

Nested Relationships: Beauty, Art, Aesthetics and Happiness (BAAH!)

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Overview

Consumerism and Global Capitalism have shaped societal and cultural systems (including the arts) around the world. A market-driven economic system has formed which mainly values what can be priced, bought, sold or held as investment. It further seems to assume that happiness is primarily an economic issue and can be achieved through consumption and capital accumulation.

In this world view, beauty, aesthetics and the arts have become widely misunderstood. Their revitalisation forms a key part of addressing the systemic problems such as growing environmental challenges, increasing disparities in income, wasteful consumption and depletion of resources that our children will need in the future.

Summary

The current economic crisis is a symptom of a disease, rather than the disease itself. The disease originates from the way in which our socio-economic culture conditions us to believe that happiness comes primarily from consumption and capital accumulation. This view has significantly shaped societies and cultures around the world, framing our understanding and driving personal and societal value-systems and behaviours.

Fortunately, a shift in perspective is currently underway from the old (which stresses individualism, materialism, consumption and accumulation) towards a new core value of relationality in which beauty, if it is rightly understood, will form a key part in addressing important global systemic challenges.

Currently, beauty has lost the power of its meaning, being used interchangeably with words such as terrific, great, excellent etc. It has also become a superficial word, is understood to be only skin deep and is deemed to be completely subjective and in the eye of the beholder.

This idea of fixed and inviolate definitions of beauty must be resisted. These issues of subjective and absolute beauty are related misunderstandings. Beauty *is* subjective but this does not diminish its importance. This should be seen as the fallacy of a world view which overemphasises the non-subjective, the measurable and the absolute.

These, and other, false dichotomies about beauty are not common in the knowledge systems of India, which hold that beauty is an *experience* rather than simply the inherent quality of any object or thing. Objects can create the beauty experience in people and, like all experiences, the beauty experience is temporary and relational. This perspective has four dynamic relational values: balance; harmony; proportion and rhythm.

Two important points flow from this, both of which further emphasise the relational and dynamic qualities of beauty. Firstly, that different objects may create the beauty experience in different people. Secondly, that while the experience may be prompted by different stimuli, there are commonalities in this experience ie that the feelings are structurally similar across people, groups and cultures. These are imbued with the feelings of balance, harmony, proportionality and rhythm.

Deep beauty experiences in this view have the potential to induce *ananda* – a transformative bliss, capable of changing perspective. Therefore, while the beauty experience begins with the senses, it can also engage the intellect, cognition and induce shifts in consciousness. Since its qualities can also be integrative, it has the potential to reconcile what we think of opposites. For example, seeing death as an integral part of life could have a significant impact on how social, economic and medical systems are conceived and how they practice, seeking to balance and harmonise the relationship between these two aspects of life rather than eschewing one at the expense of the other.

As there is no absolute, timeless or permanent beauty, the fostering of beauty in architecture, design and social and economic systems can become an engaging and democratising priority. Since it is about relational qualities it provides a relational and holistic value system through which the interconnectedness of life is acknowledged and nurtured, again with an emphasis on balance, harmony, proportion and rhythm. With such an understanding of beauty it becomes useful to ask questions such as - 'Is this economic policy balanced?' and 'Is the manufacture of this product appropriate in its relation to the environment?' and so on. Such a perspective can be constructively used in any field of human endeavour.

We find ourselves at a crossroads. We can, as some suggest, try to return to where we were before our current crisis began or we can start on a path which leads towards beauty, sustainability and happiness. To pursue the later course, we need to create small and large scale initiatives which highlight the possibilities of this approach; one such idea could be the development of a 'Glasgow Beauty Card'.

The Glasgow Beauty Card

In a world where too much work or too little work can cause frustration and unhappiness for many, one way to encourage the beauty experience would be to present every Glaswegian over the age of six with a credit card 'pre-loaded' with a set amount of money, for example £150 per annum, which is solely available to pay for cultural events like the theatre or a music concert or to buy items such as books, arts and crafts. This would encourage people to become more *informed*, in the particular sense of the word ie 'they form differently inside'. It could stimulate the arts and culture sector by potentially injecting a further £75million into it – further indicating the value of such activities in the city and creating a common bond of belonging among Glaswegians.

The opportunities that such a card would create could stimulate wellbeing, health and happiness. Such a scheme across the UK would cost approx £7.5 billion, a fraction of the £20 billion recently expended to 'prop up' a single bank. Would it provide a more beautiful way to address the challenges which we currently face?

The views expressed in this paper are those of the speaker and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.

Summary prepared by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.