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Relational Aesthetics and Emotional Relations: Leadership on Board Merchant Marine Ships

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Life on board merchant marine ships is very tough, very male, and isolated from much of the rest of the world by language, culture, and usually a large expanse of sea. This article presents data that show that leadership in this environment is full of aesthetic appreciation that is often relational, arising in interaction with others' appreciation, and also full of strongly felt emotion. Those who exercise leadership on merchant marine ships (captains, chief engineers, first officers) turn out to have strong views on the importance of understanding aesthetics and emotions in discharging their responsibilities. We illuminate these leaders' aesthetics and emotions about the sea and ships by comparing and contrasting them with those of a professional seascape painter. *Organization Management Journal*, 9: 179–186, 2012. doi: 10.1080/15416518.2012.708852

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The sea is a lot of things and that is why I keep saying that the sea is a muse. By looking at the sea you can get lost in your thoughts. The sea makes you dream. . . . The sea purifies one's soul. . . . Seafarers live a dramatic/tragic life, it is not pleasant. They make it pleasant with their inner lives. . . . I learn more about the sea by listening to seafarers' stories, which are filled with the fantasies and metaphors they live by. (Iosif Demiris, seascape painter)

This article discusses research in an environment that is not widely associated with either aesthetics or emotion. Few outsiders have any concept of what people actually do on board ship. We started from the assumption that the experience might be too painful to dwell on, that it might be one of those jobs that people do in order to amass cash with which to enjoy themselves between tours of duty. This makes it an exciting environment for our investigation; if leadership here concerns itself with aesthetics and emotions, then the same may be true in other surprising places.

The kind of leadership we want to understand takes account of the fact that beauty, harmony, and the sublime dwell in organizations, and our study suggests that this is certainly true

on board merchant ships. This research has involved three strands of data; we conducted 16 interviews with captains, first officers, and chief engineers, using this group as primary research collaborators (Grisoni & Page, 2010). We subsequently interviewed a painter of seascapes, hoping that his perspective on the aesthetics of the sea would give more depth to our understanding of what we had heard from seafarers. We also paid attention to a number of cultural artifacts that the seafarers volunteered as a way of illustrating what they wanted us to understand from them about the beauty of life at sea. As we discuss later, these came in several forms, but the ones that we have been able to show in this article are the photographs they gave us. The point of these photographs, spaced through the text of this article, is twofold. First, we intend that they should serve as another form of data, which, while they could be open to further analysis (e.g. by photo-elicitation; Harper, 1988), we wish to use as continuous reminders to the reader of the seafarers' understanding of the beauty of their surroundings and the importance they attached to trying to show this to us. Second, some readers may be surprised by the sophistication and the level of education and understanding shown by the seafarers in the quotations that we use. This surprised us, too, and is a part of our findings. We believe that the level of ability and understanding shown by our interviewees is supported by the artistic and compositional quality of their photographs. The sea images are offered in this article as a way of involving readers in the process of seeing through "native eyes" the context in which the social action occurs.

The sea does not look the same to everyone. Our seafarers told us that it shows flashes of color to those who have the art of seeing. This is always a learned art (Berger, 1972), even though the physical act of seeing precedes words in child development. As Merleau-Ponty (1962) taught us, we are "always already" skilled in such arts, but we can also be dangerously estranged from them. The seafarers have that skill, and they offered the photographs on their own initiative. They wanted to make their own contribution to our research and to the field. The artworks offered by seafarers, such as photographs, music, and films, enhance our ability to feel what they feel. The medium of a journal article enables us to display some of the photographs, and the music and films have also been part of our understanding of

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the context, even though we have not been able to show these in the article. These works, offered by the leaders whom we interviewed, are integral to our understanding of their aesthetic and emotional experience, and we hope that readers will find them helpful in understanding the world that we are writing about. The photographs were offered to us in the spirit of painting a general picture of the context of leadership on board ship, and they do not necessarily tie closely to any particular part of our analysis. We have judged that they are nevertheless worthy of inclusion, even if the connections are sometimes allusive rather than clear. As part of the aesthetic inquiry these images evoke sensory and aesthetic knowledge about seafarers' lives. Our theoretical analysis is of the words the seafarers used to us, not of the photographs, which have been important mostly in that they helped us to understand context, and particularly in that the seafarers thought it was important for us to see the photographs in order to understand how they understood their working world.

Our objective is that, at the end of this aesthetic and emotional voyage into the organizational context of merchant marine seafarers, the reader will be able to view the lived experience of seafarers through different eyes, and from the perspective of their lived experience, as well as gaining new theoretical ideas on relational aesthetics and emotional relations in leadership. We also believe that this work will be complementary with studies that explore the difficulties of maritime life, such as Oldenburg, Jensen, Latza, and Baur (2009), as well as with those that express a much more positive view, such as Griffiths and Mack (2007), where the aesthetic rewards are seen as outweighing the discomforts. As Mack (2010, p. 374) says, "Seafarers have historically been drawn to the sea *partially* for aesthetic reasons (Weiburst, 1976)."

RELATIONAL AESTHETICS

Beardsley (1982) offers five criteria for describing *aesthetic experience*, which are paraphrased as follows by Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990): (1) object focus: the person willingly invests attention in a visual stimulus; (2) felt freedom: he (she) feels a sense of harmony that preempts everyday concerns and is experienced as freedom; (3) detached affect: the experience is not taken literally, so that the aesthetic presentation of a disaster might move the viewer to reflection but not to panic; (4) active discovery: the person becomes cognitively involved in the challenges presented by the stimulus and derives a sense of exhilaration from the involvement; and (5) wholeness: a sense of integration follows from the experience, giving the person a feeling of self-acceptance and self-expansion.

"Relational aesthetics" is a term coined by the French curator and writer Nicolas Bourriaud (1999) to describe a broad strand of contemporary art in which the sphere of human relations constitutes the site of the artwork, and that artwork can only be understood in the present moment of its context. In this tradition, artists use performative and interactive techniques that rely on the responses of others. "The art occurs in the relations

between the artist and the bystanders, and is a co-creation of two or more parties." Two basic aspects of the contemporary artistic process are "relational" and "contextual," which are mainly one and the same thing according to Bourriaud (1999): "What do relations eventually create?—Context."

Bourriaud gives a new interpretation of the aesthetic object; the object is no longer materially or conceptually defined, but relationally. Such an approach brings together artists whose raw material is not wood, marble, or fabric but culture. What Bourriaud insists they have in common is the desire and intention to relate across the artificiality of time and space, whether that be physical, social, or institutional space. They choose, design, and assemble. They start from people's behavior and the way they live. For Bourriaud, art is something you want to do as a social, recreational activity rather than a special transaction. In social interaction and relational aesthetics, art meets everyday life, and it is one of the findings of our research that this definitely includes life on board ship.

Our interest in the idea of "relational aesthetics" in this article is because the descriptions of the beauty and ugliness of leadership at sea by our participants are very much to do with the experience in the moment. In our research on leadership on board ships, we have become interested in understanding what aesthetic experience means to the seafarers whose experience is being discussed. What can seafarers tell us about why a particular experience is pleasurable and valuable for them, and why does it help them to survive and perform at sea? A brief review of what the philosophy and psychology of aesthetics say about the criteria and functions of the aesthetic experience may help to answer that question.

From a contemporary point of view, it is possible to say that "all aesthetic theories can be subsumed under what used to be called a naturalistic perspective" (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990). As Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) said,

Even the most idealistic and formal theories of the past can be seen as variants of a basic hedonistic epistemology, according to which the aesthetic experience is good for the perceiver. . . . To a large extent, it seems to depend on how one defines what *good* is. (p. 10)

In other words, we regard something that does us good, or makes us feel good, as aesthetically positive.

Ladkin (2008) considers the place of beauty in the aesthetics of embodied leadership, and analyzes the way that Plato (1982) presents aspects of beauty. First, there is a relationship between what is beautiful and what is ethical. "Here Plato clearly links the beautiful with the moral. In order to be beautiful, an action, or way of being must have the purpose of being good" (Ladkin, 2008, p. 34). This is reminiscent of Keats's phrase "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" from his "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (Keats, 1820). It also contrasts with some recent uses of the word "aesthetics," which as Gabriel (2008, p. 5) has pointed out has been juxtaposed with ethics. Second, there is the beautiful as that which is fit for a purpose. Even an action that might be seen as ugly in itself, and Ladkin gives the example of Mo Mowlem, a British politician, taking her wig off and banging it on the table

in one of the meetings that brought an end to the conflict in Northern Ireland, can be beautiful if it fits its purpose perfectly and is fully effective (as Mowlem's wig banging was). Third, beauty in leadership is a matter of mastery, where the person who has mastered the activity knows both the way to go about it, or "form," and how much to do of any particular activity. This third aspect of beauty is very reminiscent of the notion of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990), which we return to later.

No approach to aesthetic experience relies on either purely rational or purely emotional explanations. Human beings have another way of apprehending reality: an experience of blinding intuition, a sense of certainty and completeness as convincing as any reason (Baumgarten, 1735/1936), although we would accept that this experience does not have to be blinding, but could also come after contemplation. This way of seeing the world has been called *aesthetic experience* (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990). "To exclude sensations and perceptions from knowledge" is "to sacrifice valuable forms of consciousness" such as the emotional, the intuitive, and to a lesser extent the volitional aspects "on the altar of reason" (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990, p. 6).

Approaches to aesthetics based on the concept of the Platonic ideal stressed the belief that art represents not the limited particularities of the world of appearances but the underlying, eternal forms behind them. Aesthetic pleasure results from the union of intuition and understanding (Kant, 1790/1914), and according to Croce (1902/1909) it results from the process of expressing a formerly unformulated intuition. This does not mean that one must achieve understanding to appreciate aesthetically—but some of the pleasure, and some of the perception of beauty, come in the attempt to understand.

Dewey (1934) argued that the aesthetic arose from the recognition of organic wholeness, and as such was a model for the highest forms of organization in matter and consciousness. It has also been argued that the integration of consciousness brought about by aesthetic experiences leads to mental health and greater societal well-being (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990). For example, one seafarer says,

The young cadet who was treated well on the vessel by his colleagues, he will never behave unethically. He conveys positive energy and love for others because these feelings have been cultivated on the vessel. And these feelings are growing and he looks for beauty and harmony everywhere.

The implications for when the young cadet experiences the opposite (Oldenburg et al., 2009) are left implicit in this quotation, but are clear enough to see.

EMOTIONAL RELATIONS

A relational view of aesthetics encourages people to invest emotions, makes them feel good, and enables them to believe in fulfilling the needs of goodness, by using relational space ethically, fittingly for their purpose, and with mastery (Ladkin, 2008). Interacting human relationships can create a new form of aesthetic knowledge—relational aesthetics. This has a profound

effect on the emotional relations on board. The context of the relational aesthetics is a total institution (Goffman, 1961). This is a context that you cannot simply enter or leave at will, and this means that emotions on board are heightened.

As one seafarer said to us:

The vessel is our home and the crew is our family. I spend half of my life on the vessel. I try to influence people to feel that they are in their home and they must care about it, to make it more beautiful. They must feel like a part of this family, of our small society. We must be sensitive to each other. Sometimes people are very closed in on themselves; then we are living as strangers in one family. That's why we must try to have harmony in our relationships. In order to achieve harmony of relationship the feeling of responsibility, morality and feeling of beauty are necessary. We need harmony everywhere. At the least, we must strive for beauty and harmony.

As Mack (2010) commented, Ships are uniquely workplaces and 'home-places' for seafarers, at least for periods of time; and blur some of the traditional boundaries between work and leisure onboard. Their quotidian is grounded in the experiences associated with dwelling aboard vessels. (pp. 375—376)

As another seafarer put it:

When you are in the work place the best stimulus is to receive normal human treatment and have a human relationship; you do not need anything else. That is like a good, peaceful family. . . . Sometimes against our moral principals we decide in favor of rationalism. People always, in every situation must remain humans. First and foremost we are humans. People must be honest with themselves and with others. The most fearful judge is your conscience. And if you have good relations with your conscience then you feel happy.

One of the captains said,

If humanity and feelings work well together this will bring harmony to the work. The vessel is our 'home sweet home.' . . . The vessel is our wet-nurse. . . . The ship is a female (she) and you cannot know her without loving her.

Emotional and sentimental expressions from the seafarers often define the work relationship and convey the sense of their feelings. It seems that the authentic emotional behavior of actors fosters a sense of community at work.

All the stories that we have heard from seafarers have the main *leitmotif* that people who survive and perform at sea are those who have a loving relationship with their work and their ship (Sims, 2004; Gharibyan-Kefalloniti, 2005, 2006). For seafarers the term "shipmate" has a very powerful meaning. They talk about human belonging as being really all about living relationships: "You work with others, you eat next to them, and then, of course you learn that the most important thing is how to get along with others."

METHOD

As Wittgenstein (1981, p. 173) claimed, "Words have meaning only in the stream of life." What people tell us about their feelings is likely to be an important dimension of human existence. Their words represent perceptions, emotions (Fineman, 1993), ideas—in short, their experiences. These experiences,

in turn, are the subject matter for interpretive study. They are basic protocol statements of what people believe is happening to them, even though words (especially in translation, and without the nonverbal clues to understanding with which they were originally spoken) are necessarily an imperfect representation of states of consciousness.

Our research sought to capture a reflexive blend of the aesthetic experience and the flow experience of all participants, offering “an embedded sense of possibilities for meaning construction while including the voices of others” (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 134). In the process, by focusing closely on the quality of aesthetic experience, we wish to reflect our understanding of the potentialities for enjoyment open to human beings and to refine the theoretical model of the flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990), which will be enriched through its application to this unique body of data. The interpretive method we chose is based on a close analysis of accounts given by leaders among merchant marine seafarers. From our interviews with leading seafarers we have identified what we believe to be salient features of their aesthetic experience, as well as discovering its dynamics.

The Greek *poiein* means that to create is about images, imagining rather than literal meaning, “about creating possibilities rather than describing actualities, and about multiplicity not specificity” (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 133):

Thus, poetic forms of talk do not give us information about an already structured situation but help us form or constitute for the very first time, a way of orienting toward or relating ourselves to our surroundings and the circumstances of our lives. (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 133)

We set out to allow leading seafarers to speak poetically, if they chose, to help us study meaning in everyday practice. Practical understanding, according to Wittgenstein (1953, p. 122), “consists in seeing connections”: between aspects of our surrounding circumstances, between ourselves and others, and between action and sense (Geertz, 1983, p. 34), thus sounding very like relational aesthetics as earlier described. We need to consider the “role of the other” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 72), because meaning is created by each person as the person interacts with others or the text:

In essence, this means focusing on responsive dialogue and the relational moments in which we try to shape and make sense of our surroundings. . . . Research can be seen as a living process of reconstructing and reinterpreting in which we need to develop rhetorical . . . practices that enact this process. (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 134)

Social poetics is such a practice because it offers a way of relationally engaging with others (McNamee, 2000).

The interviews were conducted by the first author in Russian and Greek, recorded, and translated and transcribed by her into English before analytic, interpretive, and poetic discussion between the two authors. Sixteen interviews were used for the analysis on which this article is based. Interviews were conducted at the offices of a shipping company in Athens.

Appointments for these interviews were facilitated by a crew manager. The 16 interviewees consisted of nine captains, two first officers and five chief engineers. All of them were Russian speaking, and they were working in a Greek shipping company. Ages ranged from 36 to 64 years. In some cases these people may have worked together at some stage, but in most cases not, and this is not part of our methodology. We see these as 16 independent interviews, with the likelihood of any of the comments made by interviewees relating to any others of the interviewees being very low. We make no claim that this is a random sample or necessarily an inclusive one. We cannot guarantee that some of the things they said were not influenced by being interviewed on the premises of the shipping company for which they were all working at the time, nor that there was no bias in those with whom we were put in touch by the crew manager. All were involved in large merchant ships, operating intercontinentally. As our research aims to offer a set of grounded constructs that could be the basis for further research, rather than a truth statement about a population, we are comfortable with these provisos. Our methodology was not intended to tell us anything about how the views of the seafaring leaders might vary with age, nationality, length of time at sea, and so on, so we have not specified these in giving the quotations from them.

PICTURING AESTHETICS AND EMOTIONS

Perhaps the best-known accounts of the aesthetic experience focus on what happens to the emotions in the encounter with works of art. Aristotle felt that tragedy, by evoking pity and fear, helped purge the audience’s feelings—a conclusion with which many contemporary analysts would agree. As the seascape painter whom we interviewed said,

The best work is like pain. A good work of art derives from pain. When I am thinking and painting the sea I imagine a sea crew. Seafarers are truly brave men armed with courage . . . they live a dramatic/tragic life, it is not pleasant. They make it pleasant with their inner lives . . . I learn more about the sea by listening to seafarers’s stories, which are filled with the fantasies and metaphors they live by. . . . The sea is directly related to our soul.

As Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990, p. 14) put it, “Catharsis brings about inner balance and equanimity,” effecting through pity and fear the purification (*catharsis*) of such emotions. “The good here consists in reliving hidden impulses in such a way that they can be sorted out and brought into harmony with the more conscious aspects of life” (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990, p. 14).

Art can give people an alternative approach to those aspects of consciousness that are too limited by the impersonal rules of reason, in which the private joys and fears of people are not taken into account. As Collingwood (1938) persuasively argued, art can effectively communicate many things that abstract concepts cannot convey. Says the seascape painter,

If I did not paint, I would like to write poems about the sea . . . but you can find poetry in painting. They are all together. When the

heart is stimulated, he starts painting and . . . believe me, the sea you imagine is better than the one you see, because it is within you. . . . In order to paint a good sea you need emotion. Emotion is of significant importance. Emotion has fear and awe, otherwise the sea painted would be mediocre. It would be a posed sea.

This is discussed by Strati (1999), using the language of sentiment. “Sentiment is not a ‘fact,’ an abstract object, it is the manifestation of a style, of an intentional attitude” (p. 179).

One has a variety of sensory links to one’s environment, each of them capable, in different ways, of providing pleasurable experiences. “A man possesses nothing certainly save a brief loan of his own body, and yet the body of man is capable of much curious pleasure” (Cabell, 1919, in Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990, p. 1). To translate the potential benefits of our sensory equipment into actuality, the senses must be cultivated and disciplined (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990, p. 1). As one of the seafarers said:

The seafarer is cultivating his aesthetic perception by traveling from a very young age. As the more beautiful things you can see in your surroundings touch you, their beauty changes the way you look at other things. . . . The more beautiful the things, the images that you have received in your life, from your childhood, the easier it is to live with this in the future. . . . And in your work, if the captain, the chief engineer treat you beautifully, they can influence you; you become a better person after that work contract. It happened with one of my friends. After one work contract, where the captain and the others were very polite and kind to him he developed aesthetically, he became more polite, he had improved his manners and I was surprised and pleased when I saw these changes.

From a materialistic viewpoint, whether or not experiences give pleasure is not very important. They are evanescent subjective phenomena, whose value must be discounted in comparison with serious and concrete concerns like power and wealth. But the way in which some of our interviews looked at their value took it that the essential point of existence is not established by criteria such as how much people own or how much power they wield but by the quality of their experiences (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990). As one seafarer said:

Yes, we are working for money but the feeling and emotional satisfaction is greater than the material one. I am looking for beauty in my surroundings, because it is important not to feel like a mechanism for earning money but to see and enjoy the beauty around us. Beauty ennobles people. As people say, “Beauty will save humanity” . . . I love my work very much. My work gives me a lot, means a lot for my emotional life.

According to this view, objective standards such as money are trivial, because they do not directly affect how we feel; in comparison with them, experiences are more important. By this measure, aesthetic experiences are more important than objective experience (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990).

“The autotelic experience, that is, one that contains its goal in itself, was called *flow experience* because respondents used that term frequently to describe the deep involvement in effortless progression of the activity” (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson,

1990, p. 7). The aesthetic scholarship on which Beardsley’s (1982) list, described earlier, is based was completely independent of the flow research (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). The two authors were unaware of each other’s work at the time. It was only later that the conclusion was reached that “philosophers describing the aesthetic experience and psychologists describing flow are talking about essentially the same state of mind” (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990, p. 8). This in turns means that “human beings enjoy experiences that are relatively more clear and focused than everyday life” (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990, p. 9), a conclusion already drawn by Dewey (1934).

“When this heightened state of consciousness occurs in response to music, painting, and so on, we call it an aesthetic experience. In other contexts, such as sports, hobbies, challenging work, and social interactions, the heightened state of consciousness is called a flow experience” (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990, p. 9). Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson claimed that “looking at the aesthetic experience as a form of flow reveals more clearly its structural characteristics and its dynamics.” The aesthetic experience and the “flow” experience are indistinguishable from one another. It seems that the quality of the subjective states is the same in both contexts.

For example, in the case of the seascape painter’s and the seafarers’ responses about the feelings aroused by the sea, different stimuli are involved, different skills are required to respond, but the structural elements of consciousness that account for the rewarding nature of the experience are the same in both cases. In other words, while the thoughts and emotions in their responses might be different, the structure of the experience, its quality, the way it feels while it lasts, seems to be the same regardless of its cognitive and emotional content. These structural similarities include the conditions mentioned in the set of criteria for describing the *aesthetic experience* proposed by Beardsley (1982).

The seascape painter said,

Seafarers have a passion for the sea, they are addicted to it, and the sea is their whole life. They enjoy going down to the engine, feeding albatross, gazing at the sea, looking at the storm approaching or passing by.

As one captain put it:

Seafarers are romantic and sentimental people. . . . One cadet made such beautiful photographs from the vessel, which capture the magnificence of a stormy sea. He was waiting on the deck regardless of danger, trying to find the most favorable moment, which shows the power of the waves, the unique combination of white frothy sea with the turquoise color of the waves . . . I was trying to photograph with a camera a sunset at sea, but may be there are not yet cameras that can capture the beauty that only seafarers can see. The sea can be stormy or calm but when it is stormy the sun makes the most fantastic outlines. It can look like a hedgehog and whatever else you can imagine. . . . Have you seen green clouds? When the sun’s rays illuminate the sea by coloring the clouds in green? You cannot imagine this beauty and the sensation, the feeling it arouses.

Several of our participating seafarers enjoyed their work to the extent that experiencing the activity, feeling a sense of harmony that preempts everyday concerns, is experienced as freedom.

As the seascape painter said:

The sea's infinity is endless. . . . One must be completely free, undistracted, and it is this freedom that leads one's hand, mind and its whole existence. . . . The sea is a lot of things and that is why I keep saying that the sea is a muse. The sea is the artist's, dancer's, painter's, writer's muse. . . . By looking at the sea you can get lost in your thoughts. The sea makes you dream, reflect when you are free, infinite, you can do whatever you want. . . . It is certain that the sea purifies one's soul. . . . I can talk about my problems. My problems and disappointments vanish when I am painting. I feel that when I am in front of a seascape, real or just a representation, I forget about everything else and I try to see how every small inch is made, the movements, how does the light fall upon the sea, what's far beyond . . . every small detail.

One captain said:

I love my work with a passion. I love a stormy sea. I love a fluttering sea. Its grandeur and might—I love it. You cannot imagine this power, all its magnificence. The color of the sea is never the same. Depending on the sun, a sea takes different tones of blue and green. I like this color, all tones of blue, but for me it is associated with the ship.

The characteristics of blue as a color that transmits sensations of freshness, distance, calm, and peace were propounded by Goethe in his *Theory of Colours* (1810/1970). The abundant expanses of sea and sky are analogies of great evocative power, which orient the significance of the color. The heights of the skies and the depths of the seas, the sense of the infinite that one feels when contemplating them, besides having a pacifying effect on the central nervous system, confer spiritual values on the color blue. When blue assumes greater chromatic fullness, as the sky does in the softness of the evening, it accentuates the values of tranquility, intimacy, and intensity of feelings (Arnheim, 1974; Klee, 1956). The negative aspects of this color emerge when some of its connotations are excessively accentuated: Freshness becomes coldness, calm becomes isolation and solitude. The favoring of blue is always an indication of a preference for tranquil, orderly, and trouble-free environments in which events proceed softly, along more or less traditional lines. A coherence with ideological orientations is easily traceable in the case of colors. A long tradition ties them to ceremonial rules, customs, and social roles, and largely determines their process of signification (Baudrillard, 1968).

Transcendent experiences that take us out of the realm of everyday life are also valued by seafarers for giving them a foretaste of other-worldly reality, for bringing to the fore those human potentialities that the social system has repressed and in showing up the causes of repression. As one Russian seafarer said,

In our Soviet country . . . it was aesthetically wrong to be noted for your wit. It was politically wrong to think in a different way and

if anyone stood out for his originality, very soon he was isolated. . . . In our country there was no beauty, no harmony. And this is a big problem for people. . . . The harmony which we reach on the vessel, in our small community, we want to bring it to our country and to our family. When I return to my mother country I want to find the same there . . . but instead of beauty we meet anger and drunken faces. I leave my country with hard feelings . . . we always hope for better conditions of life for people in our country and everywhere. Maybe the ship could be a good model of harmony and beauty in relationship; and we could transfer this to offices, to our country and our family.

If the value of a society is measured by its ability to develop fully the potentialities of its members, then the making of visual beauty and learning how to enjoy it should become important for society as a whole (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990). Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) go on to amplify what they mean by the phrase “learning how to enjoy it”: “Most events in consciousness are built from culturally defined contents as well as from personal meanings developed throughout an individual's life.” Bourdieu (1987) reminds us that a person can never have a pure, immediate aesthetic experience—whenever we gaze at an object our reaction to it is historically grounded, inseparable from ideologies and social values. The social and cultural context in which aesthetic experience is created is an integral part of it. Whether such an experience exists on board, whether we can call a particular experience aesthetic or not, ultimately depends on cultural conventions that change with time and place. The sea constitutes a living element in the life of every seafarer, and the entire evolution and development of marine culture are inseparably linked with naval history and tradition. It is therefore natural that the marine element should play a leading role in the aesthetic expressions of seafarers with respect not only to the presentation of the changing diverse forms of the sea, but also to the depiction of major events and other, common activities of seafaring life.

AESTHETICS AND EMOTIONS ON BOARD

The emotional responses of the seafarers interviewed proclaim the healing powers of aesthetic experience on board. The most frequent feelings they described are inspiration, love, and respect that give them a sense of harmony. We cannot be sure why, but we heard nothing from them of the stress and hardship of life at sea (Oldenburg et al., 2009). One chief engineer said:

As I have learnt to work with people and become more experienced, I begin to understand that it is beauty which is very important in our work and in our life in general, because it helps to organize. At each stage of work everything must be done correctly in order to achieve good results, because lack of discipline and negligence in the work becomes visible from details. I may be using technical terms but I always urge people to think about these issues. . . . This is also the aesthetic of our work. . . . You always try to work beautifully . . . we always admire things which are beautiful. This is also true in work. . . . When the engine does not work and you fix it and it works again you feel as if you have won something, it is rewarding. You made every effort to bring it [the main engine] to life.

Another chief engineer said:

People have different feelings of beauty. One has a more cultivated feeling and the other less. People who had never been taught aesthetics may think that aesthetics is unnecessary and that there is no need for aesthetics in work . . . there is also technical aesthetic in the work. All engines actually have the same function but aesthetic experience is different. For example, an engine built in Japan is a piece of art. On a vessel with a Japanese engine you feel comfortable and relaxed and feel proud to work on this vessel.

The seafarers we talked to linked beauty with their feelings. They identify their feelings with aesthetic categories. For example, they link a feeling of responsibility with beauty. They see unethical behavior as ugly and unacceptable. As one officer said:

The feeling of responsibility is a beautiful feeling. All these issues of culture, discipline and morality, ethics, aesthetics, and beauty are interrelated. Men in sea crews are very close to each other. Every act of a seafarer is related to others. If another member of crew snubbed a seafarer he cannot get over it easily as he could do on shore by meeting his family or friends. We are living together; we are eating and sleeping and working together and not just for one or two days but months. In our small community people who are able to act in an immoral and ugly way cannot stay for a long time, they cannot survive. The other members of crew will try everything possible to get rid of him. . . . It is painful when somebody hurts you. . . . It is very important to have a positive moral climate on the vessel. If there is some anger it will affect everything: our work and the beauty of our relationship, our existence as a whole. If we are cooperating in harmony it is very important for the whole crew. We need to show people, to give them an example of how to work beautifully. Beauty characterizes humans. If we are not aware of aesthetics, beauty, and purity then we look like more animals than humans.

The way people speak to each other is linked with the most important issues of social power and ethics. As one seafarer said:

Moral acts are always beautiful and immoral are always ugly. People must be aesthetes in their soul. External beauty is not real. . . . We learn about each other very quickly, because we are together twenty-four hours. . . . But the whole climate on the vessel depends on the captain. He has all authority; all lines go through him. The moral and aesthetic climate of the vessel depends on the morality and aesthetics of the captain.

This illustrates the first of the categories of beauty in Ladkin's (2008) summary of Plato. One captain said:

Human beings differ from machines because of their emotions and feelings. When we are satisfied with our work and with each other, crew from captain and captain from his crew, when everything is going well in loading and discharging you feel a burst of energy. My main purpose is to make people satisfied with their job and encourage them to feel happy and feel joy in order to leave the vessel with positive memories, with the feeling that they learned something new and acquired experience. People always appreciate your support and your responsible relationship to them.

As another captain put it:

People know my requirements regarding their personal behavior and ethics. But they also know that I always call their attention to

see the beauty of the nature surrounding us. It can be a school of dolphins playing with a vessel or when the whale is following the ship by turning on its side and wagging with its flipper, then trying again to catch up the vessel by saluting us and playing with us, and doing it again and again. . . . And when after the rain the huge rainbow appears at sea and it seems like the ship is entering the arch. By marine tradition the seafarer must make a wish and his wish will become true. All these help people to relax from work. We have very intensive working hours and sometimes there is no time even to think about aesthetics. But if it is possible after working hours we organize events, which make people feel they have had a break. . . . For example, when we are passing the equator we have an ancient tradition to ordain a seafarer. One of the seafarers dresses as the god Poseidon and comes to the Captain and we perform speeches from mythology. People like to celebrate marine traditions.

Another seafarer told us this story:

On one of the vessels on which the chief engineer was disembarking, and on which I was staying, when leaving the engine room and saying goodbye to his team, he turned, looked at us with nostalgia, and said: "Oh my God, how much work, energy and emotion we invest in this place. Honestly, I feel that I am leaving home, my heart bleeds." I liked his words and as he looked at the engine room, we really were one peaceful family. The vessel was our home.

As one captain said,

At sea we become more sensitive to each other. The sea sensitizes us to our surrounding circumstances, to our fellows, and to our loved ones. . . . Sometimes when a member of crew is disembarking after completion of the contract, when we say goodbye we have tears in our eyes, we are all deeply touched. . . . When leaving the vessel I have a feeling that I leave part of myself on the ship.

CONCLUSION

To our surprise, feelings about the beauty of their surroundings seem to be enormously important to the seafarers we talked to. They say that their aesthetic appreciation of this beauty helps them to survive and perform at sea. Harmony is clearly very important to them—harmony both in the living conditions and in their relationships. They seem to be as concerned with the aesthetics of the sea, and as full of powerful emotions about it, as the seascape painter was. They did not deny the toughness of the conditions under which they worked, but this was more than compensated by feelings about the beauty of the physical and social environment.

In order to give meaning to their lives and work, people need to have "real" relationships: love with pathos, feelings of responsibility for their fellows. A relational aesthetic makes communication "real." The relationships they build at sea are works of art, created through human interaction, which can make conversation more "real." People are as affected by the aesthetics of communication as by the content of it. Aesthetic knowledge based on the emotional and often sentimental responses with the main motif of human belonging helps people make sense of their lives, and thus is taken into account by leaders of seafarers.

The experiences they told us about were not only aesthetic and emotional, but at times transcendental. The aesthetic was

not always of unalloyed beauty, but was sometimes sublime (Ladkin, 2006) in the sense that it was not unambiguously positive, but mixed with some of those very negativities that Oldenburg et al. have pointed out. Experiences that take them out of the realm of everyday life help them by giving them “a foretaste of other-worldly reality.” Aesthetics, and emotional responses to aesthetics, are far from a luxury or an optional extra. They are seen as crucial by those who exercise leadership on merchant marine ships in the most severe of all working conditions.

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