

Franco Bolelli

INSTANT FUTURE

Sottotitolo contribuito su una riga

#smarter
#reinvention
#beyond

We are the first group of human beings who went beyond the standard coordinates of time and space. We are the first group of humans – anyone of us, not only small avant-gardes – who find themselves holding in their hands the unprecedented chance to access, in a few seconds, everything humanity has produced in every place of the planet and in every time of history – materials, data, ideas, projects, works. We are – a great privilege, yet a great risk– in an era of reinvention of our mental, cognitive and perceptive circuits: it is now impossible to do, think, design, communicate, talk, behave the way we did it just a few years ago. We were an expression of a mechanical world. We are now an expression of an organic world. We had a vertical mind. We now have a horizontal mind. We were sequential. We have become simultaneous and instantaneous. We were static. We have become dynamic and changeable. We were fragmented. We have become connective. We were linear. We have become multiple and variable. We were logical. We have become neo-biological and mythological. We were systematic. We are learning to become unsystematic, to search and find our own units of measurement, not in external narrations and mainstream frameworks, in the vital process. In this way we are – yes, we really are – much smarter than before. In this way we can and must reinvent our own relationship with space and time. **In this way we are taking the personal and shared responsibility of our own existence.**



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Learning from Franco

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Franco Bolelli was, is, and will forever be an excellent philosopher, an irreverent thinker, an avid explorer-transformer and anything that is impossible to describe in just a few pages. We could call him Great, using all the superlatives dear to him in describing people and circumstances in detail. He was an indefatigable writer, speaker and enthusiastic lecturer with an incredible ability to express his thoughts. He could effortlessly speak for five minutes as well as two hours or a whole day completely impromptu, as he was a thinker with a lucid thought process and the ability to argue the vicissitudes of existence. *Give me a microphone*, he often repeated in the classroom, *and I will be perfectly fine*. His thought was never ideological, and he did not cede responsibility for the content to any external structure or system, but took it on himself. Perhaps this boundless sense of responsibility was precisely the main feature of Franco Bolelli's approach to life and the world.

In 2018 he wrote *'above everything, the sense of responsibility. Responsibility to yourself, trying to be and do something you can be proud of. Responsibility towards those you love. they must be sure that you are willing to do everything for them. Responsibility towards the things you do. Do them to the best of your ability and never stop to improve them. Responsibility towards the world. Never take advantage, never abuse, no alibis, no victimisation. Responsibility towards life. You must nurture it, enrich it, make it proliferate, dance.*

Any other virtue is useless without an intractable sense of responsibility' (Franco Bolelli. Personal academic notes)

Intractable was one of his favourite words. Intractable, in the sense that no negotiations nor compromises are allowed, and that one's own worldview can never be negotiated. At least until such worldview changes because, beautifully, even one's own certainties could be questioned, and this intractable awareness has accompanied Franco in everything he has done.

His approach was characterised by the coexistence of *'brain and muscles'*, in other words an intellectual dimension impossible to be separated from its physical counterpart, in an anthropological unit inseparable from these two aspects that define our human being.

He was sixteen years old – he often told our students – and was a young basketball player, when suddenly, during a school day, he was struck when reading a book by Nietzsche. He realised, from the text, that his body, eager for movement and a vivid container of instincts, could not be separated from the mental and intellectual sphere. From then on, body and mind went hand in hand, in his private and public sphere.

It is a precise anthropological view that brings humans back to being understood as complex figures in the entire planetary system. Figures in which the physical, instinctive dimensions, of animal origin, exists in full synergy with the intellectual

and cultural dimension. Precisely from this synergy, in the balance between the two, comes the evolutionary tension that drives man to conquer the qualities of life, and not the territories or objects. He said, *'in my vision, personal responsibility, the impulse to grow, hard work to improve oneself, the desire to build projects, heart, courage, character, generosity, sensitivity, impulses, a sense of enterprise, a sense of protection, absolute dedication are fundamental: all of these are far beyond ideologies and alignments, all of these belong to the essence of life'*. (Franco Bolelli. Personal notes)

Precisely with these concepts he pushed students to confront with each other, provoking an initial disorientation, but then helping them to understand their own strengths and guiding them to translate these motions of energy into a project through the practice of design.

Students were therefore subject to small disciplinary traumas, in order to find themselves looking at the world from points of view very different to the comfort zone they were inclined to construct and inhabit. One of these traumas, small but rather destabilising, concerned the combination of the project with the human body, in its various components and different peculiarities.

When we think of our bodies, we are always inclined to be attentive to the aesthetic and emotional dimension of the face, as if the face sums up our inner universe that can be expressed to others.

We also think to the classical gestures and practical references that the hands inspire in us, taking into consideration, at most, the rest of the body only in terms of general proportions. The body thus takes on a very little expressive connotation with respect to the potential that its own biological structure offers. We often talked with Franco, more or less seriously, but always carefully, about feet. Two moving pillars. Feet make it possible to stay firmly planted on the ground as well as to jump, to move inexorably beyond any condition and then, since time immemorial, they allow mankind to dance. Feet have the ability to express anger and joy. The sensuality, the strength, the brutality, the grace, the disappointment that we express in a specific dance is defined by the tension of the feet. The control of the movements derives from precise emotional impulses. How do we rethink legs and feet in specific social contexts, we wondered. It was not uncommon for Franco to raise one leg and stretch, quietly, during revisions of student projects in the classroom. His body, always in movement, needed to activate other muscles in addition to the brain in use. No student seemed to mind: Franco was the teacher and the role carried with it a freedom of expression that was allowed. Legitimised. But this attitude, at the same time, led to a greater freedom of the body for everyone, in line with Greek culture where the academic teacher taught while walking with students in an open space, following the belief that this was the best way to get their attention.

Therefore, considering a greater body activity and mobility, what would have happened to a student acting in the same way as Franco? Nobody would have explicitly told them to be more composed, but rather to take physical and intellectual responsibility for what they were doing. Therefore, this almost unconscious action by Franco re-opened an old question, between psychophysical well-being and the places of learning, where the physical parameters of classrooms and their health and safety are, surely, no longer sufficient.

Which revolution of thought should we undertake to avoid the required body stasis in some schools as if the mind were separated from the body? How should we design this new/ancient dynamism to be able to reunite mind and body in our universities, workplaces, and all contexts where the body is required to be *stuck*? If not the preference, at least the proposal of an equal treatment, towards the dynamism of the movement *versus* a specific static nature of thought, also emerges in the title of his book "Cartesio non balla" (Descartes does not dance). In this book, Franco suggests a new reading of pop culture, in which he recognises an evolutionary function in pop, defined as the only culture in tune with the changes of the contemporaneity. It takes place, collects and processes the signals of connected and global challenges, and participates in the creation of new sensitivities, new visions, new perceptions of existence.

Franco wrote many books.

He wrote a compulsive and continuous production that, for those who did not know him, could look like a sign of an excessive presence in the scene or even a form of narcissism. But those who had the luck to know Franco know that he had the astonishing and very special ability to go beyond what he had done. He was always projected towards the *near* present that was important to him, with a constant evolutionary tension, constructive dynamism *for doing* things and proposing visions. Unceasingly and tirelessly.

More than once, facing quotes from his published books, it was not uncommon to see him widen his eyes and to answer that he could not remember even the title of that book. *'I forget what I publish: I am interested only in what I am doing and what I would like to do'*. An approach that is definitely in line with the evolutions of contemporaneity, of a connected and global society, subject to a continuous reset on the basis of new perceptual, sensory and neurological stimuli. An approach recognised as predominant within pop culture that, through its elements is adaptable to changes, builds new paradigms and new scenarios. It is therefore decidedly more advanced and superior to any other academically normed phenomenon.

Therefore, in order to be continually in tune, it is necessary to be aware of what lies outside ourselves; to be curious adventurers, to be informed, to know and to be projected towards a 'today' that flows fluidly.

This does not mean that it is necessary to follow the current dynamics and trends, but to develop critical and proactive capacities through a thought process accustomed to a great degree of autonomy. Franco wrote extremely incisively: *'We have Full Powers. These are the ones we have and that many forget they have, too busy to obsessively deal with what 'the others' say. We have Full Powers, we have full power to create, build, share, communicate projects, ideas, works, visions, values. We have full power to raise strong, responsible children. We have full power to nurture great feelings, and character and courage. This power -full as can be- is the highest expression of our relationship with the biological and evolutionary project. We are fully empowered. Use them with all our intensity, full stop'*. (Franco Bolelli. Personal academic notes)

Often extolling the need to *'steal fire from the Gods'*, he recalled how this possibility, these powers, were within the reach of each one of us and, in the case of the students, also at their service. Of each and every one of them.

If there was something that Franco Bolelli did not fit in, it was minimalism. We often heard him say how his favourite rhetorical figure was hyperbole and how he would only like to express himself with it. By definition, hyperbole is a rhetorical figure that consists of exaggerating the description of reality through expressions that amplify it, either by excess or by defect, and in this there is much of how Franco liked to talk about the world.

He used an expressive language that was very powerful and precise, that left little space for doubt, intended as a pretext to stop actions.

A very much representative book of this approach is *'Si fa così'*, in which, despite the fact that Franco had the unexpected modesty to not use the exclamation mark in the title, manifests itself more as a hyperbolic (indeed) expansion of the Ten Commandments, than as a collection of serial advice.

He used to discuss feelings, sport and current affairs in the classroom with ease, expressing himself with extreme clarity. He often reiterated how useless and limiting *Critical Thinking* could become if applied in a sterile manner, as he reported in some of his notes: *'Many - especially here in our country - still identify intelligence with critical thinking, many believe that one appears more intelligent if one says that everything around is vulgar and senseless. To me, this intelligence appears -I strive to be polite-limited and sterile. It is clear that every innovation has a price to pay, unpleasant side effects, painful losses: but that is how everything works, that is how everything advances'*. (Franco Bolelli. Personal academic notes)

Franco always contrasted this sterile critique with a vital, fertile and proactive thinking. A biological and evolutionary thinking. This position becomes even more interesting if we consider that in recent years, the horizon of technological development has been marked by the emerging trend of artificial intelligence,

through the great challenge that sees machines measuring themselves on the territory of the human. Huge machines, capable of making an enormous number of calculations in a short time, consuming an enormous amount of energy, to approach reading the world as a human would. Without succeeding. Because free will, passions, improvisation, lightning strikes, the ability to focus and exclude, sensible connections however unmotivated, are things that a machine finds extremely difficult. Machines use an enormous amount of data, energy and time to arrive at results that for us humans are almost instinctive. Even if artificial intelligence were to arrive at simulations very close to those of the human, this would only be another confirmation of the latter's enormous potential and resource. Great resources that animated Franco's great passion for *Biology*, which, while never excluding the innovative and technological world of research, always sought to find *'vital'* forms of feedback. Therefore, technology or critical thinking were not self-referential, but a vital, evolutionary and responsible thought: *'Evolution is made up of losses and side effects, you must take them into account: but if you see the losses and side effects without seeing evolution, you may be a renowned intellectual, but you are a fool. The entire evolution, the entire life process, is marked by the human capacity to build, to invent, to perform small and great feats even in everyday choices and actions. Highlighting this strength is not positive thinking: it is vital thinking'*. (Franco Bolelli. Personal academic

notes).

Approaching one's ideas with passion, being convinced of them, brings an extraordinary competitive advantage, that is the advantage of doing things without fear. Undoubtedly, there could be a hint of recklessness in this approach, but it is a pondered, responsible and conscious recklessness.

It is what you can find in daredevils, innovators or madmen, because as a mythical Apple commercial from many years ago - probably the best of all time - used to say, *'only those who are mad enough to think they can change the world really change it'*.

In order to change the world, not only is fear useless, but it also leads to strategies, tricks, and all the petty meanness put in place by those who do not feel safe. Franco often contrasts fear with the concept of strength, with which we need to re-confront ourselves in a decisive manner, and in this regard, he writes: *'I am certain of it: we must return to value the idea of strength. We must - it is really an anthropological, evolutionary duty - return to familiarising ourselves with the idea of strength, return to teaching it, to recounting it. Today, in our culture, we tend to have a negative prejudice against strength... Because strength is not aggression or abuse of power, it is not bombing, and it certainly does not lie in verbal outbursts. Strength lies in one's values and feelings, in the dedication with which we cultivate and protect them. Strength is a sense of responsibility, the ability to choose and decide under pressure'*. (Franco Bolelli. Personal notes)

We should apply this concept of strength in group work, in sharing and dividing up tasks. We should make project decisions with courage.

This was discussed a lot with Franco in class and his support for the students was never missing.

Franco was an eclectic philosopher and a man enthusiastic of life in all its complexity. An irrepressible visionary with a fervent impetus, as when he began declaring, to the amazement and scepticism of many academics, that he wanted to do a "Festival dell'Amore" (Love Festival), because it seemed unthinkable that there was no such thing. An idea, at first sight bizarre but, in reality, as strongly connected to anthropological impulses as supported by millennia-old reflections of philosophers and men of books. *"If there is one wrong we can do to love, it is to confine it to a corner in its own right, to a separate zone, to a kind of marvellous privé of our existence that does not, however, radiate all the rest"*. (Personal notes). With this basis, the idea of realising a festival celebrating love appeared less bizarre than it seemed, as often happened with his ideas. In fact, having overcome the initial astonishment of those who heard them, they ended up coming to fruition because Franco's iron will and his natural inclination to promote them so incisively induced others to think that 'that thing' had to 'exist', and there was no alternative. Indeed, the Festival dell'Amore project, orchestrated and conceived with his wife Manuela Mantegazza, took the form of a series of events held

in prestigious Milanese locations such as the Triennale and Base. The programme was definitely a manifesto of the overwhelming and contagious energy that the original idea managed to generate. During the days of the events, it was possible to listen to speeches by very different figures, from philosophers to showbusiness personalities, screenings of themed films, contests (Franco loved competitions) of declarations of love and celebrations of 'free marriages' and, for the first time in the history of the Triennale, this Festival went on during the night allowing people to spend the night sleeping publicly on specially placed mattresses and embracing. All this shows how strong ideas, while bizarre, if well-founded and well-conducted (and the term relates precisely to the figure of the 'leader') can produce new worlds. According to Franco, it is not possible to act without passion *'because passion is right even when it is wrong. Because it is better to err by impetus and enthusiasm than to err by mental calculation. Because there is a profound vital wisdom in passion, not the partial wisdom of logical and conceptual thinking. The primacy of reason, they say. Well, no: or rather, yes to reason, naturally and absolutely, but no, just no, to its primacy, no to entrusting it the command post'* (Franco Bolelli. Personal academic notes) and this was certainly not a rejection of rationality or its fragmentation in order to introduce passion, but a new interlocution between them for a cognitive and anthropological qualitative leap as a better expression of themselves,

because *'in the end it is always and only the great passions that give the impetus, the rhythm, the intensity, the atmospheric condition, the will to power, the superior vital sense. Passion may be excessive, off-centred, shameless, even foolish, but it is right, always'*. (Franco Bolelli. Personal notes)

So to those who might wonder what a philosopher was doing inside a design workshop, we can only answer that never has anyone been more disruptive, enthralling and energising than him. With his ability to stimulate visions, to instil passion and to push us to go further with a great sense of responsibility, Franco Bolelli conveyed to his students, as to all those who had the fortune to listen to and read of him, a dynamic energy of rare quality.

Thank you Master Bolelli!

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