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1. How can we conceive of the interface between the aesthetic and strategic domains? Can beauty be a source of competitive advantage?

Of course beauty can be a source of competitive advantage. If given the opportunity, it is not unreasonable to expect a fair amount of people to be willing to pay a premium price for something beautiful (that they find beautiful, anyway), as long as it works (sometimes even if it does not), and they can afford it (sometimes even if they cannot).

Do we need quantitative evidence of it published on the *American Economic Review*? Or can we just accept that this is something that – to a different degree – happens for most consumer products (and probably, for many industrial or professional products too), and move on to more sophisticated questions like: what makes an object beautiful? What characterizes “timeless” beauty, from objects that are found beautiful in a particular time period? What makes an organization capable of systematically produce “beautiful” objects?

It almost seems unreal that in 2020 we are still discussing this. Is there really anyone who is still questioning the fact that many companies – say Braun under Dieter Rams, Alfa Romeo or Lancia in their golden eras, Apple, Bang & Olufsen and many other companies – managed to gain an edge over their competitors (also) because their design centers were able to systematically release products that were (among other things) aesthetically more pleasing than their competitors? These people should go out more often...

And by aesthetics, I do not only mean visual. Aesthetics – beauty in a broad sense – includes tactile, olfactory, and auditory experiences. The magic of the infra-red sliding doors of Bang & Olufsen CD players. The quality of the internal upholstery or wood insets of a luxury car, or the plastic surfaces of some Kartell chairs. Think about how trade publishers managed to revitalize the market for printed books with beautiful new editions, high-quality paper and binding, and gorgeous cover art. Think about the importance of artful covers for the popularity of some vinyls...

By the same token, not all that is visual purely matters for aesthetic reasons only – that is the intrinsic pleasantness of harmonious forms, organic shapes, etc. What we find visually attractive, exciting, stimulating in the visual appearance of products is also the symbolism that we associate with these forms. Remember the first iMac? Its colourful, rounded, translucent plastic case? Its enormous success – more than 8 million items sold around the world – was not only due to the intrinsic appeal of color, but also to the fact that it carried entirely different symbolic associations – play, fun, entertainment, as opposed to the office, work, technology signalled by the traditional design of personal computers. Associations that people felt more appropriate for objects ‘furnishing’ personal spaces and expressing personal identities.

And let’s not forget the importance of beautiful spaces. Yes, salary matters, but in the end it is not unreasonable to assume that the capacity of an organization to attract talent also depends on the beauty of the workplace environment: light, airy offices, with high quality furnishings and materials, pleasant décor. Even this, in the end, makes competitive advantage.

It could be argued that, in the end, beautiful it is but another source of differentiation, so it may not deserve particular attention. I find this statement myopic, because it fails to appreciate the importance of the cultural and the symbolic in shaping competition in several markets, of which “beauty” is but one manifestation.

2. Do you think the role of beauty in strategy and management has become more or less important over the last few decades?

Beauty – the aesthetic pleasantness of products – has always been important. Just look at the extraordinary success of William Morris – not only one of the intellectual leaders of the Arts and Craft movement in the late 19th century, but also an accomplished entrepreneur, selling at a hefty price a broad range of items for the house – designed by himself and manufactured in his artisanal workshops - to wealthy contemporaries.

What has changed in the last few decades is perhaps that more and more people can afford to pay the premium price that is often (but not necessarily) associated with aesthetically superior products (because of talent employed in designing them, the quality of manufacturing and materials, etc.). Designing beautiful objects can be quite expensive. If you visit the Alessi museum, for instance, you will have an idea of the amount of time and resources they invest in prototyping and developing the objects that finally enter their catalogue. As more and more people are willing to pay a premium price for beauty, so the relevance of beauty as source of competitive advantage increases.

3. Jim March espoused a vision of scholarship as containing aesthetic elements that approach it to art, encouraging the pursuit of beauty as well as of truth and justice. What is the "value" of beauty in scholarship and how can we make science more beautiful?

In my own scholarly activity, I constantly search for beauty.

Theoretically, for me, beauty lies in simplicity. A beautiful theory is usually a theory that offers a simple but compelling explanation to something that might have been puzzling us for a long time. It is not easy to do that, but occasionally I am pleased at the “beauty” of the theoretical explanations I can find for the patterns I observe – explanations that find simple ways to make sense of apparently inexplicable relationships or heterogeneous manifestations of a phenomenon.

Beauty may also lie in the narration of findings. I am a qualitative researcher, and storytelling is my trade. Whenever I craft the findings section of my papers, I not only try to produce compelling evidence for my interpretations, but also to offer readers a “beautiful” narrative, through a careful choice of wording, adjectives, details, and quotes.

Finally, beauty, may lie in the harmonious visual representation of an emerging theoretical framework. I spend a considerable amount of time experimenting with different visual solutions – streamlining, decluttering, carefully choosing shapes and sizes, ensuring symmetry and alignment. Sometimes, I try more than one visual representation – two, three, four, sometimes very different from one another – until I find something I am happy with.

I do not think I will ever be remembered for the depth or the originality of my theoretical insights, but I would be happy if I was remembered for the “beauty” of my papers. To the point that I have some publications that I am not entirely happy with because they are not as “beautiful” as I would have liked them to be.

Most of the time, the review process really helps bring the best out of one’s work. I was enlightened, years ago, by two reviewers simultaneously pointing out that one figure in the paper was not “elegant” – that completely changed the way I designed figures from then on! More dynamic, less cluttered, less clunky.

Sometimes, however, papers become over-reviewed, over-edited, and you are forced to produce unnecessarily convoluted and complicated – hence, no longer beautiful – analytical explanations, or to turn what were visually beautiful holistic grasps of a phenomenon, into more boring, very analytical graphs, almost resembling a flow chart.

Perhaps beauty requires a degree of undetermined-ness, a degree of intuitiveness. Pushing a theory to be too analytical, or a figure to account for too many steps and interactions may eventually take the “beauty” of the intuitive and the evocative out of them.

Then there are papers where I cannot blame anyone else but me, and my relatively lack of experience or poor choices in the visual representation or wording of a theory. I have at least a couple of papers that I would very much like to have a chance to amend, by changing the visuals. I actually give a seminar to our doctoral students where, among other things, I show them how I would design differently the figures of some of my paper, now that I am a little better at it!

4. If you have the necessary time and resources, what kind of research related to style and beauty would you engage in?

Ha, but I had and I did. I still have a paper about how design infuses products with valuable symbolism – and how organizations can do that systematically – that needs some quality time. A research from scratch? Perhaps I would like to learn more about what shapes our perception of beauty, apart from the well-known effect of symmetry, proportions, etc. But I suspect that lots have been done already in other disciplines. I just need to find the time to read more...