

## The Aesthetic Imperative of a Rational-Technical Machinery: A Study in Organizational Control Through the Design of Artifacts

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### ABSTRACT

The development of modern business and administrative organizations that are formally rational and technical in their structures and operations has given rise to the false conclusion that the aesthetic dimension does not figure at all in their making. The present paper argues that the opposite is the case, that the organization as a 'rational-technical machinery' gives rise to an aesthetic imperative characterized by those familiar elements of modernist design: the sharpness and simplicity of line, the suppression of color, the smoothness and hardness of tactile values, and the preference for planar forms. By such aesthetic means, modern organizations successfully cultivate, in their members, a presence through which the organization is made and re-made; this presence is characterized by the separation of head from body, of work life from private life, of rationality from sensuous values, of production from consumption, and of organizational function from personal expression.

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## PREFACE

I am grateful to colleagues who have chosen to revisit a paper I wrote 20 years ago for a Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism (SCOS) colloquium, held in Milan. The text reproduced here is an amended version of the original. I have not sought to update the paper nor to extend its ideas to encompass more recent thinking about social agency and the aesthetics of modernity; the latter is, in any case, the topic of a new and larger project which is, at the time of writing, a work in progress. In revising the paper my aim has been to make it more readable, both by tidying the writing and by unpacking a few of the more dense paragraphs. In the process, I have taken the opportunity, here and there, to provide some elaboration of the argument in order to make the stated meaning clearer.

Work in modern organizations is being rapidly transformed by the ongoing digital revolution that was in its infancy when my original paper was written. Today, vastly more powerful means of calculation and communication are reaching into every aspect of organizational relations and re-shaping the working lives of organizational members. These changes were still in their early stages at the time of writing this article. On re-reading my paper, I am conscious of how things have moved on and how the new awareness of organizational design is centered not so much on the *modernist* bureaucratic organizations of 30 years ago, but on the so-called “*postmodern*” organizations of today that encompass hot-desking and remote work patterns. Notwithstanding, there will be few who will not recognize, as familiar the ideal-typical design features, dress codes, and artifacts of the administrative systems that I refer to in the paper as “rational-technical machineries”. More importantly, I hope that the approach to a socio-aesthetics outlined in the paper may prove more generally applicable to aesthetic systems everywhere, including those that have a more recent provenance than the one addressed here.

Terms that are associated with language, such as “idea” and “meaning”, are frequently used in connection with the aesthetic. Reference has often been made to the “language of the arts”. But if art is language, it clearly does not work in the same way as the discursive language in which we think and reason about the world. In the latter case, it is appropriate to speak of *signs* in language as bearing an arbitrary relationship to their referents; the connection of a sign to its referent is a matter of custom and convention. In English, the word “tree” is used to refer to the same thing as the word “arbre” in French. In logico-algebraic discourse, the arbitrary and conventional meaning of symbols is announced whenever the word “let” is used, as in “let  $x$  = the unknown variable”;  $y$ ,  $z$ , or any other symbol might just as well have been selected in its place. In learning such a language we learn what each sign stands for. We can even consult a dictionary or glossary to obtain a definition of a we do not word.

Contrastively, aesthetic symboling is not arbitrary. The stimulus properties of the sign in an aesthetic system are directly and qualitatively identified with the sign's meaning. Aesthetic signs are subject-centered. They find their “reciprocals” in the “readiness”, the incipient arousal of the subject that they bring about; this readiness constitutes the subject's *presence* or *I-sense*. To have presence is to form a being, it is *to be* in a particular way. Aesthetic symboling works through “calling out” this presence in the subject.

The power of an aesthetic stimulus to call out a presence should not be equated with the universal power of any *stimulus* to elicit a *response* from the subject. A stimulus only becomes an aesthetic stimulus and capable of calling out a “presence” when it has developed as an integral element in an aesthetic system, when it has been *affected* and

transformed by its associations with other stimuli (much as the meaning of a word is affected by its context). It is true, of course, that we do not need to learn what meaning to attach to particular sounds in music as we do in the case of words in ordinary language (there is no “dictionary” in which we can look up what this or that musical sound denotes), but if music is to make sense, to call out a presence in us, we do need to have “native” experience with music as an organized aesthetic stimulus world and to *learn*, as natives, to find our way in that world, to read its code.

The “code” of an aesthetic system underpins what is familiarly referred to as “style”. Styles change, not only in the arts, but in the aesthetics of material culture, in fashion, and in design (Witkin 1980). However, in the aesthetics of a given social order — in its art, design and fashion — the code that underlies these changes in style remains relatively stable and unchanging. The subject draws upon this code to *form* a being, to become his own artist in the praxis of everyday life. As in the appreciation of a work of art, understanding is not usually instantaneous; it is prepared for by a process of *attunement* whereby the subject, through “indwelling”, makes the aesthetic her own.

Modernity brings with it its own aesthetic system. It manifests in all the arts. It is imminent, too, in the aesthetics of everyday life and in the aesthetic codes that govern the corporate world of business. The formation of a sensibility and an agency is a social process, through and through. A key question for me, both in this paper and in other publications, has been: how do aesthetic factors contribute to action and production? The assumption has usually been that they do not, or, rather, that if they do, they do so in an ancillary or secondary way by providing an acceptable front, image, or packaging, but that they are more or less irrelevant to the primary business of production itself.

The paper below begins with the opposite claim, namely that work in such organizations is an aesthetic accomplishment in itself. Further, that a design aesthetic founded upon *flatness*, and on certain constraints in the use of color and texture, impinges directly upon the subject, guiding the formation of experience and understanding. The properties of aesthetic codes are such that they condition behavior by determining the level of abstraction at which a society will allow its values to be thought. Flatness, in the aesthetics of modernity, is a medium for experiencing “values” at a heightened level of abstraction, one that reflects, at a social level, “a de-centered” and “de-individuated” subjectivity. By contrast, the volumetric aesthetic that preceded it and was dominant in the arts during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a medium for experiencing values at a lower level of abstraction, one that was a vehicle for “individuated” and “ego-centered” subjectivity. Aesthetic materials, as discussed in the paper, are materials for knowing and understanding. Here knowledge is not the knowledge of “things” or “propositional” knowledge, but the kind of knowing involved in developing “*a feel for...*”, *an understanding, a skilful understanding...*; an **I-sense**, *a presence, a becoming*.

Robert Witkin (Exeter, July 2009)

## INTRODUCTION

The present paper develops a view of the aesthetic imperative that inheres in the (ideal-typical) modern organization. I have in mind, here, the large formal organizations that most of us are familiar with in our daily lives and which, at a theoretical level, have been analyzed by Weber and others as bureaucracies or

rational-technical machineries for administration, for the production of goods and services, and the generation of profits (Weber 1948).

Working life in a modern organization imposes a definite aesthetic discipline on people. It can be observed in organizational constraints and expectations in respect to dress and personal presentation, in modes of address, and in office manners. Aesthetic discipline can also be observed in the design of buildings, furniture, and furnishings, in the organization of physical space, in the use of color and texture, and in organizational artifacts of all kinds. So pervasive is the aesthetic control imposed on individuals by the existence of the modern organization, it is surprising that the styling of organizational artifacts is accorded so little attention in the sociological literature.

There are reasons, however, for the scant attention paid to the aesthetics of organizational artifacts. An appreciation of the most important of these may help to situate the idea of the aesthetic imperative developed here. The concept of the modern bureaucracy as a rational-technical machinery for the achievement of empirical ends emphasizes cognitive process, even scientific reasoning, as the basis of mental life in organizations. As theorized, the development of the modern organization is marked by renunciation of non-rational and “sensuous” modes of experience that are identified with the arts and with the aesthetic. Almost by definition, therefore, the aesthetic element is viewed as more or less irrelevant to the functioning of the organization; its role is reduced to that of decoration.

This flight from the aesthetic has its roots in classical sociological conceptions of modern society as opposed to traditional society (e.g. Durkheim 1933, Tonnies 1957), psychological theories about adult cognition as opposed to childhood thought (e.g. Flavell 1963), and in the design of secondary school curricula as opposed to primary school curricula (Witkin 1974). All such theories share, in common, an idea of “progress” in which rational, scientific cognition is seen as characteristic of the “advanced” state and sensuous aesthetic thought, of the “primitive” state (Witkin 1983).

It is not surprising, therefore, that the closer an organization approximates the quintessential character assigned to it by organizational theorists, the less is the aesthetic dimension considered seriously. The artifacts with which modern organizations are “furnished” are seen to be more or less pleasing, “modern”, “stylish” and so forth; their impact is recognized both as an aesthetic interpretation of technical function and also as an enhancement of the organization's “image” with regards to its more important clients or customers. But all this is viewed as secondary, as packaging. It is a matter of presentation and style, rather than substance.

## **THE TRIVIALIZATION OF THE AESTHETIC DIMENSION OF ORGANIZATIONAL LIFE**

Phenomena which are clearly identified as “aesthetic” are conceptually trivialized. The aesthetic is usually identified with the experience of pleasure, with pleasing the senses. While the senses are certainly important in aesthetic experience, this aspect has to be seen in the context of the aesthetic as a mode of understanding, of knowing, and as intelligence (Dewey 1934, Langer 1967, Reid 1969), an “intelligence of feeling” (Witkin 1974, 1995, 2005). It is the separation of the sensuous aspect of aesthetic experience from “knowing” and “understanding” that has led to the trivialization of the aesthetic domain in the theoretical discourse. In reality, the

aesthetic dimension is integral to the substantive relations of organizational life. Action itself, even the actions through which rational-technical machineries are produced and reproduced, is an aesthetic accomplishment.

If the aesthetic dimension has barely figured in the understanding of organizational life, it has been taken much more seriously on its margins, that is, in the sphere of consumption and leisure. A notable example is provided by the work on youth subcultures carried out at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham. The styles of the various youth movements since World War II have been shown to be grounded in the class experience of young people seeking to resolve fundamental contradictions posed by the erosion of community and territory in post-war reconstruction and development (Cohen 1972, Hall & Jefferson 1976, Hebdidge 1979). The dress and music, the types of drug use, and typical activities of different youth groups, which have often been popularly dismissed as exotic or as bizarre entertainment or youthful excess, are theorized instead as instances of complex cultural creation, articulated about the central problems of existence for real groups and classes in society.

It has been argued by these theorists that there is a homology that identifies the web of sensuous display, of argots and aesthetic symboling, with the focal values and life-world concerns of youth groups coping with problems and contradictions inherent in the cultures of their parents. Ironically, because the efforts of these groups are confined to “the magical re-creation of community” within the sphere of consumption and leisure and do not extend into the production process, they can be taken seriously as a phenomenon while at the same time being dismissed as ultimately unimportant. The aesthetic work of these groups has been theorized as a doomed attempt to resolve life-world problems that can only really be resolved by a transformation of society as a whole, which includes the sphere of production. Thus, the very seriousness with which the aesthetic is treated in the context of leisure culture has had the unintended consequence of reinforcing, significantly, the status of the aesthetic as marginal; it contributes, therefore, to the continuing failure to take aesthetic work seriously. Studies of youth styles certainly point the way to the kind of sociological attention that aesthetic factors deserve, but an exclusive preoccupation with aesthetic values at the level of consumption and leisure must be overcome if we are to appreciate the role played by aesthetic factors throughout society, including and not excluding, the domain of production.

### **THE ORGANIZATION AS A “GEOMETRICAL SPECTACLE”**

The history of industrial design charts the inexorable progress of the rationalization and standardization of products (Heskett 1980, Sparke 1986). The early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the emergence of the “machine aesthetic” in which the rational and technical features of mechanization were exploited to the full in realizing a sensibility of a type appropriate to the demands of modern organizations. Most conspicuous in this aesthetic was the dominance of simple geometry. It was clearly expressed in an early design periodical “Le Rappel a l'Ordre”, quoted by Reyner Banham (Banham 1960, p. 210).

If we go indoors to work... the office is square, the desk is square and cubic, and everything on it is at right angles (the paper, the envelopes, the correspondence baskets with their geometrical weave, the files, the folders, the registers, etc.)... the hours of the day are spent amid a geometrical spectacle, our eyes are subject to a constant commerce with forms that are almost all geometry.

A key feature of this “geometrical spectacle” is its linear-planar structure. The cultivation of rectilinear planes and the corresponding suppression of (the appearance of) volume — that is, the ubiquitous appearance of *flatness* — became so universal a feature of modern organizations throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century that it justifies designation as an “aesthetic imperative”. Moreover, this aesthetic imperative was not restricted to organizational design. It has been a feature of modernism in the visual arts, too. Painting from 1400-1900 cultivated the third dimension and sought to imitate sculpture in its depiction of the fully rounded forms of figures and objects in a three-dimensional space. From the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this direction was reversed in the painting of artists such as Manet and Cezanne. Paintings appeared progressively flatter, drawing the viewer's attention to the surface of the picture plane and impeding visual entry into the picture. By the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Picasso, Braque, and the Cubists had completed this artistic revolution. To describe the aesthetic imperative of flatness in the modern period as an element of fashion or preference is less than adequate. Flatness has become the period style. Style, in this sense, is a mode of knowing and experiencing. The question to be addressed is: what type of knowing or “understanding” is uniquely afforded the subject by the aesthetic imperative of flatness?

I restrict my focus, here, to the case of organizations and ask how the design of organizational artifacts — and the organization, as an artifact — mediates action and performance in the organizational environment. No doubt, the geometrical spectacle provided by the design of modern buildings and organizational artifacts is seen as consistent with the rationality of which Weber wrote. However, this consistency cannot be taken for granted. The aesthetic imperative of flatness, including the design of the artifact, plays a significant role in mediating organizational behavior.

### **AESTHETIC DESIGN AND THE PROBLEM OF AGENCY**

Insofar as organizations design situations of action for their members in a sensuously coherent and consistent way, they call out in individuals a certain “presence” — a structured tension, a readiness for action, a preparedness for experience — which corresponds to the sensuous values manifest in the design of the action situation. Physical artifacts are integral to the design of action situations, and they play an important part in calling out “appropriate” attitudes and responses in members. It is in and through the design of action situations that organizations indicate, in the “presence” that they awaken in their members, how they are to be navigated and lived.

While attention is paid to the results or effects of actions in organizations, it is the aesthetic character of action, its qualities as *sensibility* and as *agency*, that are key to its effectiveness. The aesthetic structure of action realizes a distribution and ordering of energies. Each type of action, diplomacy, collective bargaining, accounting, risk taking, and so forth, can be seen as aesthetically structured. The languages used to discuss aesthetic characteristics, whether those of art or theatre or music, etc., can be appropriated in the description of action. Actions have rhythm, pitch, dynamics, dissonances, and harmonics. Their qualities can also be described using visual language; they have color, texture, and tonal (light and shade) values. An action situation specifies the demand characteristics for “agency” in the situation, that is, it calls out in the subject, the specific qualitative values needed for performance.

Action which we would label “diplomacy” is formed, styled, and delivered in a different way from that of, say, “cost accounting” or sales. Organizational skills such as those cultivated in personnel departments and departments of organizational development differ from the entrepreneurial or marketing skills of business departments. The structured tension with which action is performed, its rhythm, timbre, or texture — in short, its aesthetic quality — is grounded in the action situation and is mediated by physical artifacts. The “demand characteristics” of the situation are made “visible” in the aesthetic qualities manifest in the actions of those involved in the situation *and in the aesthetic qualities of the physical artifacts from dress to furniture which mediate that action.*

What is essential for the individual, in generating skilled action of a particular type, is that there should be some identity (homology) between the structured tensions (aesthetic qualities) visible in the action situation and those which inhere in his or her performance. It is this very resonance or continuity, between the ordering of energies constituting the action of the individual and the ordering of energies present or implicit in the action situation, which enables the individual to *bring to mind* the sensuous import of action in the situation and to regulate it accordingly. To be effective in the situation, that is, to “deliver” action of the type and quality required, the individual must find within herself the structured tension which corresponds to the visible demand characteristics of the action situation.

Physical artifacts play an important role here in their power to reflect and cue these demand characteristics. They constitute “perceptua” which provide the elements of a “symbolic system” through which action can be brought to mind, and through which its import in the situation can be grasped. The intelligent structuring of energies in action demands this continuous effort to realize a resonance between the affective import of outer forms and the inner sensuous tension that is the life process of the subject. Only thus can the subject turn about on that inner sensuous tension and order it in ways that will realize the subject's possibilities in the world.

The design of organizational artifacts and of the material environment of the organization plays a part, therefore, in determining and constraining the possibilities for sensuous ordering that are realizable in the situation. By indicating its affordance of certain types of action and, by implication, its impedance of others, the design of organizational artifacts calls out in the subject a certain *presence*. This presence is realized in the personal bearing and presentation of an individual, the way he moves, dresses, and comports himself in relating to others, and the way he forms and delivers action. It is in and through this presence that the subject's being-in-the-situation answers to the demand characteristic of organizational life.

### **EVOKING A “PRESENCE”**

The organizational presence realized by a typist, involves much more than an incipient readiness with respect to the disposition of eye, hand, and body in the execution of the action of typing. These physical movements are nested in a structure of social interactions and relations that are mediated by the physical environment, including artifacts. The demand characteristics of the total action situation call out in her the incipient readiness with which the typist orients herself in performing her role. Such a presence is realized in and through the flow of organizational encounters and interactions in which she is involved and from which she acquires her sense of herself, her own being, in action. These encounters, inherently social in character, are mediated by physical artifacts.

Presence, in this sense, should be identified with skillfulness and with intelligence. It is in and through realizing presence in the situation that the individual successfully negotiates the complex demands of a flow of “encounters” in which there is continuous variation in the sensuous demands made upon her. Such a realization is an aesthetic accomplishment, an ordering of sensuous values in expression. Organizational morale and organizational values are continuously recreated in and through the aesthetic work of organizational members.

The presence which an individual realizes in a situation is in itself an intimate “intelligence”, with which the individual shapes his or her actions. I have, elsewhere, referred to this intelligence as “the intelligence of feeling” (Witkin 1974) in order to draw attention to the epistemological significance of affect. The presence of the individual as a subject, in a dynamic and active sense, is the only direct and immediate knowledge of the felt life — the sensing of his sensing — that the individual can have. Because we are accustomed to thinking of knowledge as knowledge of “things”, we are less prepared for the recognition that the presence cultivated by an actor on stage, or captured in a painting, a poem, or a piece of sculpture — no less than the presence cultivated by the chief executive of a multi-national company — is, in itself, a mode of knowing and understanding upon which the individual depends for orientation in the real world. Furthermore, the activation of this presence, this *understanding*, is essential to skillful behavior and interaction, to interpersonal perception and judgment, and to personal relations of all kinds. Organizations, therefore, have a real interest in ensuring that they call out a presence in their members that is appropriate in the context of their objectives; the design of situations and the artifacts that are integral to them is key to this pursuit.

### **THE AESTHETIC IMPERATIVE OF A RATIONAL-TECHNICAL MACHINERY**

Organizations differ in their purposes, in their environments, and in their cultural contexts. These differences are reflected in the design of artifacts. It matters whether an organization is making steel or offering financial services, whether it is a small organization or a large multi-national, and so forth. The type of business, the type of client, and the importance of the organizational premises in respect to contact with clients and customers of different types may all affect the aesthetic presentation, the styling of artifacts, and the aesthetic organization of space.

In referring, therefore, to an “aesthetic imperative”, I do not imply that there are not important aesthetic differences among organizations at the level of artifacts. On the contrary, there are clearly important differences in the aesthetic dimension of artifacts, even among departments of the same organization (e.g., the aesthetic styles of actuarial and sales departments in the same insurance company). Because of the nature of the argument that follows, it is important to take this qualification seriously. I am not attempting a comprehensive account of organizational artifacts. Rather, in line with the arguments of the classic organizational theorists such as Weber, I am considering only some of the most essential and typical tendencies of modern organizations and asking how these are reflected in the design of organizational artifacts. In effect, what are the aesthetic correlates of a rational-technical machinery?

Being an office-holder in an ideal-typical bureaucratic organization demands a radical separation of the office from the private or personal life of the official. As Simmel (1964) argued, in the world of business and administration the mental life of the individual is given over to calculation, ratiocination, and cognition. The private and domestic life of the subject, by contrast, is concerned with diffuse commitments of an emotional kind, with feeling, spiritual values, and self-expression. How is this



separation marked aesthetically in the styling of organizational artifacts? How do such markers mediate action and performance?

The aesthetic of modern organizations involves severe constraints on the use of color and texture, for example, both at the level of organizational artifacts and of the dress codes and presentational style of organizational members. This aesthetic also involves a suppression of the sense of volume, of mass, and of rounded forms in favor of rectilinear planes. These aesthetic choices play an important part in mediating the separation of working life from personal and private life. These same aesthetic preferences concerning color, texture, and flatness also have a positive function in that the use of such aesthetic markers establishes, clearly, what type of presence is demanded from an organization's workers and what type is excluded.

### **THE ROOM AT UNILEVER**

To ground my remarks on the aesthetic dimension of modern organizational life, I will describe one particular room in which I once (one of life's surprises) addressed a group of business consultants. I regard the room as more or less unremarkable and as typical of many such rooms in organizations all over the world. It accords with the generalization made by Banham (1960), cited above, in which "our eyes are subject to a constant commerce with forms that are almost all geometry".

The room was on the fourth floor of a multi-storey rectangular block and was situated at one end of the building. It was about nine meters long by roughly three meters wide and was entered from a corridor. The walls were smooth and white. On three sides of the room, the windows were shaded with two sets of blinds. One set consisted of wide, grey, vertical strips of material, and the other set was of horizontal, narrow strips (venetian blinds) and white in color. The vertical strips, which were in front of the others, were dominant. The remaining side of the room consisted of a wall, white in color, from the top half of which projected a solid white rectangular fronted block, some four meters in length, with small rectangular ventilation grilles at regular intervals along the entire length. There was a long rectangular table, white in color, which ran the length of the room and which appeared, to the eye, as a smaller rectangle nested within the larger one of the room itself. The table was made up of several small rectangular tables that had been bolted together.

Along both sides of the table and at one end there were chairs, rectangular in shape, with seats and back and arm rests padded and covered in a shiny, black vinyl material. The strong vertical and horizontal lines of the chairs, together with the smooth hard appearance of the coverings, gave a visual impression of lack of comfort. (In fact, the chairs were comfortable to sit in). Behind the chairs, at one end of the table, there were two flip chart boards, white in color and rectangular in shape. Their flat vertical planes rose above equally flat-looking metal frames. They were supported at their base by two pairs of tiny legs descending from two horizontal bars. The supports only served to accentuate the flatness of the boards, a flatness which was echoed in the strong smooth white plane of the table and the white planes of the walls. The floor was of a tough hard material that gave the impression of being smooth mottled stone. At the far end of the room was a coat stand. It was made of metal, and, although it had something of the traditional shape, with its central column and curving arms on which to hang coats, it was altogether sharp and stabbing in appearance. Its curves were attenuated, straightened, and spiky. The metal cirlet for holding umbrellas looked sharp enough to cut your hands. The only other

curves that I could see in the room were those of the circular chunky ash trays placed at intervals along the table. So strong was the linear and planar impression conveyed by this room that these ash trays looked out of place.

It was as though the room had been purged of volume, texture, and color. It was filled with rectilinear planes which visually flattened the entire space. The men and women present there, were dressed in the conventional business manner. The men wore dark suits, plain in color and smooth in texture. They wore contrasting shirts, light colored, mostly white, and with a contrasting tie. Color was largely restricted to this last item. The strong figure-ground contrast created at the neck by the suit, shirt, and tie set off the head in a distinctive way and drew the eye to it. The lack of texture and the darkness of the suit, suppressed the body, flattening it and restricting its possibilities for expression. A young child looking up from the knees of such a figure would see the dark expanse rising above her like the trunk of a tree, bursting into light at its apex.

### **THE SUPPRESSION OF SENSUOUS VALUES**

It is possible to see this aesthetic imperative as simply a particular instance of “modernism” in design, as lionized in the writings of Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, and others. Modernism, in this sense, refers to a “machine aesthetic” in which simplicity, rationality, and standardization are the principle tenets. In this way, the modernist designer may be said to have made a virtue out of the necessity imposed by the conditions of mass production and mass consumption; the designer has adapted, culturally, to modern metropolitan life by metaphorically appropriating the machine and the mechanical environment (Sparke 1986).

It is also possible to invoke a technical functionalism to account for this aesthetic imperative. Modern organizations developed vast administrative systems centered on the production of written documents, the management and movement of paper. The paper on which organizations work is both rectilinear and flat. It requires housing and transporting in containers suitable for the purpose, filing cabinets, correspondence baskets, and so forth.

Such explanations neither exhaust, nor even adequately confront, the meaning of the revolution in design for the people who live and work in modern societies. Furthermore, the emphasis on the linear and planar emerged among artists in the early years of the century and represented a profound cultural shift that could hardly be reduced to the exigencies of managing paper. When Picasso and Braque initiated the Cubist revolution, they turned their backs on the fully volumetric tradition that had dominated in the visual arts in Europe for five centuries, and evolved a new kind of spatial reading in which naturalistic appearance was sacrificed for a synthesis of the “moments” in which objects appear. The juxtaposition of planes and restriction on color in the Cubist paintings has profoundly influenced all design, including industrial design.

There is a literature which views this distinction between the volumetric and the linear-planar as fundamental in the history of art and as linked to social factors (Hauser 1951, Wolfllin 1932, Witkin 1995, 2005). Hauser (1951), in his monumental *Social History of Art*, makes the issue central. His concern is not so much with the modern geometrizing tendencies in European art as with past traditions and traditions elsewhere, for example those of Neolithic civilizations, of ancient Egypt, or of “primitive” societies. Hauser identifies planar and geometric styles with

aristocratic and hieratic societies. Where there is a developed urban middle class and an associated rise in individualism, he sees naturalistic representation as predominating. There are two aspects to this association. At the level of content, naturalistic (volumetric) representation permits the depiction of a high degree of individuation, of personality, and of particularity. From the standpoint of the producer of the art, it may be said to grant significance to a particular point of view, an individual's perspective on the world. By contrast, the geometric and planar represent a de-individuating tendency in art in which the transcendent order (often hierarchically imposed) predominates.

The room at Unilever is for encounters between heads, not relations between bodies, and it is designed as a production resource, not as a consumption utility. The aesthetic of the room — and it is not untypical of such organizations — abstracts the head from the body. The absence of real color, textural variety, and soft or rounded forms, the unrelieved rectilinear planes and the lack of an impression of volume; the dominance of white and the strong vertical and horizontal lines all seem part of an aesthetic imperative that suppresses sensuous values centered in the *being* of the individual as a living “subject”; these values, of course, are values expressive of the body, its relations, moods, and tensions. When aesthetic values must express the multitudinous and complex states of being of the subject, there is a demand for a heightened use of color and textural varieties and the cultivation of forms that have volume. Bodies have interiors; they have mass and volume; they are possessed of an inner authority with respect to the disposition of their surfaces in relation to the surfaces of other bodies and to the body of the observer. In the volumetric aesthetic, interiors can be thought of as constituting a *suspense* (the cumulative pressure of what has been but is not “present”), a depth or background from which events in the foreground emerge. Aesthetically, volume affords the construction of the historical dimension, biography and personality, and expression and individuation, in and through the dialectic of (inner) suspense and (outer) presence.

Flatness, aesthetically, is de-individuating. It extinguishes suspense (the historical dimension) and, with it, both personal expression and biographical determination. Flatness affords mechanism and engineering; it is a machine aesthetic, de-historicizing and impersonal. In the modern organization, the subordination of all aspects of performance to total managerial control was a dream of Scientific Management. The demands of a rational-technical organization are ideal-typically met when all aspects of performance are liberated from suspense and rendered susceptible to a continuous process of ordering. A structure of action that is oriented to formal administration, to the rational-technical, is at home with linear and planar forms, for they permit the degree of abstraction of head from body, and of conception from execution, implicit in the development of the modern large-scale bureaucracies.

The annihilation of inner freedom, authority, and initiative, which is achieved aesthetically in the suppression of chromatic and textural variety and volume, is, paradoxically, conducive to the sense that everything is under control and in accordance with its plan or prescribed form. For many people, it is only when they are outside the organization that they feel they can be themselves, that they can free up the possibilities of the inner life or express themselves, or realize their potential for experience.

In discussing the more extreme case of the “hippy” culture, Paul Willis (1976) has drawn attention to the barrier between the “straight society” and the world of

enlarged sensibility which lies on the other side and to which access is sought through the use of drugs. Here, it is argued that “straight society” is marked by an illusion of autonomy, a suppression of the subject, and a deprivation of the senses implicit in rational-technical domination, which masks the real state of being a “determined variable in the world”. The straight society was seen as one in which people’s sensibilities had been irrevocably reduced by the compulsive urge to barricade experience away. To the “head” (“hippy”), the “straight” consciousness, or the everyday assumption of autonomy in the world, in fact meant limiting consciousness to a microdot in the full spectrum of potential states of consciousness, that dot which an accidental turn of history — the discovery of rational-technical analysis — had magnified into the whole known world of thought. If you could trust yourself to leave that tight circle of apparent certainty, then you would be free to enter vast new experiential areas (Willis 1976).

### THE CULTIVATION OF SENSUOUS VALUES

The suppression of sensuous values in the room at Unilever can also be conveyed in positive rather than negative terms, that is, in terms of the cultivation of certain values of importance in an organizational context. There is, for example, a preference for clean lines, plain and smooth surfaces, and sharp contrasts, which is reflected not only in the physical artifacts in the room as well as the room itself, but also in the attire of members using the room. Thus, it is not really accidental that a suit with strong patterning, loose folds, or roughness of texture is not really as acceptable as a blue or grey suit, cut with clean lines that make a definite figure-ground contrast and which is worn with a contrasting light-colored shirt, usually white, and blending tie. The shirt and tie establish the sharpness of line and contrast at the collar. Patterning, where it does occur, is more likely to take the form of thin vertical stripes in either suit or shirt.

In his classic essay on “The Metropolis and Mental Life”, Georg Simmel argued that the principle demand upon the personality of the modern urban dweller, pursuing his livelihood in organizations, was to appear incisive and to the point: to be someone whose talk and actions were practical and effective, who did not digress or take up more of other people’s time than was necessary, and who was fitted for a life in which “money economy has filled the days of so many people with weighing, calculating and numerical determinations with a reduction of qualitative values to quantitative ones” (Simmel 1964, p. 412). Certainly, the imperatives for dress in a modern organization would appear to reinforce that impression aesthetically. The dress itself announces that which is incisive and to the point. However, there is more to it than that. Formal organizational attire, like the room at Unilever, suppresses volume — in this case “body”. The sensuous life of the body is obscured by the cultivation of an organizational presence. The subject is not legitimately “expressed” in his or her attire or manner of presentation. The power and charisma with which presentation and appearance may be invested becomes very much an organizational rather than a personal attribute, having its source not in personal life but in organizational relations and functions.

The development of an organization as a rational-technical machinery gives rise to an aesthetic imperative characterized by those familiar elements of the modernist design: the sharpness and simplicity of line, the suppression of color, the smoothness and hardness of tactile values, and the preference for planar forms. By such means, the room at Unilever, and rooms like it everywhere, successfully cultivate, in their members, a presence through which the organization is made and

re-made. This presence is characterized by the separation of head from body, of work life from private life, of rationality from sensuous values, of production from consumption, and of organizational function from personal expression.

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