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## **Aestheticizing the world of organization — creating beautiful untrue things**

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### **Abstract** (Article Summary)

The final revelation is that lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of art.

Oscar Wilde - *The Decay of Lying* (1905/1913, p. 54)

The aesthetic has long endured an uneasy relationship with institutions of power and authority. For Plato (trans. 1955/1987), the subversive potential he detected in the practice of art, and the aesthetic it engendered, was sufficient for him to call for poets and performers to be banned from his ideal Republic, lest they should corrupt his guardians and future philosopher kings. For the great minds of the Enlightenment the aesthetic, something unwieldy and corporeal in its nature, threatened their idealized realm of mind and led Kant (1790/1952) to construct his elaborate philosophical system to ensure its subservience to the exercise of reason and judgement. More recently, the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries saw a great explosion in both the emergence of art and aesthetic practice as a force of political and cultural radicalism, yet while at the same time it increasingly became the preserve of the rich and powerful to accumulate and enjoy.

### **Full Text** (8,009 words)

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Today, however, in these so-called postmodern times, it would seem that the aesthetic has finally been liberated. Freed by the democratizing forces of market capitalism and no longer formally restricted to the domain of art, aestheticized experience is available everywhere and to everyone: in the local high street, through the media and even, in the workplace. We consume on the basis of style, symbolism and fashion. Our bodies have become aesthetic projects to be adorned, toned and displayed. Even the organizations we work for are now, or so it would seem, getting in on this particular act. Not only is the value of corporate art collections on the increase (see Jacobson, 1993, 1996), but, in the wake of the corporate culture movement (Deal & Kennedy, 1982) and calls for more managed emotion in the workplace (Cooper & Sawaf, 1998), it would now seem that organizations are themselves becoming increasingly sensitive to aesthetic values. In the UK both the mainstream business press have, for example, started to run stories and articles on the recognized importance of aesthetics to 'efficient' office design (Gardner, 2001) and the role artistic activities can play in motivating and retaining staff (Pollock, 2000). Radio and television programmes have discussed issues ranging from the impact of the aesthetics of PowerPoint presentations on organizational thinking, to the

aesthetic of organized religion and how big business can and should learn from it. Furthermore, this is not simply an organizational issue in the narrow sense of the term. From designer outlets to glossy and stylized public relations documents, vehicle livery to the training of staff in self-presentation, corporate organizations are also increasingly playing a major role in the landscaping of our everyday aesthetic environment. Issues of organizational aesthetics are also therefore, increasingly socio-cultural issues as the modern distinction between formal organization and culture is rendered increasingly meaningless.

So how are critical theorists of organization and society to interpret such developments? Do they take them to represent a possible desublimation of the sensuality of society, or rather, should they look upon them as yet a further example of the ever-encroaching tide of rationalization that continues to haunt and undermine the emancipatory vision of critical social theory? In this chapter, what I seek to do is approach such questions through the critical textual scrutiny of some of the work that has recently emerged to champion such developments, particularly that which exults organizational managers to take seriously the need to make strategic interventions into the realm of organizational aesthetics. In doing so, and drawing a range of theoretical resources including those to be found in the work of Theodor Adorno, Stjepan Mestrovic and Wolfgang Welsch, I then attempt to draw some critical conclusions regarding what I argue here is a process of organizational aestheticization, maintaining that rather than representing the emancipation of the aesthetic, such developments can be more accurately understood to represent the potential negation of the unique, and possibly emancipatory qualities of the aesthetic as a realm of non-conceptual experience.

## **THE PROBLEM OF EVERYDAY AESTHETICIZATION**

We are, as Wolfgang Welsch (1997, p. 1) has noted, “without doubt currently experiencing an aesthetics boom”. While a multi-faceted process, integral to this “boom” is what he refers to as a process of surface aestheticization - the embellishment and sensualization of everyday objects, environments and experiences. Yet despite the initial impressions (sic), the term surface may give, we should not necessarily take it to imply something trivial or inconsequential. For to refer to the surface in this context is to refer, I would suggest, to the conceptual and physical space within which our everyday experiences and understandings of the world around us are negotiated and reproduced. That is, a constantly contested space within which human subjects are able to exercise their potential for subjective understanding and inter-subjective communication based on the autonomous realization of will, and the practice of undistorted communication (Habermas, 1981/1984). Yet, as the term "contested" suggests, this everyday realm is one within which a multitude of forces and interests play themselves out, each both potentially threatening and facilitating the possibility of human relations based on the values and practice of autonomy, creativity and respect.

The potential aestheticization of this everyday space has, perhaps not surprisingly therefore, encountered somewhat mixed reactions. For Featherstone (1991), for example,

this aestheticization of the mundane is taken as the positive outcome of a consumer culture that actually promotes the aestheticization of the rational and instrumental components of consumer capitalism. Thus, socio-cultural aestheticization is taken to represent a celebration of human creativity in a world of people who “have a sense of adventure and take risks to explore life’s options to the full, who are conscious they have only one life to live and must work hard to enjoy, experience and express it” (p. 59). Posited against such optimism, however, sits an alternative perspective, one more critical and wary of the origins, and potential implications, of such an aestheticization process. Drawing in particular on the legacy of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School in general, and the work of Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse in particular, it challenges the relationship outlined above between aestheticization and rationality in that it considers it to be a rationalization and instrumentalization of the aesthetic that in fact underpins such developments. A process that, in turn, rather than valorizing the aesthetic dimension of everyday life, signifies the negation of aesthetic experience as a unique and potentially emancipatory mode of apprehending the world.

Yet while normatively and politically divergent, what evidently unites these perspectives is a shared awareness of the economic basis of such a process. Now of course, for Featherstone, while proving a useful starting point for his theorization, ultimately the primacy of economic analysis is rendered somewhat obsolete by what he considers to be the elevated prominence of cultural determinism within contemporary societies. However, for the more Marxist inspired tradition of Critical Theory it is the economic dimension that provides, in large part, the basis for its critique of what is considered to be the debasement of western art and culture by the reductionist and instrumentalist logic of commodity capitalism (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944/1979). This assault on the value of aesthetic experience is viewed, therefore, as essentially a colonization process whereby, as Welsch (1997, p. 3) notes, aesthetic values can even be employed to rehabilitate and promote, for instance, commodities that have otherwise become “increasingly unusable on moral or health grounds”. The main concern here then is not simply that contemporary aestheticization processes render us increasingly vulnerable to the practices of advertisers and marketeers. Rather, as I have intimated above, what may also be at stake is the quality of the aesthetic as an integral aspect of human culture and experience, facing as it does the onslaught of a rationalization process that reduces it to little more than yet another quantifiable variable, devoid not only of the magical quality of sensuality, but that emancipatory potential which, as Marcuse (1978/1979, p. 69) notes, has for so long deferred its promise of “freedom and happiness for the individual”.

What is particularly interesting in the context of this collection, however, is that for those concerned with developing a critical approach to the ideas and practices underpinning contemporary organizational activity, such debates are also coming to take on a newly invigorated importance. For organizations, as Berg and Kreiner (1990) observed over a decade ago, have been no less seduced by the aestheticization processes apparently availing the rest of society resulting, in turn, in the emergence of a sizeable body of literature both extolling, and warily acknowledging, the implications of aesthetics for the contemporary organizational endeavour. In relation to this latter genre,

along with Strati's (1990, 1992, 1996, 1999, 2000a, 2000b) sizeable contribution to the development of an aesthetically driven approach to organization studies itself, several authors have subsequently addressed what they consider to be a range of negative manifestations of the purposeful manipulation and management of aesthetics within the organizational domain. Drawing on Gagliardi's (1990, 1996) re-formulation of the aesthetic capacity of the organizational artifact, for example, Larsen and Schultz's (1990) study of a Danish bureaucracy addresses the ways in which material artifacts ranging from office furnishings to the physical posturing of individual bodies, can be manipulated to maintain the perceived legitimacy of asymmetrical organizational power relations, and thus function as pervasive technologies of unconscious control.

Other examples of this more critical approach to the aestheticization of organizational life can also be found in recent work, such as that by Hancock and Tyler (2000), Höpfl (2000), and Thompson, Warhurst and Callaghan (2000), all of whom have focused on how the management of both environmental and embodied aesthetics can be understood to operate as a mechanism of employee control through what Witkin (1990, p. 332) has referred to as the "positive cultivation of certain sensuous values that directly express or realize the organizational presence demanded". However, as the work of Carter and Jackson (2000) suggests, the capacity for organizational aesthetics to influence and cultivate the sensuous is not necessarily restricted to the interior of the organizational domain. As their study of the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission illustrates, the aestheticization of organizational activities can serve an important function in terms of reinforcing far wider socio-cultural belief systems. For while the formal role of the Commission is the "care and maintenance of cemeteries and memorials for military war dead" (Carter & Jackson, 2000, p. 184), underpinning this responsibility, they argue, is the material generation of an aesthetic designed to invoke, through the orderly and dignified design of such facilities, a "feeling of solace and peace and not of depression" (Gibson & Ward, cited in Carter & Jackson, 2000, p. 184). While at first sight this could be taken to represent simply an attempt to generate an appropriate sense of dignity and respect for the deceased, the account put forward by the authors is somewhat more critical, and perhaps rather more insightful. For by locating the interpretation of such physical spaces within the context of a broader critical theory of the relationship between authority and the portrayal of war, they somewhat convincingly suggest that what they actually represent are aesthetically engineered spaces designed to deny their relationship to the experience of war, death, destruction and chaos. Of equal importance, however, is that in doing so they also actively favour the values of universal order and reason that, in turn, obscures both the irrationality of modern warfare and the irrationality of a social and political order which so often perpetrates or justifies such acts of destruction.

Organizational aesthetics, in this instance at least, can therefore be said to transcend the particular realm of the organization itself, and function to reinforce the more general cultural regime characteristic of modernity and its unapologetic adherence to the formality of post-enlightenment rationality; whatever the human cost incurred. Yet as I noted earlier, not all literature is so critically inclined. While the imperative in the material I have considered above is the identification and critique of a process of instrumental appropriation directed towards the aesthetic dimension of experience, an

alternative body of literature has also recently emerged which presents itself in very different terms. For in contrast to say the work of Carter and Jackson, its authors consider the organizational appropriation, and manipulation, of the aesthetic dimension to be not only a positive development in traditional business terms, but also to offer a potentially liberating experience for society as a whole. Such material, therefore, extols the virtue of the aesthetic and its capacity to both stimulate organizational competitiveness and efficiency while, at one and the same time, fostering the capacity of contemporary work organizations to enhance the quality of the aesthetic experience of society as a whole.

Yet despite such apparently noble intent, what I propose in the remainder of this paper, and drawing on the critical tradition alluded to above, is that such literature in fact does little more than to further reduce the reduction of the aesthetic to the status of an instrumentalized carrier of a very particular organizational ideology. Furthermore, to achieve this, it would seem that even despite the literatures acknowledgement of the uniqueness of the aesthetic as a mode of commercial, if not social engagement, it must still be stripped of its intangible or ineffable qualities, as well as any notion of experiential autonomy, reducing it to the level of yet another a quantifiable variable within the design of a broader organizational system. As such, the aesthetic as a critical mode of experience and cognition is itself emasculated, reduced to the status of yet another heteronymous ordered component within the organized environment of contemporary consumer capitalism — and like Carter and Jackson's cemeteries — left to function as an engineered legitimization of the dominance of an instrumentalized and dehumanized culture.

## **DESIGNING THE BEAUTIFUL ORGANIZATION**

Before proceeding any further, it is perhaps worth stating one important caveat, namely, that in no way should it be taken that I am suggesting that an instrumental attitude towards the aesthetic and its relationship to the pursuit of commercial gain or organizational productivity is, in itself, entirely novel. From the requirement for aesthetic labour, to the use of designers, architects and artists to generate brand or corporate identities, the relationship between them is as old, if not far older, than capitalism itself. For example, architecture, as Olins (1989) observes referring to the great London railway stations built during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and, more latterly, the imposing City headquarters of the Midland Bank which, when it was built in 1924, was the wealthiest such institution in the world, provides a striking illustration of this fact. Today, the felt need to express one's corporate power and position through the design and scale of one's public buildings is no less diminished of course. Structures such as the Chrysler Building in New York, the Bank of China tower in Hong Kong, or the recently completed Citigroup Building on London's Canary Wharf function not simply as containers, but as Berg and Kreiner (1990, p. 43) would have it, "impelling symbols of corporate virtues and managerial intentions". However, what is perhaps increasingly significant today is the potential for organizations to generate, project and sustain an aestheticized relationship between themselves and their increasingly diverse range of stakeholders via a far greater range of media than simply buildings and product advertising. Now while in part this is a

consequence of technological developments and the increased primacy of information and knowledge management within society as a whole, what is also significant is the requirement for organizations to be able to communicate a commercially attractive and publicly memorable identity, largely in response to the pressures of intensified global competition, at each and every opportunity that presents itself. Thus, from product advertisements to annual reports, internal newsletters to recruitment brochures and mission statements to web sites, increasingly the emphasis is being placed on taking the opportunity to "get across the right image", "look good" and "make a strong impression" in order to maintain or achieve even the slightest of market advantages.

Yet it is not so much the quantitative increase in the amount of aestheticized material being produced by contemporary organizations that is of primary concern here, but rather the qualitative shift this may have generated in terms of how the category of the aesthetic is experienced within contemporary organizational circles and society at large. What I am suggesting by this, is not simply that aesthetic experience is increasingly coming to serve the economic interests of the corporate sphere — a somewhat inevitable process — but the idea that in doing so, it is in fact becoming identical with, or reduced to it. By this I mean that we are facing a potential situation whereby aesthetic experience no longer simply serves the requirements of the corporate sphere, but where corporate style and beauty becomes style and beauty per se, and aesthetic experience is valued at naught unless it is formally sanctioned through organizational affiliation or corporate association: a world where the sanitized, plastic beauty of organizational aesthetics provides the only credible, or indeed legitimate, source of aesthetic gratification.

Certainly, there are others who share a concern that such a shift in our cultural sensibilities may already be taking place. As I indicated earlier Welsch (1997, p. 3), for example, notes how it is evident that the ongoing surface aestheticization of contemporary western societies is, in large part, driven by the increasingly aestheticized nature of marketable commodities. This is occurring, he goes on to argue, and clearly drawing on the work of Baudrillard (1981), to the extent whereby even the exchange value of commodities is supplanted by their "aesthetic aura" which itself becomes the consumer's "primary acquisition, with the article merely incidental". Equally, in her polemical account of the continuing expansion of the corporate brand into almost every facet of our everyday lives, Klein (1999/2001) provides a not dissimilar set of observations. For instance, she notes how it is becoming not merely accepted, but culturally expected that major leisure and arts events should be accompanied by sponsorship relations that ensure that every aspect of the experience is stamped and adorned with the aestheticized identity of the sponsor themselves. Thus, every kind of aesthetic event, from popular music tours, to art exhibitions, television drama and theatrical productions are, in Klein's view, on the verge of becoming indistinguishable from the aestheticized experience of the corporate sponsorship upon which such events now rely. Perhaps more telling, however, is the work I referred to nearer the beginning of this paper, that which is directly concerned with promoting the systematic process of organizational aestheticization and the benefits it can bring, and to which I now want to turn my attentions.

It is in the work of Bernd Schmitt and what he terms his Corporate Aesthetics Management (CAM) Framework that the drive to establish a systematic approach to the planning and design of an aestheticized organizational environment is probably best exemplified. Schmitt, author of a number of single-authored and collaborative works (Schmitt, 2000; Schmitt, Simonson & Marcus, 1995; Schmitt & Simonson, 1997), first outlined his strategic approach to management of organizational aesthetics in a journal article entitled *Managing Corporate Image and Identity* (Schmitt, Simonson & Marcus, 1995). While he acknowledges that, generally speaking, organizational managers have tended to sidestep discussions on aesthetics due to the somewhat esoteric and generally subjective nature of the topic, for Schmitt the solution to this ‘problem’ is simply to reduce the language of the aesthetic to a style (sic) more ‘familiar’ to managers, thus allowing it to be more easily comprehended and deployed as the basis for a “comprehensive and strategic approach...to [managing] a corporations aesthetic image” (Schmitt et al., 1995, p. 83).

The path that Schmitt and his colleagues take in this respect commences, perhaps not surprisingly, with the act of definition. That is, by defining the object of their attentions, namely *corporate aesthetics*, they are able provide a readily digestible reduction of a complex concept while, at the same time, establishing important socially grounded relations as somehow natural or almost inevitable such as the very conjunction of the two terms or the relationship between corporate imagery and the possibility of “gratification”,

*....the term ‘corporate aesthetics’ is used in its broadest sense to refer to a company’s visual (and otherwise aesthetic) output in the form of packaging, logos, trade names, business cards, company uniforms, buildings, advertisements and other corporate elements that have the potential of providing aesthetic gratification. (Schmitt et al., 1995, p. 83)*

The focus of their strategy, it should also be noted, is then placed firmly on the evaluation of material artifacts as the aesthetic components of the organization. Thus, the subjective dimension of aesthetic experience is, or so it appears, carefully excluded, further reducing potential obstacles to the construction of a systematic framework within which the aesthetic may be reduced to a series of variables, subject to manipulation over both time and space.

Thus having now reduced the aesthetic to a discursively knowable and materially quantifiable entity, it is then possible to ‘slot’ it into the CAM framework and articulate the necessary categorizations, procedures and assessment criteria which, we are informed, provide an approach to the management of aesthetics that is "systematic", "comprehensive" and "strategic" (Schmitt et al., 1995, p. 83). So, like the architectural projects associated with high modernism, for example, aesthetic concerns are determined by the principles of order, calculability and replicability that already underpin the organizational logic familiar to individuals like Schmitt. Its own aesthetic is that of the machine, which then almost inevitably descends into the formulaic management-speak of systems, sub-systems and strategies as managers are counselled in the need to undertake

careful and systematic analyses, calculations and evaluations as part of their aesthetics management strategies. Take, for example, the following passage describing the structure of an aesthetics situation analysis,

*The situation analysis encompasses four distinct sub-stages, each reflecting a separate goal (see Figure 2.). The first sub-stage consists of a thorough status quo analysis of every aspect of a company's image. Without proper identification of all image-related elements, the comprehensive, systematic and strategic qualities are compromised. (Schmitt, et al., 1995, p. 84)*

Notably, a central component of this situation analysis are what the authors describe as the four "P categories" of aesthetics management, "properties, products, presentations and publications", all of which must be carefully evaluated (although we are warned that the initial sub-divisions may require the use of "subjective judgements") to ensure a sound knowledge base is provided with regard to the aesthetics of the existing corporate image. Further stages then follow; the design of a corporate aesthetics strategy, the building of design elements, and finally a process for aesthetic quality control through which consistency of image and style may be maintained and necessary updates and upgrades undertaken.

In the more substantial text, *Marketing Aesthetics* (Schmitt & Simonson, 1997), not only is the CAM framework refined, but the emphasis shifts to the presentation of a fully blown "self-help" or "how to" manual for budding aesthetics managers. Here, everything from style to various architectural and geometric forms is identified, defined and then illustrated in their specific application. Perhaps more significant, however, are the examples the authors provide of what they consider to be particularly successful attempts at generating very specific aestheticized identities by several leading companies. Starbucks, IBM and GAP all provide case studies of organizations whose approach to the management of aesthetics has led the way in the use of images, sounds, smells and textures as tools to achieve "tangible value for the organization" (Schmitt & Simonson, 1997, p. 21) including "increased consumer loyalty, the ability to charge higher prices for similar products and increased employee productivity". So while such organizations increasingly contribute to the aesthetic landscape of contemporary western culture, the aesthetic is itself, or so it would seem, contemporaneously reduced to an equivalent value, one identical to the value such organizations place upon it as a resource for the maximization of profit and the marginalization of potential competition.

Now it has to be admitted that in many respects the work of Schmitt and his colleagues offers something of an obvious target for the kind of criticism I have presented above. For despite their allusions to the generation of cultural value and the like, they do not, after all, entirely shy away from articulating the priorities underpinning their efforts, namely to ensure corporate leaders recognize the aesthetic dimension as a potential resource, which, as with any other resource, exists to be exploited. As such, the aesthetic, as the realm of sensory apprehension, is clearly conceptualized and articulated as a site of strategic managerial intervention, amenable to qualification and quantification, analysis, appropriation and finally, purposeful commodification, while the potential wider

consequences of this are not, at the end of the day, overly concerning to them. However, the same cannot be so straightforwardly said of the work of Dickinson and Svensen (2000), whose *Beautiful Corporations: Corporate Style in Action* signifies a very different approach to the issue at hand.

Unlike Schmitt and Simonson's offering, this appears to be no work of sensible scientism and fathomable frameworks. Indeed, one's very first encounter with this particular artifact is itself — like an increasing number of new-wave management texts — profoundly material and aestheticized. The dust cover, striking in design, verges on the fluorescent. The inside combines paper that is silky to the touch with full-page glossy photos and engaging montages while the text is organized in short, punchy paragraphs laid out with plenty of space to spare and punctuated with 'stylish' images and MTVesque soundbites. Certainly more corporate coffee table than corporate boardroom, more pop culture than intellectual treatise, its aesthetic is one of fun, accessibility, and the feeling that business can be cool, slick and stylish. Even when one ventures beyond (or below) this level of engagement, the narrative is apparently equally different in content to Schmitt and Simonson's. Rather than a technical manual, this is a direct evocation to a more attractive world through organizational aesthetics and the creation of truly beautiful corporations. That is, a world in which corporate activity should constitute "style, beauty, a positive attitude and pleasing experiences" (Dickinson & Svenson, 2000, p. 3) not only for its members but society as a whole. This holistic vision is summed up well by Sean Blair, Design Director of the UK Design Council (cited in Dickinson & Svenson, 2000, p. xii) who describes the beautiful corporation as one that will,

*....seek people not as human resources, but as human talents, aiming to realize potential not control it. [That] will touch the earth lightly, not using physical resources unnecessarily, but will use resources in new and more efficient ways. The corporation that will dominate tomorrow's business landscape will pursue the social as well as the financial agenda.*

The aesthetic at work here then, is perhaps more "post" than "high" modern. This is a vision of contemporary corporations similar to that of Prince Charles' vision for modern architecture; one where design is sensitive to human scale of need, rather than dictated to by abstract principles such as those of "the one best way" or "form follows function".

Nevertheless, there is much here that remains deeply unsettling. What, for example, constitutes this "style" that Dickinson and Svensen constantly refer to both in their subtitle and throughout the work itself? For Schmitt and Simonson (1997, p. 85) style is the albeit sensitively constructed combination of "color, shape, line and pattern [or] volume, pitch and meter", ultimately quantifiable and certainly marketable. However, for Dickinson and Svensen, style appears to represent a far more metaphysical organizational quality. Style, they acknowledge is in fact an intrinsic quality that cannot simply be invented or acquired — you either have it or you don't. But this does not mean that corporations cannot act in a stylish way, however. For to be stylish is to be attractive, and to be attractive corporations must learn to act with "integrity and honesty",

characteristics that the authors view as "prerequisites for success" (Dickinson & Svensen, 2000, p. 4). Style is also portrayed in terms of corporate "individuality and personality" (Dickinson & Svensen, 2000, p. 30); it is a way of doing things that can differ between businesses and the contexts within which they operate. So, while the concept of style itself remains esoteric, accessible to those who 'know', illusive for the rest, it also represents the primary ingredient for corporate success.

Yet despite the fact that such apparent mystification may sit well with the ineffable quality of the aesthetic previously disregarded by Schmitt and Simonson, it still appears, however, to serve a very particular function. That being, the placing of the authors and the text itself into a position of power and authority — leaving them relatively free to present their vision of the beautiful corporation free from any need to ground their propositions in anything other than the self-referentiality of their own assertions. Certainly, there is little to convince one that the example of the so-called beautiful corporations they offer up as illustrations of their vision represent anything other than a combination of slick design and the valorization of material aspiration. While the graphic design associated with organizations such as Shell, Mercedes-Benz and UK cable television company OnDigital certainly demonstrate a high degree of corporate aestheticization, there is little evidence to suggest the necessary shift in underlying values and practices that would qualify them, by Dickinson and Svensen's criteria, for the status of a "beautiful corporation". Hence, despite their allusions to something beyond a simple surface aestheticization of organizational activities and presentation, it would seem that Dickinson and Svensen's approach is, on closer inspection not so different from the one taken by Schmitt and Simonson whereby surface aestheticization qualifies as aestheticization per se., and corporate presence exists as the preeminent motivation and goal.

Certainly, when one compares the two approaches, there remains the important common denominator that prevails throughout — their overriding concern with the economic utility of aesthetics for corporate performance within the global marketplace. Design, for example, is championed as the new buzzword for those truly interested in corporate success, replacing now defunct managerial fashions such as TQM and JIT (Dickinson & Svenson, 2000, p. 41). And, while bottom line and humanistic concerns are combined in the claim that aesthetics can generate both what they term "cultural currency" (Dickinson & Svenson, 2000, p. 38) and a more humane and productive environment for employees to work in, it is often quite difficult to unravel the distinctions that are made between the pursuit of profit and the professed nurturing of corporate responsibility. Referring, for example, to the thoughts of Jamie Anley, a founder of the design and communication group "JAM", the pursuit of organizational identity through aesthetics is reflected, they suggest, in the belief that it is more admirable for companies to invest in "beautifully designed and made" staff uniforms than it is to spend even more of television advertising (Dickinson & Svenson, 2000, p. 40). The prioritizing of such activities, while perhaps at first sight a reference to the intrinsic value of providing a more comfortable and stylish working environment for employees, quickly retreats as, on further reading, its impetus derives clearly from the tradition of various 'soft', yet instrumentally focused, employee management strategies associated with other

movements and fads such as Human Resource Management (see Legge, 1995) or corporate culturalism (see Parker, 2000).

Furthermore, the opportunities offered by aesthetic management to nurture patterns of normative compliance and ethical attachment by employees is one not lost on those that the authors associate with the popularization of the aesthetics of organizing. Resonating with Featherstone's (1991, p. 126) comment on contemporary value systems that tend to draw "on tendencies in consumer culture that favour the aestheticization of life, [and] the assumption that the aesthetic life is the ethically good life", the proposition that a clear aesthetic identity can help produce employees that "would have such confidence and satisfaction in the organization that they would, if you met them at a party on a Saturday night, want to press a business card in your hand" (Anley, cited in Dickinson & Svenson, 2000, p. 41) conflates aesthetic attraction with social value and personal achievement in a way consistent once again with ideas frequently expressed throughout the genre of corporate culturalist "how to" manuals. Furthermore, despite the talk of participation, fluidity and innovative design, the authors requirements that corporate managers learn to "police" the corporate image, to impose "pre-set templates that cannot be changed", undertake the removal "from computer networks all but approved typefaces and introduce publications management systems" (Dickinson & Svenson, 2000, p. 94) to ensure levels of "standardization and control" in all aesthetic activities, further reinforces the realization that corporate beauty comes at a price. That price, or so it would seem, being the regimentation, standardization and creative closure of the meaning making process as expressed at that very level of organizational practice they so passionately seek to champion.

## **AESTHETICS, MODERNITY AND THE CULTURE INDUSTRY**

These two particular examples of managerialist literature concerned with the relationship between contemporary organizational life and the aesthetic realm should not, I must stress, be taken as yet to represent anything like a coherent movement within the sphere of contemporary managerial thought. As I have noted, the majority of work that has engaged with the relationship between the aesthetic and the organizational has tended to adopt a far less instrumental orientation, focusing instead on predominantly epistemological or critical issues. Nevertheless, such literature remains significant. For despite the relatively limited level of debate regarding the role of aesthetics management in contemporary work organizations, the practices championed in this literature certainly appear to be increasingly important to the day-to-day operation of a notable range of organizational forms. As I have already suggested this, in large part, can be accounted for by the proliferation of opportunities for organizations to present themselves to the outside world via material that requires constant attention to be paid to its design and presentation. Mission statements, recruitment brochures, web sites, multi-media advertising and the competition that exists around such media all require the closest attention be paid to issues of style, presentation and above all, "feel". It also reflects, however, what I have alluded to as a more general response to our aestheticized culture, one that valorizes above almost all else the qualities of spectacle and display (Urry, 1990). Hence, in what is an increasingly media-saturated environment with its

proliferation of sounds and images, organizations involved in the global struggle for market recognition are required to compete in what is an increasingly stimulus rich environment. As such they must seek to pay increasing attention to the aesthetic qualities of everything from its products to its invoice sheets, from its outlets to its office design contribute to the pursuit of that imperative if they are to make an impact on potential stakeholders at each and every opportunity.

Accompanying such a quantitative shift, however, we must, as I also urged earlier, consider the potential qualitative implications of such literature and the developments it both encourages and reflects. In particular, we have to ask just what might it suggest about the nature of contemporary aesthetic experience both within the organizational domain, and the socio-cultural environment more generally. Well, in many respects, it perhaps raises issues similar to those I have explored elsewhere in relation to the question of organizational emotionality (Hancock & Tyler, 2001). This work drew in particular on the ideas of Mestrovic (1997) and his view that we are currently experiencing the dawn of what he terms a *postemotional society*; one in which emotion as an authentically lived experience is being gradually eroded by our constant exposure to mechanized, rationalized and ultimately commodified emotional stimuli. Such postemotionalism is, for Mestrovic (1997, p. xi) at least, the direct outcome of what he terms the “authenticity industry”, consisting largely of a combination of the service and culture industries, and their never ending pursuit of new markets and those mechanisms by which potential consumers may be drawn to them through the generation and then apparent fulfilling of their newly “discovered” emotional needs. Mestrovic’s analysis draws together, therefore, a series of apparent developments between the sphere of contemporary work organizations and broader patterns of socio-cultural change, in an attempt to establish a fuller picture of the status of emotion in contemporary society.

Now, the similarities between this particular analysis of contemporary emotion and that which is suggested by the material concerned with the management of aesthetics are, I would argue, potentially informative. For whether or not one could convincingly describe the works of the likes of Schmitt and Simonson as part of an authenticity industry per se., certainly their work shares many of the attributes described by Mestrovic, particularly those which he derives from his own analysis of the work of Adorno and Horkheimer (1944/1979, 1991) and their critical account of the “culture industry”. Their particular thesis is premised on the view that post-Enlightenment societies can be characterized by the predominance of a mode of rationality that is itself grounded in a drive to domination and control. As such, human activity is considered to be increasingly organized in relation to means, not the consideration of ends, until, as Adorno (1991/2001, p. 93) notes, “to speak even of culture is to speak of administration whose task is to ‘assemble, distribute, evaluate and organize’”. This is not to suggest that for Adorno culture and administration are identical in themselves. Rather, he argues that they ideally exist in a state of tension whereby culture serves to celebrate the particular features of life over its generalization, while administration in order to control life, seeks the reverse. Yet the requirements of modern society, and in particular those of capitalism, have unbalanced this tension, increasingly debasing the *lived activity* of culture, and reducing it to a standardized, replicable quantity, which is both easily producible and

unquestionably consumable.

While Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the instrumentalization of culture is perhaps informative in itself in relation to the general incorporation of the "problem of culture" into the field of organizational management, when it comes to the realm of aesthetics it is, I would suggest, particularly pertinent. This is in large part due to the fundamentally emancipatory potential Adorno (1991/2001) ascribed to art in particular, and aesthetic experience in general, due to both its inherent impracticality, and non-conceptual structure; a structure that enables it to articulate the world in a way that is non-reducible to the instrumental categories that contemporary rationality has sought to impose upon it. Yet even in the midst of his attempt to theorize the aesthetic as an enduring realm of critical possibility, he was aware of the ever-encroaching influence of organizational rationality. So while Adorno deliberately opposed culture, as the realm inhabited by art and the aesthetic sensibility, to that of administration and organization he was forced to admit that despite its non-conceptual character, art had not entirely resisted the onslaught of the instrumentalized rationality of modernity.

*Today manifestations of extreme artistry can be fostered, produced and presented by official institutions; indeed art is dependent upon such support if it is to be produced at all and find its way to an audience. Yet, at the same time, art denounces everything institutional and official. This gives some evidence of the neutralization of culture and of the irreconcilability with administration of what has been neutralized. Through the sacrifice of its possible relation to praxis, the cultural concept itself becomes an instance of organization; that which is so provokingly useless in culture is transformed into tolerated negativity or even into something negatively useful — into a lubricant for the system, into something which exists for something else, into untruth, or into goods of the culture industry calculated for the consumer. (Adorno, 1991/2001, p. 102 emphasis added)*

Like Mestrovic's post-emotional society then, what Adorno appears to lament here is the emergence of a form of post-aestheticism, whereby aesthetic experience is itself little more than the experience of the untruth of the culture industry, albeit one of "beautiful untrue things" (Wilde, 1913, p. 54). Extrapolating out from this, it could be argued therefore that in creating its systems and frameworks for aesthetic management, in adorning the world in stunning livery, dazzling logos and even, where appropriate, the imagery, sounds and sensations of what may have once been considered the highest of art and culture, the corporate world is equally guilty of reducing aesthetic experience to little more than just another repository of mechanically produced, instrumentally orientated codes and symbols. Having colonized the cognitive and affective realms of both their employees and consumers, it would seem then, that the next assault is to be on the realm of the sensual, albeit in the name of a more beautiful world — naturally.

## CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Now, to criticize the aesthetics of the everyday may, in many respects appear to be something of a reactionary activity. After all, if human beings cannot enjoy the mundane sensuality of their surroundings and everyday interactions, what hope is there? Does Featherstone's celebration of the opportunities presented by the commodification of the aesthetic for novel experience, idiosyncratic experimentation and self-expression not deserve to be embraced, rather than dismissed as, at best naive and at worst complicit? Equally, should we not welcome the call for more beautiful corporations from the likes of Dickinson and Svenson, and indeed hope that organizations will embrace the values of design and presentation as their contribution to a more sensually pleasing world? Well, in many respects, this is a well-rehearsed argument, resonating as it does with the schism within cultural studies between the critique of mass culture by the Frankfurt School and its followers and the defenders of what they consider to be the value of the popular (see Fiske, 1989a, 1989b). For the champions of the latter, the resources provided by the culture industry are there to be re-appropriated by the masses – who more often than not succeed in shaping them to their own desires and intentions. However, for the former this remains merely an illusion, determined as it is by the imperatives of mass production and the reductionist logic of cultural commodification. It is, moreover, a debate that appears to show little sign of reaching a satisfactory resolution, with both sides wedded to their respective meta-theoretical and normative positions.

However, the prior existence of such debates should not, I would argue, deter us from continuing to ask those questions which we may feel are of importance to generating a critical understanding of the implications of social change, whatever side of this particular divide they fall on. In this instance that question is, for me at least, what do we take to be the nature of these such aestheticization processes that seem to confront us at both at work and leisure, and what effect, if any, might they have on our capacity for aesthetic experience and judgement? Certainly what such a question does not require, as Adorno and Horkheimer remind us, is a simple finger pointing exercise, seeking out particular individuals for making the world a somehow less authentic place. But perhaps it is a case of following Adorno and Horkheimer's lead, by trying to come to terms with the ways in which "the power of society" as they refer to it (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944/1979, p. 124), underwrites a rolling aestheticization of the world. A process by which the ever accelerating demands of a consumer driven market appears to obliterate the need for substance and, in turn, replaces it with the requirement of instant gratification of experience, with the "predominance of the effect, the obvious touch and the technical detail over the work itself" (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1947/1979, p. 125). For what this suggests is the fundamentally ontological problem of more image and less substance, the experience of an over aestheticization of the world, an explosion of sensuality grounded in large part in the expansion of corporate marketing and organizational aestheticization. Now while this is perhaps something we may initially welcome, for as I suggested above, who would not wish to live in a more aesthetically stimulating world, we should also be sensitive to its potential dangers. Perhaps the most immediate of these being the danger of an over-stimulation of the aesthetic<sup>1</sup>— which in turn numbs our faculty of experience and judgement — a fear echoed by Welsch (1997,

p. 25) recognizing as he does that,

*our perception needs not only invigoration and stimulation, but delays, quiet areas and interruptions too... Total aestheticization results in its own opposite. Where everything becomes beautiful, nothing is beautiful any more; continued excitement leads to indifference; aestheticization breaks into anaesthetization.*

Thus, once again in a similar vein to Baudrillard's musings over the implications of an over-meditated society on the purposeful nature of the subject (see Hancock, 1999) Welsch counsels us on the dangers of a world made 'too beautiful', one in which the primary danger is the loss of our faculty for aesthetic experience and judgment in the face of an over-aestheticized world. This may not simply be an issue of the potential anesthetization of society however. For it also has important implications for the likes of Adorno's view of the aesthetic as a potentially emancipatory force in contemporary society. For reduced to what appears to be an omnipresent dimension of the everyday in general, and the corporate in particular, the diminution of aesthetic experience can only neutralize its unique mimetic character — its ability to conceive of the world in non-conceptual terms — and in turn witness what is left of it resurrected as little more than a mechanism of conceptual identification, relating stimulus to brand, experience to company or organization. It is not then perhaps a question solely of anesthetization itself, but rather the political implications of an aestheticized environment increasingly driven by the standardized corporate aesthetic; one that embraces our everyday lives telling us its beautiful but untrue things and, in doing so reducing the aesthetic to little more than yet another instrumental carrier of reified 'reality' over utopian possibility.

## CONCLUSION

*"I mistrust all systematizers and avoid them. The will to a system is a lack of integrity" --- Nietzsche (1889/1990, p. 35)*

Human history has been characterized by a fundamental struggle between the forces of abstract order and embodied, sensual experience. Yet modernity has witnessed, in large part, the triumph of the former, ushering in an age of reason, of systems and ultimately the dominion of production. So when Wilde observed that for art to have aesthetic value it must tell beautiful untrue things he was, in part, correct. For he recognized that reality, as we experience it, has lost its beauty. Rather, what we have now is a world of order and identity in which what is taken as beauty, or indeed any other facet of authentic aesthetic experience is merely an "appendage of the process of production, without autonomy or substance of its own" (Adorno, 1951/1978, p. 15). Of course what he forgot was that it does not necessarily mean that what art reveals to us is untrue; merely that it lacks truth in a world of even greater falsehood. Perhaps it is rather more useful to realize that it is the drive to systematically aestheticize organizational life that is in fact the realm of the beautiful untrue things. For rather than providing the expressive and conceptual space for aesthetic experience to bloom and to flourish in whatever way it might, it in fact intensifies the Enlightenment project of incorporation, seeking to reintegrate the aesthetic into the realm of calculable knowledge

and practical utility.

Yet in doing so, it not only debases the aesthetic, depriving it of that which is genuinely identical to it, but also potentially renders it useless in its own cause as well as depriving humanity of its radical potential, its potential to allow us to experience things other than they are. Reduced to yet another tool of the organizational technocrat, the neutralization of the aesthetic risks becoming absolute, until it becomes indistinguishable in a world where aesthetic experience is reduced to nothing more than the deadened apprehension of the sterile landscape of society, and judgment an association of a contrived meaning with an appropriate corporate livery.

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<sup>1</sup> Adrian Carr (2002) and Russell Meares (1992) have warned that, at a more general level, there are psychological consequences of an environment that is over-stimulating. A phenomenon dubbed "stimulus entrapment" may ensue. Stimulus entrapment is a notion that through continual hypervigilance externally, a person fails to develop an "inner self voice" and, as a result, experiences feelings of "emptiness". A lack of an ability to self reflect, makes these individuals prone to external locus of control and/or to a false self that is often one dimensional. "They live as if at the mercy of the environment, in a hypertrophy of the 'real' " (Meares & Coombes, 1994, p. 66). Further, Carr (2002) argues that the increasing pace of our capitalist society, that demands the instantaneous, has itself demanded and sustained a state of external hypervigilance, maintaining a need for societal personas while simultaneously mitigating against individuality.

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