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# Think Outside: Exploring the Influence of Nature on the Individual and of the Individual on Society

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Think Outside:

Exploring the Influence of Nature on the Individual and of the Individual on Society

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**Abstract:**

This video project has an overarching goal to question the influence the natural environment has on the development of individual people and society as a whole. It begins by looking into the important role played by creativity in societal and economic development. From here a brief background is given on the requirements of maintaining and producing a creative environment. The piece alludes to the possibility that a relationship with nature has a deeper meaning than just being conducive to creativity. It also shows the effects pollution has had on the work of local artists and briefly the challenges faced by Moroccan artists. To conclude it offers a sense of hope for Moroccan artists by mentioning that challenge in an environment has been deemed a stimulant to creativity (Evans, McCoy, 2002). Regardless of challenges improvement can be made by becoming conscious of the influence of the natural environment. The video aims to be exploratory as well as thorough and factual. Material is drawn from analysis of scholarly literature, quotes from a developmental psychologist, and interviews of artists and artist hopefuls.

## **Introduction:**

Upon digging into a suspected connection between a natural environment and creativity, it was surprising to see how deep the roots seem to go. The importance of the implications was surprising as well, especially in a country like Morocco. This process began by looking at artists, but the implications became clear when the information was analyzed through an economic lens. In the constraints of economic thinking, one can take a step back from the concept of creativity. It can then be seen as a component of human capital because creativity is a quality that contributes to the productivity of the individual worker. Human capital is “one of the central elements of modern economic growth theory” (Storper, Scott, 2009, p. 148). And economic growth, is pretty widely understood as beneficial to society as a whole. Keeping in mind this implied importance of creativity in social health, this study explores the influence of a natural environment on the individual’s ability to be creative.

## **Rationale of Creative Piece:**

Due to the creative disposition of this research, it seemed relevant and even a little necessary to present the findings in a creative manner. Through the conversations I had with several art students I came to the understanding that art is often a platform on which to bring forth social problems and to advertise for social change. The amount of consciousness that Moroccan people as a whole seem to have for the role a natural environment one might classify as less than ideal. Especially when considering that this has effects not just on the individual but on societal growth in general. And as quoted by the famous documentarist Morgan Spurlock in *The Guardian*, "There's real power in a documentary... they transcend countries, and to be able to have something that can create global awareness is necessary today" (Jones, 2011). In attempt

to spread this idea in the most accessible and efficient way possible, a short documentary style video project seemed to be the way to go.

It is understood, however, that the language in which this piece was created may be a barrier to the efficacy of these ideas. To combat this, in the future it may be beneficial to add subtitles in French and Moroccan Arabic in order to allow the message to reach a broader audience outside of the realm of academia – where it would be more likely to have a real impact.

### **Methodology:**

I chose to first look into artists opinions on this subject for several reasons. The first is that in past experience I have found artists to be rather reflective people. As a group they are usually aware, if not willing, to examine influences of their work and their creative process. And they often take pride in possessing creativity. This opinion was mainly composed from my personal experience as an art student and my interactions with fellow artists/students/student-artists and other people in my community. This reasoning may be tinted due to personal experience, but the process of this research seemed to reinforce this idea. It became evident that choosing artists as the main subject for interviews added in another significant way. While artists are typically considered to be creative, many focus on using their work as a platform in which to spread ideas. One student from the Institut des Beaux Arts in Tétouan explained to me that art is seen as having two purposes – either to be aesthetically pleasing or to generate social change. She continued to deem that in both situations' art is a necessity (Personal Interview 2, 2018). Thinking of art in this way adds another dimension to the study. Because yes – creativity in any field can be traced to a component of economic and social growth as will be explained. But artists are both bringing new creative ideas to the table and working directly toward social

change in a way that might bypass the economic aspect. Artists offer a sense of duality to the topic; therefore, they are an interesting and efficient place to begin research.

My methods of gathering information consisted of extensive review of previous related studies and interpersonal interviews. I conducted interviews with six students at the University des Beaux Arts in Tétouan. These interviews ranged in length from half an hour to an hour and a half. In all of these interviews I began by asking the students about their recent work, and from there I attempted to let the conversation flow as naturally as possible. I also conducted an interview of around an hour and a half with a successful artist working out of Rabat. This was a much more formal interview in which I asked 20 questions and prepared consent/video release forms. My final interview was a conversation over skype with a developmental psychologist and psychology professor working out of New York. To prepare for this interview I examined a newspaper article written by him that most closely correlated with my research and prepared questions specific to the article.

### **Ethics:**

The biggest ethical concern for this project was obtaining consent from interviewee's to be video recorded, and obtaining consent from these individuals to use the footage in the film. This was combatted by being certain to make sure the project details were understood and that the answering of any questions was voluntary before conducting the interviews. Having done this, I then asked each interviewee to state their name and to express their consent on camera in lieu of a consent form before asking any questions. I also made an effort to cite as little personal information as possible about the artists in this analysis.

## **Findings and Analysis:**

### *The connection between the natural world and economic growth:*

The key link in the chain between the natural environment and economic growth is human capital. Storper and Scott (2009) examine the effects of human capital, specifically creativity, on urban growth. They use the endogenous growth model, called the Romer-Lucas model, which explains that investments in internal factors, (ex. workers,) contribute to long term economic growth. This means providing resources that increase workers ability to produce by boosting the beneficial qualities they possess. A few examples of these qualities are “knowledge, skills, habits, and social and personality” and most importantly in the context of this research, “creativity also contributes” (Market Business News, 2018.)

With this understanding of creativity as a component of human capital, and human capital as an influencer of economic growth, one can connect the influence of the natural world on economic growth through creativity. Evans and McCoy’s study quotes that “creative personalities are sensitive to sensuous experiences” and “sensory stimuli available in a natural environment may be conducive to creative behavior”(2002, p. 410). This, combined with interviewee artists having described nature having an influence on their energy levels and a source of inspiration can lead one to conclude that creativity, when seen as a commodity that can be altered by outside forces, is the connection between the natural world and economic growth (Personal Interview 1, 3, 2018).

### *The influence of nature on the individual, beyond creativity:*

An interviewee described nature as their source of inspiration: “I walked in Normandy with the low tide and I saw a very big carpet of seaweeds. . . when I saw what nature was doing

and when I saw the carpet it is a fantastic work of art. . . I said this is art”(Personal Interview 1, 2018). And another defined nature as a source of energy (Personal Interview 2, 2018). But conversations with others invited the idea that this relationship with nature goes beyond a source of inspiration or a mere encouragement of creative behavior. One interviewee explained that from nature she finds, music, beauty, and enchantment. And these are the values, she explains, that “tie her to the gravity of the world” (Personal Interview 2, 2018). Nature/the earth is her basis from which to create. A similar concept was elucidated in an article written by the developmental psychologist, William Crain, who I interviewed. While explaining the observations of children at play in nature, he explains that children often “feel an urge to build an outpost or base from which to venture forth” (Crain, 2001, p. 23). This could be a coincidence, but it could also allude to an idea that when people are more comfortable or more secure they feel freer to venture into the unknown. This would explain an increased appetite for creativity when immersed in restorative environments. It would also add more importance to relationships with nature similar to the one mentioned by the interviewee above (Personal Interview 2, 2018). However, her comment about finding important values through nature and those values being what grounds her to the world is cause for further exploration. In an article written by Vanessa Sheenan “human imagination is defined as a medium for communications with divine intelligence” (Sheenan, 2016, p. 34-35). The combination of these things as well as the fact that pollution, or a force that contaminates the restorative qualities of nature, inspired two interviewees to create work could make one wonder if an affiliation with nature is more than just an influence of creativity. Maybe it is important to the understanding of our role as a species on this planet. However, this is an offshoot that needs to be researched further, and for now all that can be concluded is that nature has a part in people’s ability to be creative.

### *Creative influences mimicked in the natural world:*

To some, as exemplified above, nature offers a sense of grounding in the world. Having this grounding is most likely rather beneficial in many aspects of life. However, for the purposes of this research, it is interesting to examine how a sense of grounding affects creativity as a commodity. When looking at what stimulants of creativity, (among freedom, challenge, resources, co-workers, and recognition) support was mentioned in an article in the *Creativity Research Journal* (Evans and McCoy, 2002). This appears to be a common theme. In a different study Richard Florida deemed tolerance to be the most sought-after amenity in the “creative class” (Florida, 2002, 2003, 2004). Which he defines as “people who add economic value through their creativity” (Florida, 2004). It appears as if a supportive/tolerant foundation provides for an environment conducive to creativity. With this in mind and thinking of the interviewee who explained that nature is her grounding in the world (Personal Interview 2, 2018), one might consider nature to be similar in effect to a fore mentioned approving environment. Especially when thinking of a natural environment as a “restorative environment” (Evans, McCoy, 2002). It needs to be developed further, but it is possible that the reason that nature is a “restorative environment” is because it offers the same stimulants of creativity that are mentioned above: freedom, challenge, and resources to name a few (Evans, McCoy, 2002).

### **Conclusions:**

At times throughout this research the abundance of seemingly important offshoots became overwhelming. The inability to look fully into these venues, due to the time constraints, led me to draw a very broad, but supported, conclusion. There is definite evidence of human qualities having an effect on the economy, the Romer-Lucas model of endogenous growth is a commonly accepted theory that explains this. There is also significant indication that restorative

environments found in nature and supportive communities are conducive to creative behavior. The biggest conclusion I came to realize is that humans are deeply affected by a natural environment, and this effect has bigger implications on the health of society as a whole. Uncovering more specifics in this field could be vital in understanding our role as a species on this planet as well as economic and social success. Bringing awareness to the important role this plays in society could lead to more activism in the preservation of the natural environment. This is especially important in the context of Morocco which is a country heavily affected by pollution and will be the North African country most affected by climate change (Schilling, 2012). Moroccan artists face many other challenges as well. However, challenge is known to be a stimulant of creativity. Maybe the added challenges in the Moroccan society will increase the creative success of some individuals. Regardless, it seems like nature plays an influential role on humans. Therefore, it is necessary to continue to try to understand nature's impact in order to take advantage of its benefits and to prevent ourselves from hindering economic growth by subconsciously removing ourselves from it.

### **Recommendation for Continuation of Research:**

Due to the amount of time and the breadth of this topic, the amount and diversity of people interviewed was not as comprehensive as would have been ideal. If this research were to be continued it would benefit from talking with individuals in multiple different fields that require creativity - beyond artists. It would be useful as well to interview individuals who do not explicitly associate creativity with their line of work. Finding connections between nature and other aspects of human capital beyond creativity would be certainly strengthen the conclusions drawn by this study. Examining further the liaison between economic growth and societal prosperity as well as the link between restorative environments, self-expression, and life

satisfaction would also strengthen the point being argued in this case. It would be interesting as well to look further into the restorative environments that exist beyond a supportive community and nature. There are so many offshoots of this idea that I was unable to explore. I looked at what happened with day zero in Cape town: where day zero was brought to the media, realized as an absolute issue by the people, and eventually postponed significantly due to drastic change in conservation efforts (Klein, Posner, 2018). Based on this I think that moving this understanding of the influence of nature from the subconscious to the conscious alone would be enough to make a positive difference.

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