

Classical ideas endure in modern digital culture: study

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Radio and Television Arts professor David Tucker is the author of a new study that examines modern digital interpretations of classical definitions of beauty.

Computer enhanced images surround us. Flip through any magazine or catch a current film and you will find scores of digitally enhanced images that serve as ideals. According to Radio and Television Arts professor David Tucker, the notion of the ideal has permeated all cultures throughout history, whether reflected in the pursuit of beauty in art, athletic achievement in sport, orderly and just government or mathematical equations based on classical symmetry and golden rules.

"In art, the concept of beauty serves as a metaphor of order, balance and

harmony, qualities that are considered fundamental to human happiness and well-being. Without them, our lives fall into chaos and anarchy," said Tucker. "In fact, the quest for the ideal informs all media narratives, since storylines are invariably built around a struggle between order, balance and harmony on the one hand and chaos on the other. We often tend to think of beauty as being something superficial or skin deep but in fact it is rooted in all experience."

In his paper "The Digital Divine: Ideal Form in an Alpha-numeric Age," Tucker, a Gemini award-winning filmmaker, argues that while the classical Greek concept of beauty and the Realist traditions it inspired in the 18th century have been thoroughly deconstructed in recent years, the age old quest for perfection remains.

"What the [ancient Greeks](#) did was to try to produce the gods in human form through a process of enhancement. For example, they might take a model with a perfectly formed foot and merge that with another model with beautifully shaped legs to eventually produce a statue that represented an ideal of order, balance and harmony, rather than an accurate rendering of any one person. It is easy to see how this plays out in a digital age where individual images are captured and then enhanced through digital effects, PhotoShop, games or in Second Life environments. Instead of marble, artists now use software, but it is part and parcel of the same thought process of enhancing what we observe around us."

What is especially intriguing about the pursuit of the ideal in the digital age is that the software itself is based on mathematical formulas of symmetry. In other words, the actual tools themselves lead us toward enhancement by virtue of their very alpha-numeric organization.

"Whether we choose to make something more beautiful such as in a fashion spread or branding exercise or make it uglier in a horror movie, we are still taking the natural world and enhancing it. Now, with a mouse

click, we can transform the ordinary into the extraordinary and turn mere mortals into images the ancient Greeks could have only dreamed of," said Tucker.

In popular culture, meanwhile, the quest for perfection can be seen across multiple mediums. For example, TV news stories and programs such as CSI, Mad Men, The Sopranos and Dexter focus on characters who are facing personal crises or chaotic situations. Underlying each storyline is a desire to restore order, balance and harmony to the world.

“Whether we are working with classical Greek art or developing avatars in Second Life, humans are still doing what we have always done through the ages: endowing the ordinary and making it special. Today, we’re just doing that through mouse-clicks rather than chipping away at marble,” said Tucker.

The Digital Divine: Ideal Form in an Alpha-numeric Age was published in the June 2011 issue of The International Journal of the Arts in Society. Tucker also presented his paper in May at the International Conference on the Arts in Society in Berlin.

Provided by Ryerson University

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