Aesthetic Capitalism

Edited by

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## Contents

Acknowledgements vii  
List of Contributors viii  

**Introduction: Aesthetic Capitalism**  
*Peter Murphy and Eduardo de la Fuente*  

1  
**From the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism to the Creative Economy: Reflections on the New Spirit of Art and Capitalism**  
*David Roberts*  

2  
**The Artefacts of Capitalism and the Objecthood of Their Aesthetics**  
*Vrasidas Karalis*  

3  
**The Aesthetic Spirit of Modern Capitalism**  
*Peter Murphy*  

4  
*Anders Michelsen*  

5  
**Aesthetic Capital: Hermeneutic Speculation, Economic Themes, and the Dismal Science**  
*Ken Friedman*  

6  
**The Social Negotiation of Aesthetics and Organisational Democracy**  
*Antonio Strati*  

7  
**Neo-Modernism: Architecture in the Age of Aesthetic Capitalism**  
*Eduardo de la Fuente*  

8  
**The Aesthetics of Fiscal Consolidation**  
*Carlo Tognato*  

9  
**The Innovative Role of Art in the Time of the Absence of Myth**  
*Dominique Bouchet*  

Index 195
In organisations, aesthetics aggregate and discriminate among individuals and groups because they are socially constructed through the negotiations in which organisational actors engage. Beauty and ugliness, the graceful and the grotesque, the elegant and the kitsch, the sacred and the tragic, often represent more a locus of contention that the attainment of stable harmony among the organisational actors. What implications, therefore, do organisational aesthetics have for issues concerning organisational democracy?

This is the question that will be explored and discussed in this chapter, through the illustration of the principal sociological issues raised in the recent study of organisational aesthetics.1 These issues are related to both the rich theoretical debate and the intense methodological controversies developed since the cultural or linguistic turn, which occurred in the social sciences during the 1980s. In the following two to three decades diverse and innovative approaches and research styles in the sociology of organisations and organisation theories were invented, constructed, and disseminated, and they greatly enriched the already highly diversified array of perspectives on organisational analysis.2

Amid that flourishing of new approaches to organisational analysis, and in sharp polemic with organisational studies inspired by the rationalist

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and structural-functionalist paradigm, there also arose the strand of organisational analysis which examined the art and aesthetics characteristic of everyday working life in organisations.

Yet the attention paid to the aesthetic dimension in organisations should not be taken to mean that working practices always use aesthetic language, nor that there is invariably a taste for the beautiful and disgust at the ugly in everyday organisational life. By way of example, consider someone who enters and leaves a beautiful building every day, or someone who works as a picture framer—in short, people who work in close contact with materials and settings that conventionally have a certain aesthetic value. These people may have no aesthetic appreciation in regard to the organisation for which they work. They use materials and they work in settings whose beauty or ugliness they take for granted. Or it may be that the materials are beautiful but the organisation is not, and neither is the work that takes place within it. Be that as it may, what we may observe with regard to the sociological contribution of the study of the aesthetic dimension in organisations is that there is a new awareness in organisational research: namely that scholars should pay due attention to the fact that organisational life, in its materiality of interacting bodies and artefacts, can be aesthetically experienced, and therefore judged, at the level of sensible knowledge, and that this is a sociologically important element for the social construction of the theoretical discourse on the organisation.

This point is now developed with an empirical example drawn, not from organisational research in the field, but from a novel. The example will illustrate the significance for sociology of the fact that an organisational event or phenomenon may be grotesque, beautiful, ugly, tragic, sacred, kitsch, comic, graceful or, indeed, disgusting.

Organisational Aesthetics: Negotiation, Aggregation and Discrimination

The event considered is one illustrated by the novelist David Lodge when describing the first visit of the university researcher, Robyn, to a foundry in England. Robyn is there to conduct research as part of the ‘Industry Year Shadow Scheme’, a cooperation programme between Robyn’s university and local manufacturing industry. Robyn has arranged to ‘shadow’ the managing director, Vic Wilcox, for a certain period of time. She will observe his activities

in order to study ‘from within’ how the foundry’s management conducts its everyday work routine.

“There you are,” said Wilcox. “Our one and only CNC machine.”
“What?”
“Computer-numerically-controlled machine. See how quickly it changes tools?”
Robyn peered through a Perspex window and watched things moving round and going in and out in sudden spasms, lubricated by spurts of a liquid that looked like milky coffee.
“What’s it doing?”
“Machining cylinder heads. Beautiful, isn’t it?”
“No, the word I’d choose.”
There was something uncanny, almost obscene, to Robyn's eye, about the sudden, violent, yet controlled movements of the machine, darting forward and retreating, like some steely reptile devouring its prey or copulating with a passive mate.4

This excerpt from Lodge’s novel prompts a number of considerations. The first is that beauty is not something objective and universal in the everyday working life of a foundry. The operation of the machine arouses a sense of beauty in the managing director but disgust in the university researcher. Beauty in the organisation is neither evident in itself nor universally acknowledged; on the contrary, it is subject to negotiation and opposition between the two different protagonists of the university/industry cooperation scheme. Indeed, the machine arouses conflicting aesthetic judgements in the novel’s two characters and, in doing so, stimulates distinctions that discriminate between them, a discrimination which is rooted in their different personal emotional feelings and aesthetic sensibilities.

The second consideration is that the beauty negotiated between Robyn and Wilcox does not consist in mere decoration. The computer-numerically-controlled machine does not appear in the story as an object to be exhibited, but does so rather in its being-in-use, in its being-at-work. It is therefore not the machine as a beautiful object decorating that work setting which attracts or repels. It is instead the machine in its concrete ‘doing’, in its work, that makes the managing director describe it as ‘beautiful!’ whereas the researcher finds it almost obscene. In other words, beauty in that organisation is an aesthetic experience which cannot be circumscribed to embellishment of the workplace,  

4 Ibid., p. 125.
to the elegance of the objects used to represent the foundry’s image, to the display of stylistic features distinctive of its corporate culture. In short, beauty in the organisation consists neither exclusively nor principally in what is put on show to attract both its members and those outsiders who temporarily become part of it.

We have thus identified two core notions in organisational aesthetics. They concern what is studied when research is carried out on the aesthetic dimension of organisations—even if what is being discussed here is a passage from a novel, rather than an excerpt from an interview or from field notes based on empirical observation.

**What is Beautiful and What is Not**

The first core notion is that organisational aesthetics evades deterministic definitions, such as, for example, the contention that a department meeting evokes similar, or even identical, aesthetic feelings in those attending it. Returning to Lodge’s story, asking whether the computer-numerically-controlled machine in the foundry is beautiful or ugly is not pertinent to the study of organisational aesthetics. What is instead pertinent is exemplified by these two lines:

[Wilcox:] . . . Beautiful, isn’t it?
[Robyn:] Not the word I’d choose.5

Although it consists of only a few words, this excerpt suffices as the basis for sociological reflection on the aesthetic dimension of that particular organisation, in that it:

a) shows the difference between the aesthetic experience of the story’s two protagonists;

b) signals a negotiatory dynamic concerning definition of what is beautiful or ugly in the organisation;

c) highlights that calling the machine beautiful or ugly is a demonstration of power in the organisation. It will have been noted that Robyn does not adjust her aesthetic judgement to that of Wilcox, even though she is ‘new’ to the context. Rather, she defends her different aesthetic judgement by replying, polite but firmly, “Not the word I’d choose”.6

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d) induces us to resolve the doubt as to whether the linguistic expression used in the organisation belongs in the stylistic repertoire of aesthetic understanding or whether, instead, ‘beautiful’ means good in the sense of useful and functional. Wilcox and Robyn are certainly defining an organisational aesthetic, and they are doing so with the language of aesthetics: that is, by proposing aesthetic judgements and feelings to each other. But such questioning is obligatory in the study of organisational aesthetics because ‘beautiful’ frequently means ‘right’ or ‘good’, so that ethical or instrumental, rather than aesthetic, value is assigned to the organisational phenomenon in question.

Aesthetic qualification, in fact, may also be produced by the architecture of the discourse, the idioms used, the technical jargon, and the rhetoric intended to make a good impression. That is to say, it may be produced by linguistic repertoires and relational dynamics which do not always reveal aesthetic experiences of everyday life in organisations, but rather the aesthetic conventions and canons effective in a particular organisation. The distinction is based on nuances and dynamics internal to organisational aesthetics, and which concern pathos, its significance and intensity, not the interweaving between it and the ethical-value definitions of the nature of organisations typical, respectively, of the organisational ethos and logos.7

### Aesthetic Feeling and Post-Social Relations

The second core theoretical notion is that organisational aesthetics uses the term ‘organisation’ to denote a context of post-social relations, where ‘post-social’ refers to relations among individuals and groups which are intermediated, or indeed generated, by the capacity for action of organisational artefacts. This is illustrated in a passage from Lodge’s novel.

The machine is in action: it is grinding cylinder heads. After Wilcox and Robyn arrive, as the machine continues to work, it becomes situated in a new organisational context marked by the physical presence of the two visitors and their conversation. In this new frame, the machine ceases to be the object that Wilcox first shows to Robyn. It does its work as before, but it also ‘acts’ to elicit Robyn’s question “What’s it doing?”8

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Now, this might not have happened; however, in Lodge’s story not only does it happen, but it does so between Wilcox and Robyn, triggering the process of aesthetic, rather than merely analytical, definition of the machine-at-work. The protagonists of the on-going interaction, therefore, are not two but three in number, and all three of them are actors in the construction of the aesthetic meaning of the organisational process. Organisational aesthetics, therefore, emphasises that the everyday routine of organisations also involves non-human elements—the ‘missing masses’ in studies on society for which Bruno Latour urges sociological analysis.\(^9\)

Organisational aesthetics places a different emphasis on the encounter. It certainly envisages the capacity of the just-mentioned missing masses to influence the understanding of organisational phenomena, but this is because they arouse deep feelings and emotions at a pre-cognitive level.\(^10\) Moreover, these aesthetic dynamics can reach the point that others may delight at our joy, or be offended at our displeasure and disgust.\(^11\)

**Organisational Aesthetics in the Plural**

In the workshop, Wilcox’s comment, “Beautiful, isn’t it?”\(^12\) makes the aesthetic question explicit and begins the process of collectively constructing the organisation’s aesthetics. Aesthetics in the plural, however, not aesthetic in the singular. Robyn, as we have seen, has aesthetic feelings entirely different from Wilcox’s—disgust more than delight—and her aesthetic judgement, that pertains to the aesthetic category of the ugly rather than the beautiful, does not change during the brief dialogue. Wilcox’s words seem to have no effect on Robyn’s disgust. They are unable to give a different sense to her aesthetic experience. Nor, on the other hand, does Wilcox change his aesthetic definition so as to adjust it to the definition—couched in negative terms as “Not the word I’d

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\(^12\) Lodge, *Nice Work*, p. 125.
choose”13—expressed by Robyn. What could the researcher understand aesthetically and report from observing this process of negotiation?

This question is an important one, since similar episodes have emerged in aesthetic organisational research. First of all, as I stressed elsewhere, “the researcher has direct access to the aesthetic in organizational life, to its features and to its diversity, to its abstractness and to its visibility.”14 He or she may appreciate—or else—aesthetically the dynamics of the negotiation in action in the workshop. If s/he ignores the aesthetic dimension of researching organisational life—something that Robyn, on the contrary, is well aware of—this decision “blurs communication of his or her approach to the organizational actor and the reader.”15 Second, the dialogical relation must be privileged, so that the negotiation of organisational aesthetics can be described and represented in terms of ‘open text’ rather than as logico-analytical report. The point for the researcher is, suggests George Cairns,16 to adopt a ‘postdichotomous’ and multi-perspective viewpoint and let the disputes regarding the aesthetic dimension of work and organisational life surface and coexist.

We may notice something more in Lodge’s excerpt, something that transpires from the tone of the story: that Robyn’s emotional reaction is stronger than Wilcox’s.

Georg Simmel already stressed the importance of the intensity of aesthetic feeling in social relations:

The personal contact between cultivated people and workers, so often enthusiastically advocated for the social development of the present, which is also recognized by the cultivated as the ethical ideal of closing the gap between two worlds “of which one does not know how the other lives,” simply fails before the insurmountable nature of the olfactory sense impressions.17
He subsequently comments that the “social question is not only an ethical one, but also a nasal question”\textsuperscript{18}—a remark which recalls the subject of this chapter: the connection between sensory perception and aesthetic judgement, on the one hand, and democracy in the everyday routines of organisations on the other. I shall more closely explore the links between Simmel’s sociology and aesthetic organisational research in the sections which follow. Now, I conclude this part of the chapter by returning to Lodge’s story in order to complete its analysis in light of the aesthetic approach to the organisation.

Lodge has us witness, almost as if we were present, the ‘discursive practices’ inherent in organisational aesthetics. We must bear in mind, as shown by empirical research on the aesthetic dimension of organisational routine, that this does not always happen, even if the aesthetic feeling is intense. On the contrary, it is frequently the case that aesthetic experience is subject to a sort of ‘muteness’, as if it were forced to be silent in the organisation, being confined to the tacit dimension of organisational knowledge, rather than emerging with the abundance of detail that Lodge provides\textsuperscript{19}. In the latter case, a question arises: how many actors are there in the engineering workshop?

If we proceed in order, those initially present are we the readers of the passage from Lodge’s novel and the two protagonists of the visit: Wilcox who speaks while Robyn listens as they move around the workshop. Immediately afterwards, when Wilcox says “There you are . . . Our one and only CNC machine,” the machine is added. Whereupon they are joined by (i) the novelist (as the narrating voice), (ii) the “Perspex window” through which Robyn can watch the machine at work, (iii) the “things moving round and going in and out,” (iv) the “liquid that looked like milky coffee,” and (v) the “cylinder heads”—though it is not clear whether these can be seen\textsuperscript{20}.

All these, therefore, beside ourselves, are the actors involved in the process of post-social construction of the organisational aesthetics of that workshop in the foundry. Note, however, that these are actors able both to communicate aesthetic judgements and feelings—“Beautiful,” “something uncanny,” something “almost obscene,”\textsuperscript{21} to mention only some—and to arouse the imagination (the visual thinking theorised by the Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 577.
\textsuperscript{20} Lodge, \textit{Nice Work}, p. 125.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p. 125.
They are able, in fact, to resort to metaphors (“steely reptile”), to analogies (“that looked like milky coffee”), or to observations such as the one on the rhythm characterised by “sudden spasms,” which reminds us of the importance of the agonic aesthetic categories.

These actors are present in their complex human and non-human materiality, without being translated into semiotic subjects like the actants consisting of networks of human and non-human elements envisaged by actor-network theory. Whether imagined or directly observed, they maintain their physical corporeality, and they exhibit irreducible and polysemous differences—their différence, as the French philosopher Jacques Derrida would put it—which distinguishes them one from the other. Materiality in the plural, therefore, which is not just a cognitive or semiotic concept, but an aesthetic one, since it stimulates the pathos of aesthetic feeling. Pathos that is due to the machine while in operation, as well as to Wilcox, Robyn and the words of the narrating voice when they negotiate the sense of the organisational aesthetic experience. Pathos that, no less importantly, originates also from my reflections on the passage from David Lodge’s novel, where I have:

• focused on the fragment of aesthetic experience in the description made by the novelist;
• treated the passage from the novel as if it were an extract from field notes taken during empirical organisational research;
• imagined myself as present in the guise of a researcher who observes, activating his sensory and perceptual capacities, the ways in which the shadowing foreseen by the university/industry cooperation scheme is performed. In short, conducting imaginative participant observation;
• been enthused by this passage on the social negotiation of organisational aesthetics to the point of returning to it in order to analyse further its overtones and details, thus exploring it more attentively and completely than I have done previously.

23 Lodge, Nice Work, p. 125.
24 Latour, Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory.
This passage from Lodge’s novel has made it possible to give salience to diverse aspects of the aesthetic dimension of organisational life, and especially to how the social negotiation of aesthetics raises questions concerning power and equality of rights in organisations which pertain to the constitutive elements of organisational citizenship. The crucial issue is that organisational democracy must take due consideration of the fact that it is precisely the materiality of organisational interactions that accounts for individual differences. Consequently, the sociological importance of aesthetic sensibility and sensory experiences must, as Simmel said, be constantly reiterated.

Simmel, Sociology of the Senses and Social Practice in Organisations

That sensory knowledge is of fundamental sociological importance for the understanding of social relations in society was argued a century ago by Georg Simmel. A distinctive voice among sociologists of his time, Simmel gave key significance to aesthetics in the sociological study of the forms of association among individuals.

Because aesthetics was part of Simmel’s method of investigation, he focused on “the microscopic-molecular processes inside human material that are, however, the actual activity.”

That humans look at one another and that they are jealous of each other, that they exchange letters or eat lunch together, that beyond all tangible interests they elicit sympathy in one another, that the gratitude of altruistic service consistently has an unbreakable bonding effect, that one asks directions from another, and that they dress and adorn themselves for one another—all the thousands of person-to-person performances, momentary or enduring, conscious or not, fleeting or momentous relationships, from which these examples are selected entirely arbitrarily, continuously tie us together. Such threads are woven at every moment, allowed to fall, are taken up again, substituted for others, and interwoven with others.

Herein reside the imperceptible reciprocal actions—between person and person and between individuals and groups, but also, one might add, between

28 Simmel, Soziologie. Untersuchungen über di Formen der Vergesellschaftung.
29 Ibid., p. 33.
30 Ibid., p. 33.
humans and non-humans—that give rise to the post-social relations to which attention must be paid in sociological analysis. In his discussion of the extraordinary informatisation of contemporary society, and how this impacts on our social practices and perceptual experiences, Christian Papilloud views Simmel’s emphasis on these quotidian micro-practices as inviting a refinement of the sociological study of technological phenomena in their interactivity and indeterminacy.31

Interactivity and indeterminacy are of sociological importance in descriptions of social practices in organisations which start from the most elementary and essential material contacts. This is beautifully evocated by Simmel when he treats the unique sociological function performed by the sense organ of sight—the eye—when people look at each other. Looking at each other, in fact, does not consist solely in seeing the other person; it also involves a social relation of specific intensity and proximity.

The closeness of this relationship is borne by the remarkable fact that the perceptive glance directed at the other is itself full of expression, and in fact precisely by the way one looks at the other. In the look that takes in the other one reveals oneself; with the same act, in which the subject seeks to know its object, it surrenders itself to the object. One cannot take with the eye without at the same time giving. The eye unveils to the other the soul that seeks to unveil the other. While this occurs obviously only in immediate eye-to-eye contact, it is here that the most complete mutuality in the whole realm of human relations is produced.

Hence it becomes really quite understandable why shame leads us to look to the ground to avoid the gaze of the other.32

These interactions—in constant flux and almost imperceptible—have the capacity to coalesce individuals into some sort of association within the organisation. Yet they are apparently unimportant, given that they are embedded in the routine of workplace social practices and which, too, take concrete form “in physical and mental contact, in reciprocal excitation of desire and suffering, in conversations and silences, in common and antagonistic interests.”33 It is precisely to these apparently unimportant relations, interactivities and indeterminacies, Simmel recommends, that sociology should devote the maximum attention.

32 Simmel, Soziologie. Untersuchungen über di Formen der Vergesellschaftung, p. 571.
33 Ibid., p. 34.
The matters discussed in Simmel’s *Soziologie* constitute the theoretical-methodological core of numerous studies on organisational aesthetics—though obviously not all of them. Among the four main approaches to the study of organisational aesthetics—archaeological, artistic, empathic-logical and aesthetic—it is the aesthetic approach that has particular assonance with Simmel’s sociological theory. This is due to the fact that the researchers who adopt the aesthetic approach give maximum importance to the organisational micro processes activated and experienced by individuals in their everyday work, to the micro-practices that are developed, enacted and negotiated, and to the sociological meaning of sensible knowledge and organisational interaction based on the corporeality of the perceptual-sensory faculties and the sensible-aesthetic judgement. This approach conceives an organisation’s aesthetic as a dimension of the ‘practice’—whether banal or extraordinary—that gives origin to organisational life. Or, if one prefers, social practice in organisations is also a matter of taste, as Silvia Gherardi observes. What makes a practice recognisable and recognised, she writes:

...is its being socially sustained and constantly reproduced. A working practice is such if it is recognized by a community, and if it is sustained by a normative basis both ethical and aesthetic. Communities of practitioners sustain their practices by negotiating and discussing what is a good practice, which of them is better or more beautiful, when a practice should be changed and how, or whether it should be discarded.

These are working practices which, it should be stressed, are also those intended to make sense of organisational life by building theories and propounding research views grounded on it.

**Aesthetic Style, Sociology and the Wide Range of Social Studies**

The aesthetic study of organisations, as I said at the beginning of the chapter, is openly critical of approaches which reduce the understanding of organisational interaction to the mental and cognitive dimension alone. This strand of

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34 A. Strati, *Organization and Aesthetics*.
organisation studies was consolidated at the turn of the century,37 and conducts a radical critique against the conventionally validated forms of organisational research and theorising, as David Buchanan and Alan Bryman point out:

An ‘aesthetic style’ of research challenges the dominance of cognitive understanding with four approaches which transgress traditional methods: archaeological, empathic-logical, aesthetic, and artistic. Opposing alienating and manipulative processes, an aesthetic approach is critical of positivist perspectives, challenging the distinction between the value of research and the pleasure of doing it. Critical also of managerial standpoints, aesthetic research is concerned with emancipation and the exercise of aesthetic judgement.38

At the same time, it engages in an internal debate which articulates into the four different approaches described in detail in the next section of this chapter. Here, however, due salience should first be given to the organisational and social-science studies that form the cultural milieu within which the aesthetic understanding of organisational life has developed and consolidated.

As Jean-François Chanlat observes,39 study of the aesthetic dimension of organisations has drawn on a wide range of theories in the social sciences besides sociology of the organisation, management studies, and organisational theories. Particularly influential were theoretical and methodological debate in aesthetic philosophy, theories on art and the history of art, semiotics, economics of the arts, social psychology and symbolic anthropology, as well as more recent theorisations on the artistic practices of social and organisational research.

Also to be emphasised are what I have elsewhere called the “inner voices”40 which, like the chorus in a Greek tragedy, recall and reiterate organisational and sociological themes, and others from the social sciences in general. Theoretical reflection on the symbolic construction of organisational life has

38 D. Buchanan and A. Bryman, eds., The Sage Handbook of Organizational Research Methods, p. xxxi.
been primarily developed using the organisational symbolism approach.\textsuperscript{41} This has driven the aesthetic study of organisations, even though the aesthetic discourse on the organisation is a distinct and autonomous line of intellectual inquiry.\textsuperscript{42} At the same time, there has arisen the view of the organisation as an arena of emotions: that is, as a context of organisational interactions constituted by emotional dynamics and not merely influenced by them.\textsuperscript{43} And then, above all, there is the thematisation of the following arguments, some of which have already been discussed in the previous sections of this chapter:

- corporeality as the capacity of sensible knowledge and social relationality in both sociology\textsuperscript{44} and philosophy—from the aesthetics of Baumgarten,\textsuperscript{45} through the pragmatism of Dewey\textsuperscript{46} and the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty,\textsuperscript{47} to the existentialism of Pareyson\textsuperscript{48} and the more recent somaesthetics of Shusterman\textsuperscript{49}—and in sensory anthropology,\textsuperscript{50} besides research in the arts on bodies’ metamorphoses (see, for instance, Bériou),\textsuperscript{51} feminist studies on the symbolic construction of power relations between the genders\textsuperscript{52}

\begin{thebibliography}{52}
\bibitem{turner} B. A. Turner, ed., \emph{Organizational Symbolism}, Berlin, de Gruyter, 1990.
\bibitem{gagliardi} P. Gagliardi, \emph{The Sage Handbook of Organization Studies}; M. O. Jones, M. D. Moore and R. C. Snyder, eds., \emph{Inside Organizations. Understanding the Human Dimension}, Newbury Park, CA, Sage, 1988; S. Linstead and H. Höpfl, \emph{The Aesthetics of Organization}; A. Strati, \emph{Organization and Aesthetics}.
\bibitem{simmel} G. Simmel, \emph{Soziologie. Untersuchungen über di Formen der Vergesellschaftung}.
\bibitem{pareyson} M. Merleau-Ponty, \emph{Le primat de la perception et ses conséquences philosophiques}, Grenoble, Cynara, 1947.
\bibitem{pareyson} L. Pareyson, \emph{Estetica. Teoria della formatività}, Turin, Giappichelli, 1954.
\bibitem{beriou} Bériou, \emph{Ex Memoriam}, France, 5’ video of Computer Graphic Art, 1992.
\end{thebibliography}
and the post-structuralist and Foucaultian ones that investigate how organisations discipline bodies;\textsuperscript{53}

- the materiality of organisational life in actor-network theory,\textsuperscript{54} which identifies a new protagonist of social interaction that is well expressed by the semiotic term ‘actant’. The subject of social action, that is to say, is not just the individual or a group of individuals, because non-human elements are also involved, and their capacity for action interweaves with that of people;

- personal knowledge,\textsuperscript{55} which is grounded on the tacit dimension of knowing that allows the emergence of the knowledge of which a person is aware even without being able to give a rigorous analytical description of it. The relationship between tacit knowledge and an organisation’s aesthetic is the concern of Practice-based Studies which explore social practices in organisations and build theories on the basis of their findings;\textsuperscript{56}

- organisational communication in its aesthetically different forms—oral and visual communication, symbolic evocation, poetic language, metaphors in-use in workplaces besides professional and technical language—that show the controversial expression of power by the different voices that make up the organisational discourse;\textsuperscript{57}

- sociological debate on the radical influence of art and aesthetics in critical analysis of contemporary society\textsuperscript{58} and on art worlds and social aesthetics\textsuperscript{60}

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\textsuperscript{54} B. Latour, \textit{Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory}.


• theoretical reflection on art practices as social research\(^{61}\) and on the artistic forms that capture and represent the complex phenomenology of experiencing organisational life.\(^{62}\)

The cultural milieu of organisational studies in particular, and the social sciences in general, within which aesthetic organisational research has developed—and to which it has contributed in its turn—is therefore dense and multiform. Let me now illustrate, in the next section, the complex articulation of the theoretical and methodological debate within aesthetic organisational research.

### The Four Approaches to Aesthetic Study of the Organisation

Not all the scholars who have considered the current configuration of aesthetic organisational research have described it in the same way. On the contrary, other organisation scholars\(^{63}\) propose different systematisations of the organisational literature on the aesthetic dimension of organisational life. I have preferred to emphasise research styles and stress the interweaving of approaches in the study of organisations which are distinct and to some extent in disagreement, though not necessarily in conflict. I have accordingly pointed out that the social construction of organisational aesthetics initially came about through three main approaches,\(^{64}\) which have more recently been joined by a fourth.\(^{65}\) These are the *archaeological approach* of the second half of the 1980s; the *empathic-logical approach* and the *aesthetic approach*, both developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s; and, finally, the *artistic approach*,

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64 A. Strati, *Organization and Aesthetics*, pp. 188–190.
which came to the attention of organisation scholars mainly during the early 2000s.

All four approaches indicate that the barycentre of studies on organisational aesthetics is Europe, since, as Rafael Ramírez observes, the most influential studies and most far-reaching research have been produced by European scholars—something which is rather unusual in organisational studies. Moreover, all four approaches stress the emancipatory capacity of the aesthetic dimension in organisations, just as they denounce, with critical analyses, the strategies of aesthetic manipulation of organisational life and set value on the flow of negotiative processes in the construction of organisational aesthetics.

The differences among the four approaches consist in (a) the style with which research is conducted and (b) the characteristics of the organisation's aesthetic dimension which are given priority. The strengths and limitations of each approach are presented in Table 6.1.

**Table 6.1 The four approaches of aesthetic organizational research**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research approach</th>
<th>Researcher’s style</th>
<th>Emphasis on</th>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archaeological</td>
<td>Guise of an archaeologist and/or a historian of art using qualitative research design and methods</td>
<td>The symbolism of art and aesthetics in organisational life</td>
<td>The aesthetic side of organizational cultures and of the symbolic management of organizations</td>
<td>Aesthetics are ancillary to symbolism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathic-logical</td>
<td>Empathic immersion followed by empathic and logical interpretation, and by a logical-analytical illustration of the outcomes</td>
<td>The pathos of organizational artefacts</td>
<td>Precognitive knowledge of organizations and the organizational control based on the pathos of artefacts</td>
<td>Aesthetics are translated into logical-analytical descriptions</td>
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<th>Weaknesses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aesthetic</strong></td>
<td>Empathic understanding, imaginary participant observation, aesthetic judgement, evocative process of knowing, 'open text' for communicating the outcomes</td>
<td>The collective everyday negotiation of organizational aesthetics</td>
<td>The materiality of quotidian organizational life and also of the researcher’s interactions with both organizational actors and organizational scholars</td>
<td>Aesthetics are grounded on connoisseurship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Artistic</strong></td>
<td>Hybridization of artistic creative energy and ratiocinative capacity</td>
<td>The creativity and playfulness of organizational interactions</td>
<td>The artistic performance in managing organization processes</td>
<td>Aesthetics are 'art-bounded'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The *archaeological approach* is probably the one most commonly used; and it was the approach employed at the beginning of the aesthetic study of organisational life. It is epitomised by the question asked during organisational research: does the organisation’s architecture reflect the values at the basis of its identity or identities? The internal architecture immediately leads researchers to the materiality of organisational life. Equally important—almost as if researchers were archaeologists—it enables them to discern in that materiality the complex interweaving of aesthetic feelings, emotions, values, desires, and patterns of action that constitute the dynamics of a civilisation in a given historical period. “Do buildings really convey corporate values?” wonders Per Olof Berg\(^6\) in his pioneering study on organisational aesthetics; a question often, though not necessarily always, asked by those who examine the

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\(^6\) P. O. Berg, “Some Notes on Corporate Artifacts,” *Scos Note-Work*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1987, p. 27.
aesthetics of an organisation’s premises in order to conduct empirical research on some topic of interest.

The materiality of an organisation may be monolithic in its complex reality, as in this response by a lathe operator when asked to describe the firm that he worked for:

For me, this company is that damned gate I come through every morning, running if I’m late, my grey locker in the changing-room, this acrid smell of iron filings and grease—can’t you smell it yourself?—the smooth surface of the pieces I’ve milled—I instinctively rub my fingers over them before putting them aside—and . . . yes! That bit of glass up there, in front, where sometimes—there you are—I spot a passing cloud.69

All together, the elements in this reply demonstrate the influence of the pathos of the organisational artefacts that the empathic-logical approach seeks to grasp, both to show what constitutes the organisation’s symbolic landscape, and to give critical salience to the kind of organisational control exercised through aesthetics. This is a strand of organisational analysis that is more closely centred on the aesthetic dimension of organisational life, as are the aesthetic and artistic approaches. These three approaches, in fact, unlike the archaeological, examine the organisational aesthetic in order to gain aesthetic understanding of organisational life.

The aesthetic approach, in fact, as we have seen in the previous sections of this chapter, focuses on sensible knowledge by returning to the aesthetics of Baumgarten and Vico, the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, and the sociology of Simmel.

It returns to the etymology itself of the term ‘aesthetics’, without taking it to be synonymous with the notion of beauty, nor confusing it with art, but on the contrary underlining the meaning of sensible knowledge, which derives from the root aisth and the verb aisthánomai of ancient Greek: the knowledge, that is, which springs from the senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch.

It is by virtue of the aesthetic experiences acquired through the senses—that is, through these diverse ‘ways’ of being sensitive to the world and others that people interact in organisations.70 These perceptive faculties all have a particular characteristic in common: when they are activated, when they are at work, they prompt judgements on the knowledge that they yield; judgements

70 M. Merleau-Ponty, Le primat de la perception et ses conséquences philosophiques, Grenoble, Cynara, 1947.
which are sensible-aesthetic, rather than cognitive and rational. They express these judgements by responding to a logic which is not analytical but poetic in that it is based on the evocative process characteristic of metaphorisation, visual thinking, and mythical thought.\textsuperscript{71}

In this approach, therefore, the aesthetic understanding of organisational life relies on the capacity to immerse oneself empathetically in organisational settings and to produce an open text consisting of aesthetic hypertexts able to stimulate evocative, poetic and, sometimes, also artistic processes of organisational knowledge.

Instead, the artistic processes behind knowledge about organisational life distinguish the artistic approach. In this case, organisation scholars, theoreticians of art concerned with the artistic practices of social inquiry, and artists exploring everyday working life in organisations, focus on the artistic experience in order to gain insights into the management of organisational processes.

The central concern of the artistic approach is the organisational performance as experiential flux, with particular regard to leadership.\textsuperscript{72} It explores creativity and the pleasure of inventiveness and play in the management of organisational life almost as if these were experiential flows of playfulness.\textsuperscript{73} The organisational contexts usually investigated are those of the art world. But this is not always so, as evidenced by the piece \textit{This is Not a Written Sentence}, a performance staged by the artist and sociologist Anna Scalfi Eghenter at the University of Essex in England. Its subject was papers given at international conferences and seminars. Scalfi’s presentation adopted a widely-used communicative routine to give a paper; for which she also projected a series of PowerPoint slides. Her voice, therefore, was reflected in a visible text.

As shown in Figure 6.1, the PowerPoint slides presented a text that surprised. Instead of being the usual aid to understanding and memorisation the audience was shown something unexpected—the phonetic alphabet, accurately reproducing the sound of the paper’s text. This becomes evident on reading the first sentence in Figure 6.1, which is the title of the presentation: \textit{This is Not a Written Sentence}.

\textsuperscript{71} G. Vico, \textit{Principi di una scienza nuova}.
For me, this performance was an eloquent example of organisational communication as contradiction, in that it evoked:

- the difficulty of communicating in organisations;
- the relation between aesthetically different forms of organisational communication, such as oral and visual;
- the richness and complexity of the various languages that interweave in organisational communication even when they are saying the same thing;
- the value of both symbolic evocation and analytical accuracy for communication in organisations.

Anna Scalfi Eghenter writes in regard to this and other performances grouped under the title—or, more precisely, the *locus*—of *Traslata* that “the conversion from one discipline to another enjoys a state of such manifest arbitrariness..."
that it cannot be institutionalized, and remains a negotiation of meaning, a discovered form, suspended above the authority of that ambit.\footnote{A. Viliani, ed., \textit{Anna Scalfi Eghenter: KataLogos}, Milan, Silvana Editoriale, 2011, p. 230.}

**Conclusion**

The study of the social negotiation of an organisation’s aesthetic is socio-logically relevant because of its implications for expanding the criteria of the organisational citizen and democracy in everyday working life by including in them the principal features of the aesthetic dimension of organisational life.

In organisations, in fact, people ‘do’ aesthetics in the sense that they not only make beautiful and ugly things but also ‘organise aesthetics’ and ‘organise themselves by means of aesthetics’; because an aesthetic is a way to know and interact in an organisation which arises from the senses, perceptions, and aesthetic judgements, and which interweaves with the cognitive and rational.

The aesthetic study of organisations brings into light how organisational citizenship and democracy can be shaped in the everyday routine work, since it investigates how individuals and groups operate by listening to their feelings, desires, tastes, talents and passions, and by negotiating them—achieving success or failure—in interactions where they deploy their organisational expertise, which is not merely mental, but on the contrary rooted in the corporeality of sensible knowledge.

The aesthetic approach studies, in fact, how, through the negotiating processes that distinguish interaction in organisations, the tastes of people at work are educated, because one way of working is defined as elegant, another as clumsy, yet another as disgusting or revolting. That is to say, it studies how negotiated aesthetic judgements are formulated on the basis of feelings which give salience to the \textit{pathos} of the materiality of everyday life in organisations constituted by corporeality and artefacts to which aesthetic, though impalpable, form is given and which makes them beautiful or horrendous, or just kitsch, to the taste of those concerned.

We have seen in this chapter that the social negotiation of aesthetics is a fundamental component of the aesthetic study of organisational life, and that it is central to all four of the approaches into which aesthetic organisational research articulates: \textit{archaeological, empathic-logical, aesthetic,} and \textit{artistic}. These approaches are also highly critical of organisational embellishment and \textit{maquillage}, because these are forms of art and aesthetics intended to anaesthetise rather than enhance the personal knowledge and individual
subjectivities which, by contrast, the material differences among bodies and the sensory faculties exalt. They are radically critical of the aesthetic manipulation, disciplining, and exploitation of people who work in organisations or on behalf of them.

Moreover, by expressing a vision alternative to the exclusively mental and logical-analytical organisational knowledge dominant in large part of organisational theories, these approaches conduct a radical polemic against the epistemological assumptions on which so much of the theoretical discourse on organisation management has hinged.