

What is Organizational Aesthetics?

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I am often asked, “what is organizational aesthetics?” I usually start my answer by talking about the use of arts-based methods within organizations (e.g. Taylor & Ladkin, 2009). Then, if there is still interest I gradually make my way to taking an aesthetic perspective on organizations and organizational phenomena (e.g. Taylor & Hansen, 2005) and if there is still interest we end up in a discussion about epistemology, art, and the meaning of life. But I almost never tell my story, the story of what organizational aesthetics means to me.

It started in my second year of graduate school at Boston College. I was collecting stories of organizational transformation for my first major research project (see Taylor, 1999 for the official account of the project). I was reflecting with my advisor on the stories I had been told and what struck me was how one of the stories was great and the other was horrible. My advisor told me that good and bad weren’t sufficient and I needed to be able to say what that meant. I struggled with this – it wasn’t that one story had more information or better structure or had a happy ending and the other didn’t. After about a year of thinking about it, I realized it was simply that one story was told well and the other was told poorly – it was the aesthetics of the storytelling performance. This led to my PhD dissertation on the aesthetics of leadership storytelling (which really didn’t go very well (see Taylor, 2002 for an account of the difficulties I encountered)). My interest in the quality of the performance found a small voice in my dissertation, I had a model that included a link between storytelling technique and the strength of the aesthetic experience of hearing the story for the audience, for which I dutifully collected data, coded it up and ran the statistics – and found no significant relationship.

In November of 2003 I was told about a meeting where there had been “lots of beautiful interventions,” and I knew I had to dive in. This was not something like storytelling that had an obvious analog in the performing arts, this was an everyday organizational action – an intervention into group dynamics in a meeting – and someone had called it “beautiful.” Trying to make sense of these beautiful interventions was a long journey of discovery (which was eventually published as *Little Beauties* (Taylor, 2013) almost a decade later) and led me to think seriously about art and craft.

Which takes me to a question that Bill Torbert posed in his review on Amazon.com of my book *Leadership Craft, Leadership Art* (Taylor, 2012), “you may be left with a question that’s hard to understand and also hard to shake, namely, can one’s life as a whole be enacted as a work of art?” And in short, for me, that is what organizational aesthetics is all about – the possibility of living one’s life (which is largely lived in various organizations) as a work of art. To open up the possibility for more and more people to act, to be, to relate to each other in a way that is based in a way of being that is

fundamentally, consciously, informed by aesthetic sensibilities and a deep sense of craft practices.

At the heart of this way of being are the practices of “not knowing” (Berthoin Antal, 2013) and “staying with your senses” (Springborg, 2010, 2012) – which are two sides of the same coin. It is a way of being that requires being present and attending to what is happening in the moment. It requires letting go of the preconceived shortcuts that allow us to quickly make sense of what is going around us, and pay attention to what our senses (the five senses that give us information about the outside world as well as the senses that give us information about what is happening within our own person) are telling us is happening in that moment. It is what many artists call “being open” to their art, but here I am suggesting “being open” to others within organizations. It feels vulnerable. It is hard to not-know in modern organizational cultures that privilege cognitive, analytical (often quantitatively based) rationality. It is hard to be vulnerable in organizations that are structured via power relations. But if organizational aesthetics holds any real promise for us, it is exactly these difficulties that must be central to our work.

This may be a relatively new way of articulating this vision, but is by no means a new idea. There are many spiritual traditions from meditation practices, to yoga practices, to the Jesuit spiritual exercises that strive to achieve something that I understand as a very similar way of being – something that is based in being in the present moment, while holding an awareness of your own awareness. Within the social sciences, my favorite ways that this has been expressed are the *Action Science* (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985) and *Action Inquiry* (Fisher, Rooke, & Torbert, 2001; Torbert & Associates, 2004) approaches. However, both of these approaches are predominately cognitive requiring a relatively uncommon post-conventional stage of ego development (Foster, 2013; Torbert & Stacey, 2009) which makes it unlikely to be successfully practiced by the majority of any modern organization’s members.

In contrast, I see many artists who are still young (certainly in terms of adult ego development theory) who have learned this sort of openness, this combination of not-knowing and staying with your senses in their artistic practice. Of course, when I speak to friends of mine who are artists, they are skeptical of bringing that same sort of openness to acting in organizational matters, to leading, managing, and following. The same theater director who can be completely open during rehearsal process wouldn’t think of being that way in a budget meeting. And I think that is because of a lack of organizational aesthetics, a lack of theory, a lack of practice, a lack of any sort of common understanding of what it would mean to treat the day-to-day aspects of being in an organization as your art.

I am not suggesting that enacting one’s organizational life as a work of art would result in beautiful organizations – although I do think it would certainly increase the amount of beauty in organizations (which is setting the bar pretty low (Ottensmeyer, 1996)). I think it would mean that organizations might be less kitschy (Linstead, 2002). I think it would mean a greater emphasis on connection (Ramirez, 1991; Taylor & Karanian, 2009) and meaningfulness (Dissanayake, 2000). But I don’t really know what it would mean – I’ve never seen any example of an organization where even a significant minority of the members are approaching their day-to-day interactions as art. But I hope to, and I hope that the field of organizational aesthetics helps make it happen.

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