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Willy Legrand, Robert Schønrock Nielsen,

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TOWARDS A RESPONSIBLE EXPERIENCE ECONOMY: ETHICS THROUGH AESTHETICS IN TOURISM

Willy Legrand and Robert Schønrock Nielsen

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we investigate the connection between ethics and aesthetics with a supporting case from the international tourism industry. Researchers in sustainable tourism have ignored, resisted or simply been reluctant to include the aesthetic perspective in the analysis of sustainable development, social responsibility or climate adaptation. The consequence is that we know very little about the ways aesthetic affects ethical considerations among guests and travellers. A more comprehensive reconciliation of the ethical and aesthetic dimensions may lead to the recognition that a stronger emphasis on aesthetics can enhance the guest's experience of sustainable tourism within a responsible experience economy. We argue that this economy can thrive under sophisticated capitalism.

Keywords: Sustainability; experience economy; aesthetic versus ethics; tourism industry; Tivoli Gardens

INTRODUCTION

Aesthetics is a 'branch of philosophy devoted to conceptual and theoretical inquiry into art and aesthetic experience' (Levinson, 2005, p. 1). In particular, aesthetics is concerned with the creation and appreciation of beauty. Within the tourism context, this could mean the enjoyment of natural landscape, the pleasure in discovering new food or the delight from attentive service. And if the

sole aim of tourists is enjoyment, then ‘it would be foolish to be scrupulous about the means for getting it’ (Kant, 1790, p. 50). And so, the aesthetic domain in modern times has a potential unethical bias and is possibly linked to an unsustainable consumption of abundance where the purpose is simply to satisfy a particular taste or create a particular mood within the consumer – independent of the consequences to the planet and its inhabitants.

Our immediate assumption, however, is that the aesthetic consciousness (Gadamer, 1900–2002) plays a significant role in the advances of sustainable development in the hospitality industry (Gadamer, [1960] 2013). The presence of an aesthetic awareness among hoteliers, executives and employees who are already aware of sustainability may be an advantage when the task is to make the hotel’s sustainability policy and operations attractive and visible to guests. For example, green architecture and eco-design found in ecolodges and urban ecohotels are setting trends in hospitality (e.g. Legrand, Sloan, & Chen, 2017; Mieder, 2018; Von Freyberg & Schmidt, 2018) and create a connection between the aesthetic and the ethical. This is a breaking down of barriers between aesthetics and ethics. Aesthetic awareness may play an even more important role in the hospitality industry compared to other industries since guests enter an architectural space containing a number of design constructions creating a unique experience atmosphere but also driving the choice of hotels in the first place. It is our goal to present our theory for a possible theoretical alignment of the aesthetic and ethical dimensions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Aestheticization of Economy

If we turn to the literature of sociology and philosophy, both Zygmunt Bauman (1925–2017) and Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) share the perception that aesthetics contains a built-in unethical component (Bauman, 1993; Levinas, 1989). Bauman bases parts of his sociological thinking on Levinas’ proximity ethics. In proximity ethics, an individual tends to give greater priority and consideration to an issue the closer the impacted person or group is to the individual. Thus, the ethical responsibility towards another human being is related to proximity (Bauman, 1993; Levinas, 1991). According to Bauman’s and Levinas’ phenomenological perspectives on the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, the aesthetic dimension does not in any way redeem ethical responsibility between humans. Bauman emphasizes that aestheticization of urban space is an *entertainment dimension* overriding all other considerations, including ethical considerations (Bauman, 1995). Bauman specifically refers to the tourist who, during his travels, creates an own aesthetic space where the ethical dimension is absent (Bauman, 1993). The author concludes that tourism is the main example of the divide between aesthetics and ethics in the postmodern society (Bauman, 1993). Bauman discusses the *aesthetic enjoyment of the city* and the *aesthetic sense of the world* as expressions of an aestheticization of society and the economy (Bauman, 1993). The ‘experience economy’, coined by Pine and Gilmore (1999),

can be considered as an example of the aestheticization of economy. By connecting aesthetics and entertainment, we can argue that Bauman attacks the very fundament of the experience economy, where aesthetics and entertainment together with learning and escapism are the four central domains in the theory (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Pine & Gilmore, 2011).

Sociologist Georg Simmel (1858–1918) was, similar to Bauman, sceptical of the significant status of aesthetics in the urban space, since it reduces people's attention to each other and leads to the absence of an ethical concern towards people who need to be cared about (Simmel, [1900] 2011). Philosopher and cultural theorist Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) follows a similar logic to Simmel in the incomplete masterpiece *The Arcades Project*. Here aesthetics has become a commodity, similar to the consumables, when the author discusses the effect of passing through glass-covered square halls of nineteenth century Paris (Benjamin, [1940] 2002). In this sense, *The Arcades Project* can be regarded as the first major work of the experience economy, where the aesthetic consumer-experience is central to Benjamin's comprehensive and refined cultural analysis (Benjamin, [1940] 2002). Benjamin was originally the inventor behind the concept of aestheticization, named originally the *aestheticization of politics* and used in a critical analysis of fascist ideology (Martin, 1992). Cultural theorist Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969), the same generation of aesthetics-thinkers as Benjamin, argues in that landscape with natural beauty appears to be a silent privilege for humans (Adorno, [1970] 2002). The aesthetic dimension puts the viewer into a particular mood that leads to well-being, whether it is a nature experience, a visit to an art museum or during a visit to an amusement park containing various aesthetic instruments. Regardless of the aesthetic dimension's indisputable qualities of contributing to individual pleasure and well-being, there are doubts remaining about the status of ethics and ethical horizon. Can one justifiably talk about ethics with an aesthetic consciousness or aesthetics with an ethical approach to life? We can reasonably suppose that it is meaningful to combine the two phenomena.

Søren Kierkegaard's Concept of Aesthetics and Ethics

The considerations about the relationship between aesthetic and ethics are studied most closely by Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855). Kierkegaard is regarded as the founder of existentialism, and as a forerunner to other significant philosophers such as Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980). Kierkegaard's analysis of the aesthetic and ethical is mostly concentrated in the work *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, first published in 1843 (Kierkegaard, [1843] 2004). Kierkegaard develops 'dialectical progression of existential stages' (McDonald, 2017, p. 9) whereby the aesthetist gives way to the ethicist which gives way to the religious stage (McDonald, 2017). According to Kierkegaard, the aesthetist is fascinated by all the beautiful and is on an ongoing pursuit of enjoyment and experiences that can enrich life (Kierkegaard, [1843] 2004). The aesthetic stage is also defined as the following: 'immersion in sensuous experience; valorization of possibility over actuality; egotism; fragmentation of the subject of experience; nihilistic wielding of irony

and scepticism; and flight from boredom' (McDonald, 2017, p. 9). Another characteristic of the aesthetist is that he is subject to external factors as the outer existence is believed to be more important than a reflection on one's way of living (Grøn, 2008; Kierkegaard, [1843] 2004). The aesthetist is indifferent to anything but the aesthetic view of the world (Kierkegaard, [1843] 2004). The aesthetist finds it hard to give up his drive for enjoyment (hedonism), but risks, at the same time, facing boredom and despair once the aesthetic pleasures are exhausted, which Kierkegaard denotes as a feeling of the dizziness of freedom (Kierkegaard, [1844] 2014). In fact, Kierkegaard's presentation of the aesthetic view of life contains several stages where the aesthetist eventually – at the final stage – faces emptiness, thus sensing despair over the lack of coherence and direction in life (Grøn, 2008). Contrary to the aesthetist, the ethicist is oriented towards a general accomplishment which means showing an engagement and a responsibility in life that stretches beyond oneself and points towards the common good (Kierkegaard, [1843] 2004). Kant had developed, in the late eighteenth century, already the disinterest thesis which is 'that pleasure in the beautiful is disinterested' (Shelley, 2017, p. 5). According to Kant, 'pleasure involved in judging an object to be beautiful is disinterested because such a judgment issues in no desire to do anything in particular' (Kant, 1790 in Shelley, 2017, p. 6). In contrast, 'the pleasure involved in judging an action to be morally good is interested because such a judgment issues in a desire to bring the action into existence, i.e., to perform it' (Kant, 1790 in Shelley, 2017, p. 6). Consequently, the argument is made that once an individual is judging an action to be morally good, the same individual realizes the inherent duty or willingness to perform the morally good action. In other words, 'to become so aware is to gain a desire to perform it' (Kant, 1790 in Shelley, 2017, p. 6). This provides some of the basic understandings between the aesthetist and the ethicist.

Assumption and Research Question

In this paper, we investigate the experience economy based on an analytical distinction between the aesthetic and ethical. We examine the assumption that ethics can be achieved through the aesthetic, despite the fact that philosophers and sociologists have long regarded the two philosophical phenomena as contradictory and highly incompatible. The assumption leads us to the following research questions:

- RQ1.** *Are distinctions between aesthetic and ethics relevant in a responsible experience-economy context?*
- RQ2.** *How can we create a bridge between aesthetic awareness and ethical considerations in the tourism context?*

Since the experience economy in a sociological and philosophical optic can be seen as an expression of an aestheticization of the economy, the purpose of the conceptual paper is to analyse the ethics status within the experience economy. The questions intend to improve the underlying value dimension in the experience economy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Kierkegaard's View of the Experience Economy

In the transition from the aesthetist to the ethicist, Kierkegaard discusses the qualitative leap between the different views of life, for example from the aesthetist to the ethicist to the religious stages (Kierkegaard, [1844] 2014). A qualitative leap is an expression of a change in the individual self. The individual self can be changed through life-defining choices – for example where the consequences of these choices result in another self (Grøn, 2008). When an aesthetist suddenly feels a duty towards the well-being of others, the individual self transforms qualitatively. The main difference between the aesthetist and the ethicist is that sense of duty (Kierkegaard, [1849] 2008). There are still questions as to whether Kierkegaard's distinction between the aesthetist and ethicist captures the nuances within each of the two categories and complexities between the two forms of views of the world. However, Kierkegaard is fully aware of the grey areas between those two categories. He recommends that each individual create an appropriate equilibrium between the aesthetic and ethical dimension in the development of one's own personality (Kierkegaard, [1859] 2009). Within an economic and experience context, Kierkegaard characterizes the guests visiting the – at that time – newly-opened Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen as individuals who are lost in adversity and entertainment (Kierkegaard, [1846] 2013; Pattison, 2013). According to the philosopher's assessment, the guests of the Tivoli Gardens exemplify the aesthetic stage with carefree approach to existence, orientated towards the pleasures and enjoyments in the city life in the mid-nineteenth century.

The Responsible Effort of Tivoli Gardens

Kierkegaard did not consider the social value that entertainment can add to the life of individuals. However, based on his idea of balancing aesthetic and ethical traits in personality, we can define a guest wandering the Tivoli Gardens as an aesthetic ethicist or an ethical aestheticist, since he or she is entertained by an amusement park that makes clear efforts in environmental, social and economic sustainability (Legrand et al., 2017). Since 2009, the Tivoli Gardens, which turned 170 years old in 2013, operates its own urban wind turbine that produces electricity for respectively lighting in the Gardens, its rides and restaurants; it also has a 'no thank you' policy towards disposable cups (Tivoli, 2016). Tivoli Gardens' electricity consumption is based on renewable energy sources and is supported by energy-efficient equipment such as LED bulbs for lighting up the park. The reduced environmental impact is combined with a social effort to recruit staff of diverse backgrounds. From a procurement policy point of view, organic products represent a large part of the total food served in the park, and the goal is to expand organic food sales in the coming years (Tivoli, 2016). These can all be considered steps towards a responsible experience economy.

Heavily inspired by Kierkegaard's reflections on the relationship between aesthetics and ethics, we propose a personal statement that moderates the otherwise sharp distinction between the aesthetic and ethical view of life while speaking of

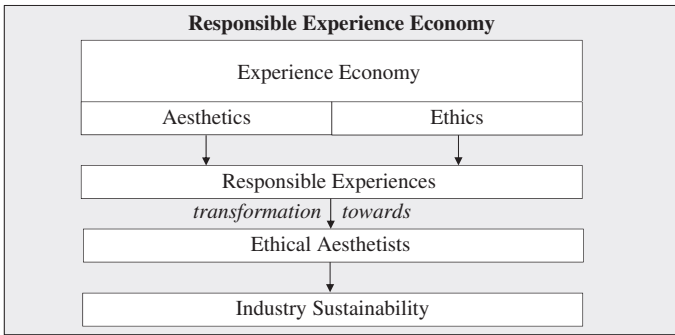


Fig. 1. The Ethical Aesthetist and Responsible Experience Economy Framework.

the *ethical aesthetist* or the *aesthetic ethicist*. We will choose the term *ethical aesthetist* for this paper. The idea of ethical aesthetist seems to be in line with a perspective of a more responsible experience economy. The ethical aesthetist personified as the guest at Tivoli Gardens can be defined as a consumer identity attracted by the experience of the beautiful, but at the same time is committed to demonstrate behaviours that support social cohesion and chooses services and products that do not undermine the fragile ecological system, as exemplified in Fig. 1.

Towards a Responsible Experience Economy

In Benjamin's book *The Arcades Project*, presented earlier in the paper, we remember that glass-and iron-covered shopping passages are of seminal importance in terms of aesthetics. Inspired by Benjamin's discussion of nineteenth century passages, taking into consideration that aesthetic should not be an experience at the expense of ethics, we suggest that the Tivoli Gardens' commitment to sustainability can be seen as a route from the aesthetical dimension towards the ethical dimension. The Tivoli Gardens' combination of aesthetic experiences on the one hand (we recommend the reader to wander the many flowery alleys during springtime) and sustainability on the other hand is an attempt to unite the otherwise distinct aesthetic and ethical domains. Amusement parks such as the Tivoli Gardens but also other companies within the event industry have gained increased attention in recent years on designing events that are socially and environmentally sustainable (Getz, 2005). Green events have emerged as a response to pressure from the political level as well as from guest and other stakeholders in society that demand a more responsible approach towards the production and consumption of events (Laing & Frost, 2010). In Britain, the experience economy's efforts to take a broader responsibility in society has resulted in a standard ISO 20121, which is based on BS8901 developed and controlled by the British Standard Institute (BSI). The standard ensures that companies or organizations managing events do so in a sustainable and efficient manner (BSI, 2018). This systematic effort on turning the

experience economy into a responsible direction demonstrates that at the practical level there are no contradictions between an aesthetic awareness and the range of ethical considerations that companies and guests engage in the selling and buying experiences.

Responsible Experience Economy as Part of a Sophisticated Capitalism

Tivoli Gardens' involvement in sustainability demonstrates, similar to other businesses, that the *responsible* can be part of the *experience economy*. The company understands how to restore the fabric of society before it becomes damaged beyond repair. Using the credo 'doing good by doing business', it is often asked whether it even is possible to combine the needs of communities and society at large while at the same time delivering on the economic pillar, including positive financial results. Based on a combination of elements gathered from Reinhardt Koselleck's (1923–2006) conceptual history, Hartmut Rosas's idea of acceleration as well as insights from Michael E. Porter and Mark R. Kramer's work on creating shared value (CSV) and discussion on the status of contemporary capitalism, we propose an answer on this question.

Considering the emergence of *sustainability* as a social phenomenon, the concept itself has demonstrated superior semantic strength since its introduction to the public back in the 1980s and definition in 'Our Common Future' report (WCED, 1987). By referring to Koselleck's theory on 'history of concepts' (originally referred to *Begriffsgeschichte* in German), we can argue that the successful evolution of sustainability during the last decades is a result of a semantic battle between concepts and counter-concepts (Koselleck, 2004). After all, who has not heard the word 'sustainability' used to define pretty much anything as long as it made sense to the user of the term. Statements such as *this is a sustainable car*; *this bank has sustainable profits*; *this hotel is sustainable* are commonly used. In fact, by the second decade of the 2000s, the mass media was already noting that the word *sustainable was becoming unsustainable* (e.g. DuFault & Kho, 2015; Gerard, 2008; Grover, 2012; Novacovici, 2013). And this is quite normal as society is on the brink of global challenges such as climate changes due to human activities and thus debates are open about the best course of action to be taken, both individually and as a society. This debate also includes the meaning of words such as the difference and meaning of *weather* versus *climate*, for example. And so, the semantic competition between concepts is a struggle that unfolds beyond competition between companies on a market or the political rivalry between a government and opposition (Koselleck, 2004). In this sense, we have two sets of competitions. Firstly, a form of invisible competition based on symbols and significance. A company must find the most appropriate set of values, virtues, attitudes, opinions or meanings, and protect (and perhaps fight for) those against competitors' own set of values. Secondly, we have a more visible competition, usually measurable, such as market shares, customer satisfaction and profitability. Our argument is that the semantic battle between companies – such as the understanding of what 'sustainability is' – is the foundation of competitiveness on the visible or observable level (Cassirer, 1953). A

company such as the Tivoli creates a kind of semantic-based resonance where the implementation of sustainable practices is resonated back where guests and other stakeholders find the initiatives to be of significant importance to the local community, or to society in general.

If we raise the perspective of sustainability and the idea of ethics through aesthetics to the social level, we can argue that the experience economy, whether it takes responsibility or not, is naturally an important part of the capitalistic market system. In the aftermath of the global financial crisis in 2011, Porter and Kramer argued that capitalism, as a societal and economic system, finds itself in a serious legitimacy crisis. The core argument is that companies fail to solve the many social and environmental challenges faced by the markets in which they operate. In fact, should the social, environmental and climatic challenges remain unresolved, the foundation of capitalism risks being undermined in the long term (Porter & Kramer, 2011). Porter and Kramer emphasize that prerequisites for recovering some of the lost legitimacy and creating new global economic growth are more fluid boundaries between companies and communities that together create shared value and integrated profit maximization (Porter & Kramer, 2011). We suggest that there is a demand for a more sophisticated capitalism in terms of a socially inclusive and environmentally orientated capitalism. Such capitalism must be combined with a strong sensitivity towards understanding cultural roots and attributes in society. *Sophisticated capitalism* might be the terminology to be used particularly as Porter and Kramer argued for a higher form of capitalism based on joint company and community value creation where profit is included a social purpose (2011). Unlike the mainstream capitalism based on short-term profit maximization and fast exchanges of commodities, companies acting and operating in a sophisticated capitalism model seem to have a deeper linkage to the values stored in local communities as well as in the broader society.

In a similar argumentation and according to Hartmut Rosa, we live in a high-speed society, where acceleration of social changes combined with accelerating rate of technological innovation and acceleration of pace of life risks destroying the social fabric within society (Rosa, 2010). Indeed, Rosa argues that a society is defined by the fabric of social associations, groups and role patterns, but that the fabric that binds respectively the individual, the community and society together in an organic whole and ensures the evolution of society risks being torn apart due to the several accelerations mentioned above (Rosa, 2009). The combination of different acceleration processes within contemporary capitalism and in society in general makes companies choose to either ignore or overlook the importance of understanding the layer of silent values and tacit knowledge stored in the fabric of local communities (Petersen, 2002). Those silent values also sit in the broader society and are transmitted from generation to generation without ever being converted to explicit rules (Petersen, 2002). In a sophisticated capitalism, the values of the past are transmitted in one way or another and should provide a base on which societies can continue evolving to face the grand challenge where interests should be aligned for a greater impact, may it be individual, communities, government or businesses interests.

CONCLUDING REMARKS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

From a theoretical point of view, we propose that the ethical dimension can be reached by an aesthetic horizon even if a number of prominent thinkers would not agree with us. The distinction between the aesthetic and ethics that Benjamin, Simmel, Levinas and Bauman maintained through their respective authorship has lately become more porous and pervasive. Kierkegaard's argument about the importance of at least creating an appropriate balance between aesthetic and ethical seems to be more up to date with reality than the sharp distinctions between aesthetics and ethics that long have been drawn in the literature of social science, philosophy and culture studies. Tivoli Gardens' contribution to creating a more responsible experience economy where the company allows guests to be aestheticians while also being ethicists at the same time provides a concrete example. The guests at the Tivoli Gardens are no longer only aesthetists but ethical aesthetists. Tivoli is in more than one way a world of many ages, from the youngest to the oldest. In this regard, sustainable experiences or experience-based sustainability are not alone a corridor from aesthetics towards ethics but also a corridor of time from a present to a future state of sustainability.

This paper is based on theoretical considerations and the development of a conceptual framework which can serve for a future empirical study. This study should explore the relationship between aesthetics and ethics in the experience economy at a practice-based. We think that a combination of qualitative and quantitative research techniques should be oriented towards understanding the importance of a guest or traveller's aesthetics and ethics values in regard to responsible experiences. This understanding can help providers design the perfect experience in line with sustainability principles.

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