

ON SIMPLICITY (introduction)

Text by Marialaura Ghidini

Law 1: Reduce

The simplest way to achieve simplicity is through thoughtful reduction.

John Maeda, *Laws of Simplicity*, MIT Press; 2006

Simplicity is a state - of mind, of being or of behaving - that is never easily achieved.

It requires a process of "thoughtful reduction", which often entails a high degree of complexity - and here I am borrowing the words of computer scientist and graphic designer John Maeda, whose book *Laws of Simplicity*¹ explores possible ways for people to simplify their lives.

In short, the nature of the word itself is very paradoxical; Simplicity is not really what can be defined an elementary state as its outward appearance might suggest.

Yet, over the last few months I have repeatedly come across references to it in newspapers and magazines, in which Simplicity, in its connotation of reduction and moderation, was proposed as an almost therapeutic way of being in response to the effects of the recent financial crisis.

I will jump somewhere else for a moment in an attempt to describe this duality.

In the excerpt of the linked documentary featuring the German band Kraftwerk - made for the BBC TV programme *Tomorrow's World* and broadcast on the 25th September 1975 -, the reporter Derek Cooper described the band's compositional process as follows: "the sounds are created in their laboratory in Düsseldorf, programmed, then recreated on stage with the minimum of fuss".

The "minimum of fuss" of Cooper's commentary is precisely what makes evident the intricacy of the modes in which Simplicity appears and is recognized. Kraftwerk's musical practice is emblematic of the above-mentioned process of "thoughtful reduction". In their work a complex musical operation is delivered thorough a very simplified performance and melody - the minimalistic desks and customized instruments used during their live shows, as well as the mechanized repetitions of both the music and actions of the band members -. However, it is by way of a multilayered process that Kraftwerk reduce sound to a bare essentiality that is 'deceitfully' presented as elementary after having been electronically processed - the vocals could be an example, in that they are always analysed and transformed through the use of a Vocoder and simultaneously reproduced live.

In the light of the double reading of Kraftwerk's work, the "minimum of fuss", or essentiality, pointed out in the TV report becomes as self-contradictory as Simplicity; and comparable to the characteristics of that ideal 'state of being simple' very longed by contemporary society. A state that, beneath the apparent ease, is permeated by complexity.

The soaring vogue of *living a life without frills* prompts the proliferation of a few customs that I see symptomatic of the perfect 21st century dweller. Assembling your own bicycle bit by bit and stripping it down to the most essential and basic is one of them; you can buy all the bicycle's parts and then fiddle with them for hours, or days, in order to have the most functional and least accessorized means of transport possible. You can also grow your own vegetables in your own garden - no matters how big or sunny the garden is - to make yourself feel you are now living a simpler life; or, alternatively, you can have food delivered to your house front door from the nearest local farm and find it in the form of an old wooden box containing dirty fruit and vegetables.

¹ MIT Press, 2006

This is the way I see Simplicity often understood nowadays; centred around the outward appearance of something which, instead, is intrinsically more complicated than what it appears to be.

Another noticeable aspect emerging from the above overview is that these early-21st century practices can be traced back to the lifestyle of 50-60 years ago, just before the industrial revolution of the 50s spread the race for ready-to-use objects and easily replaceable items - but the consequences of the second industrial revolution are part of another story.

That said, associating Simplicity with a lack of complexity or insufficiency is very far from its sum and substance. And it is removed from the actual significance of those customs that are thought, or have been proposed by the media, as practices leading the way to a simplified life.

In any case, Simplicity is always manifested in connection to some sort of reduction; a reduction that, at present, I see integral to the act of *looking backwards* since it seems to operate in connection to a retrieval of past forms of production.

At first sight, whether I consider Kraftwerk or an assembled bicycle I think of the idea of "thoughtful reduction". But, on a closer look, the two instances put forward a difference in their approach to reduction, a difference that can be found in the mode in which time is understood and thought of. And this distinction is what further defines the concept of Simplicity I am discussing in this text.

In their process of reduction, Kraftwerk looked to the future - Michal Rother co-founder of another German band of the time, Neu!, defined them as part of the "fast-forward movement"² that was developing in those days -. Kraftwerk were at the avant-guard of the German music scene of the 70s and today they are seen as the precursor of modern pop electronic music. Whereas now, almost forty years later on, in our endeavours to reduce in order to achieve Simplicity we are curiously *looking to the past*.

What then could be a current interpretation of Simplicity in the light of the shift in time pointed out here?

At present, Simplicity appears to me more as a scenario rather than a condition. And it is a scenario concerned with comparison and parallelism; attributes of the way I see the production and reception of culture largely manifesting themselves today.

This scenario operates from a retrieval of what appears to be minimal and results in the creation of complex formal systems. This is because it stems from a conception of time that I would define as that of an *historical present*; a present that looks at the past to talk about itself and draws parallelisms with what already happened in order to comment on itself.

On Simplicity is the editorial of the first instalment of the online exhibition *Simplicity* (Part One) featuring an essay by Nadine Puetz; <http://www.or-bits.com/simplicitypt1.php>

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