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The Digital Divine: Ideal Form in an Alpha-numeric Age

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Abstract: In an era of postmodern digital branding, classical ideals of truth and beauty once revered by the ancient Greeks and later so eloquently championed by the likes of Keats and Blake, now might appear as forlorn and forgotten as Ozymandias lying deserted and abandoned in the desert of antediluvian dreams. The notion that universal truth can be found in a Grecian Urn no longer resonates with audiences conditioned as consumers to see art as commodity and classical beauty as the raw material of millennial marketers. Yet despite the backlash against classical aesthetics and culture's march toward a more inclusive, non-elitist understanding of art (Foster 66), there remains ample evidence that ideal beauty's influence is still very much alive and well and reflected in contemporary digital culture. Not unlike classical civilization, digital culture continues to employ mathematical Golden Rules to produce virtual gods in our own image, achieving in cyberspace what Blake once characterized as "representations of spiritual existences, of gods immortal...embodied and organized in solid marble." This paper will explore classical Greek archetypes of order, balance and harmony as reflected in contemporary digital media culture, arguing that in an age when art has become synonymous with branding, ideal beauty not only plays a central role in its promulgation but—most significantly—as digital culture merges body and computer chip through motion capture technology, touch-sensitive screen art, Second Life, gaming and ultimately bio-engineering, increasingly, ideal beauty becomes the norm, endowing even the frailest of mortals with god-like characteristics.

Keywords: Digital, Classical, Beauty

Contrary to public opinion, you really can squeeze your soul through a keyboard and produce something as passionate, positive and profound as any physical work. The computer is easy. Art is hard."

Chrome Underwood (painter, mixed media and Second Life digital artist)

THE PAST FORTY years have not been kind to the aesthetic vision associated with ideal beauty and the philosophy of rational humanism from which it took inspiration. Dave Beech writes in his introduction to *Beauty: Documents in Contemporary Art* that "neither beauty nor art have come through avant-gardist rebellion and modern social disruption unscathed. Their special relationship has, as a result, become estranged and tense" (Beech 12). The commodification of art through mass-production and—more recently—branding, as well as the withering critiques of postmodern cultural analyses, begun in earnest during the Seventies, have re-presented beauty not as pleasure but as the re-actionist construct of powerful elites. As Beech points out, "Beauty might seem like something that we know when we see it, but the hermeneutics of suspicion refers such experiences to hidden motives, unintended consequences, structural conditions and spurious rationalizations" (Beech 16).

The purpose of this brief paper is not to resurrect an aspersed aesthetic in an age of deconstructed privilege, cyber-cynicism and postmodern irony, nor is it to deny that beauty is now conjoined as much to commerce as culture. My goal is not to challenge the Foucaults, Adornos and Derridas of Post-Modern scholarship, nor do I wish to resurrect unitary Modernism, Phoenix-like, from the ashes of social and political deconstruction. Rather, as this paper will argue, the ground is not yet frozen over the crypt of Emily Dickinson who “died for Beauty” (Dickenson 204). Despite the seeming wholesale rejection of classical aesthetics as a viable philosophy, and despite Jurgen Habermas’ belief that modernism is dead (Foster 5), there is ample artistic evidence to suggest that the quest for beauty through ideal form, with its emphasis on mathematical order, balance and harmony, is integral to the aesthetic of contemporary digital algorithmic culture.

In virtually all realms of human investigation, the quest for an ideal remains a pervasive force in human striving, inspiration and progress. Galileo saw elegance in universal formulas; Einstein, beauty in scientific investigation; Olympic athletes, in surpassing previous records and personal bests. As well, companies improve their products, doctors seek better treatments and societies try to end wars, poverty and pollution in the hope of returning order, balance and harmony to a beleaguered world. Ancient Greek sculptors extracted art from marble and other raw materials, drawing from multiple subject sources in the search for ideal form. Classical Western art, from the Renaissance on, resumed this pursuit of aesthetic balance, order and harmony, distilling it through the philosophy of humanism, which maintains mankind can be improved through the application of reason. According to humanism, the symbolic ideals of truth and beauty associated with this vision can be expressed through artistic works. As Kenneth Clark suggests in *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* “A mass of naked figures does not move us to empathy, but to disillusion and dismay. We do not wish to imitate; we wish to perfect” (Clark 6). Further, Clark argues that the underlying motivation for human improvement and its representation through idealized form is rooted in the simple pleasure that it affords. In describing the *Ephebe* of Kritios, a statue that he considers “the first beautiful nude in art,” he observes thus: “Here for the first time we feel the passionate pleasure in the human body familiar to all readers of Greek literature” (Clark 34). By discarding the ideal in art in a quest for inclusiveness, do we not deprive ourselves of the innate pleasure derived from the act of aesthetic enhancement?

In “A Short Organum for the Theatre,” Bertholt Brecht is equally emphatic about the pursuit of pleasure in art when he states, “Even when people speak of higher and lower degrees of pleasure, art stares impassively back at them; for it wishes to fly high and low and to be left in peace, so long as it can give pleasure to people” (Willet 181). More recently, in *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why*, ethnographer Ellen Dissanayake probes the psychology of pleasure in art-making by arguing that “the elements used for making something aesthetically special are normally themselves inherently pleasing and gratifying to humans... These pleasing characteristics are those that would have been selected-for in human evolution as indicating that something is wholesome and good” (Dissanayake 54).

Like art, entertainment is similarly aligned with pleasure, since by definition, art, entertainment and pleasure “occupy agreeably” and cause a “feeling of satisfaction” (OED 450, 1049) and routinely mine the intrinsic delights found in the contemplation of aesthetic beauty. As art becomes increasingly commoditized and branded in a postmodern age and popular entertainment continues to absorb art’s influences, both find consensus in aesthetic pleasure.

Consumers of popular entertainments such as film and television might well conclude that images of violence, crime and human misery that ubiquitously dominate the popular aesthetic landscape are counter-intuitive to order, balance and harmony and have little if anything to do with pleasure or beauty. Yet, that same dramatized struggle to restore order, balance and harmony to the lives of the characters is a quest for beauty through its absence. For instance, in Orson Welles' Brechtian-inspired *Lady from Shanghai*, Everyman protagonist Michael O'Hara, played by Welles, literally enters Brecht's theatre of alienation—the Chinese theatre—and later descends into the underworld, Hades: an Orpheus in search of his Euripides, ideal beauty here being represented by Rita Hayworth. Employing the then avant-garde aesthetics of German Expressionism, Dali-esque Surrealism and Duchamp-inspired Cubism, *The Lady from Shanghai* eventually sees the protagonist re-emerge from darkness to the light, to a world of restored order, balance and harmony, as his femme fatale goddess lies lifeless in the fun-house Hades of her own manufacture. The film morphs into a meditation on beauty seen through its absence: a discourse on the relative pleasures of an ethical versus an immoral life. In this way, Welles' film simultaneously functions both as entertainment and art.

The classical dramatic aesthetic seeks to restore order, balance and harmony, (i.e., beauty and its bi-product pleasure) to a world continually fraught with challenges of war, crime, poverty and other social injustices, at the heart of media narratives. It informs not only police procedurals and other dramatic entertainments such as *CSI*, *Mad Men*, *The Sopranos* and *Dexter*, but also the socially aware documentary, news and current affairs programming, the images of photojournalists and new media blogs, as well as the conceptual creations of inter-disciplinary artists, gamers and virtual art communities. Underlying each artistic statement is an implicit recognition of, and striving for, expression of the metaphorical ideal.

To produce today's digital art, interactive or otherwise, creative energy passes through binary coding or as Lev Manovich characterizes it in *The Language of New Media*, "code and image coexist" (Manovich 331). This embedded relationship between artist and programmer through software encoding informs an aesthetic of re-imaging, retouching and re-purposing. Computer software with its infinite matrix of Pythagorean and fractal harmonies functions as an alpha-numeric tool to enhance data, producing works that ultimately express a more ideal form. Increasingly, applied and fine art design, photography, animation, live action, art and entertainment are filtered through these digital processes, as a few keystrokes now routinely transmute commonplace images into ethereal panoramas and the mere mortal into a digital Dionysius.

The digital aesthetic, informed by a programming culture steeped in binary logic, is a systemic expression of mathematical balances, orders and harmonies—arguably the building blocks of classical truth and beauty. A recent study conducted by Reber, Brun and Mitterdorfer and reported in *ScienceDaily* on November 24, 2008, argues that the classical notion of beauty as truth can be empirically established through a phenomenon the authors refer to as "the processing fluency theory of beauty." Conducting two quantitative peer-reviewed studies, the researchers observed that symmetry, a quality closely associated with classical beauty, serves as a cue in mathematical problem solving. The study also demonstrated that the speed of processing increases when the numbers are seen to be symmetrical, suggesting that symmetry plays an important role in discovering answers or truths.

The role of symmetry in the creation of mathematically inspired beauty is further revealed by Taylor, Micolich and Jonas, who, in 1999, demonstrated through fractal geometry analysis

that abstract expressionist Jackson Pollack created his iconic spatter paintings, not in a random manner as generally assumed, but by employing symmetrical techniques resulting in “repetitive, cumulative, ‘continuous dynamic’ painting” and that “his approach from all four sides replicated the isotropy and homogeneity of many natural patterns.” If symmetry is in fact a demonstrable characteristic found in both software design and classical beauty, then arguably, digital art by its very nature and processes of enhancement, mimics a classical aesthetic.

Today’s digital artist paints on an electrified canvas, utilizing a pallet of computer-generated pixels to enhance the real. Through this ordinal process, the artist moves closer to his or her envisioned ideal and by doing so, enters into an alpha-numeric meditation on beauty or its absence. In digital art creation, software informs the aesthetic, but it remains the artist’s task to progressively add or subtract in a continuous search for the virtual ideal.

As digital artist Dimitrios Loumiotis suggests when describing his own process:

“The virtual 3D forms, which exist in three-dimensional environments, have no fixed countenance; they change material stance and colour. They are under constant improvement and the uncertainty of their completion commits the artist to never-ending experimentation. While searching for methods and material, the artist either borrows or produces himself, he constantly adds and takes away in order to impart perfection.”

Loumiotis’ process of constant addition and subtraction, consistent with a mathematically inspired digital aesthetic based on code and database, is effectively illustrated in a recent series of meditative studies entitled “Project Immortality 2011.” Through physiologically inspired digital manipulations, Loumiotis painstakingly augments a gigantic head that evokes a twenty-first century alpha-numeric Ozymandias set in a barren desert, conjuring surreal meditative landscapes out of various organic forms.

Project Immortality 2011 reflects Dissanayake’s theories of creative process; of “making special” the ordinary through a transformative methodology (Dissanayake 51). Consistent with the urge toward enhancement as part of an overarching aesthetic philosophy, Dissanayake argues that aesthetic processes are fundamentally driven by the gratification they produce in the emotional, cognitive and perceptual sense. If this is so, such refinements must first be informed by an objective, or else there is no way of measuring relative success. The model, the archetype, the essence, the exemplar, the ultimate, the superlative—the ideal—serve as that benchmark. Although unattainable, the ideal establishes a standard by which the work’s comparative merits and pleasures can be assessed.

Through the practice of enhancing and refining work, whether it be a cave drawing, an action painting, a text-driven installation piece or a digital blog, each developer/artist follows a similar creative process of gradual enhancement leading him or her a step at a time toward a more fully realized creative sensibility. With the emergence of interactive virtual environments and social media, the creative, meditative, “making special” process is extended to the audience, potentially fulfilling Brecht’s twentieth century vision of an actively engaged spectator who instead of passively identifying with the character on stage, becomes immersed in a process of self and collective discovery, using the aesthetic signposts planted by the originating author as catalysts in that pleasurable exploration. In the twenty-first century, interactive game designers create cyber surrogates to explore physically dangerous and morally troubling virtual environments, often imbuing their avatars with super-human qualities consistent with those of the ancient Greek gods. In these virtual environments, truth

is sought not by contemplating the ideal but by sharing in the aesthetic process that leads to its fulfillment.

Current fractal inspired digital culture increasingly merges body and computer chip through motion capture technology and touch-sensitive screens, cybernetics, 360-degree IPIX technology, 3D imaging and a host of other advanced software tools, yet whether we don a tribal mask or masquerade in Second Life, we still express ourselves through enhancement, and through that process we move one step closer to the ideal. Renaissance artists who revisited the ancient Greek ideals of beauty might well have embraced digital software in the same way they adopted the camera obscura. Both media tools are mathematically “programmed” to enhance aesthetic expression: the camera obscura through geometric extension, the computer through alpha-numeric manipulation—their underlying technologies serving to heighten order, balance and harmony, beauty’s symmetrical building blocks. As Clark observes: “The Greeks perfected the nude in order that man might feel like a god, and in a sense this is still its function, for although we no longer suppose that God is like a beautiful man, we still feel close to divinity in those flashes of self-identification when, through our own bodies, we seem to be aware of a universal order” (Clark 370).

Artists create because they must. The internalized mediated process of artistic creation and the fundamental human desire to improve, augment, enrich and enhance the world is a constant, regardless of the dictates of commerce, the paradigm shifts of artistic avant-gardism, social and political agendas or the ever-evolving technologies that inform and create new and novel arts and entertainments. Whether expressed through polished marble or cybernetic ephemera, the artist’s universal, creative, intuitive, reflective and potentially transformative processes remains rooted in a fundamental human desire to imagine beyond what is toward what might be.

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About the Author

Prof. David L. Tucker

David Tucker holds a terminal degree in Interdisciplinary Fine Arts and an Honours BFA in Film. He is also a Gemini Award-winning filmmaker. As past Chair of Radio & Television Arts at Ryerson, David spearheaded the development of its first graduate program in Media Production. Before joining Ryerson, David served as the Associate Dean of Media at Sheridan College in Oakville, Ontario, where he helped to launch Sheridan's Centre for Animation & Emerging Technology. A frequent contributor to CBC-TV's *The Nature of Things* with David Suzuki, David has also written, produced and directed a MOW, created arts specials, won numerous international awards including a Gracie and a Prix Leonardo and had work screened at Hot Docs. A member of the Documentary Organization of Canada, the Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television and the Writer's Guild of Canada, David

was recently an associate producer on the feature-length documentary, *Force of Nature*, premiered at TIFF 2010. David teaches documentary and media aesthetics at the graduate and undergraduate level in RTA and Image Arts. He has presented numerous papers on media aesthetics at international conferences and been published in academic journals including at the Sorbonne in Paris.



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