All ye need to know? : aesthetics from a design perspective

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Aesthetics from a design perspective

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Abstract

In support of the notion that the aesthetic side of organisations is as yet underdeveloped in organisation theory, we develop in this paper a research agenda for studying the impact of aesthetics on organizations. We take a design perspective (Romme, 2003; Van Aken, 2004) and structure the field of aesthetics in organization following an input-output model of organizations. This leads us to the development of seven hypotheses, which address the various aspects in which beauty in organisations influences organisational performance, as well as the various factors that drive organisational beauty. We also further develop our conceptual gear, by discussing the concepts process aesthetics, product aesthetics and aesthetic sensibility. We suggest that the key aspects of aesthetic sensibility (robustness, breath, sharpness and tolerance) can be of aid in understanding why some of us are more aesthetic sensible then others.

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! With brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st
'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' – that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

From: Ode on a Grecian Urn*, John Keats, 1820*

Introduction

Aesthetic considerations rarely take a prominent place in discussions on organisation, neither in the process of organisational design nor in discussing its results (Guillén 1997). Debates on organisation frequently touch upon questions such as what organisational form or process is better in terms of more fit-for-purpose, but rarely on the question of which is more *beautiful*. In this sense, the field of organisation science still neatly fits in the picture of three disconnected perspectives on life as noted by Plato and revitalised by Habermas (1981):
-   The *true*: the cognitive, objective view or the positivist perspective (dominant in science);
-   The *good*: the ethic normative view or the moral perspective (dominant in spiritual and judiciary organisations);
-   The *beautiful*: the expressive or impressionist view or the aesthetic perspective (dominant in the arts).

Traditionally, organisation studies have put a strong emphasis on the first perspective (e.g. scientific management, rational decision making, measuring is knowing). Increasingly, the ethic perspective is gaining ground if we look into notions like quality management, sustainability (people, planet, profit) and corporate citizenship. But, we believe it is true what Guillén stated in the ASQ, that "People seem to yearn for beauty as intensely as they pursue instrumental methods and morally acceptable methods." (Guillén 1997, p.710). As a consequence, "our understanding of the inner logic of organisational theories, as well as of their effectiveness and impact, is likely to be enhanced by taking the aesthetic dimension into account" (Guillén 1997, p.710). Therefore, in this paper, we wish to cast doubt on the convention that the focus of organisation science is solely on truth and some ethical issues and not on esthetical dimensions. Moreover, we aspire to open or perhaps widen the academic debate on the very thought of "the aesthetics of organisation".

   One can ask: why do we need to talk about aesthetics in organisation? Perhaps the relevance of this topic is best explained with a related line of inquiry. Only a few years ago, before the scandals around corporate ethics such as the Enron case, the notion that ethical and moral considerations lay outside of the domain of organisation science could often be heard. If such views were not voiced explicitly, they could be inferred from the fact that ethics courses played very, very modest roles in most leading management education curricula. In only a year or two, this has changed dramatically. Similarly, aesthetic considerations are today still largely absent from these programmes.

Although it seems obvious that aesthetic deliberations play a role in many different aspects of organizations, it is not so clear if and how aesthetics play a role in the process of organisational design. Surely all professionals, including those in organisations, now and than will take into account aesthetic considerations in their work. Schön (1983) pointed this out for architects, which is understandable as it is commonly assumed that the products of their work, architectural designs, should display beauty (see also Guillén 1997). But perhaps it appears less obvious at first sight that the products of managerial work can also display beauty, in the sense that they facilitate the origination of aesthetic experiences in workprocesses in the operational core.

Comparisons between management and managers and other areas where aesthetic considerations play an important role, have often been made. For instance, Weick (1998), Lewin (1998) and Berniker (1998) have stressed the relevance of jazz improvisation as a metaphor for organisation, and jazz musicians most certainly strive for beauty in their creative work. Also, it has repeatedly been stressed that managers as organisational designers should display creativity. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) has stressed the importance of a deep interest in various art forms such as music and poetry for the professional productivity of most of the highly successful creative individuals he interviewed. A well known example of such an individual was Albert Einstein, and perhaps also the most outspoken one regarding the importance of beauty for his professional domain, physics. Einstein stated that "the only physical theories that we are willing to except are the beautiful ones" and "physical laws should have mathematical beauty" (Formelo 2002, p.xiii) although this view is not free of controversies in theoretical and applied physics. So, how about organisation science?

As indicated, the purpose of this paper is to open up an academic debate on the role of aesthetics of organisation, in both the process of organising and in the outcomes of this process: organisations. Are some organisations more beautiful than others and, if so, why? What roles can aesthetic considerations play in organisational design rules (Van Aken 2003, Romme 2003)? Do aesthetically pleasing organisational processes lead to more successful organisations? Our aim here is to present a research agenda, consisting of a logically ordered set of propositions suggesting potential correlations between aspects of aesthetics and performance in an organisational context.

This article is structured as follows. First, we review what has been said about aesthetics in the broad context of organisation so far. Then we present a number of logically ordered propositions regarding the role of aesthetics in organisation and its possible links with organisational performance. None of these will go so far as to suggest that truth and beauty are one, as the poet John Keats once did. But all of them propose clear causal connections between these concepts. Connections that are worthy of further research and discussion. To illustrate how much work is really needed to explore this research agenda properly, we make one small excursion round the topic of what "aesthetic sensibility" may mean in this context. We round off with a concluding section.

Aesthetics and the study of organisation

Derived from the Ancient Greek *aisthetikos*, meaning the concern of perception, the term aesthetics was originally introduced in 1753 by the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714 – 1762). His formulation of the aesthetic was in response to the perceived need for a direct philosophical study of human

perceptions and sensations. The study of aesthetics was formulated as more than simply the categorization of the beautiful, but rather the study of

> "…the whole of our sensate life together – the business of affections and aversions, of how the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces, of what takes root in the gaze and the guts and all that arises from our banal, biological insertion into the world" [Eagleton, 1990].

For Baumgarten, aesthetics is the science of sensible knowledge, which is distinct from intellectual and scientific knowledge. Giambattista Vico (1725) extended the argument, arguing that aesthetic understanding stands in antithesis to cognitively based knowledge. There is wisdom that is not rational but poetic, and it is rooted in those relations that are not reasoned but nevertheless bind us to surrounding reality, he writes.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770 – 1831) introduced a second and different conception of the term aesthetics. He understood aesthetics as the philosophy of art. The fundamental task of art is to copy, to learn from or even to transcend nature. Plato (427 –347 BC) was very much against art and artists. He believed art to be misleading, untrustworthy and pretentious, the creator of illusions and irrationality. Others - including Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Schelling - saw art to be a way to access the most fundamental aspects of our life and our world, due to its ability to express beyond the limits of philosophical or discursive-rational ways of expressing. Hegel found the latter point of view outdated, because of the social system in which art develops.

The fundamental question within the philosophy of art is the difference between art and kitsch, the latter being defined as art that can't live up to its pretensions (see for a thourough discussion of this concept Linstead 2002). But what are these pretensions? By what criteria can artistic value be established? Plato saw beauty as a 'form', and as such timeless, immutable and thus objective. Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717 – 1768) spoke of *'edle Einfalt und stille Grösse'* (noble plainness and quiet magnificence). Hegel viewed beauty, as expressed through art, as the materialization of the unfolding of the absolute spirit through human consciousness and action. He defined beautifull art as that which most closely represents the unity of 'nature and spirit' (Weiss 1974, p. 318). Others saw beauty as harmony, utility, solidity, proportionality, unity or the use of classical shapes (think of the ancient *'proportio divina'*, that is still in use nowadays). However, all attempts to establish objective criteria for beauty, have inevitably been undermined by the ever-present objection that the appreciation of the beautiful is inevitably a subjective experience. The beautifull is therefore immune to the forms of rational assessment that must underpin such objective criteria. Nowadays, in our culture, the concept of beauty is closely associated with originality, genius, expressiveness, and the ability of a work of art to appeal beyond rationality to the taste or the senses of the spectator or listener. But other views are still present too. In previous research, one of the authors found that aesthetic appreciation tend to be expressed in either of the following four criteria. These are:

a. In balance, in harmony, at peace
b. Simple, complete, pure authentic
c. Exciting, adventurous, provoking, challenging
d. Innovative, discontinuous, surprising, strange (Weggeman 2003, in dutch).

Those who prefer to use categories a. and b. are usually not very enthusiastic about categories c. and d, and vice versa. Whitehead (1929) explains his preference for what in this scheme would be category c., by saying that no single beauty can ever install itself in a harmony that has already been achieved. Even perfection cannot save

beauty from endless repetition. Standing still is also moving backwards and sinking into anaesthesia. That is why beauty, in its very essence, is linked with renewal and adventure, with the mental and in that way with discourse. A civilisation without adventure is in decline, Whitehead states. Would this also apply to an organisation as a micro-civilisation?

If aesthetics as a topic of philosophical enquiry goes back several *centuries*, it is only in the past few *decades* that more and more aspects of our reality are becoming aesthetically mantled, and that our social reality becomes more and more an aesthetic construction (Welsch 1996). Welsch points at a number of aestheticisation processes happening around us. We live in styled houses, drive our beautiful cars through our minitiously planned city, go to shops with a carefully designed 'total shop experience', wander through parks and forests with nice lingering lanes and let our noses made perfect by our plastic surgeon. In other words, we are transforming our urban, industrial and natural environment *in toto* into a hyperaesthetic scenario.

Aestheticisation can also be seen in the rise of specific industries that are geared to meet our aesthetic interest: our need to have fun, make ourselves and our surroundings beautiful and to have as much meaningful experiences or adrenaline-experiences as we can. Lastly, aesthetic deliberations clearly form the basis of many different activities of organizations, for example for advertising campaigns, product designs and the physical arrangement of workspaces and offices. Corporate buildings are carefully designed to reflect the corporate image, see for instance the very impressive buildings of some financial institutes.

Aesthetics is more and more part of a deliberate marketing strategy. Products are styled, and made fashionable. As aesthetic fashions are particularly short-lived, the need for replacement arises as soon as they are aesthetically 'out'. Whether it is clothes, cigarettes, cars, furniture, perfume: you're not buying the product itself, but the image, the aesthetic value the company has created around it. The aesthetic is no longer the 'software' around a material 'hardware' but more and more the essence, the core of a product. This can also be seen in the service industries, where the face-to-face or voice-to-voice interactions with customers are also carefully aesthetically styled by organizations. A dress-code or corporate clothing, detailed instructions on how to make contact and when to smile, and thorough training of the staff on how to look good or to sound right, are phenomena that illustrate the rise of aesthetics in many different elements of organization.

While philosophy has been dealing with aesthetics for centuries and the past decades have shown a strong growth of attention to aesthetics in our daily lives, within organisation studies aesthetics as a line of inquiry is a very recent activity indeed, dating only from a few years back. Pioneering work on the notion of organizational aesthetic has been done by Strati (1990, 1992, 1996, 1999) and Gagliardi (1990, 1996). Both sought to address the importance of studying organizational aesthetics as a means of developing a greater insight into how meanings are structured and promoted within an organization, seen as a cultural environment. Strati presents a case for the importance of studying previously overlooked examples of organizational facility, such as the significance of office decors or the location and style of office chairs, as a means of understanding the structuring of social relations within the workplace. For Strati, an organizational artefact is simultaneously material and non-material, belongs to both an individual and everybody else, denotes status, plays a part in organizational rituals, symbols competition within organizations etc. Strati calls the

aesthetic knowledge that results from this kind of analysis 'weak thought', that has the potential to enrich organizational theory based on strong paradigms and the search for universalism and domination.

In his contribution to the Handbook of Organization Studies called 'Exploring the aesthetic side of organizational life', Gagliardi (1996) deliberately seeks to be 'mould breaking, future oriented and agenda setting'. He argues that our experience of the real is in the basis a sensory experience, called the aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience, due to its unconscious nature, can't be (completely) expressed by words. A way to solve this problem, for Gagliardi, is the study of organizational artefacts. An artefact can be defined as a product of human action, which exists independently of its creator, that is aimed at solving a problem or satisfying a need and that it is endowed with its own corporeality or physicality. Following Latours (1992) observation that 'material things are the missing masses who knock insistently at the doors of sociology', Gagliardi makes it likely that the study of artefacts is a way to bypass the dominant cognitive and intentional ways of accessing systems of meaning, for instance through the direct relationship between things and the development of the self:

> "If, for example, we seek confirmation of our identity as thinkers through the working out of ideas, it is only the written page in front of us, it is only the materialized idea, which reassures us about our capacity to pursue such aims. Only the sight, the feel, the smell of printing ink form the newly published book unequivocally tells us that we are capable of exercising those particular forms of control of external reality with which our identity as writers is bound up." [Gagliardi, 1996, p. 569]

Another line of research are the studies that have been published on the aesthetics of service labour (Witz *et al* 2003, Adkins 2000, Hancock & Tyler 2000, Sturdy *et al* 2001). These studies focus on the ways in which employers seek to influence the embodied 'dispositions' of service workers. The notion of aesthetics is used as a way to refocus the perspective to the sensible, physical elements of organizational life. Thus, these studies don't focus on the way the smiles and manners, or the 'right' emotions of service workers are produced, but they focus on the managerial strategies that are executed to install those standards of behaviour like the dress-code, how to wear your hear, make-up or how to shave.

These different approaches have in common, that they all stem from the first conception of aesthetics, which brings the sensory and perceptive faculties of organizations to the fore. A Hegelian conception of aesthetics, that focuses on the beauty of organizations is mostly lacking. An exception is the work of Ramirez (1991, 1996), who focuses on the description of the beauty of social organization, grounding his analysis on the approach of Kant[1](2002). Unfortunately, Ramirez stops where our interest begins, namely at the question whether it is possible to determine the factors that enable an organization to act beautifully. He argues:

> "… this in effect amounted to determining the 'necessary and sufficient factors' that enabled something to be considered as beautiful. Since no one has ever been able to come up with such a recipe for anything, be it a painting, a statue or whatever, it [is] ludicrous to attempt to do so in the domain of social organization" [Ramirez, 1991, p. 12].

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[1] Kant found (in his *Kritik der Urteilskraft, 1. Analytik des Schönen,* 1791) that beauty is something which can and should be universally appreciable through the human faculty of judgement. According to Kant, the experience of beauty has four characteristics:
1. It is disinterested (we can like an object without wanting to have it); 2. It is universal (objects have the capacity to be found beautiful by any observer); 3. It has purposiveness without purpose (the object displays some reason or function wich cannot be completely grasped); 4. It is necessary (if we judge something to be beautiful, we feel as if everyone ought to agree with us).

We consider an attempt to establish what it is that makes an organization act beautiful not ludicrous, but a possible and worthwhile undertaking. We argue that there is more to say about the appreciation of the beautiful than it being a mere subjective experience. Within the art world, the value of a work of art is the outcome of the dynamics of its institutional context, the art-world (Vickery, 2003). Likewise, the aesthetic value of an organization can be socially constructed, leading to ideas that enhance both the beauty and the performance of organizations.

Our perspective in the remainder of this contribution is applying a design science perspective (Van Aken 2003, Romme 2003) geared to the development of a researchagenda on the aesthetics of organisation. We are interested in the ways in which aesthetic considerations can be instrumental in designing better organizational processes, better being defined in terms of organisational performance. With aesthetics, we want to 'make a difference' here (Romme, 2003). For many scientists and engineers, it is obvious that beautyfully designed technological processes or artefacts yield better performance. Our quest is for a similar role of aesthetics in organisational design, for we consider organisations to be artefacts as well, 'things' that can be designed and made. Here, our literature search has yield very few results. We have the intention to define a research agenda for this topic, that that will be developed in the next section.

Aesthetics of organisation, a research agenda

If we want to study the impact of aesthetics on organisation, it is necessary to start from an overview and a initial structure of the field. We will structure the field from a design science perspective, leading to an initial conceptual model that is depicked in figure 1. Derived from this model we will develop several propositions. Each of them will be discussed below.
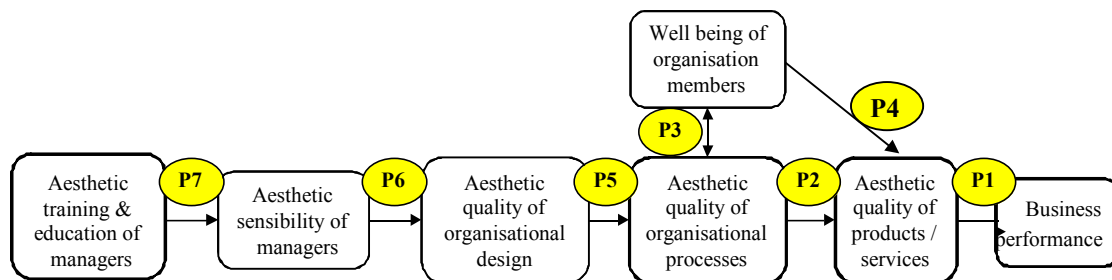

FIGURE 1. CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF THE IMPACT OF AESTHETICS ON ORGANISATION

We will start by discussing some key assumptions that lay underneath our research agenda. We argue that an analytical distinction can be made in, what we have called, process aesthetics and result aesthetics. *Result aesthetics* refer to the experiences of beauty someone goes through while he or she as an observer or bystander is exposed to an outside artefact. That is the case when we are moved by listening to a symphonie, tasting a course or seeing a limousine. This is the kind of aestetics that we are most familiar with. With *process aesthetics* we refer to the experiences of beauty someone goes through while he or she is actually participating in the originationprocess of the artefact. This kind of experience occurs while playing the violin in an orchestra, making a car or preparing dishes in a restaurant. In our terminology Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) notion of flow corresponds with a situation in

which someone experiences the highest level of process aesthetics. We want to extend that notion by introducing the term *collective flow* meaning a situation in which many workers experience high level process aesthetics while working together on the same artefact, at the same time in the same process. Furthermore in our conceptual model the term *aesthetic quality* is used several times. By that we mean the capacity of an artefact (a man-made design, product or process) to generate, evoke experiences of beauty, either by observers (result aesthetics) or makers (process aesthetics). In addition we presuppose that such artefact is beautiful if an individual or a group is moved or touched by it, that is goes through an aesthetic experience. To conclude, *aesthetic sensibility* is defined here as the subjective predisposition to experience beauty. This predisposition expresses itself, consciously or unconsciously in the skill to assess and appreciate the aesthetic quality of artefacts. This skill is largely influenced by the upbringing, training and education of the individual as well as by the values and believes of the local culture.

Our conceptual model is based on the logic of an input-output model of organisation. In this we follow the the common logic in designing organisations, that we are seeking to apply on the aesthetics of organisation. Organisational designs lead to organisational processes, those processes deliver certain products and services and those can be more or less successful in the external environment. Equally straightforward it would seem to assume that the quality of this organisational design is influenced by certain characteristics of the management of these organisations, and that these characteristics are partly formed by education and training. Following this logic, we can see that the final link in this causal chain implies that the aesthetic quality of products and services influences business performance (proposition P1). Tracing one step back, proposition P2 is that the higher the aesthetic quality of organisational processes, the higher the aesthetic quality of products and services. In other words: process aesthetics influences result aesthetics. P3 takes a side step and investigates the question to what extent people are happier when they experience aesthetically pleasing processes and the reverse, if happier people make organisational processes more aesthetically pleasing. Our proposition P4 investigates the relationship between the well being of organisation members and the aesthetic quality of products and services, an issue that is surprisingly well researched within the domain of services management. Our proposition P5 looks at the question to what extent organisational designs with high aesthetic quality also lead to organisational processes with high aesthetic quality. Proposition P6 traces even further back. It looks at managers as organisational designers, a concept frequently stressed in the systems thinking and organisational learning literature (Forrester 1965, Keough and Doman 1992, Senge 1990). Do managers with a highly developed aesthetic sensibility design organisational structures of high aesthetic quality? And proposition P7 ends at the beginning, which is the educational question: if more attention were given to aesthetics in management curricula, would this heighten aesthetic sensibilities of managers in their roles as organisational designers? We will now discuss each proposition in turn.

P1: Product or service beauty and business performance

Our first proposition is that organisations that generate more beautiful products or services will be more successful in their environment. We would suggest measuring successful performance according to the EFQM Excellence Model, which distinguishes in people results, customer results and society results (corporate image

and citizenship). Successful performance than becomes having more then average satisfied customers, employees and other stake- and shareholders (EFQM, 2004). This seems fairly mundane, in comparison with the elevated ideas brought forward elsewhere in this paper. However, we have to be frank about this: although we believe explicit attention for the aesthetic dimension is relevant in organisation studies, we do not want to suggest a *l'art pour l'art* attitude in organisations. We recognise that, in terms of Witz *et al* (2003), we are, "in effect, 'adding on' a concern with aesthetics to a fundamentally rationalist and structuralist paradigm of organization" (p. 43) As we emphasise the role and significance of aesthetics, we primarily do so, as Witz *et al* call it, for instrumental reasons. In doing so, we are not that far away from business authors such as Peters and Waterman (1982), who have looked for "excellence" as a underlying explanatory factor for company success. In the eyes of Sandelands and Buckner (2003), "excellence is a kind of beauty, a kind of aesthetic. The excellent organisation engages its members in transcendent values, which rise above worldly concerns" (Sandelands and Buckner, p.119).

The left hand side of proposition P1 is less straightforward. When are products and services more beautiful? Here we come to proposition P2.

P2: Process beauty and the beauty of products and services

We are not suggesting that, aesthetic organisational processes will automatically result in beautiful products. Rather, we suggest something as shown in table 1. If the process is considered "ugly" it is unlikely that the product will be "beautiful". Equally unlikely, at least in the eyes of the creators, is the situation where a beautiful process would lead to an ugly product.

TABLE 1. POSSIBLE RELATIONS BETWEEN PROCESS AND PRODUCT BEAUTY (IN THE EYES OF CREATORS)

	Product: Beautiful	Ugly
Process:		
Beautiful	Likely	Unlikely
Ugly	Unlikely	Plausible

We acknowledge that this proposition is much more complicated than this two-by-two matrix suggests. To start off with, one might critique our emphasis on processes as the defining characteristic of organisation. Here we remain on relatively safe ground, as we can refer to Weick (1969), who states: "assume that there are processes which create, maintain and dissolve social collectivities, that these processes constitute the work of organising, and that the ways in which these processes are continuously executed *are* the organization" (Weick 1996, p.1). Another critique might be that the notion of beauty is inappropriately assigned to something as mundane as selling a ticket or fixing a car, or any other organisational process. Here a reply would be that, in the arts, those that can only appreciate beauty in a very selected number of categories are often labelled as having a low level of aesthetic sensibility indicating that they only can achieve satisfaction from certain types of music, certain painters, certain forms of dance. Sandelands and Buckner (1989) rightfully assert that "artistry is possible even in the most prosaic doings and makings of modern life" (p.117). As we know, those mundane processes like arranging flowers or serving tea in Japan can achieve the status of high art.

P3: Personal well-being and process beauty

One of the most notable proponents of well-being as a relevant aspect of organisational life is Csikszentmihalyi (1975), who has introduced the notion of flow:

> 'Flow' denotes the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement. It is the kind of feeling after which one nostalgically says: 'that was fun' or 'that was enjoyable'. It is the state in which action follows upon action according to an internal logic, which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part. We experience it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next." (p.43).

We agree with Sandelands and Buckner (1989) who point at the similarity between aesthetic experiences and flow, by also noting that "flow arises in activities that are art like" (p.121). The more aesthetically aroused people are, the more they operate in flow, the more they are indeed intrinsically motivated (Koch 1956, p.71). And, hence, the better they will do their work and the more beautiful this work will become, at least in their eyes. This feeling of flow can go so far that "one relates oneself to work with an attitude allowing one to recognize that the work justifies itself and that the employee can recognize and take pleasure in this fact. Thus, the employee will call a product beautiful, not because he or she is paid to produce it, but because the thing itself, is pleasant (..)" (White 1996 p.204). This, White argues, is in line with Kant's definition of beauty as having an element of 'disinterestedness'. So, aesthetic work processes give rise to aesthetic experiences, which can lead to better work performance.

P4: Personal well-being and the beauty of products and services

It is not always possible to correlate the workprocess of an employee directly to the products of services that an organisation produces, and this is especially the case in big organisations. For the production of products, it is possible to argue that the happiness of personell is of influence on the beauty of products that are produced, but that might be a bit far fetched.

However, the picture changes when we take a look at services organizations. One of the key characteristics of service processes is its simultaneous production and consumption of them. Service organisations, via its front-line staff, have to 'get it right first time'. In these 'service encounters' (Czepiel *et al* 1985), or *'moments of truth'* (Carlzon 1987), aesthetic aspects of a service (especially the 'software' of the service) can mean the difference between a satisfied (and returning) customer and a dissatisfied customer. As Schlesinger & Heskett (1991) have shown, there are no satisfied customers without satisfied service employees who have a good service attitude. The commercial utility of the aesthetic gaze and manners of service personell is well recognized by high street retailers, banks, hospitality outlets and airline companies (Hancock & Tyler 2000, Witz *et al* 2003, Adkins 2000). In these branches, personell with esthetic qualities (e.g. people who look 'good', sound 'right' and have the 'right' manners) are recruited and selected, and their aesthetic qualities and sensibilities are trained (Nickson *et al* 2001). For them, the difference between the beauty of the producer, the beauty to produce and the beauty of the produced is no more.

P5: Organisational design beauty and organisational process beauty

What can be said about the relation between the beauty of an organisational design and the beauty of the organisational processes this design gives rise to? Well, for instance, that Ramirez (1996) states that "it is not possible to set out to design a

beautiful organization, and, by carrying out the "right' procedures, to succeed."
(p.239). And yet, despite this earlier research, why not go for the initially impossible?
Let's take the related field of architecture. Here the idea that people that work and live
in beautiful surroundings will themselves live and work at an aesthetically elevated
level, is an old but lively one. Guillén (1997) shows how the European modernist
architects of the 1890-1930 were strongly inspired by such ideas and much of the
work by Strati (1990, 1992, 1996, 1999) and Gagliardi (1990, 1996) is aimed at the
relation of organizational aesthetics and its physical environment.

Ramirez (1996) suggests that there must be relations of this kind, even if they
cannot be "designed-in" before hand, when he notices that "the very language we use
to depict organizational phenomena is full of references to "form": we re*form*
institutions, trans*form* work practices, enhance or measure per*form*ance, *form*alize
procedures, analyse in*form*al behaviour, *form*ulate strategies…." (p.234)

P6: Aesthetic sensibility and organisational design beauty

With *aesthetic sensibility* we mean the personal ability – the mental skill – to
experience beauty. Many of the descriptions of this "aesthetic attitude" and, even, of
"the function of aesthetics" suggest similarities with what the organisation literature
tends to describe as desirable characteristics of managerial behaviour. For instance,
Sandelands and Buckner (2003) describe the aesthetic attitude as "a readiness to
explore an object, to see what it might suggests. (…) Art does not evoke or causes
aesthetic experience, you need a willing and able beholder." (p.115)

Ackoff (1981), who wrote one of the leading texts on organisational design and the
role management plays within that endeavour, dwelled on 'the pursuit of beauty'. He
quotes Singer (1948), who states that "the aesthetic function is to inspire: to create
visions of the better and give us the courage to pursue it, whatever short run sacrifices
are required. Inspiration and aspiration go hand in hand. Art therefore consists of the
works of people capable of stimulating new aspirations, and inspiring commitment to
their pursuit. We call this capability beauty." (Ackoff 1981, p.39-40).

Perhaps most clearly this relation between management style and aesthetic
sensibility has been laid out by Kuhn in his 1982 essay "Managing as an Art Form:
The Aesthetics of management". He, in turn, could build on the work of Selznick
(1957), for whom leadership was art, was the art of institution building, the reworking
of human and technological materials to fashion an organism that embodies new and
enduring values" (p. 152-153).

So, we can safely state that the relation between aesthetic sensibility of
management and the aesthetic qualities of organisational design has been repeatedly
acknowledged in the literature.

P7: Education and aesthetic sensibility

In this proposition we return to one of our original topics, which is to what extent
management education should promote the development of aesthetic sensibility.
Indeed, some evidence exist that companies themselfs take the aesthetic production of
new recruits, through training and enculturation, in their own hands (Nickson *et al*,
2001). Shouldn't management education come to the aid of companies and develop
the aesthetic sensibilities of the new recruits and the managers of tomorrow?
Whenever such suggestions occur, the European mind is easily drawn back to the
original concept of *Bildung* (Von Humboldt (1767-1835), see Von Humboldt, 1964).
Bildung can also be seen as a revival of classic ideals. Indeed, Sandelands and

Buckner (1989) quote Hamilton's (1942) history of Hellenistic Greece in this context, where an integration of aesthetic and practical values flourished that never before and perhaps never since then had been attained. "Scientific theories were written in verse, learning and leisure were considered synonymous" (p.117). It is this notion of *mens sane in corpore sano*, of "a healthy mind in a healthy body", that also resounds from Keat's Ode to an ancient scene depicted on a Grecian urn, from which we derived our title for the current article.

Needless to say that we do not believe that increasing the aesthetic content of education and training programmes *alone* is sufficient to generate people with high aesthetic sensibility. Local culture, genetic programming and personal level of consciousness are most likely at least as important on an individual basis.

On the other hand, ethically we can hardly refrain from aesthetic content in our educational programmes if we agree with Danto (2003) who states: "Beauty is an option for art and not a necessary condition. But it is not an option for life. It is a necessary condition for life as we would want to live it".

The above propositions collectively lay out a research agenda. Our own ambitions are, to study empirically some of the key propositions within this research agenda (e.g. the relationship between process aesthetics and result aesthetics, the influence of the result-aesthetics of the design on the process aesthetics in the operational core, and the influence of the aesthetics of workprocess on the result-aesthetics of the products and services) and to further develop key concepts within this research agenda. A key-concept for being able to study the relationsships of our interest is aesthetic sensibility. In the following section we allow ourselves to speculate briefly on what aesthetic sensibility might be.

A first excursion: defining aesthetic sensibility

As indicated before, by aesthetic sensibility we refer to the subjective predisposition to experience beauty, a predisposition that expresses itself, consciously or unconsciously in the skill to assess and appreciate the aesthetic quality of artefacts. The appreciation of result-aesthetics can happen moments or days after the exposure has taken place and might change in time (low at the very moment of exposure, high a few days later and moderate after a few weeks). The valuation of process aesthetics only can take place in real-time, while being part of that process. Of course one can memorize later a pleasant aesthetic experience gained when one was participating in a certain process, but than the subject has switched to the result-aesthetics of a mental picture.

We assume the existence of the following aspects of aesthetic sensibility: 'robustness', 'breath,' 'sharpness' and 'tolerance'.

Robustness
Somebody with a higher aesthetic sensibility will be semi-permanently alert – his or her eyes will be open – to the (non) beauty in the things that spontaneously surround him or her or which he or she actively seeks out. They will be able to make the aesthetic perspective operational for lengthy periods, whether consciously or unconsciously. On the other hand, someone with a lower aesthetic sensibility will not consider aesthetics important enough to concentrate on for any length of time. Indeed, according to Arthur Schopenhauer (1819), the one quality that distinguishes man from animals is that animals never experience boredom and man does. Our suspicion is that

people with a higher aesthetic sensibility are less likely to become bored than those with a lower aesthetic sensibility. This is because, *ceteris paribus,* the neurophysical complex for the first group simply has more to do per time unit.

Breadth
We suggest that somebody with a higher aesthetic sensibility will be open to the beauty of a broad range of material and immaterial products and processes, e.g. to children at play, small trees, hip-hop, dada collages, glass blowing, a political debate, a signature, the war against terror, convents, cooking, helping the whale and so on. People with a lower aesthetic sensibility we expect to be open only to the beauty of products and processes that belong to a limited number of categories, for example, certain sports, certain music, certain painters, and certain means of transport. It may also be the case that such people are more sensitive to material products and less to immaterial services and processes.

   People with a lower aesthetic sensibility need, you could say, harder stimuli. Frequently, these are, in the eyes of those with finer tuned sensitivities, excessive and vociferous, such as the painting of the gypsy girl with a tear on her cheek, the sweeping pathos of Pavarotti or the resounding words of the management guru. The more sensitive one will feel crushed by all this noise.

Sharpness
We expect somebody with a higher aesthetic sensibility to be capable of appreciating small aesthetic nuances. Someone with a lower aesthetic sensibility will be less sensitive to nuances in the beauty surrounding him or her. They will frequently not be noticed.

Tolerance of naivety and complexity
Finally, somebody with a higher aesthetic sensibility will also – so not especially – be able to attach a high aesthetic appreciation to:
- Mundane products, such as a cup or a table (as opposed to a Boeing 747 or a drilling rig)
- Simple dynamic processes, such as organising a party or cleaning an office (as opposed to tracking down an international criminal or building a cathedral)
- A Dilbert cartoon or another Elton John ballad, as opposed to products and processes with a complex - that is to say multiple, layered, or abstract - meaning, such as a painting by Kandinsky or a Mahler symphony.

We will finish off this excursion with a tricky table containing a number of examples that suggest either higher of lower aesthetic sensibility, as shown in table 2.

TABLE 2. POSSIBLE INDICATIONS OF HIGHER VERSUS LOWER AESTHETIC SENSIBILITY

Statements that suggest a lower aesthetic sensibility	Statements that suggest a higher aesthetic sensibility
All Rembrandt's paintings are beautiful.	There is a painting by Rembrandt that strikes me dumb. It is…
Operas are boring. I must prefer an exciting football match.	I can enjoy an exciting football match just as much as an opera by Wagner.
All those documentaries about surgical operations make me ill. I don't need to see all that…	When I see the skill and dedication of the team performing an operation, then that can move me.
That gun's cool.	I like the shape of that hunting rifle's butt.
When they're on holiday, they always want to visit old churches. I prefer lying on the beach. I've seen enough old buildings, they're all the same.	I'm always impressed when I see a medieval cathedral and realise what it took to build it.
No, I don't like fancy restaurants. They're expensive, you sit there for hours, and when you leave you're still hungry.	I enjoy haute cuisine, but I also love a bag of real Belgian chips from time to time.

Discussion

In organisation studies, we have long neglected the aesthetic context of organisational behaviour. Our purpose in this paper has been threefold. Firstly, to support the notion that organisational theories may have aesthetic as well as technical and ideological implications (Guillén 1997). Secondly, to contribute to the development of our conceptual gear, among others by distinguishing between process aesthetics and result aesthetics. And lastly, if the aesthetics of organisation is at least for the time being accepted as worthy of further study, to propose a practical research agenda for the study of the various aspects in which beauty in organisation influences organisational performance, as well as the various factors that drive organisational beauty. We acknowledge, with Guillén, that "people seem to yearn for beauty as intensely as they pursue instrumental methods and morally acceptable conditions" (Guillén 1997, p.710). Therefore, it is about time that we as organisational researchers can become of assistance in this quest. Wouldn't that be beautiful?

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