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Reconciling Aesthetics and Justice in Organization Studies

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Overview¹

Drawing upon cultural studies and organizational sociology, I argue for the reconciliation of aesthetics and justice in organizational life and in organizational theory. Such reconciliation could create more humane organizations as well as strengthen the emerging field of organizational aesthetics. In order to advance this argument, aesthetics will be linked with justice at three locations: inside the organization at the site of work itself, where an aesthetics of process is thought to mitigate status inequalities; outside the organization at the level of metaphor, where common images of organization highlight either injustice or aesthetics, but not both; and, in the public space of the media, where organizations present themselves to the world using aesthetics and justice in order to establish brand identity. These three sites (work, metaphor, and brand) do not present a complete overview of the possibilities for reconciling aesthetics and justice; rather, they combine to ground and to embody current thinking on the relationships among organizations, aesthetics, and justice.

Aesthetics and justice

Philosophers and social scientists have long contemplated the tension between aesthetics and justice. To the ancient Greeks, the two were intrinsically connected: justice was a perfect cube, symmetrical and therefore beautiful (Scarry, 1999, pp. 129–30). In *The Critique of Judgment* Kant (1790/1951) argued for an essential connection, asserting that, ‘the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good’ (p. 198). Yet as modernity progressed, negative aspects of the relationship prevailed: the hegemonic

power of aesthetics was thought to interfere with a just society. Foucault wrote critically about aesthetic politics (Osborne, 1998); Bourdieu (1977), offered the concepts of cultural capital and symbolic violence to explain the consequences of society's differential aesthetic values. Said (1994) argued for connections between literature and domination. Thus a political critique of aesthetics evolved, with the result being that aesthetics and justice have become separate, antithetical concerns in the intellectual sphere.

Cultural studies scholars have recently challenged this disconnection of aesthetics and justice. Gagnier (2000) accuses the market society of 'forgetting' the transformative power of aesthetics in its desire for consumption and profit. She writes of the consequences of this separation, saying, 'Before aesthetics was forgotten as a social force or a handmaiden of the good, the Fabian socialists thought that disgust – distaste – at poverty and violence would be a progressive force for its amelioration' (Gagnier, p. 232). She argues for a reconnection of art and justice through her example of the theatre of the homeless. Scarry (1999) also decries the disconnection of aesthetics and justice, and argues again for an intrinsic link between 'beauty and being just'. To her, the political critique of beauty has relied upon two main tenets: the search for beauty distracts attention from wrongful social arrangements, and the gaze objectifies, reifies and thus destroys (Scarry, 1999, p. 58). Repudiating this 'beauty blindness', Scarry (1999), like Ramirez (1991), suggests that connection is at the core of valuing beauty, and beauty can inspire justice.

Scarry's reconciliation of aesthetics and justice in the humanities inspired my efforts to argue for a similar reconciliation in the context of organization theory. Consideration of aesthetics and justice within organizations (rather than abstractly) allows a grounded perspective on the tension and its reconciliation. Organizations are where power is made visible, and both aesthetics and justice can be understood as constructed and negotiated through organizational processes. The lenses of organizational theory provide a starting point for understanding the construction of aesthetics and justice and the possibilities for reconnecting the two.

Aesthetics and justice within organizations

Notwithstanding (or perhaps avoiding) this rich debate in the larger academy, aesthetics and justice have been considered separately, thus far, within organization theory. Both organizational aesthetics and organizational justice are regarded as relatively undeveloped fields; and, as