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'Poverty as Aesthetic Deprivation: empirical and theoretical issues' (Keynote address)

Aesthetics of Poverty: a Poverty Network meeting, 30th November 2017, Warwick Institute of Advanced Study, University of Warwick. (1)

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Preamble:

This paper emerged from a brief exchange in the context of the Warwick Global Research Priority in International Development (internal research network). The exchange left me with a general question: Can *aesthetics* play any meaningful role in International Development – research or strategy? Conceptually, the relation between research and strategy is a topic of interest in my own field of cultural policy studies, particularly pertaining to recent global trends in using arts, culture and creative industries as instruments of social and economic development; and of interest, of course, in relation to the work of global institutions like UNESCO and their various declarations and UN Conventions, like the 2005 *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions*. The world over, the arts and culture now function in three ways: (i) as stimulants of education, community and general civility (or citizenship); (ii) as forms of innovation and creativity for solving instrumental problems (particularly in developing urban economies, where skills and knowledge of new technologies are required); and (iii), of course, in start-up creative and media industries – particularly businesses that engage in, or support, international trade.

My contention in this paper is that the arts and culture are rarely cast in *their own terms* – in terms of their own productive potential, as distinctive or independent forms of cultural *value* or *value-creation* (involving experience, thought, interpretation, public reasoning and critical dissent from social norms, and a developing civil society around the kinds of cultural production that facilitate all these elements). And so theories of development (particularly in relation to poverty) too often position the arts and culture as marginal priorities – desirable but not essential in relation to the alleviation of poverty and deprivation. My interest here, is, of course, in conceptualising the arts and culture as *internal* to development policies on poverty and deprivation.

This is not to say that a researcher will not be able to locate truly impressive arts and culture for development all over the world. Here in Coventry two weeks ago we enjoyed the Rising Global Peace Forum, a showcase for so much powerful artistic engagement in development discourse. I currently have a research assistant who's regular occupation is for a cultural organisation in Phnom Penh called Cambodian Living Arts. The British Council, and many NGOs – like Manchester University's *In Place of War* project – undertake extraordinary projects. My argument in this paper is more general (on the practice) and more specific (on the theory) – that *there exists no theoretical basis for a policy infrastructure where the 'aesthetics' of arts and culture are articulated*. And we must make an immediate distinction between aesthetics and the global trend in 'creativity' (creative economy, creative cities, creative industries, and so on), which is, as we know, very popular with governments otherwise hostile to other expressions of civil society.

Assuming the absence of a theoretical basis for such a policy framework, I will not be looking at specific development policies, so my aims are more in the line of a scoping exercise or coordinating a small range of empirical and theoretical issues so as to define how aesthetics – as an historical concept – can generate specifically useful and credible terms for development. I use the term 'deprivation' in my title, as this is how poverty is articulated by Amartya Sen in his now famous *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (1982). Given the rise of the Human Development (HD) discourse as the principle articulation of the development *subject's* own role and position in relation to poverty-based development policy, I will situate my line of investigation within HD. What I find particularly attractive about the Human Development 'capabilities approach' is both the 'humanisation' of development, where development is defined in terms of individual human agency and not broad collective needs. I don't know how familiar you are with this – largely inspired by Sen's work, it has become a major dimension of UN development policy, with its famous annual report and Index – my interest will extend only to its central problematic: *human capability*. I'll come to this more specifically in the third and last part of this talk – the first two parts are about aesthetics: first, the concept of the aesthetic; and second, aesthetics as historical discourse.

Part 1: the troubling concept of 'aesthetics' We have to begin with the question on whether aesthetics is a delimited realm of human experience at all, and so an object of inquiry? One can use the phrase 'an aesthetics' of just about anything, insofar as aesthetics semantically refers to (etymologically, from the Gk *aesthesis*) sense-perception or the operation of the senses in the acquisition of meaning or cognition. In its Greek iteration (Plato's *Republic*, and his notorious Book X) it strongly connoted the expression and communication of emotion. And in our own time, aesthetics is used in physiology, behavioural psychology or the psychology of perception, and neuropsychology particularly, but in a more unqualified sense is applied as a prefix to many forms of cultural inquiry. We find aesthetics-like forms of inquiry in anthropology, philosophical phenomenology, the study of cultural memory (and its fascinating variants, like 'cultural trauma'), and the study of affective form, symbolic meaning or visual sense-making in contemporary Art History. Here, however, I want to consider the historical concept of aesthetics, which posits a distinctive (autonomous) realm of human experience and knowledge. In other words, it is not a *synonym* for the experience of the visual in general, or of affective visual communication. As an historical concept, aesthetics maintained two foci – (i) *form* (as in the form of nature, or form of a work of art) and (ii) *experience* (as in perception and cognition -- of form, but extending to the analysis or criticism of judgements of taste or discriminations in relation to form). Renowned philosophical works, like Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (Kritik der Urteilskraft: the 'Third Critique' of 1790) maintain a particular and complex understanding of the constitution of perception in relation to the cognition of form, and the implications of this for judgement, taste and critical thought – so much so, over 200 years later his text is still the subject of exegesis, not simply reference or interpretation. In the history of art, it is difficult to find a more significant term than 'form', in part as form has been defined through the enduring phenomenon of *beauty*. However, the phenomenon of beauty became a central problematic within cultural modernity by 1860 or even before (remember Courbet, then Manet), and more recently, has been excoriated (in part as a euphemism of the entire tradition of aesthetic inquiry) during the 1980s and 1990s by poststructuralists and postmodernists. The way beauty has come to be routinely derided as, at best crass ('kitsch') and at worse, masking domination through seduction (or appeals to a quasi-metaphysical order of 'human-nature'), still endures within development discourse. *Indeed, can beauty be admitted to representations of poverty and deprivation, and if not why not?* I would say that we would assume it to be offensive; for representations of poverty and deprivation must on principle, if not precaution, preclude cultural expressions involving beauty and the pleasures of form. But what if such cultural expression emerges from the subjects of development themselves? What would we say in the face of photographic expressions of beauty from a starving person in Malawi or Eritrea? On what grounds would we deny them such an exercise of agency, or assume them to be acting on false assumptions – unwitting agents of colonial domination?

What cultural rights do they indeed possess? This is something I wish to pursue, tangentially, but before I do we might well consider the 'controversy' of photographer Jimmy Nelson – who was (as far as one can tell) sincere in attempting to respect the autonomy of his subjects while expressing their visual beauty. His book (and subsequent website) *Before they Pass Away* (2009) comprise portraits of tribes and tribal cultures around the world (the Kalam of Indonesia and Papua New Guinea; the Kazakh tribe in Mongolia, and so on) all threatened by extinction because of poverty, deprivation or some other serious threat. As his images began to circulate, he was accused, among other things, of 'misrepresenting' his subjects and their desperate plight. But, in my view, where many of the criticisms were politically inappropriate (or at least non-cognisant of Nelson's artistic approach), they indicated a genuine problematic central to the visual construction of beauty in a contemporary

development context. Nelson's photographs are stunningly beautiful, so much so, the beauty is arresting and entirely satisfying of any other form of intellectual curiosity we may have (curiosity for who the subject is, what their particular plight is, and so on). I cannot offer a 'reading' of these images, but I will suggest that here beauty functions to activate the photograph as a field of exploration for *our own* visual desire, and in so doing does not provide the means or conditions for allowing the subjects' own articulation of social agency to find expression. The photographs, in making these indigenous or tribal peoples utterly sensually and stylistically beautiful, insert them into *our* world, not us into theirs. They demand no *cognitive interest or involvement on the part of the viewer as to our relation to them*.

And many of us remember, as undergraduates, our venerable professors declaring how the aesthetic was fundamentally ideological – in its power to substitute thought for feeling, masking the real nature of social agency, or the agency of nature, and thereby as an independent intellectual inquiry aesthetics had become critically bankrupt (unless, that is, aesthetics meant the philosophy of art or criticism i.e. as philosophy proper, which takes the phenomenon or discourse of 'aesthetic' as its object).

Broadly, the reasons were (and they were always broad) that (a) in the age of post-structuralism, no realm of experience was un-structured by language; aesthetics suggested a pre- or supra-linguistic sphere of experience, which offered a superior level of cognitive reflexivity (notions take up, as it happened, by phenomenology and then deconstruction on very different terms); and (b) the Post-modern cultural epoch was irrefutably dissolving the historical-institutional European value systems of taste and hierarchies of fine art through which philosophical aesthetics had forged its self-definition.

Here, I want to make another brief observation about development photography, and the way these two principles above became axiomatic to the pervasive influence of semiotics (not to one of the many specific disciplines of semiotic or semiosis analysis as such, but to the general philosophy of artistic practice that absorbed semiotics as axiomatic truths). Development photographers I have spoken to over the last ten years or so have, without a doubt, absorbed a general semiotic understanding of the visual, and this has happened symbiotically with the rise of normative discourses of human rights and gender equality, social justice and recognition. In the absence of a longitudinal study of development photography aesthetics, simply by extracting a random series of examples from sites like Guardian Global Development or the UNDP website, we can identify common characteristics, if not visual strategies and their animating consensus of pictorial values. The strategies carefully compose and crop the photograph to generate a visually striking unified image, with a single focal point, usually a human subject, who is not, however, separated visually from their community or environment. They are positioned, framed or asked to perform in such a way that they *represent* that community or environment – through physical proximity, gesture, situation or orientation; and furthermore, that human subject, even though their context of 'development' is one of poverty and deprivation, they are active agents of change – visually attractive, agile, and oriented in a way that suggests productive action. Of course, we can still find images of victims, death and destruction, but these tend only to be in contexts of disaster, aid and relief (like famine or war) rather than development per se. This situation contrasts, of course, to now famous BBC reportage and images of the 1970s, embedded in the minds of older generations like many of us, for example Michael Beurk's foreign correspondence on BBC News on the 1984 Ethiopian famine.

One example I like to discuss with my students is Annie Leibovitz's photo-shoot for Louise Vuitton 'Core Values' campaign in 2011 – Angelina Jolie had been an UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador since 2001 and active in Cambodia. I use this beautiful image to demonstrate the semiotic inseparability of aesthetic qualities from the symbolic language of Western humanitarianism as codified in particular orientations to gender (signs, codes and myths).

The pervasive assumption is, then, that 'aesthetics' is not a distinct category of analysis, because it is always inscribed within some or other discourse and power regime of representation – which becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We live in and through global mediascapes, as Arjun Appadurai (1990) would say; and the mediascape is replete with semiotically-constructed (not merely 'interpreted') imagery, which precludes of any sense of an independent aesthetic realm as a condition of empowering the agency of the subject so pictured (though of course, in this case the 'empowering' is symbolic only, as photography in itself does not involve a change in the material conditions of the subject or actual change, even though it hopes to playing a role in affecting such). But at what cost, we may ask? Do we miss anything by losing the aesthetic? Without gesturing to a theory of specifically *photographic* aesthetics, I would suggest that by virtue of losing the indefinable aesthetic to the semiotically comprehensible, we lose a powerful dimension of the affective and emotional power an image can possess (I would argue that semiotically programmed images are designed to be 'read' and not 'experienced'; are routinely didactic or politically instructive, and at times self-censored, and they appeal to cognition and not to perception; they are not perceptually complex, but are all too often structured 'classically' in a way Leon Battista Alberti or any Renaissance artist would recognise). This affective and emotional power is not an issue of velocity, but media. What I wish to question is the role of the photographer: semiotically-coded images are not self-reflexive as *images*. They may problematise their subject conceptually, but not problematise themselves as media (as an operation of human subjectivity and technology producing a certain species of image about the world). In fact, I find the critique of Jimmy Nelson relevant also to the modish photographic practices of politically-Left development photographers: they tell us more about the Western political imaginary than they do the subjects of development.

So, to conclude my Part 1: It's hard to see how 'aesthetics' has any meaningful or critical use in understanding the form of contemporary development imagery, other than to problematise – as with Jimmy Nelson – the whole enterprise of representation as such. But it also seems to me that we lose something, to do with the moral intensity of visual experience and the self as producer of imagery of the world.

2: Critique and aesthetic experience

To further compound the fate of aesthetics, I could reiterate the claims of critical theory since the second generation Frankfurt School (c1940-60): How, in the Twentieth Century, culture itself has become the object of industrialisation, material for mass media communications, and so how both its aesthetics and stylistics have become absorbed in an emerging consumer economy (i.e. as designed commodities and brands – famously theorised by Lash and Urry in their book *Economies of Signs and Space* of 1992). The marketplace has become a symbolic landscape of affective and emotionally powerful form and experience, invested in consumption and new orders of value based on human desire. Through this process, as we all well know, Modern art became resolutely *anti-aesthetic* (or critical of the idea and values of aesthetics, classical or modern, and their complicity with the market or other forms of domination).

Terry Eagleton's *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990) made a huge impact on its publication when I was an undergraduate, and is useful in expanding on the 'economic absorption' of art, but also for defining the enduring significance of 'aesthetics'. After Marxist thinkers like Lukács, Adorno, and an eclectic range of other non-Marxist thinkers (Left-leaning poststructuralists), Eagleton argued that aesthetics as a philosophical tradition of thought was, in fact, more properly understood as an 'ideology' (i.e. it is formative of the collective subjectivity of the bourgeois classes in 19C Europe, and so their project of the nation state and citizenship). And with the mass movements of the 20th Century, aesthetics really came into its own, from the ascendancy of the British Empire to Nazi Germany: in the 1930s and 40s, aesthetics became politics, as Walter Benjamin later put it.

But, there is another dimension to Eagleton's argument, which he takes from the Frankfurt tradition and which is significant here. I will mention it in relation to his book cover, the famous painting by German romantic, Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* of 1818. On referring to Wikipedia to check the date of this painting, I remarked upon two quotations attributed to Friedrich: "I have to stay alone in order to fully contemplate and feel nature"; and "The painter should paint not only what he has in front of him, but also what he sees inside himself." Yes, there is always a politics of gender in aesthetics, but what's being articulated here? It is a sense of agency: what is articulated in these simple and unashamedly romantic statements is how the aesthetic evoked deep and profound thoughts, human plenitude, awesome pleasures and deep sensuality, and most of all, the human subject finding a solitary confidence in the face of the expansive enormity and perilous potential of nature. Kant would define this experience as *sublimity*, with a specific theoretical explication of it, but here I am more interested in the apparent individuation of human agency through a profound subjectivisation of experience – by 'othering' or a simultaneous *envelopment and resistance* (resistance through envelopment?) to threatening surrounds. Here, the critical element of this is its capacity for self-evaluation – what used to be called 'reflection'. Aesthetics was a *reflective apprehension of one's own capacity for experience*; a conscious reflexivity with regard to increasing one's perceptual powers (Bowie, 2003).

This romantic strain in the broad evolution of aesthetics (as a philosophical inquiry whose object of theory is the experiential relation between human nature and material nature) fascinates me, as it pertains to human agency and its expansion. But while Eagleton would reduce this aesthetic expansion of individual experience and sense of self (by its encounter with the Other of nature), to a collective ego defining itself through its ascendancy in the ladder of class power, for thinkers like Adorno, this expansion of the individual's powers of perception held out another potential. This potential (articulated most acutely in avant-garde music after the Second Viennese School) amounted to a human capability in resistance to limits imposed on experience by the rising symbiosis of capital and authoritarian government. Capitalist modernity is often cast as a crisis of *collective* solidarity, *class* politics, and *social* justice, in the face of increasing consumerism and thus *individualism*. But for Adorno, capitalist modernity's first victim was actual, reflexive, aesthetically educated, individuality – of a form of human thought and experience of human thought that had to facility to be *non-identical* to the mass, the system, the state and its repressive homogenisation masking as free choice (Adorno, 1979). Individuality must be re-cast, if it is not to become absorbed in the mass politics of the Left as much as mass consumerism of the Right.

However, there are two notable reasons why aesthetics as an intellectual tradition was curtailed or truncated in terms of its exploration of aesthetic agency as social theory. The first was the seemingly internal relation between the capacity for such experience and specific or generalised *prosperity* (the Wanderer doesn't look like a poor man – Eagleton would say that there is a necessary interconnection between the capacity of aesthetic experience and the security, confidence and latent sense of nature's meaningfulness, with a prosperity whose complexion can only be accounted for with reference to Nineteenth century capitalism). Starting with Baumgarten, then Kant, both influenced by a generation of educated and privileged British (Hume, Burke, Shaftesbury, Addison and so on) the very concept of aesthetic experience emerged symbiotically with a growing human domination over nature, and a growing domination over others who did not share in this growing assumption of power. Aesthetic experience is just the experience of *that* form of power.

The second issue is the problem of the industrialisation and institutionalisation of culture, I previously mentioned, particularly the aesthetic in modern art after 1930 and the emergence of aesthetics in popular culture. By Habermas, the aesthetic dissolves as a significant concept in Frankfurt critical social theory. And with this, I will conclude this section with another moment of nostalgia – what I think was my first encounter (or remembered encounter) with a visual image of actual poverty: the album cover for the 1971 *Concert for Bangladesh* (though I encountered it somewhat later than 1971, of course). The experience of this image has remained with me throughout my life, and there is much that could be said about it. I don't want to offer a *reading* of the image here, but relevant to our subject, is how this typical post-1960s style of photography – mawkish and beautiful in the most aesthetically regressive manner – was nonetheless used as symbolic warfare in a very powerful activist project. The album was part of the first major protest at poverty by Western pop musicians (George Harrison and Ravi Shankar), in this instance at the state of refugees from what was East Pakistan, following the Bangladesh Liberation War genocide in 1971.

The photograph of the child was not itself a solitary image, an aesthetic contemplation of which will yield a sense of its value and power to inspire: it was one image in a complex symbolic discourse of resistance to colonialism and authority through musical activism. It might be considered in terms of its aesthetic singularity, but this arguably will not identify its source of power – even aesthetic power. The possibility that a single visual image might become inseparable from a broader field of aesthetic experiences (plural) – a political aesthetics of a social movement – was not considered by Frankfurt School (and thus Marxist) theory, and so aesthetics seemed increasingly anachronistic. But this line of thought exceeds my argument; I now want to turn to Human Development.

Part 3: Development politics and policy

In development economics and policy, poverty as a concept is no less historical and problematic than aesthetics. It has its own discursive history, conditioned by dominant lines of inquiry, and the lines of inquiry that we may be more interested in today do not see economic or material poverty and social poverty as two distinct categories. From Amartya Sen, Mahbub ul Haq and the UNDP's Human Development group, to development economists like Hans Singer (Dependency Theory pioneer) to property rights theorist Hernando de Soto Polar, and countless others, we have inherited two axiomatic premises on which they all seem to agree: (a) poverty is never random or abstract, but is a consequence of a configuration of systematic and societal material conditions – it is not, for example, an aggregate of individual rational choices; and (b) poverty is not inevitable or a natural cycle of material shortages common to an economy; it is a structural phenomenon, (i.e. not created *by* poor people). However, the framework of conceptualisation through which poverty is explained tends to the macro-economic: defining 'the individual' as agent within the context of poverty is difficult – and within the political economy of the grand policy systems – conceptualising the complex conditions that poverty creates (acknowledging the suffering of individual people, and the anatomy of that suffering) is perplexing.

As a child of the 1970s and 1980s, I remember the BBC reportage on famines – in Ethiopia (1972), then Bangladesh (1974), then Cambodia (1975), Uganda (1980), then Ethiopia again in (1984) – which became a huge influence on pop musician Bob Geldof to organise a second 'Concert for Bangladesh', called *Live Aid*, in London in 1985. But as we may remember, representing and articulating the suffering of individual people in poverty was generally the job of the media. Individuals experiencing conditions of poverty were simply poor people, deprived of the basic conditions of well-being and so thus reduced in their human agency. Representations of the poor were of weak, desperate, pitiable and immobile victims. While this indeed provoked a desirable moral approbation in the West, along with a concomitant outpouring of pity, the provocation was largely emotional. There was little in the way of collective judgement of the political regimes that engineered the famine; our experience of these images were more in the order of a fatalistic pity that human history itself is just the sorry tale of such terrible woes, and we must truly feel sorry.

The work of Amartya Sen during this time was challenging the assumption that poverty was entirely attributable to macro-economic deprivations (like an insufficient food supply after a failure of harvest), not specific place-based political responsibilities for distribution. Moreover, a central motivation was his own experience of witnessing individual human suffering. There was something concerning individual human agency that was being ignored (in fact, suppressed) in the theorisation of poverty and the policy-making of development relief. The experience and the representation of the human subject within the spectrum of theoretical frameworks Left and Right, which failed to conceptualise the role (and thus potential) of individual human agency within the politico-economic complex of deprivation and poverty.

Sen's work has been inspiring not just because of its perceptive brilliance, but because it tacitly worked with a form of theory (call it 'policy theory') that generated potential avenues for both activism (protest, dissent) and policy making (problem definition, agenda setting, and deliberation). Deprivation was defined not simply the state of being without material sustenance, but an enforced reduction in 'the human' and common, global, aspirations for self-determination and self-actualisation. Human fulfilment and quality of life were re-cast as terms of economic analysis, and moreover Sen began attempting to articulate *individuality* in poverty – not in altruistic or welfarist ways, but in terms of capabilities (human propensities and capacity for action – in other words, the conditions for their empowerment). This came, of course, after the IMF and World Bank's structural adjustment programs of the 1970s and 1980s (on infrastructure), the subsequent theoretical framings of Welfare Economics, Basic Needs or Resource-based understandings of aid, growth and prosperity, along with rational-choice theory and growing free-market theories. The concept of *individuality* in relation to choice, action, and empowerment was critical.

And to refer to my opening thoughts – the current global popularity of 'creative' everything (creative cities, creative industries) poses no threat to the oppressive regimes that perpetuate development problems. Where arts and culture are articulated as a skills-based service within consumer markets, they can easily be deployed without any implications for a lack of democracy. Sen's capabilities approach arguably generates the conditions of democracy, not simply presuppose them or maintain them as a horizon of desirable expectation, (like many development theories). Development is predicated on the empowerment of individual human agency, not markets or governments or aid organisations. The object of policy is a person's 'capabilities' – defined as an ability to function in certain ways that enable a fulfilment of values, defined by that person, and through which that person defines individual fulfilment or quality of life. The condition of choosing which or what combinations of functionings one activates, is of course, the *freedom* to do so, and so a political (or at least civil) dimension is intrinsic to Sen's broader economic theory (Sen, 1985; 1988).

Sen's work is altogether complex, and I put it to one side to consider Martha Nussbaum's more recent and influential attempt to devise a policy-useful tabulation of capabilities – what they are and how they could be used in a collectively coherent way. By now, the secondary literature on Capabilities is huge, (as well as the proliferation in various indices and ways of measuring Capabilities and transformative action outside the usual economic or social methods of evaluation). Though Nussbaum has a different framework of aims to Sen (animated less by economics and more by a philosophy of social justice) her work is intrinsic to the evolution of the Human Development framework.

In *Creating Capabilities* (2011) poverty is defined, of course, as security, systems of distribution, equality, access and rights, and many other large scale concepts. Yet, Nussbaum agonises about the chronic inability of the lexicon of mainstream Development theory to represent the real conditions of human deprivation. For Nussbaum, defining development in *systemic* terms can mask the very conditions that disable individuals, particularly in terms of gender. The opening sections of *Creating Capabilities* feature a vignette of a woman called Vasanti. She is living in poverty in a city in Gujarat, India, the book so attempts to breach the chasm between the particularity of Vasanti's experience of poverty and the necessary macro-scale (and ethical universality) of development economic theory and the forms of policy management we must assume. One issue that strikes the reader early in the book is that even within the normative universalism of human rights and social justice, we still tend to assume that the poor are all poor because they are subject to the same (unjust) macro-scale socio-economic conditions. Yet, as the case of Vasanti illustrates, outside the realm of total destitution, poverty is extraordinarily particular to the individual, and equally diverse in its social manifestations.

Nussbaum's list of capabilities is an attempt to define the anatomy of poverty in terms of the disempowerment of the individual capabilities that negotiate and articulate agency – subjects acting within material conditions specific to them. Like Sen, she avoids the 'negative liberty' problem that would result in a humanist essentialism or a diagnostic list of missing elements from the life of a private individual. The capability approach is an attempt to define the psycho-social coordinates of a fully actualised life of freedom, and takes the following form (I paraphrase for the sake of brevity):

1. **Life:** longevity and valuing life itself.
2. **Bodily Health:** reproduction, nourishment and shelter.
3. **Bodily Integrity:** mobility, personal security, sexual opportunity.
4. **Senses, Imagination, and Thought:** imagine, think, and reason.
5. **Emotions:** attachments to things and people; love bonds; human association and protections.
6. **Practical Reason:** conceiving fulfilment, the good; using critical reflection; conscience and religious observance.
7. **Affiliation:** (i) social interaction, institutions, assembly and speech; (ii) self-respect, dignity, non non-discrimination.
8. **Other Species:** to tend animals, plants, and nature.
9. **Play:** to laugh; recreational activities.
10. **Control over one's Environment:** (i) political participation and protection; (ii) material prosperity, property rights; employment; unionisation; business alliances. (Nussbaum, 2011: 33-34).

In the context of this paper, we are most interested in No. 4: [I quote in full]:

4. **Senses, Imagination, and Thought.** Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason—and to do these things in a "truly human" way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one's own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth. Being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid non-beneficial pain.

The categorical distinctions this clause no.4 runs together only indicates its minimal usefulness for policymakers. I can hardly summarise the wealth of critique this list has provoked – not least how its tabulation evokes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the US Constitution all wrapped in the rhetoric of contemporary progressive Western liberal democracy. And yes, for these reasons it is also powerful and attractive. Lists, of course, present epistemological problems in policy development in any case because of their lack of interconnection and order.

I will not join the chorus of responses from those who see this list as asserting the superiority of individuals over group or collective rights, as I think the reconstruction of the concept of individuality by the Capabilities Approach is significant. Indeed, one of the aspects of historical aesthetics I find compelling is how 'individual' and 'collective' are not ontological absolutes, and individual experience is (by virtue of the senses) grounded in the human body and shared conditions of embodiment (and not the realms of private proclivity or personal taste). Even 'taste', which maintains an extensive breadth of individual expression, for Kant, for instance, was grounded in a capacity of judgement that was universal as a human capability (in Sen's sense), and whose articulation could only take place through a collectively acknowledged order of value. Here is where I think aesthetics could generate a series of axiomatic contributions to HD, which in turn presuppose and generate agreed collective value – where 'agreed' value does not presuppose collective assent: this is what I do have an issue with Nussbaum's list. The list pictures a perfectly harmonious society, and not a realm where development is in operation (where individual capabilities are politicised and mobilised in relation to resources and utilities).

So what would be *aesthetic* capabilities? I would list them like this:

Sensibility – the optimal operation of the senses in the capacity for experience of artistic form and the complexity of nature.

Perception – the exercise of observation, taste and discrimination in quality (in art, or 'qualities' plural in nature).

Judgment and interpretation – of visual communication and symbolic form.

Visual depiction – the innovation and production of a diversity of expressions and representations.

Criticism – linguistic powers of argument, translation, expression and value.

What is significant about this seemingly random list of historical descriptors is that they range from a deep intellectual *introspection* (sensibility, perception) to *public* discourse (judgment and interpretation), to *civil* institutions (that visual depiction and criticism require). This may seem overly speculative, but I would argue that it provokes us to reconsider how this historical discourse might make a series of substantive demands on the Capabilities Approach, while retaining the aspirations of the current Sen-Nussbaum trajectory towards quality of life and well-being (concepts whose that are surely a part of the philosophical history of aesthetics).

An investigation of aesthetics could generate some further applications for the concept of capability itself – extending the theory into the work of what we might call the 'cultural production of the self'. This would imply a more reflexive production of subjectivity that is individual (the capacity of deep introspection) and collective (that engages in cultural discourse in its many forms) and a more reflexive understanding of the empowerment of social agency. In the meantime, an interim exercise would involve mapping the historical concept of the aesthetic onto Sen's basic schema. This could look as follows:

Resource	Capability (aesthetic)	Functionings	Utility
(policy issues)	Perception	Cognitive awareness and reflexivity	Environmental awareness
	Sensibility	Capacity for experience (hybridity, empathy, synthesis, etc.)	Expanded ethical consciousness
	Judgment and interpretation	Making and communicating qualitative distinctions	Participation in public discourse
	Visual depiction	Creativity and imagination	Cultural production
	Criticism	Literacy and discourse	Intellectual community in civil society

This tabulation provides us with some critical reflection on Nussbaum's list, as well as perhaps highlighting Sen's own neglect of a theory of culture: understanding culture as the experience of certain forms of social empowerment could, ostensibly, account for the many of the social processes of *valuing, choosing and evaluation* that Sen takes as central to his crucial 'functionings'.

Concluding: Critical points

In this unapologetically discursive paper, I have attempted to recover some of the historical sense of the concept of the aesthetic. In this I hope to have indicated that while aesthetics as a distinct form of inquiry has (for good reason) been marginalised in cultural research tout court, an exercise in critical retrieval might allow us to expose the cultural deficit implicit in Human Development theory and research. Based on the above tabulation of aesthetic capabilities, we could identify potential areas for devising and refining critical research questions:

1. The *experience* of valuing and choosing (of 'evaluation') and the cultural content of such.
2. *Imagining* the good life (or a state of well-being, or what a 'quality' life would feel like, or mean) is surely embedded in any assumption that human beings are motivation toward such.
3. The *cultural* (affective and emotional) basis of all capabilities (delimited in the cognition of the individual as components of the self that are to be improved, applied and directed).

An individual with the aesthetic capabilities, above, possesses the ability to engage with their own empowerment (the programmes and discourses of development) reflexively; and empowerment is not merely defined in terms of emancipation from disempowerment so much as an engagement in a cultural production of the self. They ideally aim to exercise the most complex and sensitive of their faculties, locate and maintain a state of solitude and a space of reflection, developing a cognitive reflexivity in their capacity for experience; they will stand apart of (as subject to object) in contemplation of nature – as opposed to nature as domination, or the immersion in nature through want or need. They can be educated in human communication and its conventions (expression and representation) – and this through finding a community of shared experience (of, say, a natural environment, a culture, hierarchies and norms, canons of culture and their values). It is not difficult to see how aesthetic capabilities allow for an empowerment of the development subject, make education intrinsic to development, and possesses implications for a developing civil society.

In this, we could support the capabilities approach away from the continual criticism that capabilities are defined in ‘individualist’ terms (aesthetic capabilities, rather, begin with cultural *engagement* – of tradition, cultural production, intellectual community, and so on.). The form of human agency defined through an aesthetics approach preserves the individual as a vital category of development (against its neoliberal co-option), but where individuality is developed through intersubjectivity (shared experience, communication and interpretation) and civil (institutionalised) social life.

For while ‘quality of life’ is the broad aim of Capabilities Approach, it is not defined in a way sufficiently robust against neoliberal co-option. Functionings need to be conceptualised in such a way to prevent the instrumentalisation of vital human abilities given the extent of their appropriation within the economies of Western consumer cultures. Lastly, Nussbaum’s ‘list’ frames a desired state of citizenry, which of course assumes a benign or coherent society that has achieved a reasonable degree of institutionalisation. What about life in unstable, informal economies, or life under repression, war, anarchy or minority marginalisation? Any framework for development needs to empower an individual in a way that the need for informal self-management in a state of dissent is presupposed.

Notes

1. This is the written script, which in the event was spoken, and accompanied by 28 Power point slides, which cannot be reproduced here for reasons of copyright.
- 2: Quotations from Nussbaum, M. (2011) *Creating Capabilities* (Camb. Mass.: Belknap Press, pp.33-34)].
- 3: We need to bear in mind Sen's resistance to such a tabulation, suggesting that the articulation of capabilities in a policy format must be the production of public reason – i.e. for that individual culture and society.

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