shibui' can also mean 'true', 'simple' or 'chaste'. It captures a quality that can be an aspect of what we make, what we are, and what we assert or express [...] Shibusa is a way and a place to live³ [...]”

The (in)voluntary poverty idea that underlies in some of the mentioned concepts of 'poverty' or 'elegance' (such as the Japanese 'shibui'), combined with the acceptance of the unintended as a potential source of values (which seems to be one of the assets of accepting serendipity) represents a very powerful tool to bypass a certain situation of status-quo that our societies have reached in their community life.

1 Poetic(s) will be used from now on as discussed at the beginning of the seminar '12 Dialogical and Poetical Strategies': *'poesis'* (making) as a representation of all the ways of artistic creativity.

2 Often seen as 'elegance' despite the evident loss of meaning and richness that this translation implies.

3 Sartwell, C. (p.112-113)

SERENDIPITY AND THE PROBLEM OF LUCK

Serendipity is a term used to explain any kind of process in which the involvement of luck and chance have a crucial effect, producing results completely unexpected by the viewer. The richness of this faculty depends on the capacity of the viewer for setting up a general frame of speculation that makes possible the uncertain and the unexpected. Just a simple dose of confidence on the validity of any possible discovery or the use of a completely undefined work system would not be enough to assure the success of a serendipitous process. Obviously, the interest of the obtained results will be directly related to the capacity of the viewer to build his own ideal environment where the discoveries can be isolated, analyzed and evaluated according to a personal set of interests. Once at this point, the role of the observer becomes exciting and definitive: his sensibility towards the intermediate states of the process will be essential to calibrate and interpret the potential results. Both tools, the glance and personal sensibility are purely subjective and depending on the culture, the character and the personal interests of the observer.

This aspect of the unintended is perfectly described by Umberto Eco in his book 'Serendipities', a collection of lectures given on the serendipitous condition of the search of a perfect language. This utopian search would lead to a series of intellectual misunderstandings that far from being discarded offered extremely valuable information for the formulation of many of the theories in which we still believe today. In the chapter dedicated to Marco Polo and Leibniz⁴, it becomes perfectly clear how the personal background -"the background books" according to Eco's personal terminology- of the observer influence any capacity of analysis. Despite the misunderstanding that this detour could cause, Eco argues that this initial mistake often represents a solid starting point that would eventually lead the search to an unexpected state of advancement. A certain 'double bind' condition occurs by assuming this mistake as a valid starting point. Despite the apparent inconsistency of this premise, it becomes easier to overcome any assumption precisely because of this paradoxical condition:

4 Eco, U. (*From Marco Polo to Leibniz* p.53-75)

“[Athanasius] Kircher and [Gottfried] Leibniz were both illustrations of serendipity: both misunderstood Chinese writing, but the former, looking for the China of his hermetic dream, contributed to the future understanding of Chinese writing, while the later looking for the mathematical awareness of Fu-hsi, , contributed to development of modern logic [...]”⁵”

Despite the evident benefits of this speculative position, the acceptance of luck as a determining factor in processes culturally considered as complex and exclusive (which is the case of any *poetical* form) raises a polemical issue from a social point of view. The connotation that comes with the use of luck is generally associated to the idea of merit⁶, which is nothing but a cultural construction based in a set of communal values. Therefore, if the individual is considered 'meritorious', the luck will be considered as minor in their importance and incidence on the finale result, while a considered 'unmerited stroke of luck' can ruin any relevant advance labeling it as perfectly arbitrary.

This is completely unfair and dependent on the dictates of the social norms and customs, since the validity of the result is not affected by the process and should be considered and evaluated regardless of their origin. Nevertheless, the importance given to luck trough any poetic process, together with the way merit is attributed, denotes how individuals involved in these processes consider themselves and their role (and importance) in society:

“[...] *No scientific discovery* can, with any justice, be considered *due to accident*.... The common love of the marvelous and the vulgar desire to bring down the greatest achievements of genius to our own level, may lead men to ascribe such results to any casual circumstances which accompany them; but no one who fairly considers the real nature of great discoveries, and the intellectual processes which they involve, can seriously hold the opinion of their being the effect of accident.... *Such accidents never happen to common men*. Thousands of men, even the most inquiring and speculative, have seen bodies fall; but who, except Newton, ever followed the accident to such consequences? [...]”⁷”

5 Eco, U. (p.74)

6 Merton, R. (p.170-171)

7 Whewell, W. (p.23)

The general acceptance of architectural speculation and serendipitous attitudes as valid strategies within the architectural production would mean assuming that it is possible to obtain successful results out of the traditional linear processes of cause-effect. Assuming that any creative process is an exercise of subjective dissection of reality; that our role as creators and guides of the society have changed and evolves to become something different.

The capacity to adapt ourselves to the new situation and find new valuable tools for the new challenges passes for accepting our own limits and use them as an advantage. [...]“After all, the cultivated person's first duty is to be always prepared to rewrite the encyclopedia⁸ [...]”

⁸ Eco, U. (*The force of falsity*, p.21)

(IN)VOLUNTARY POVERTY

As stated before, the notion of poverty has a negative connotation in western culture. It is identified with the absence of what it is considered as the essence of the progress and civilization: the access to a series of facilities and material commodities that represent the social class of their owner. Compared to richness, which is presented as an state of fulfillment and happiness, poverty designs an state of deprivation of the basics of modern life. However, this state of fulfillment is completely artificial, only validated by the agreements of what society considers suitable or desirable and, more than anything, represents an state of paralysis under the effects of the communal agenda. Nowadays, the ambitions of anyone living under the category of poverty are dictated by the the overwhelming technological breakthroughs: the latest versions of telephones and plasma screens are perceived as the most desirable luxuries, perfectly valid indicators of the degree of success and happiness of their owners.

This conception of a society based on mercantilism has lead us to a continuous abandon of the set of values that made relevant certain aspects of our culture. The poetic act has been stripped of any valuable content and meaning. Besides, any attempt to deal with issues that question this richness-poverty dichotomy quickly receives a tag that often hides a certain derogatory hint: povera, brutalist, naif, raw... Despite the evident loss of meaning and richness that our cultural values have suffered, our conception of the poetic object is still hooked on the firm value of the origin and the result; on the beauty and richness of the tools and materials used.

“[...] The usual conception states that there are beautiful objects and ugly objects, beautiful persons and ugly persons, beautiful places and ugly places, and so forth. Not I. I believe beauty is nowhere. I consider the usual notion of beauty to be completely false. I refuse absolutely to assent to this idea, that there are ugly persons and ugly objects. This idea is stiffing and revolting to me⁹ [...]”

The challenge is how to define this new conception of the poetics without resorting to the existing model of opposites (richness-poverty) that implies a value judgment in its premises. As Umberto Eco concludes in his book 'Serendipities'¹⁰, these categorizations are based in the belief that a model of truth exists so anything can be compared

9 Dubuffet, J.

10 Eco, U. p.19

and referred to it in order to determine its validity. Therefore, the question is which are the instruments to determine the authenticity of the canon (or model). The stake is in determining the pertinence of the definition of richness, independently of the notion of poverty.

In the Japanese culture, the concept of poverty is broader and deeper in its significance than in western cultures. It is associated to the term 'wabi', that freed from any negative connotations from the past, represents a certain quality of the objects but also the nature of certain attitudes or behaviors based on humility, asymmetry, disintegration... “[...] a way of seeing imperfection as itself embodying beauty¹¹ [...]”. The term is often used in combination with the word 'sabi', that refers to loneliness (another word with a former negative connotation), and represent a form of beauty that is beyond any definition of beauty on itself:

“[...] Wabi-sabi is a kind of trap, an ever-intensifying consciousness of the need for a lapse of consciousness, an ever-broadening exaltation of the ordinary in which the ordinary loses its ordinariness [...] At its deepest, broadest reach, wabi-sabi is a form of beauty that overcomes the dichotomy of beauty and ugliness, even as it overcomes the dichotomy of ordinary and extraordinary¹² [...]”

This conception of both poverty and beauty implies a radical understanding of the role of the author. In fact, the notion of authorship in the Japanese folk art does not exist, the form has to be 'natural', not imposed by the craftsman. Besides, the objects created cannot have any commercial motivation, since this is considered dishonest to the very end purpose of the process of creation. This concept of the 'pure form of the craft' is very powerful and questions all our assumptions about the construction of both poetics and dialectics.

The same questions are raised when regarding to other examples of poverty where there is no freedom of choice when adopting it. The state of necessity, in these cases, forces the individuals to take those decisions that best fit their interests achieving an equivalent form of pure 'making'. Many examples of this particular sensibility, developed with a very reduced amount of resources and with a high sense of service to the community, can be found in different countries of Western Africa. Here, a wide cultural background and history combined with an state of immediate

11 Sartwell, C. p.113-114

12 Sartwell, C. p. 117-118

necessity produce an extremely powerful combination of commitment, creativity and inventiveness. Probably, one of the best examples are the Dogon, an ethnic living in the Mid-East territory of the Republic of Mali. The Dogon have always attracted visitors and researchers eager to understand their rituals and secrets, masterly portrayed in several documentaries by the French director Jean Rouch¹³. The set of values that the Dogon seem to exhibit in the development of their crafts perfectly fit into the definition that Soetsu Yanag¹⁴i made of what Mingei art should be:

1. honest to utility and “healthy” in form
2. particular about quality
3. produced without being forced, artificial or self-imposing
4. conscious of the user

¹³ Jean Rouch worked in many projects, films and documentaries in Western Africa during the early 50's until the late 80's. One of his most famous films was 'Cocorico Monsieur Poulet' an 'impromptu' film shot between Niger and the Republic of Mali, which is a perfect example of a serendipitous succession of events on board of a custom-made and self-built Citroen 2CV.

¹⁴ Yanagi, S. 'Two Centuries of Japanese Folk Art'

LACATON & VASSAL AND JEAN ROUCH'S COCORICO MONSIEUR POULET

Paradoxically, most of the times, the detection of valuable material in the threshold of the unattended and unexpected requires a higher effort and commitment in order to overcome all the received ideas affecting these speculative positions. It is at this point where the concepts of serendipity and poverty result extremely powerful and appealing, as they offer opportunities to contour reality by positively accepting the outcomes of non-linear processes.

The architecture of Anne Lacaton and Jean Philippe Vassal is the perfect expression of this attitude. Their ideas about luxury and beauty represent an alternative to the established set of moral values and aesthetic recipes accepted by the majority of the contemporary architects. By thinking about how to offer added values to their clients (more space at lesser cost, more daylight, more direct ventilation, less charges, more passive solutions...) they seem to try to set their agenda according to an ideal of voluntary poverty that they turn into their major asset. All this practical concerns are handled with an extremely delicate uncertainty, not taking anything for granted, an attitude that allows them to come up with surprising discoveries during their design process.

[...] The argument for an architecture that can be at once beautiful and just, modern and culturally specific, locally significant and universally eloquent, seductive and respectful is difficult in our present technopolitical climate¹⁵ [...]

A very good example of their attitude and techniques is the design of a new cultural institution in the Palais de Tokyo, in Paris (France), a decrepit building of the Universal Exposition held in 1937. In their project Anne Lacaton and Jean Philippe Vassal seem to operate with the same kind of practical logic that the main characters of 'Cocorico Monsieur Poulet', Jean Rouch' masterpiece of creativity and adaptability in an ever changing environment. Just after the competition, the office moved to some spaces inside the Palais Tokyo, having the chance of being able to work in situ. Initially, the extremely low construction budget was destined to improve the skylights system and remake the electrical and water supplies., however, once in the premises, they discovered that there was a magnificent view from the terrace of the building and decided to build the firescapes in a way that could eventually be used as a public access

15 Perez-Gomez (p.204)

to the roof. This apparently petty detail in appearance hides a great amount of valuable lessons about the topics previously discussed: the exact degree of simplicity and delicacy necessary to focus on the details that really made the difference.

The perfect combination of a serendipitous sensibility and a set of values based in a voluntary and accepted poverty that stimulates the ambition and creativity of their scope. An agenda, not dependent on technological dictates; an alternative to the set of ethics and poetics that have emptied out of meaning the spaces we live in.

“[...] The real problem of a critique of our own cultural models is to ask, when we see an unicorn, if by any chance it is not a rhinoceros¹⁶ [...]”

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