ANTONY GORMLEY

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At the end of Antony Gormley's installation EVENT HORIZON in the centre of London in 2007, many viewers of the body-forms (which stood for three months on the roofs of buildings on either side of the River Thames around the South Bank Centre, on bridges and in other unexpected public spaces) started worrying about what would happen with these sculptures when the show was over. They asked: 'Will the sculptures just be removed and forgotten in some godforsaken warehouse, will they be destroyed, will they be used in other settings?' Those who worried the most about the destiny of these objects that had provoked so much public curiosity found solace in making suggestions on the internet about the best place to store them. Often these proposals stressed the need for the works to be kept together - perhaps by being placed in a park or a gallery space. Peter Arlt, an Austrian artist, dealt with a similar public anxiety about the lonely historical statues of the saint called Nepomuk placed on bridges in South Austria, when he decided to unite the statues. Arlt went to great lengths to secure permission from various state organisations that deal with conservation issues to 'borrow' the statues from their original place for one day only - so that they would be able to meet each other.

While Gormley's doll-sized MEMES, a series of sculptures constructed in 2011 from cast-iron blocks, are different from Arlt's statues and from Gormley's own earlier works (such as the life-sized mouldings of his body in EVENT HORIZON) they perform a similar function of figuring the body. At first glance it looks like Gormley's placement of his MEMES in a group setting could appease the anxiety that viewers might have in regard to a lonely statue. But more importantly, their exhibition in a group raises questions about how it is that a made figure per se might provoke a powerful emotional response like anxiety and whether figures placed together actually appease that anxiety or open up new sets of emotions that might actually not be so soothing. A related question is about how we, the viewers, are playing out our own anxieties and other emotions by being anxious over the destiny of an object.

Gormley's MEMES invoke the theory of Richard Dawkins, who coined the term 'memes' on the basis of genes and used it to describe the dissemination of cultural ideas and beliefs. [1] As genes are supposed to propagate from one biological organism to another, memes are taken as units of cultural information that propagate from one mind to another. Dawkins characterises ideas, religious beliefs, melodies, catch-phrases, fashion, and so forth, as memes and presupposes that they spread through the behaviour that they generate in their hosts.

If at first this propagation of both genes and memes was taken as a rather straightforward transmission, we are now increasingly aware of the unpredictability, the multitude of their expression and the cultural and environmental influence on them. In the domain of genetics, theories such as Dawkins' concept of the 'selfish gene' have been radically challenged by epigenetics, [2] which sees genes as radically dependent on language and culture, and which opposes any genetic 'fundamentalism'. Geneticists now observe that there is a multitude of possibilities when it comes to the expression of genes and that decoding the genome, for example, has given us far less of a possibility of predicting our genetic future than first expected.

Although taking their name from Dawkins' writings, Gormley's MEMES are paradoxically closer to the view presented by those who critique Dawkins. They are not about the replication of one form in another, but rather invoke the idea of a multitude of possible expressions. Instead of playing on the idea of imitation, affecting the viewer who is touched by the emotions that they convey, they open up space for identification which in the psychoanalytic domain is one of the most important concepts to help us to understand what motivates people and makes them form social networks.

The world of MEMES plays with the idea of the multitude in different ways. Each work is made out of 27 identical blocks positioned in a unique way. Gormley's repositioning of the identical blocks gives each work a different character that may be interpreted in multiple ways. One gets a very different feeling with regard to the figure according to whether the head is held upwards or points downwards. When the arms are totally aligned with the body, one guesses that the figure is expressing pride in its erect posture; when the arms are slightly moved forward one wonders if what is represented is someone who is simply standing in a neutral way or is even being measured. When there is a slight hunchback we cannot be sure if it represents humiliation or even body impairment. The strongest feelings in the viewer are often provoked by the change in the position of the head in the sitting figures. The figure with the erect head appears like it is resting, or even meditating, but the one with its head tilted forwards provokes us to ask whether we are dealing with possible humiliation or shame. When the head points downwards, we cannot be sure whether the person does not want to be seen, or rather does not want to see. When we are ashamed, we often cast our eyes downwards, since we do not want to be seen in our state of disgrace. While when we feel guilty it is often we who do not want to see. When Oedipus is haunted by guilt for committing incest and parricide he takes out his own eyes as a self-punishment for his crime. With this act he exposes himself to the gaze of others, but he himself does not want to see.

The positioning of the MEMES provokes a multitude of interpretive options. When they are placed in a group one wonders if there is a representation of their potential communication. When they are all alone, the idea that they represent an atomised society comes to the forefront.

There are numerous possible relationships between the viewer and the MEMES. The viewer can easily get the impression that he or she is visiting some kind of a miniature world (for instance, Legoland), where instead of the usual historical buildings that one finds in such places, one encounters figures which each represent a different emotion and which together play out different scenarios of interaction, or the lack of it. Or the viewer might feel like a giant. He or she might fear the possibility of stepping onto the figures or damaging them in some way. If in EVENT HORIZON some viewers perceived the works as Big Brother-like figures observing them, and others feared that they were actually humans who wanted to commit suicide, with the MEMES one might fear oneself to be a perpetrator who could easily cause harm. Some viewers, however, might find a desire to play a God-like figure: to take the power of creation into their own hands and start to rearrange the figures to their own liking.

From afar, the MEMES look like figures on a chessboard. And it is precisely in regard to chessboards that a variety of theories about how we perceive multitudes have emerged. One of the well-known logical puzzles that deals with the vagaries of our perception is that of how many squares there are on the chessboard. The usual answer appears to be 64, but the person answering the puzzle is quickly reminded that the whole chessboard is also a square and that there are numerous possibilities for looking at groups of fields on the chessboard as differently organised squares. If one simply tries to divide the chessboard into series of equal squares of different sizes (some consisting of four, others of nine and others still of sixteen small squares) one comes to 204 possible squares.

The multitude of possibilities that the MEMES play on, however, comes much closer to another chessboard puzzle that has been reiterated across various national mythologies. One version has it as a story of a Chinese emperor who was saved by a poor peasant and who offers the latter whatever payment he wishes. The peasant asks for a simple chessboard and asks the emperor to give him the amount of rice that one comes to by doubling the amount of rice that was placed on the first field of the chessboard on the second one and then doubling that amount on the next field, and so on. The peasant thus asks the emperor to place one grain of rice on the first field, two on the second field, four on the third, and so on. The shocking result is that at the end the emperor has lost all of his rice. In some versions of the story he even lost all of the rice of the country.

This story is often evoked when geneticists counter the idea of the fixity of the genes and insist on the multiple possibilities that the expression of genes implies. In their critiques of Dawkins, who sees living bodies as mere vehicles for the replication of genetic codes, many of today's geneticists point out that the way genes express themselves and the manner in which they are transmitted implies multiple variations, so that if one were to try to count them up one would arrive at a massive number, as exemplified by the Chinese chessboard story. In THE MUSIC OF LIFE the physiologist Denis Noble points out that life is not about replication of selfish genes, but rather a symphonic interplay between genes, cells, organs, body and environment. [3] As such, life emerges as a process: the ebb and flow of activity in an intricate web of connections.

A similar point can be made as a critique of Dawkins' idea of memes. Transmission of cultural ideas is also not one of simple replication, but rather a process that can provoke a rather unexpected multiplication where the whole system in which a particular idea played a part comes crashing down. Ideas are not simply passed on; the idea itself is often altered in the process of transmission, as is the worldview of the one who takes it on. Gormley's MEMES reflect precisely on this process of alteration, which is why in order to understand the impact that they have on the viewer one needs to invoke the idea of identification.

An important question, with which we began, is how sculptures provoke emotions or even anxiety in the viewer. How is it, for example, that some people experienced anxiety over what would happen next to the figures of EVENT HORIZON? And why did the figures' potential loneliness evoke concern? One response would be that loneliness - perceived in today's highly individualised society as one of the most painful and anxiety-provoking states - is simply projected onto the sculptures by viewers playing out evocations of their own states of loneliness. A much more intriguing possibility, however, is to consider how the figures, for instance those of EVENT HORIZON, might trigger feelings in the first place: how emotions and memories that were not present to our conscious mind suddenly erupt when we observe a made body-form and the place where it is set, and imagine the future place it might occupy or an event that might destroy it.

It is well known that objects or places trigger memories. It might be that we no longer consciously think about a traumatic event. Rather, when some object or place related to it comes into our visual field, old memories resurface and with them the emotions that were previously associated with the event. These sculptures ask us how we identify with the emotions of someone else and whether emotions depicted in the work of art might also trigger emotions on the side of the viewer.

When Freud was working on his theory of identification, his main problem was not only to discern identification between people who are in some way related, for instance parents and children. More problematic was to figure what holds together people who have nothing particular in common. Freud's famous example was that of girls in a dormitory. They might be together in the same place, but they are not close friends. An interesting moment of identification happens when, upon reading a break-up letter from her boyfriend, one girl in the dormitory starts to cry, following which another girl who is present also starts to cry. Since they are not close friends, we cannot conclude that the second girl identified with the pain of the first. Rather, seeing the first girl cry opened up questions for the second about her own love life, maybe triggering her own desire to be loved or provoking her fear of losing the love that she had found.

Jacques Lacan complicated the issue of identification when he coined the term 'imaginary identification'. This happens when, for example, we observe someone's suffering as something that could have happened to us. So when we are feeling sorry for a refugee it is not that we feel his pain but that we look at him as a possible mirror image of ourselves. Lacan also invoked another layer of narcissism in identification when he spoke about symbolic identification. This happens when, for instance, we are compassionate with suffering refugees, but actually all we care about is how we are observed by others. It is as if we step outside of ourselves, look at our own compassion and feel proud that we have showed emotions that we perceive are valued in our society.

Throughout the process of socialisation, we learn how to depict the emotions of others and how to come to terms with our own emotions. Simplified images are often presented to children to assist this process. We make drawings of faces that look either sad or happy; we make a Potato Man out of a potato. Roger Hargreaves' popular series of children's books MR. MEN and LITTLE MISS tried to depict different human characters by using few lines and colours. Story has it that Hargreaves produced the first of his round characters when he was asked by his little son what a tickle looks like. A figure with a round orange body and long, rubbery arms was supposed give a child an impression of how a tickle might appear if it were a person. In the domain of cartoons, the well-known Italian animation series LA LINEA [The Line] attempted to express the character's emotions through the use of a single drawn line.

All such minimisations open up space for us, the viewers, to imagine what slight changes in the line or the contours of the body reveal. Gormley's tiny MEMES thus constantly make us question what a shift in the position of the blocks says. Is the figure that kneels on the floor with his face to the wall immersed in pious prayer, or is he is an utterly desolate man? Is the figure with the stretched legs an acrobat, or is he someone being tortured? What happens if a figure is placed next to the wall? Is the person exposed, potentially tortured, or just resting?

In this multitude of expressions, what actually distinguishes one MEME from another? What makes it unique? Lacan coined the term 'unitary trait' to refer to the distinguishing element of something that is part of a series. This element might be nothing material. Let us take the example of a train which we refer to by the time that it departs: if we have a 10.15 train from London to Cambridge, we might still call it a 10.15 train even if it departs at 11. So what makes something unique in this case is the trait that is very much symbolically mediated. It can be a name or a time that is attached to it; in both cases it is the inscription - the signifier - that distinguishes one from another. In the case of Gormley's MEMES this inscription is the number that relates to each MEME. However, the number does not actually tell us much more about the MEMES than the fact that they are part of a series. Everything that we see beyond the number is thus up to us, the viewers, to interpret.

New avenues for interpretation often open when we minimise something. In the film HONEY, I SHRUNK THE KIDS (1989), the kids accidentally turn up the shrinking machine their father has been trying to construct and as a result start getting smaller and smaller. They end up only a quarter of an inch high, and their parents do not even notice that they are in the house. After a series of humorous accidents when their parents almost eat them for breakfast and almost kill them with a lawnmower, they are finally able to get their parents' attention and, with the help of a new experiment, the father makes them grow to their previous size. The moment of shrinking had a cathartic effect on the whole family: both the strained relationship between

the parents and the misunderstandings between parents and kids were miraculously solved. It is as if shrinking the kids allowed for a new view of the family situation. [4]

Minimisations of various kinds often help us to see a situation as a larger whole. Gormley's MEMES open this possibility of looking at the world we inhabit from a distance. Since it is in our (human) hands to decide how the world we live in will look in the future, we can take the MEMES as a tool to think through the God-like position humans are in regarding the space we inhabit and to question what humanity is about in times when this space is radically changing and when we can imagine it inhabited by more and more robot-like objects. But, on top of making such reflections, the viewer must not forget the simple pleasure of playing with them.

NOTES

1. See Richard Dawkins, THE SELFISH GENE (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1976). Dawkins models the word 'meme' on the word gene, but also invokes the Greek meanings of the word. In Greek mimma alludes to something being imitated; mimeisthai refers to the process of imitation and mimos to doing a mime.

2. Eva Jablonka and Marion J. Lamb (2005) EVOLUTION IN FOUR DIMENSIONS: GENETIC, EPIGENETIC, BEHAVIORAL, AND SYMBOLIC VARIATION IN THE HISTORY OF LIFE (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2005).

3. Denis Noble, THE MUSIC OF LIFE: BIOLOGY BEYOND GENES (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

4. See Claude Lévi-Strauss: 'To understand a real object in its totality we always tend to work from its parts. The resistance it offers us is overcome by dividing it. Reduction in scale reverses this situation. Being smaller, the object as a whole seems less formidable. By being quantitavely diminished, it seems to us qualitatively simplified. More exactly, this quantitative transposition extends and diversifies our power over a homologue of the thing, and by means of it the latter can be grasped, assessed and apprehended at a glance. A child's doll is no longer an enemy, a rival or even an interlocutor.' Claude Lévi-Strauss, THE SAVAGE MIND [La pensée sauvage] (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1976), p. 23.