

## 2.11 Exploring the Aesthetic Side of Organizational Life

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### The Tangible Organization

'... I was brought up not just by my mother but also by the colours registered by my eyes, by the noises that prompted reactions of alertness or of calm, by the smell of fragrance and danger, by the habit of distinguishing good and bad more through sampling than through opinions, through the variants of touch born out of wishes or prompted by desires' (Crovi 1993: 1).<sup>1</sup>

Students of organizations usually conceive, describe and interpret them as (utilitarian) forms of social aggregation. We have become accustomed to associating the idea of organization with the image of people who make decisions, by acting and interacting, each performing different tasks, more or less specialized, and more or less oriented to a collective task or purpose. If you ask a manager to describe the company for which he or she works he or she will probably draw you an organization chart, that is, nothing other than a graphic and summary representation of a set of socio-professional roles and of relations between these roles.

At one time I used to view organizations in a similar corporate way. My perspective changed as a result of some field work during which I asked a workman assigned to an old lathe to describe his company to me. In reply he said:

For me, this company is that damned gate I come through every morning, running if I'm late, my grey locker in the changing-room, this acrid smell of iron filings and grease – can't you smell it yourself? – the smooth surface of the pieces I've milled – I instinctively rub my fingers over them before putting them aside – and ... yes! that bit of glass up there, in front, where sometimes – there you are – I spot a passing cloud.

Maybe my respondent had a poetic soul and felt things that the majority of corporate actors do not feel, though I don't believe that this was the case. I think he was merely more aware than most that our experience of the real is first and foremost sensory experience of a physical reality, while he was less concerned to supply an intellectualized version of his firm. For him it was obviously above all a *place*, a physical and *tangible* reality.

He had grasped the elementary truth that the physical setting is not a naked container for organizational action (Strati 1990), but a context that *selectively* solicits – and hence, so to speak, 'cultivates' – all our senses. This context refines some of our perceptive capacities (perhaps at the expense of others), enabling us to grasp minimal gradations in the intensity of a stimulus, and accustoms us to certain sensations until we become 'fond' of them, even if those same sensations may well be unpleasant in other contexts and for other people.

The physical setting can be natural (as the rectangle of sky of my informant) but in contemporary organizations – generally receptive towards any technical expedient that may improve efficiency – it is in large measure strewn with *artifacts*. An artifact may be defined as '(a) a *product* of human action which exists independently of its creator, (b) *intentional*, it aims, that is, at solving a problem or satisfying a need, (c) *perceived by the senses*, in that it is endowed with its own corporality or physicality' (Gagliardi 1990a: 3).

The study of corporate artifacts and space has emerged in recent years as one of the more interesting new currents in the general approach whereby organizations are studied as cultures.<sup>2</sup> The object of this type of study is what, in the tradition of anthropological research, is defined as the material culture of a social group. In that tradition, though, material culture has been generally considered *an* element

(although secondary and accessory) of the cultural system, and the objects through which the material culture is expressed have often been considered worthy only of scrupulous classification. Even the study of the artistic production of traditional societies, which, as Forge (1973) observes, was an object of particular interest on the part of pioneers of anthropology such as Haddon and Boas, has vanished from the agenda of anthropologists with the spread and development of field-work techniques.

The choice of specific researchers of organizational culture to devote themselves to the study of artifacts sprang not from the desire to become specialists in a secondary or superficial 'aspect' or 'element' of the cultural system – however fascinating it may be – but from the awareness that the study of artifacts and of physical reality enables one to approach a basic human experience: the aesthetic.

The term 'aesthetic' (from the Greek *aisthānomai* 'perceive, feel with the senses') is used here in the general sense, to refer to all types of sense experience and not simply to experience of what is socially described as 'beautiful' or defined as 'art'. In the general sense in which I employ it, aesthetic experience includes a form of:

1. *Knowledge: sensory knowledge*<sup>3</sup> (different from *intellectual knowledge*), often unconscious or tacit and ineffable, i.e. not translatable into speech.
2. *Action: expressive*, disinterested action shaped by impulse and by a mode of feeling rather than by the object (the opposite of *impressive* action aimed at practical ends) (Witkin 1974).
3. *Communication* (different from *speech*) which can take place to the extent that expressive actions – or the artifacts which these produce – become the object of sensory knowledge and hence a way of passing on and sharing particular ways of feeling or ineffable knowledge.

When I call the aesthetic experience 'basic', I intend the adjective also in the literal sense of the term, to indicate that the aesthetic experience is *the basis* of other experiences and forms of cognition which constitute the usual object of organizational studies, and that it therefore implies that aesthetic experiences have a profound influence on the life and performance of the organization.

Despite the basic grounds that aesthetic experience provides for the sense of organization life, until recent years it has been an aspect generally ignored in organizational literature. When this chapter was first

written – in 1995 – for the first edition of this *Handbook*, there had been only some isolated attempts to explore this dimension (Jones et al. 1988; Sandelands and Buchner 1989; Strati 1990; 1992; Ramirez 1991). I intended the chapter mainly to be mould-breaking, future-oriented and agenda-setting; today the mould seems to have been broken. There is a growing body of literature on aesthetic themes, one in which systematic reflection is conducted on the relationships between these and organization (Dean et al. 1997; Strati 1999) and between art and management, (Guillet de Montoux 2004); there are research anthologies as well as special journal issues (*Organization* 3/2 1996; Linstead and Höpfl 2000; *Human Relations* 55/7 2002), which have resulted from seminars and conferences expressly devoted to analysis of the methodological implications of taking an aesthetic approach to the study of organizations. The aesthetics of organization is therefore taking shape as a distinct field of inquiry within organizational studies, and it is interesting to ask what has led to the affirmation of this analytical perspective in the space of only a few years.

I have already pointed out that interest in the aesthetic dimension first arose within the intellectual movement usually referred to as the 'cultural turn' in organizational studies, or other times referred to as 'organizational symbolism' (Turner 1990). Yet the study of organizations as 'cultures' or as 'symbolic fields' which was born in the early 1980s as a marginal and non-conformist movement is today a widespread current of thought with ample academic legitimacy. Not surprisingly, therefore, specialized interests have arisen and prospered within this broader movement. In this regard, it should be noted that – although the emphasis on the aesthetic dimension and the 'style' of organization has characterized organizational symbolism since its beginnings – the two categories of the symbolic and the aesthetic can and must be kept sharply distinct. As Hancock and Tyler (2000: 110) have pointed out:

... While the symbolic may well require an aesthetic component for it to be effective, it continues to demand an interpretative and cognitive reception on behalf of the receiver. Symbols must represent or 'signify' something other than themselves, and as such, exist within the domain of rational understanding and articulation. Aesthetic communication, on the other hand, transcends the merely symbolic. It constitutes meaning in its own right as a sensate quality.

In other words, the aesthetic perspective seems to have found a solid grounding in the 'cultural' movement that generated it. But it has developed as a distinct strand within that movement precisely because it does not share its predominant cognitivist stance, the origins and reasons for which will be discussed in detail in the next section.

Other research approaches and intellectual interests – which have arisen in organizational studies, in sociology, geography and anthropology – have probably created a cultural climate favourable for the institutionalization of organizational aesthetics as a distinct field of inquiry. These include the following:

1. The parallel development of strands of research such as the narrative approach (Czarniawska 1997; Czarniawska and Gagliardi 2003) and the study of emotions (Fineman 1993), which differ from the aesthetic approach in their subject-matter, method and reference disciplines – although they spring historically from the same stock – but have helped legitimate and spread their shared epistemological premise: namely, the tendency to question the rational and to explore the spaces lying 'between the organization as regulatory (the Law) and as experience (the Body)' (Linstead and Höpfl 2000: 1).
2. The conception of society as a network of practices situated in time and space, in which objects are active presences, and the conviction that social theory must necessarily examine the reciprocal relations among persons, places and things (Thrift 1996).
3. An increasing awareness of the aestheticization of the economy and of social life (Lash and Urry 1994), which has prompted Welsch (1996: 4) to call the aesthetic 'the main currency of society'.
4. The interest of postmodern and feminist thinkers in the human body, viewed not as a natural given but as a social construct and the vehicle of tacit knowledge – the site and outcome of power relations – and recognition of the body as containing and revealing cognitive and motivational dispositions (Bourdieu 1990).
5. Finally, the most recent developments in epistemological reflection on the practice of ethnography; these have broken the monopoly of traditional fieldwork techniques, highlighting sensate life as a worthwhile object of analysis, and the researcher's 'sensuality' as an epistemological disposition and a prime tool with which to understand reality (Fine 1996; Stoller 1997).

Although the changes in the cultural climate just described have helped break down the rigorous distinction between art and science, and although the

study of organizational aesthetics has acquired its own space and visibility, it remains a marginal rather than mainstream research phenomenon. This is because it contests fundamental epistemological assumptions of the modern social culture which academic communities and institutions continue to reproduce in the sphere of social and organizational research. From this culture derives the inveterate reluctance of social scientists to deal with things, with the body, and with aesthetics. Hence, if full account is to be given to the nature and implications of an 'aesthetics of organizations', it is indispensable to begin with critical analysis of some of the implicit assumptions dominant in the world of social and organizational research.

As I conduct this critical analysis, I shall seek simultaneously and symmetrically to construct a different conceptual framework, and to identify the language and categories appropriate to analysis and interpretation of the sensate life of organizations. Where can this language and these categories be found? Aesthetics, conceived as a single discipline in the terms of philosophy, does not prove adequate for the task: it is intrinsically ambiguous, because philosophical reflection on the 'sensible' concerns itself with multiple and overlapping objects (the senses, desires, art, illusions, poetry, virtuality, play) and attention oscillates between the cognitive dimension of sensible experience – perception – and its emotional dimension – assessment of the sensible on a scale ranging from aversion to desire, up to the highest forms of desire and pleasure, represented by artistic experience in the proper sense of the term (Gagliardi 1990a; Welsch 1996). As Wittgenstein (1958, quoted in Welsch 1996:8) put it, '... anything – and nothing – is right ... this is the position you are in if you look for definitions ... in aesthetics'.

If aesthetics alone does not prove adequate, one must, as ever if one is to engage in interesting organization studies, be catholic in one's use of sources. Points of view and analytic categories drawn from such diverse disciplines as the theory of knowledge, cultural anthropology, the psychology of perception, neuro-psychology, the sociology of art, the history of art, and others, turn out to be necessary. A glance at the references to this chapter will give the reader some idea of the wide range of disciplines invoked in the efforts so far made to grasp the hidden regularities of phenomena that remain, in many ways, ungraspable. For this reason, readers should not expect a thoroughly systematic treatment, but

should instead let themselves be led along a path consisting of deferments, attempts and allusions. As Strati (2000: 16) has written, we do not have '... the presumption that the aesthetic approach can provide either a more authentic or a more complete interpretation of organizational life. Rather, the organizational knowledge thus obtained is partial, fragmented and modest. It bears no resemblance to the generalizable, universal and objective knowledge yielded by approaches that use analytical methods'.

### **The Reasons for Neglect: Dominant Views of Social and Organizational Knowledge**

Every culture habituates those who share in it. Habituation takes the form of fundamental polarities that express oppositions or complementarities between extremes that shape the perception, analysis and structure of experience. A series of paired terms, close and partly overlapping, well rooted in modern Western culture, are of particular importance for my proposed analysis: art/science, intuitive knowledge/logico-scientific knowledge, play(or leisure)/work, beauty/utility, expressivity/instrumentality, contemplation/activity. These distinctions do not reflect – as many believe – an order inherent to reality. On the contrary, such distinctions are culturally determined and derive from visions and conceptions inspired by the utilitarian rationalism which became rooted and widespread in the West from the second half of the eighteenth century. These conceptions are, at the same time, cause and effect, reflection and justification of the industrial revolution. More generally they are grounded in that profound cultural transformation which we usually identify with the advent of 'modernity' and which Weber defined as the disenchantment of the world.

The scientific revolution and the perfecting of the cognitive framework of the natural sciences achieved by Newton divided the study of the *primary qualities* of the physical world – objective, universal and subject to the language of mathematics – from its *secondary qualities*, which are the object of subjective experiences, sensory and inexact. 'Special aesthetics',<sup>4</sup> meaning the study of beauty, arises at the moment when the *beautiful* is definitively split off and distinguished from the *useful* and practical, when the moment of *activity*, connected with the

exercise of the *cognitive faculties* of the intellect and its productions (science and technology), is conceptually and socially split off from the moment of *contemplation* and of the *imagination* linked to the fruition of the beautiful and of art (Carmagnola 1994). These oppositions/divisions did not exist – or did not have the same force and the same consequence – before the eighteenth century: in the Renaissance, (as in the Greco-Hellenistic civilization which inspired humanism), art and technique, functionality and beauty were hardly separable, either conceptually or in the organization of social life, and, as Hamilton (1942) suggests, the extraordinary level reached by those civilizations was the outcome of this integration.

With the advent of modernity the aforementioned distinctions hardened. New hierarchies took unequivocal shape among the values referred to by such polarities. Work and production became more important than leisure and play,<sup>5</sup> activity over contemplation, utility rather than beauty. Above all – for what interests us here – logico-scientific (objective) knowledge established itself definitively as a superior form of knowledge over aesthetico-intuitive (subjective) knowledge. The aesthetic was demoted to the 'secondary sphere of consumption, of spare time, of the useless'<sup>6</sup> (Carmagnola 1994: 129).

In the old scholastic treatises logic was considered the art of demonstration, while eloquence (or rhetoric) was held to be the art of persuasion. In the first the capacity to convince the hearer depends on objective features of the discourse, in the second on subjective qualities of the speaker and on his style, that is to say, on the formal properties – i.e. sensorially and emotionally perceptible – of his speech, which in their turn appeal to subjective characteristics and perceptual attitudes in the hearer. Rhetoric was often represented in treatises by the image of an open hand and logic by that of a fist (Howell, cited in Mamiani 1992, see Figure 2.11.1). This symbolization gave clear expression to the idea that the progress of knowledge is the fruit of an oscillation between two diverse forms of knowledge and communication of equal worth and dignity. But, starting with Newton, the sage became more and more identified with the scientist whose reports *had to be* the outcome of cold observation, stripped of any stylistic stratagem and divested of the charm of imagination. Modernity has thus inherited from the eighteenth century scientific revolution a closed fist – or at least

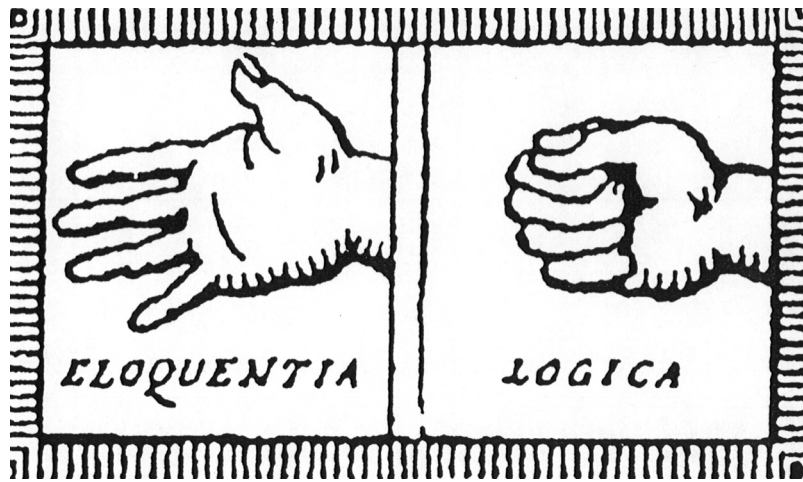


Figure 2.11.1 Two forms of knowledge and communication

the idea of the superiority of the closed fist over the open hand – and hence a conception of science ‘clenched in its processes of demonstration’<sup>7</sup> (Mamiani 1992: 225). Such a conception is still dominant in the social sciences also, despite the fact that efforts – among which those of Polanyi (1966) and of Brown (1977) are outstanding – to establish an aesthetic view of social knowledge, combining the rigorous outlook of scientific realism with the creative potentiality of Romantic idealism, have found more than a handful of enthusiastic supporters. The war against aesthetics continues to be waged in the name of ‘truth’: actually, ‘the sciences would be threatened with being undermined should rhetorical brilliance become more important than the justification of assertions’ (Fine 1996: 12).

Recently, Guillet de Montoux (2004) has brilliantly shown that the capacity to combine art and science, imagination and technique, mind and body, expressiveness and pragmatism, passion and reason was not a prerogative of ancient Greece or of the Renaissance alone. The cultural stereotypes expressed by modernist dichotomies and hierarchies prevent us from seeing these syntheses when they are produced in practice, and they discourage those who seek to accomplish them by labelling them ‘Utopian’. By means of analysis of a series of ‘art firms’ – from the Bayreuth Wagner Festival to Stanislavski’s Artistic Theatre, to contemporary experiences like the Performance Art of Robert

Wilson and the ‘Cittadellarte’ created by Michelangelo Pistoletto in Biella – Guillet de Montoux demonstrates that producing a work of art (when this requires a collective effort) involves the use of managerial techniques to a greater extent than might initially appear to be the case, and that, conversely, managing an industrial enterprise is more of an artistic undertaking than is commonly believed. For Guillet de Montoux, the combined use of rational and aesthetic capacities extraordinarily enriches both our ability to understand organizations and our ability to manage them. Aesthetic education consists in the development of the capacity to enhance and convey the creative energy generated in the endeavour to restore unity between nature and morality, form and substance. It is only this energy – which Guillet, following Kant, Schiller and Nietzsche, calls ‘dionysiac’ – that can restrict the production of the ‘impoverished artifacts’ (Kuhn 1996: 219) that are the organizational theories which inhabit our intellectual world, or the companies that populate the social landscape.

If Guillet de Montoux’s thesis is considered by some to be the provocation of an ‘artist’, being thus automatically relegated to the sphere of the amusing but pointless, this is because of the cultural stereotypes that I mentioned earlier, and it demonstrates their persistence. If formal organizations are the social artifacts which best embody the rationalistic and utilitarian ideal of modernity, we can only



expect those who deal with organizations – be they practitioners or academics – to continue to be irresistibly attracted to the rationalist half of the paired terms mentioned above. However open-minded organizational scholars may be, the fact remains that the knowledge that they produce is most frequently aimed at practitioners. Their epistemology, implicit or explicit, will thereby tend to reflect the worldview and theory of knowledge of those in whose eyes they strive to be credible: it is a question, so to speak, of cognitive and cultural attunement (Barley et al. 1988). It is this which explains, in my view, why even among students of organizational cultures, interest in the study of artifacts and of the aesthetic dimension is comparatively limited, despite the fact that the founding principles of this line of study included from the start the legitimacy of a form of understanding of corporate life different from and alternative to that of rational cognition, one which Ebers (1985) specifically defined as ‘the poetic mode’.

When one moves from the *forms* of knowledge to the *objects* of social knowledge (that is to say, if we pass from the question of epistemology to the question of ontology), we come up against the idiosyncratic tendency of social scientists, and organizational ones in particular, to shuttle between people – as subjects of relationships – and their mental products, between the ‘thinker’ and the ‘thought’, excluding from their visual field and interests material things (the ‘product’, so to speak) (Ammassari 1985). Here, too, we can see, on the one hand, the influence of Descartes’s idea of the self as the subject of thought capable of self-consciousness, and on the other the influence of the rooted distinction between mind and body, with the evident assumption of the superiority of the former over the latter. However, as Latour (1992a) has brilliantly observed, material things are the missing masses knocking insistently at the doors of sociology. To neglect to analyse them and observe only human action is like limiting one’s gaze to half of the court during a tennis match: the observed movements seem to have no meaning. For Latour (1992a; 1992b), in fact, the development of technology in modern society makes it possible to delegate a growing number of action programmes to non-human subjects, to things which while being often stationary and lacking any trace of ‘machinery’ – as for example an indicator board – are machines in the more general sense of the term. They, in fact, incorporate activity that could be – or

that was previously – performed by human beings, they condition human beings, they interact with them and are conditioned by them, in a chain of delegations and transfers – or translations, as Latour calls them – which have conscious human beings at one extreme, efficient and tenacious machines at the other, and the power of symbols and signals halfway between.

From a different standpoint, but one close to that of Latour, we can also say that ideas and things, thought and action, spirit and matter do not belong to separate and non-communicating worlds. On the contrary, things can represent the *materialization of ideas* (Czarniawska-Joerges and Joerges 1995) and thus can generate in their turn ideas that tend to materialize themselves, in a process that only when it is captured in its entirety makes possible an understanding of the *nature* and the *forms* of social and organizational change.

### The Relevance of Artifacts for the Study of Organizational Cultures

The need for the study of artifacts is particularly striking for those embarking on the exploration of organizations as cultures – that is to say, as symbolic systems of meaning – for at least two reasons.

In the first place, we can reasonably conjecture, as I have elsewhere claimed (Gagliardi 1990a), that artifacts do not constitute secondary and superficial manifestations of deeper cultural phenomena (Schein 1984), but are themselves – so to speak – primary cultural phenomena which influence corporate life from two distinct points of view: (a) artifacts make materially possible, help, hinder, or even prescribe organizational *action*; (b) more generally, artifacts influence our *perception* of reality, to the point of subtly shaping beliefs, norms and cultural values.

In the second place, if one is concerned with organizational symbolism, one must not forget that symbols are *concretions of sense*, for which things constitute their more usual and natural abode. To the extent to which, as I said at the beginning, material reality is the vehicle through which ineffable or tacit knowledge – which generally escapes the control of the mind – is communicated, the study of things enables us to aim directly at the heart of a culture, or at what the subjects do not wish – and above all *cannot* – communicate, at least in words.

Various authors (Whyte 1961; Van Maanen 1979; Meyerson 1991) have stated that the things most interesting to know about people are those which they take for granted or find difficulty in expressing and discussing openly: that about which the actors lie, or do not manage to be sincere even when they want, is in fact very often what is most central to them and can thus explain important aspects of their behaviour and social relations. So, corporate artifacts can function as 'clues' to ways of seeing and 'feeling' very distant from the rationalizations offered by the actors, sometimes entirely in good faith, when faced with a questionnaire or an interviewer, or during participant observation itself.

In other words, artifacts make it possible to rescue *the sense beyond the action* (Monaci 1991). Without wanting to resuscitate Dilthey and German historicism – and the stress on 'understanding' (*verstehen*) rather than on 'explanation' (*erklären*) – but taking over Weber's filtered version, one may say that as social scientists we are interested in grasping the uniformities in action and in the reasons behind it, taking as our starting-point the socially elaborated meanings of the actors. Up to now the study of action – that is to say of manifest behaviour – and of conscious intentions has been the principal mode of access to systems of meaning. Such an emphasis on behaviour has been judged a form of short-sightedness in the social sciences (Laughlin and Stephens 1980), and for some time now the necessity of providing a more rigorous reformulation of the whole problem of meaning, with the hope that new ways of exploring it will emerge, has been stressed (Foster 1980). The study of artifacts can constitute an answer to this need. It is therefore time to turn our attention to things and to the experience that the actors have of them in society and in organizations.

This experience can be analysed on two different levels, as subjective experience and as social fact. In the first case the aim is to explore the psychological dynamics entailed by our relationship with things; in the second case it is a matter of reconstructing the meaning and the impact of artifacts and of physical reality on the life of an organization and, in general, of a social group.

## The Meaning of Things

The things of the world have the function of stabilizing human life, and their objectivity lies in the

fact that ... men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table (Arendt 1958: 137).

The most careful study of transactions between people and things is that by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), which puts together a series of reflections deriving from psychological theories, with empirical data gathered during some ethnographic research conducted in the tradition of the Chicago School of urban sociology. Two observations – central to the authors' argument – deserve to be looked at here since they provide a convincing psychological reason for some of the regularities observable in organizational life and can serve as important elements in the conceptual framework that I am trying to construct. The first observation concerns the relationship between things and the development of the self, the second the interactive nature of our relationships with objects.

If it is easy to concede that the things we *create*, which we *use* and with which we *surround* ourselves 'reflect' our personality, it is more difficult to acknowledge, as Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton observe, that often they are *part of* or an *extension of the self*, not in a metaphorical or mystical sense but in a factual and concrete sense. Depth psychology has from time past shown the importance of the 'object' and of 'objectual' investment in the construction of personal identity, referring generally, however, to relationships with other people and not to relationships with inanimate objects. But people invest psychic energy both in other people and in ideas or things. Things – as compared to people and ideas – have the singular property of restituting to the self a feedback that is steadily and immediately perceptible to the senses. Even the feedback from our investment in ideas or people comes to us unquestionably through material signs and things: 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, even the smell from the newly published book unequivocally tell us that we are capable of exercising those particular forms of control of external reality with which our identity as writers is bound up.

Things thus incorporate our intentions of control, and the self develops out of feedback to acts of

control. In things reside the traces and memories of our past, the witness to our present experiences, our desires and our dreams for the future. Things tell us constantly who we are, what it is that differentiates us from others and what it is that we have in common with others. And in many cases it is difficult to trace out the boundary between our bodily identity and external physical reality: a judge is not a judge, does not feel himself such and is not perceived as such without his robes, a woman feels herself beautiful because she has an elegant dress, and for all of us the possibility of driving nonchalantly down a narrow street depends on the fact that we have learned to 'feel' the car as an extension of our bodily schema.

Inanimate objects that on first view seem often to be only the outcome of our projects, or the ground of our dominion, have in reality an 'active' role which has been brought out by various writers and analysed from various points of view. Scarry states that 'the object is only a fulcrum or lever across which the force of creation moves back onto the human site and remakes the makers' (1985: 307). It has been said that artifacts are pathways of action (Gagliardi 1990a) in the sense that they structure sensory experience and enlarge or narrow the range of behaviour that is materially *possible*. But they can even embody – as Latour (1992a) has shown in his analysis of, for example, the impact of an automated door-closer on human behaviour – a programme of action which prescribes a *specific* piece of behaviour. Finally, given that in all objects, even the most practical, it is difficult to separate function from symbolic meaning, the 'power' of the object derives from its capacity – as a symbol – of *awakening* sensations, feelings and reasons for acting. The stimulating and creative role of an inanimate symbol shows itself in a special way when it stands not for something else that *exists*, but for something else that *might exist*, in which case it is not a symbol of reality but a symbol *for* reality. This meaning of things, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton note, is not exclusively the outcome of a projection of categories of thought by the knowing subject. In other words the meaning of things does not depend only on the structure of the mind: it is equally determined by the intrinsic and sensible properties that things have (which make them fitted to convey specific meanings) and by the experience which the circumstances foster of them, even beyond (in the case of artifacts) the intentions of their creator.

The interactive nature of our relationship with things has also been described by Witkin (1974) – with particular regard to artistic creation – as a reverberative process, a continual shuttling between the impulse which shapes the expressive action and the material means through which the impulse expresses itself, until one becomes the echo of the other. Alluding to the same dynamics, Fabbri (1992: 38) has even spoken of a 'malignity' in objects, which constitute in their irreducible materiality and otherness 'a radical challenge to subjectivity which wearies itself, fades in the attempt to interpret their dumbness'.<sup>8</sup>

### The Corporate Landscape

Men must feed themselves, wrest from nature the conditions for their survival; and can do so only by taking account of the environment that characterizes their habitat. History shows us, however, that their productive practices are not necessarily in functional accord with this environment, but are equally determined by rites, symbols, ideas – in brief, by a worldview. A pure productive practice does not exist; every productive practice is immediately a symbolic practice of appropriation of the world; every productive practice is a way of responding, fitted to a determined environment, to the basic biological requirement, but in so far as that is already culturally formulated. And the signature through which an environment testifies to this *cultural requirement of survival* is called landscape (Duby 1986: 29).<sup>9</sup>

Material reality, which performs such an important role in the construction and development of the individual self, is equally decisive, perhaps more so, for the collective identity of an organization. If, in fact, the existence of a consciousness of self which does not seek confirmation in the external world is theoretically admissible – in extreme and pathological forms of solipsism – the existence of a social self which is not *publicly* objectivized in forms which survive the coming and going of individual people and generations, and which embody a *sharable* vision of reality, is conceptually unthinkable (Arendt 1958).

In an organization, ends are pursued, energies invested and ideas are made concrete in machines, products and places. All this is done through productive practices which – as Duby says in the passage just cited – are never pure productive practices



but are always also symbolic practices, combinations of expressive disinterested (aesthetic) actions and of impressive actions aimed at practical results. As Fine (1996: 230) noticed, 'work is a minuet between expressive form and instrumental function'. Actions, like thoughts and speeches, are contingent signs, destined to vanish if they are not reified. Only things last. A brilliant idea left out of the minutes of a meeting can be irretrievably lost. And students of strategic management learned long ago to identify the real strategy of an organization by the choices irreversibly incorporated in its concrete investments or disinvestments, in the renovated building, in the plant that is set up or dismantled.

In order to think and act, especially when they must reciprocally co-ordinate, organizational actors need an intelligible world. Things are the visible counterparts of this intelligibility, they indicate rational categories and hierarchies of values, and in this sense they collectively constitute an important system of communication, alternative to language, as we shall see more clearly below. Above all, things make it possible to pin down meanings, and contain their fluctuations. As Douglas and Isherwood (1979) have observed, verbal rituals, spoken and not recorded, vanish into the air, and hardly contribute to the demarcation of the field of interpretation. For this reason rituals make use of things, and the more costly the ritual accoutrements the stronger and more striking is the intention to fix the meaning for the future.

The instantaneous perception of things is linked with our idea of *space*. Just as new things are being incessantly created, others are multiplying and spreading, while still others are discarded. They reveal patterns of invention, repetition, and selection, cycles of stability and change, chaos and order: from things emerges the form which the collective identity has taken on over *time* (Kubler 1962). The physical setting of an organization (with its formal qualities, i.e. sensorially perceptible qualities) is thus the most faithful portrayal of its cultural identity, and artifacts – to the extent that they adumbrate a view of the world (and of the self in the world), in the dual sense of how one believes *it is* and of how one *would like it to be* – constitute a vital force for the evolution of the organization as culture.

The worldview that the physical setting offers daily and uninterruptedly to the unconscious perception of members constitutes at the same time

indelible testimony about the past and a guide for the future. Thus, it contains an implicit promise of immortality for the collective self, a public declaration that the organization will survive as a super-individual and impersonal reality (Sievers 1990). The concern of French presidents to link the construction of grandiose monuments to their time in office unequivocally expresses their desire to contribute and define the *form over time* of 'Frenchness'. On a smaller scale, the president of an industrial association – whose mandate was only three years – told me that all his predecessors (and he himself was following their example) had been concerned to leave behind some indelible trace of their brief occupation of the post by physically changing the shape of the presidential floor: thus waiting rooms, meeting rooms and offices changed form and aspect, shrinking and growing alternately, every time offering subtly different conceptions of a microcosm of roles and relations.

In light of the considerations set out so far, we can state that the supreme manifestation of a culture is the landscape, that is to say, a *natural* reality which has inscribed within itself a *cultural* code. This code is in the first place an aesthetic code. The argument for this latter affirmation requires some reflection on the relations existing between *ideas/concepts* and *images/forms*, *identity* and *style*, systems of *meanings* and systems of *sensations*.

To translate an idea into an image (or vice versa) entails passing from conceptual abstract order to formal concrete order, expressing, that is, a logical relationship between representations of the *mind* in terms of relations between formal elements perceptible to the *senses*. In a visual image these relations are spatial and chromatic, in an auditory perception they are temporal relations between sonic stimuli of different pitch and intensity, and so on. Every cultural system seems to have structural correspondences between its ontological or deontological codes and its aesthetic codes, that is to say, between systems of beliefs and of values, on the one hand, and specific patterns of relation/combination between formal elements on the other. Hauser (1952), for example, studied the connection between the geometric style, the stability of institutions and the autocracy of forms of government in the cultures of neolithic peasantry, while Vernant (1969) studied the relationship between the structuring of space and political organization in ancient Greece, and Panofsky (1974) studied the relationship between

Gothic architecture and scholastic philosophy. Coming to artistic movements closer to our time, considerable interest has been shown in the relation between Italian Futurism and fascism (De Maria 1973). Croce (1924), for example, claims that the conceptual source of fascism is to be found in Futurism and its trumpeted values of determination, aggressiveness, and thirst for the new, rejection of tradition, exaltation of force, youth and modernity. Like Croce, the leaders of the movement themselves (Marinetti 1924) stressed the links between Futurist ideology – the Futurist notion of the function of art in society – and fascist ideology, especially in its original revolutionary elements. But it is also possible to set out detailed structural correspondences between these ideologies and the Futurist aesthetic codes. For example, the exaltation of dynamism finds its correspondence in the paradoxical efforts of Boccioni (1912) to represent movement in sculpture, despite the fixity of the material. Again, the idea that Futurist art (and fascism) had to destroy society and recreate it on new foundations has its counterpart in the tendency of the Futurist painters to burst the boundaries of their traditional space through the materiality of their pigments, the stridency of their colours, and the striving to make the canvas three-dimensional (Fael 1993).

In the field of organizational studies itself, Guillén (1997) has convincingly shown that there is a structural correspondence between scientific management – as a system of concepts – and the rationalist architecture of the twentieth century. According to Guillén, scientific management contained a latent aesthetic message, an idea of beauty that could guide not only the organization of work in factories but also the architecture of those factories, and, in general, the design of cities. This idea of beauty – inspired by the metaphor of the machine – exalted regularity, continuity, simplicity, functionality, and precision. The aesthetic ‘potential’ of scientific management escaped the attention of both architects and organizational scholars in the United States, but it was grasped and made explicit in the first quarter of the twentieth century by ‘modernist’ European architects, who translated it into sensorially perceivable volumes and shapes in the buildings that characterized the new urban landscape of the main European countries. Guillén’s analysis confirms, firstly, the idea that a scientific theory can assert itself because of its aesthetic qualities (Geertz 1988; Gagliardi 1999), and that these qualities are assessed according to codes which

are culturally and historically determined. Secondly, it raises a series of intriguing questions which warrant empirical investigation.

What is the ‘hidden’ aesthetic of the organizational theories dominant today? What is the aesthetic ideal of emergent organizational forms like ‘heterarchies’ (Hedlund 1986), networks, virtual communities or temporary organizations? To the extent that the organization of work and artistic production can today rely on revolutionary technologies serving both productive ends in the sphere of economic organizations, and expressive ends in the sphere of art, there may emerge, in more evident manner than in the past, correspondences and affinities between art and organization. And it may be that the metaphors used to denote some of these emergent organizational forms – the ‘net’, the ‘platform’ (Ciborra 1996), the ‘virtual world’, the ‘moebius strip’ (Sabel 1991) – also possess (like the metaphor of the machine which inspired Taylorism) an ‘aesthetic potential’ to be discovered or developed, which is perhaps already unconsciously experienced and ‘enjoyed’ in organizational practice.

Analogous to the relation between abstract sets of ‘thinkable’ beliefs and sensorially ‘perceivable’ concrete forms is the relation between identity and style. Translating a particular conception of ourselves into concrete behaviour entails passing from an abstract definition of our *identity* to the adoption of a *style*, a word which we usually associate with an aesthetic – in the broad sense – experience. This problem is well known to those who are concerned with corporate identity, and who seek to translate particular conceptions of the collective self into subtle formal variants of elements – graphic, spatial, chromatic – that are sensorially perceptible.

There is a widely held opinion, even among anthropologists and historians of art (Firth 1973), that artifacts are the illustration of a *pre-existing* worldview, and that therefore the translations of which I have been speaking are always one-directional: from abstract thought to concrete manufactured object. Indeed, the study by Guillén discussed above suggests that the nexus invariably runs from the former to the latter. But it is difficult to say whether it is ideas which produce forms or forms which generate ideas. I have from the start expressed my leaning towards considering aesthetic experience *basic*, if for no other reason than that it takes place *before* (and often *without*) the intellect’s conferring of unity on the data of sensory experience through concepts

(Gagliardi 1990a). Artifacts, according to Goldwater's (1973) thesis as taken over by Geertz (1983), convey their own messages, often untranslatable into ideas, at least to the same extent as they demonstrate existing conceptions. In this sense, the relation between systems of meanings and systems of sensations is probably circular in nature.

Students of organizational cultures who have a cognitivist bias (that is, students who are primarily interested in mental representations of cultures) often use the expression 'vision of reality' metaphorically to indicate a 'conception' of reality. I am suggesting that we use the expression literally, to look at the corporate landscape as a materialization of a worldview, and strive to interpret the aesthetic code written into the landscape as a privileged pathway to the quiddity of a culture.

A land becomes landscape – it is aestheticized, so to speak – in two different ways, working, that is *in situ* (in the physical place) and also *in visu* (into the eye) (Roger 1991). The first way consists of writing the aesthetic code directly onto the physicality of the place, populating it with artifacts; the second consists in educating the eye, in furnishing it with schemata of perception and taste, models of vision, 'lenses' through which to look at reality. The two modalities described are equally important in the processes of socialization. The first – the writing of the aesthetic code into the physicality of place – is easily observed by those who do not belong to the culture in question, even if it is not always easy to interpret. Every landscape has a scenographic element, meaning that it is 'constructed to be seen'. This setting displays and hides, provides backgrounds and close-ups, sequences and articulations. Often the setting constitutes a real visual metaphor (just as a caricature does): it prompts one to interpret a factory as a cathedral, a pathway as a labyrinth, and a ministry as a monastery (Larsen and Schultz 1990).

The second mode of aestheticization of a physical place – the writing of the aesthetic code into the eye – is very much more difficult to grasp: it is a matter, in fact, of managing to see things materially 'through the eyes' of the natives. The importance of the education of the eye in a culture has been stressed by Worth (Worth and Adair 1972; Worth 1981), who speaks of the anthropology of visual communications and distinguishes it from visual anthropology, indicating by the former the study of *a way of seeing* – and hence a way of photographing, filming,

portraying, putting on show – as a culturally determined phenomenon, and by the latter the ethnographer's use of film or photographs to record cultural phenomena in images which replace or fill out the written report (Dabbs 1982; Van Maanen 1982). For Worth, a way of seeing is a way of choosing and combining in images aspects and fragments of the real, expressing in this way one's conception of the world and of one's role in world. In contrast to Arnheim's (1969) objectivist standpoint, Worth denies that the natural world presents an intrinsic order to the eye: it is the eye which projects onto the world an image of order. Visual communication thus presupposes the sharing of conventions between those who transmit and those who receive a message, a shared education of the eye: looking from close to and not from a distance, looking at the details and not the whole, the form more than the colour, and so on. Even a setting which selects and combines elements for the specific purpose of exhibiting them can hence be looked at from many points of view, and it is this which often makes interpretation difficult for the outsider.

Of course, the 'aestheticization' of the corporate stage is not achieved solely by creating and acting on its visible characteristics: a landscape can be physically constructed to furnish sensory experiences which involve the other senses as well, even if not all the senses – or not all to the same extent – are solicited by the diverse artifacts which populate the different organizations. It is also true that in the human species not all the senses are equally developed or have the same completeness, the same perceptive potential, as sight. Nevertheless, the dynamics described with reference to vision are very likely common to all the forms of sense experience: every organizational culture educates the sense of taste, of smell, of touch, of hearing, as well as of sight.

It has also been rightly observed (Hancock and Tyler 2000; Witz et al. 2003) that the corporate stage is constituted not solely by inanimate material artifacts but by human beings as well: 'bodies' are a vital – in the twofold sense of essential and alive – component of the landscape. They too, like material artifacts or inert nature, can be 'aestheticized', thereby giving material form to a particular conception of an organization's identity and strategy. Thus emphatically highlighted is the character of landscaping as 'technology of control' and the relationship between aesthetics and power – a topic which I shall discuss in the next paragraph.

The idea that particular conceptions of the order which are in force in a culture are the reflection of sense experiences that are either inevitable or possible in that culture (and, conversely, the idea that every landscape is the materialization of specific, often competing conceptions of the order of things) seems well worth exploring in the world of organizations, which base their social legitimacy on their instrumentality as regards specific ends and which *should* consequently tend to be *ordered* on the basis of criteria of instrumental rationality. How do pragmatic exigencies, aesthetic codes and politically-driven logics of action combine to determine the organizational order? What relationship is there between aesthetic codes and idealized images of the collective identity? What relationship is there between the structure of the physical setting – the form of the corporate landscape – and the corporate structure – the form of the social organization? Can the form of the social organization reflect a conscious ideal of beauty (Ramirez 1991)? These questions indicate fascinating areas for research to which it would be worthwhile devoting far greater resources and energies than those that have so far been invested.

### Aesthetic Experiences and Organizational Control

Beauty is a ray of light that from the first good derives and into appearances then divides ...  
 Into the senses it comes and then the wits,  
 and shows in one forms scattered and split apart:  
 it feeds and does not sate, and creates from part  
 to part desire for itself and hope of bliss (Galeazzo di Tarsia, Canzoniere).<sup>10</sup>

The wealth of associative and reactive capacities that people accumulate through living in a specific physical-cultural setting forms a set of patterns of classification, interpretation and reaction to perceptual stimuli that I propose to call 'sensory maps' (Gagliardi 1990a), distinguishing them from 'cognitive maps' (Weick 1979). Cognitive maps can be conscious or unconscious but are 'knowable'; sensory maps are learned instinctively through intuitive and imitative processes over which the mind exercises no control, and integrated automatically into life daily.

A corporate culture, then, is recognizable not only by the specificity of its beliefs – the 'logos' that

pertains to *cognitive* experience – and of its values – the 'ethos' that pertains to *moral* experience – but also by the specificity of its 'pathos' – the particular way of perceiving and 'feeling' reality – that belongs to aesthetic experience. A concept analogous to that of 'pathos' was formulated by Kubler (1962), in his claim that cultural artifacts are bearers of a central *pattern of sensibility*. Works of art, as things made to be contemplated and admired, reveal this pattern in a special way since action is guided in them only by the expressive impulse, by the way of 'feeling', and therefore need take no account of practical exigencies, as happens instead with other cultural artifacts.

In organizations whose purpose is profit the central pattern of sensibility is difficult to recognize precisely because expressive disinterested action, and the disinterested enjoyment of it, in its ongoing process or in its outcome, has no legitimate place in them: anything gratuitous can't help but be considered waste or play in a social group which demands to be judged on its efficiency and which strives to *appear* efficient, if not to *be* so. It is the reverse in not-for-profit (e.g. voluntary) organizations in which, without renouncing instrumental rationality, the 'disinterested' action of members, central to the definition of the collective identity, is set higher on the scale of values: it is more likely that expressivity is permitted or fostered, and the pattern of sensibility is more immediately and easily recognizable. But in the majority of economically oriented organizations the pattern of sensibility lodges in the folds of impressive actions, corrects the formal scansion of objects and space dictated by practical purposes. Sometimes it stands out clearly, like a lapse in the collective unconscious, in a detail or an object, apparently insignificant and useless, but which instead synthesizes the aesthetic code of a culture, the distinctive 'way of feeling' of its members.

At the opposite extreme, in organizations in which the specific result of the coordinated action of the members is an artistic product, the socialization of a new member is essentially and expressly education to the group pattern of sensibility. The expression of the pattern is not only legitimate but indispensable for organizational action and communication between the members comes about almost exclusively on the aesthetic level. The most obvious example of such a situation is that of a chamber orchestra which – like the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra – plays without a conductor. Our admiration and astonishment in cases of the

kind express our recognition of the power and mystery of ineffable communication. Yet, at levels certainly less refined and where the outcome is less startling, one may presume that there can be no organization which does not make recourse to it, given that the aesthetic is a fundamental component of every human experience: the more the pathos is distinctive and idiosyncratic, the more it constitutes a special bond between members and can turn into an extraordinary resource for coordination.

These latter observations introduce a topic I have already alluded to here and there in the preceding pages – in particular when discussing the relationships between systems of meanings and systems of sensations – but one which merits systematic treatment of its own: the essential characteristics of sensory knowledge and aesthetic communication that differentiate them from intellectual knowledge and communication through the language of words. Various commonplaces and assumptions – related to the dominant views of knowledge discussed in the second section – here invite critical scrutiny.

In first place, as Langer (1967; 1969) has cogently demonstrated, words constitute merely one of the systems that we employ in symbolizing, a system which owes its supremacy to the natural availability of words, to their cheapness and their readiness to be combined. But it is untrue that the language of words is the expression of knowledge and that other systems of symbolization are mere expression of emotions and of feelings: there is an infinity of things that we *know* and that we cannot say in words, and in the very moment that the mind confers unity on experience through concepts formulable in words, it *reduces* it irremediably. The language of words, in its literal and merely denotative function, is the most excellent of tools for exact reasoning, but its weakness lies in *discursiveness*, in the linear order of words, strung one after the other like beads on a rosary. By contrast, aesthetic communication – based on purely sensory contact with the forms – makes use of a system of symbolization that Langer calls *presentational*: the object is presented directly and holistically, in such a way that its elements – which do not have a fixed and independent meaning like words in a dictionary – are grasped in a single act of perception and understood simultaneously by virtue of their reciprocal relations and of their relation with the global structure of the object.<sup>11</sup>

Discursive language is the vehicle of knowledge *by description*: it permits us to say one thing at a

time. Presentational language is the vehicle of knowledge *by acquaintance*: it permits us to say more – even contradictory – things simultaneously and without the filter of abstraction. But precisely in this intimacy without mediations, so to speak, lies the richness and ambiguity of aesthetic communication, its capacity to break the schemata and penetrate ineffable reality, its surprising, stunning, moving character, its being – as Bruner (1962: 108) says – ‘a play of impulses at the fringe of awareness’. In this sense, aesthetic knowledge is an intuitive knowledge of the *possible*, rather and more than of the *true*, and aesthetic communication is not so much the account of that which has happened as the prompting of that which might happen or might be (Bottiroli 1993).

The *cognitive* potential of the aesthetic experience – bound up with its character of ambiguity, globality, unresolved tension – has been explored by Rochberg-Halton (1979a; 1979b). The approach of this author is based on Dewey’s (1934) distinction between ‘recognition’ – the interpretation of the object based on pre-existent schemes and stereotypes – and ‘perception’ – the capacity to embrace the object while letting its qualities modify previously formed mental schemes and habits. Perception thus understood is constitutive of aesthetic experience and the source of psychological development and learning. The conclusion, seemingly paradoxical, is that: ‘Aesthetic experiences, which are often considered subjective and hence inessential by social scientists, thus actually may be one of the essential ways we learn to become *objective*, in the sense of coming to recognize the pervasive qualities of the environment in their own terms’ (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981: 178). The idea of the ‘superiority’ of aesthetic knowledge is implicit in the approach of Dewey and Rochberg-Halton, as it is, for that matter, in the vision of a neo-positivist philosopher such as Polanyi (1966), for whom to know intellectually is to discover what one already knew unconsciously and tacitly at the subliminal level of perception of the body.

I said at the start that I would be using the term ‘aesthetic experience’ to include every type of sense experience and not only experiences that are socially defined as ‘beautiful’ or as ‘art’. But it is clear that not every form of sense experience presents the above-mentioned features with the same intensity. The pleasure linked to perceptual surprise, the emotion,



the learning; all these depend on at least three factors. The first is the capacity of the object perceived – be it a work of nature or a work of art – to surprise by the novelty of its form. The second is the specific ‘pathos’ – or pattern of sensibility – that the subject has learned by living in a particular physical-cultural setting and which he/she shares with the other members of that culture: in relation to features of this pattern an event or an object may leave us indifferent or it may reawaken our senses, it may cause pleasure or disgust, it may attract or repulse us. The third is the subjective and contingent willingness to embrace the quality of the object: a natural spectacle already seen more than once will move and surprise us as if we were seeing it for the first time only when we find the time to contemplate it and are willing to perceive it in a new way. From what I have said it follows that the feeling for beauty is a cultural product – like artifacts – and that any event or object has the potential to provide intense aesthetic emotion.

In short, one may agree with Vickers (1982) that we have two different modes of knowledge open to us, both of which we use in our efforts to understand the world in which we live. One mode relies largely on analysis, calculation, and logic, entails abstraction and the manipulation of elements – without concern for the form in which they are combined – and is completely describable. The other mode relies more on synthesis and recognition of the global context, entails recognition or creation of the form – without concern for the elements which constitute it – and is not completely describable. As we know, logico-rational knowledge and aesthetico-intuitive knowledge are both aspects of the neo-cortical development that distinguish the human species from other mammals and appear to be linked with the specialization of the hemispheres of the brain. The right hemisphere appears to synthesize the perceptual input into holistic images (visual, olfactory, tactile, and auditory) maintaining the interrelations between the elements in perception, while the left hemisphere codifies verbal information, processing it serially through hierarchical categories (Dimond and Beaumont 1974).

I have referred already to the importance of aesthetic experiences in relation to certain major organizational issues: in particular, I pointed to the role of artifacts in the formation of a concrete collective identity and in fostering the identification of members. We have also seen how the concept of

corporate pathos enables us to considerably expand both our notion of communication media and our understanding of the mechanisms of coordination among interdependent activities. The argument just put forward on the differential features of sensory knowledge *vis-à-vis* intellectual knowledge, in my view, enables us to see in a new light another crucial organizational question: that of control. Organization theory has for some time been stressing the influence of *informative premises* – logical and ideological – in determining the nature of decisions and hence organizational action. If the force of sensory knowledge and communication is in part due to the fact that it escapes the control of the mind, the importance taken on by the characteristics of the context and of *perceptual premises* in determining the effective course of events in corporate life becomes evident. For this reason I proposed (Gagliardi 1990a) adding to the three levels of control identified by Perrow (1972) – (1) direct orders, (2) programmes and procedures, (3) influence of the ideological premises of the action – a fourth level corresponding to the possibility of influencing the sensory premises of choices and behaviour. I shall look briefly at some studies that validate this suggestion and, at the same time, exemplify lines of research that could fruitfully be taken further.

Sassoon (1990) has analysed the links existing between colour codes and the formation of ideological thought, showing how shades of colour can express with extraordinary immediateness and efficacy variations in ideological vectors and in the social meaning of artifacts. It would be interesting to investigate empirically how these semantic correspondences, which seem at least in part to be cross-cultural in so far as they are bound up with universal bio-psychological experiences, translate themselves into the specific cultural codes of a society, and what use individual organizations make of these codes (to what extent they embrace them, invert them or adapt them) in relation to their own ‘character’ and to their own distinctive ideology (Selznick 1957).

In a study of a telecommunications company (Gagliardi 1991) the presence of a ‘decompositional-sequential’ archetype was identified that perhaps constituted an analogical extension of the procedure used in telegraphic transmission, the original concern of the company. The archetype was primarily recognizable in the structuring of space: the building, laid out only horizontally, had been

expanded with successive additions of parts which tended to be single elements themselves, without the pre-existing or the whole ever being questioned. This formal pattern led one to interpret – or expressed the tendency to interpret – the interdependence between the parts exclusively in terms of a unilateral sequentiality, and influenced the division of tasks, the structure of internal communications, the articulation of plans and projects: tasks were extremely fragmented, communications flowed exclusively one way, plans for action tended to be broken down into successive phases minutely specified without any appeal to forms of parallel planning and mechanisms of mutual adjustment. The most obvious use of this archetype was the way in which a global plan for corporate restructuring was conducted: the areas into which the company was divided were restructured *one after another*, and no move was made to pass to the subsequent one until the previous one had been defined in detail.

In another case (Gagliardi 1989) it was possible to interpret the failure of an expensive and massive programme aimed at sensitizing the staff of a bank – the purpose was to instil the value of ‘service to the customer’ – through an analysis of the perceptual conditioning exerted daily on employees by physical objects and structures: the thickness of the walls, the monumental character of the entrance – extremely lofty, but largely blocked by a steel grill – the luxurious carpets and tapestry in the management offices, and so on. Each of these elements – and all as a set – solicited feelings of solidity, comfort, safety on the one hand, and feelings of independence and superiority over the world outside on the other, rendering in fact barely credible the ambition to invert the image of dominance that the artifacts embodied. Similarly to the previous example, this suggests a need to re-examine the way in which corporate planning and planned corporate change have so far been conceptualized, concentrating more attention on the interplay of physical, symbolic and social structures (Gagliardi 1992).

The subtle relationship between the stylistic qualities of artifacts and the sensuous experience of members of an organization was explored in a particularly careful fashion by Witkin (1990). He showed how the design of artifacts can be an instrument of control in bureaucratic organizations. Through an analysis of the formal characteristics of a corporate micro-setting – the boardroom of a large company – he shows how a physical place can

foster certain sensations and hinder others, induce a two-dimensional rather than three-dimensional vision of reality, even deliberately suppress ‘sensuous values that are centred in the being of the individual as a living subject’ (1990: 334). Rosen et al. instead analysed from the macro point of view the dialectical relation between the organization of labour and the structuring of space on the one hand, and the way in which bureaucratic ideology concretely shapes social life on the other.

Various authors (Carter and Jackson 2000; Hofbauer 2000; Hancock and Tyler 2000; Cairns 2002; Witz et al. 2003) have recently explored from a critical and emancipatory standpoint the way in which the corporate stage is conceived, constructed, and invested with meaning, and they have highlighted the relation between aesthetics and power. To the extent that artifacts are ‘pathways of organizational life’ (Gagliardi 1990a) and shape social actions and interactions, spatial organization is in fact political organization, not just a matter of practicality or aesthetics. Office landscaping is therefore contested terrain, the form and meaning of which are subject to divergent claims and controversial, paradoxical and contradictory interpretations by diverse actors (designers, managers and users) (Cairns 2002).

Carter and Jackson have visited the landscapes created by an organization which deliberately sets out to create an ‘aesthetic’ – the Commonwealth War Graves Commission – and learnt that in every organization ‘the aesthetic which is produced...’, the evocation of a positive emotional response, appeals to the perceived threat which disorder represents to individuals and, at the same time, acts to repress the emancipatory potential of disorder’ (2000: 194). Hancock and Tyler (2000) developed a critical account of the ‘managerial colonization’ of aesthetics, describing how the bodies of female flight attendants are constituted as organizational artifacts, and required to embody the desired aesthetic of the airline by which they are employed, thus becoming the materialized expression of a corporate strategy and ideal. In the same perspective, Witz et al. studied a rapidly expanding hotel chain – Elba Hotels – showing how labourers are corporately designed and produced as stylized component of the organizational aesthetics; through processes of recruitment, selection and training their embodied dispositions are mobilized, commodified and transformed into ‘...skills which are geared toward providing a ‘style’

of service encounter that appeals to the senses of the customer' (2003: 37). I believe that, all together, these more recent studies have contributed significantly to enhancing the analytical thrust of the 'landscaping' metaphor, and to demonstrating its hermeneutic value in analysis of the aestheticization of organizational settings and its effects in concrete situations.

### Emerging Landscapes

I have repeatedly stressed that every corporate landscape tends to be unique in so far as it gives concrete form to a particular organizational culture, an idiosyncratic system of meanings. But it is also true that corporate landscapes may resemble each other – at least superficially – by virtue of isomorphism processes of various origins and kinds (Di Maggio and Powell 1983). The above-discussed study by Guillén shows, for example, how local codes are homogenized by the advent of a general aesthetic code which influences extensive and heterogeneous organizational fields. In a certain sense, therefore – and especially in an age of globalization like the present one – corporate landscapes may display marked stylistic affinities. Hence, the aspiration to 'individuation' – that is, the endeavour to construct a specific corporate identity also by means of landscaping – may engender even radical differences. These differences, however, are not apparent at first sight and can only be grasped by careful interpretation of the details.

The great social, economic and technological changes that distinguish the present age foster the birth of organizations which not only have organizational structures different from traditional bureaucracies but are physical and spatial settings radically at odds with those to which we have been accustomed for so long. The traditional organizational landscape – as outlined in previous sections – is primarily a unitary physical space, partly natural and partly artificial, in which it is generally possible to regulate (facilitate or impede) flows of information and relationality both within the organization and between the organization and the environment. But what landscape characterizes the organizations unconstrained by a territory, virtual communities or temporary organizations which are going to be the organizational forms of the future?

It is difficult to apply the idea of 'landscape', as something unitary which everyone – members or

customers – are able to perceive, to deterritorialized organizations, or at any rate to organizations whose members spend increasingly more time outside formal work areas. Actors perceive only the fragment of landscape in which they are located or with which they are in contact. They can 'imagine' (or know through media-transmitted images or sounds), the work settings of the persons with which they must coordinate themselves, but they cannot perceive them sensorially and directly. Even the landscape of a small office – organizationally conceived as a unitary system of roles and relations but whose members are physically scattered – becomes a virtual landscape in which social interactions based on sensory contact (and therefore which may be regulated in their proxemic features by means of gestures and the reciprocal positioning of the actors in space) are annulled, or at least significantly reduced. In the new physical workplaces, moreover, the fragments of the 'corporate' landscape experienced by each actor may be confused with the domestic landscape and with other organizational ones: in situations like telecommuting, e-mail at home or day-care at work, the walls that separate work from the family and the other institutions to which the worker may belong, even temporarily, weaken or disappear.

If the language of things and space is – as we have seen – both a means with which individuals are able to define their personal identities, and a means with which an organization can assimilate people and control them, the new work settings will probably prompt the invention and diffusion of new corporate artifacts and new semiotic conventions. Pratt and Rafaeli (2001) have pointed out that both of these processes – identifying and assimilating – will presumably be based to an ever greater extent on 'portable' symbols: company T-shirts or corporate ties can be expected to replace architecture, and business cards to replace diplomas and awards hanging on office walls or other 'office-bound' symbols. In a certain sense, the only alternative to a virtual corporate landscape might be a miniaturized and – so to speak – pocket-size landscape.

Whilst some commentators maintain that in these circumstances it will be more difficult for managers to use landscaping to condition the workers' aesthetic experiences, and that there will be more space for individual freedom and empowerment (Duffy 1997), others argue that it is impossible to determine '...on whether the new workplace

aesthetic is representative of democracy or dictatorship, of employee empowerment or managerial control – or of all, at one and the same time' (Cairns 2002: 817). What is certain, though, is that the tried and tested systems of socialization, communication and control will become largely obsolete, and that the central role played in the new learning environments by computer-mediated communication is laying the basis for new kinds of aesthetic experiences, while rendering others unlikely. The computer screen separates the user from a real world of multiple perceptions which engage all the senses and ushers him or her into a virtual world of infinite potential – made up of images, sounds and information – which requires and refines some senses but dulls others. From this point of view, the new corporate landscapes will probably require the use – and at the same time foster the development – of new 'sensory maps': that is, new patterns of classification, interpretation and reaction to perceptive stimuli. It is also likely that of the two modalities of aestheticization illustrated earlier – '*in situ*' and '*in visu*': the direct writing of the aesthetic code onto the physicality of the place, and education into perceiving in a particular way – the latter will assume more importance. If it is not possible to structure the setting so that it furnishes the sensory stimuli desired, the only alternative is to educate people to select stimuli by filtering them through the corporate aesthetic code. It is to be hoped in this regard, too, that the not too distant future will see empirical data which shed clearer light on these new sensory maps, and on the 'emotional climate' (Barbalet 1998) that supports or is generated by them.

### Exploring the Corporate Pathos

'... the resources of science are far from being exhausted. I think that an evening in that study would help me much.'

'An evening alone!'

'I propose to go up there presently ... I shall seat in that room and see if its atmosphere brings me inspiration. I am a believer in the *genius loci*. You smile, friend Watson. Well, we shall see' (Conan Doyle, *The Valley of Fear*).

The reader, who has followed to this point, if he/she has become persuaded of the importance of aesthetic knowledge, action and communication in organizational life, will be asking now how it is

possible to investigate this particular form of human and social experience. One of the first questions he/she will probably come up with is whether this new object can be known using the logico-analytical methods traditionally used in the practice of organizational studies or whether the choice of aesthetic experience as object necessarily implies the recourse by the enquirer to aesthetico-intuitive forms of understanding (Strati 1992). One might ask, in other words: can we study the products of the right cerebral hemisphere with the left hemisphere, or is only the right hemisphere capable of really knowing what it produces itself?

Put in these terms, the dilemma is not easily solved. Firstly, the vocabulary available to us for description of aesthetic experiences – and to achieve shared understanding of them – is limited and uneven among the five senses. Fine (1996) has pointed out that Western cultures possess a relatively ample denotative vocabulary for visual sensations, a less ample one for tactile and auditory sensations, and a very restricted one for taste and smell. Secondly, if everything I have said about the incommensurability of the two realms, about the richness of the aesthetic experience and about its ineffability, is plausible, the deployment of analytical methods and of discursive language will be intrinsically reductive, and we will not even be certain that our speeches even partially reflect tacit knowledge. Whether we ask corporate actors to tell us of their aesthetic experiences, or whether it is we ourselves as researchers who interpret them, we will always be dealing with 'espoused' theories which may not in any way coincide with the secret regularities of expressive action. If, on the other hand, we strive to 'feel' as the natives feel, we shall have understood more but we will be unable to transfer to other this 'knowledge by acquaintance' without ourselves employing forms of aesthetic communication. But perhaps this is to ask too much of intellectuals by profession: it is probable that those who have artistic gifts and vocation do not take up organizational studies. At all the international conferences organized over the last 15 years on organizational culture, the call for papers has prompted out-of-the-way, unorthodox, creative forms of communication, but – with some rare, often disconcerting, exceptions – these have never gone beyond the use of slides that more often contained words than images.

An interesting exception – but which nevertheless proves the rule – is the attempt by Steyaert and

Hjorth to radically innovate forms of communication in the scientific community by switching from the traditional presentation and publication of a paper to other forms of 'public-action'. During a workshop on 'Organizing Aesthetics', in order to highlight the political and ethical implications of an aesthetic approach to organizing and how this can influence scholarly work, Steyaert and Hjorth staged a theatrical performance which led the audience through the history of speech genres. Their intention was to induce the spectators to imagine '... possible ways of 'performing oneself' as an academic citizen in society' (Steyaert and Hjorth 2002: 767). Those attending the workshop probably benefited greatly from this strictly aesthetic experience. But when it came to involving a broader public in the experiment all that could be done was publish the script, which was only an impoverished remnant of the original performance.

The dilemma that I have posed is as old as the criticism of art: either one describes the work of art, pointing to its analytically observable formal canons – rhythm, sequences, proportions, correspondences – which usually in no way help 'to feel' the work, or one deploys an evocative, allusive, poetic language intended to transfer to the listener the aesthetic emotion experienced by the critic. It is this that leads many people to claim that the great critics are great artists in their turn. Our problem, however, is how to realistically develop in researchers the ability and the bent which will enable them to investigate aesthetic experiences through modalities appropriate to their nature without having to renounce the transference, and hence the accumulation, of their acquired knowledge, and without requiring them to have innate and marked artistic gifts.

As Bateson and Mead stated in their introduction to *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis* (the most comprehensive and ambitious visual ethnography ever carried out), our effort should be 'to translate aspects of culture never successfully recorded by the scientist, although often caught by the artist, into some form of communication sufficiently clear and sufficiently unequivocal to satisfy the requirements of scientific enquiry' (1942: XI). The work of Bateson and Mead is an interesting example of how pictures can be used to illustrate patterns of culture analytically described in the text: the authors used the pictures as records *about* culture rather than records *of* culture, as research tools rather than research material (Worth 1981).

However, their more or less implicit assumption that the camera can tell us the 'aesthetic truth' about the social system studied is seriously undermined by the postmodernist critique of traditional 'realist' ethnography and documentary photography: pictures are created social artifacts, to be interpreted by learning the system of conventions used by their makers to imply meanings; as such, they tell us more about the picture-makers than about what is pictured (Harper 1994).

In my view, even in exploring the pathos of an organization it is not a matter of the sole and unconditional employment of a particular form of knowledge and communication. As the scholastic philosophers claimed, knowledge progresses through a systematic shuttling between intuition and rationalization, between tacit and conscious knowledge, between the hand open and the hand closed, alternatively, with the regularity of breathing. It is a matter, therefore, of employing one or the other form of knowledge and of communication, one or the other cerebral hemisphere, according to the relevance that each may assume in the diverse phases of the research process, and according to the heuristic value of one method *vis-à-vis* the other (that is, according to how much we win or lose in terms of understanding).

There is no doubt that the sole way of *coming to grips with* the pathos of an organization without the filter of the actors' rationalizations and without the ethnocentric danger of attributing to the organization studied the pattern of sensibility we have assimilated in our own culture (Iwanska 1971), is that of *sharing in the aesthetic experiences* of the natives by immersing ourselves in their perceptual context and allowing ourselves to be imbued by sense experience (Gagliardi 1990a). The nature of this immersion has been very well described by Stoller (1997: 23): 'For ethnographers embodiment is ... the realization that ... we too are consumed by the sensual world, that ethnographic things capture us through our bodies, that profound lessons are learned when sharp pain streak-up our legs in the middle of night'.

If we split the process whereby a phenomenon is studied into three main phases – observation, interpretation, report – it is essential in the first phase to abandon oneself to what Kant calls 'passive intuition', and it is not difficult to do so. I have cited the Kantian expression in order to emphasize the importance of abandoning oneself unreservedly to the aesthetic experience, living it as authentically as



possible. But the expression should not be taken to mean that the aesthetic experience is a passive experience metaphorically comparable to inert contemplation. Strati (2000) has rightly pointed out that, on the contrary, aesthetic experience presupposes the subject's ability to respond actively to stimuli. If stimuli were undergone without any reaction, the experience would not be aesthetic but – in the literal sense of the term – 'anaesthetic.' This capacity to live experience without intellectual filters is in general exercised spontaneously and effortlessly by those who – venturing into a physical and symbolic terrain – are prepared to stay, as the newcomers. If we are interested in exploring the pathos of an organization, we must thus initially act 'as if we are there to stay'. As I have more than once remarked, artifacts constitute the main empirical correlate of pathos. It is to them we shall mostly devote our attention, and faced with any object – even those which appear to have an exclusively practical function – we shall ask not what purpose they serve but what sensations they rouse in us, and record these sensations in the roughest and most immediate possible form in a new column of the field notes that we are inured to keeping as ethnographers.

The best illustration to date of the heuristic value of the aesthetic approach to the study of organizations, and of the methodological implications of the exploration of corporate pathos, has been provided by Martin (2002). Twenty years previously, Martin had conducted an empirical study on residential organizations for the elderly, which offered an extraordinary variety of aesthetic experiences – generally disgusting – in terms of sights, sounds and above all smells. Her research was based on a rigorously positivist paradigm which required the researcher to be as detached as possible from the situation studied. After taking part in a workshop on organizational aesthetics at the Villa Certosa di Pontignano near Siena (Italy) in May 2000, Martin realized with hindsight that she had written a 'poor' account of a 'rich' aesthetic experience, because she had left herself, her aesthetic judgements and bodily sensations out of the story. Fortunately, she had taken detailed field notes on her sensations. She returned to those notes and 'discovered' that the residential homes for the elderly could be landscaped to create – the context and the 'disgust potential' remaining equal – different ('homey' or 'institutional') realities. These different realities aroused in residents and visitors distinct sets of sensations, and therefore of emotions

and feelings, which served to shape and maintain political and social identities. The two landscapes, in fact, reflected different conceptions of the elderly: as people able to act and take care of themselves, and as people incapable of autonomy. Repugnance, like beauty, is socially and physically constructed. These intuitions were only possible because Martin had intensely and personally 'relived' the aesthetic experience that those places produced.

An alternative way of getting at ineffable knowledge is suggested by Worth and Adair (1972). They propose to ask natives to film for us, thus concretely showing their 'way of seeing' the world. Close to their idea is Meyer's (1991) notion of asking informants to answer questions with images, figure, diagrams and other visual displays. These proposals, of great interest in my opinion, aim at enriching our field of observation by adding to artifacts already *existing* artifacts produced *on the spot* at the request of the ethnographer. If on the one hand what is produced is certainly influenced by the informant's relationship with the researcher and from his/her eventual desire to lie about himself/herself and the organization to which he/she belongs, on the other hand the possibility of observing the expressive action as it takes place can offer new and diverse opportunities for intuition.

Whether it is a matter of existing artifacts or ones produced on the spot, it is important to resist the structuralist temptation to interpret them as if they had an intrinsic semiotic status, as if they were a system of signs interpretable on the basis of a self-evident grammar accessible to all (Hodder 1994). Just as for verbal language a more complex linguistic model is required to explain poetry, so visual language requires a model more complex than one that can account for an unequivocal system of signs (Forge 1973). Objects, let us remember, are mainly vectors of symbols: they can say many, even contradictory, things, simultaneously, and their meaning oscillates in an ambiguous range, an interweaving of the intentions that motivated their *production* and the conditions of their *reception*, i.e. the sensory and emotive experiences that the artifacts awaken in a specific spatial and temporal context (Semprini 1992). It is a question, true enough, of grasping a code, a syntactic principle, a pattern, a vocabulary: whatever one wants to call it, it is irremediably local.

Through detailed investigations of three US museums, Yanow (1998) vividly showed how built spaces tell stories, and how we can grasp the meaning

that these stories convey. What built spaces tell depends not only on the 'authored' texts of designers (founders and architects) but also on the texts that readers (visitors, clients, and other outlookers) 'construct' on the basis of their expectations and sensory experience of the built space. The case of the Oakland Museum, in particular, shows that the position of the museum in the environment can be perceived alternatively as 'the accessible anti-monument' or 'the walled oasis'. Moreover, the three physically distinct museum levels – devoted to natural history, historical and ethnological collections and Californian art – (evoking the order of humanly bodily experience: feet, hands, brain) were alternatively felt as narrating the heroic story of humankind's triumph over nature or as a story of desecration of the earth and ecological degradation.

Gaining an awareness of the local pattern of sensibility is the most difficult part of the task, not only because it can be ambiguous and contradictory. Especially if we mainly rely on our own sensations, it must be done *in good time*. We must in fact manage to 'give a name' to our sensations before we become too inured to the aesthetic climate of the setting and while we are still capable of appreciating the specificity of the stimuli to which we are exposed. There is, in other words, a magical moment, short-lived I believe, in which one can hope to lead out the 'play of impulses at the fringe of awareness' of which Bruner (1962: 108) speaks *beyond* that fringe, translating one's sensations into thoughts without too much betraying them. In the interpretative phase it is then essential to solicit and keep in tension *both* forms of knowledge, achieving that balancing of emotion and reflection, empathy and analytic detachment that is perhaps in general – even when the focus of research is not the pathos of the organization – the essence of ethnographic work. As Whyte (1955: 357) has said of his Cornerville study,

The parts of the study that interest me most depended upon an intimate familiarity with people and situations... This familiarity gave rise to the basic ideas in this book. I did not develop these ideas by any strictly logical processes. They dawned on me out of what I was seeing, hearing, doing – and feeling. They grew out of an effort to organize a confusing welter of experience... I had to balance familiarity with detachment, or else no insights would have come. There were fallow periods when I seemed to be just marking time. Whenever life

flowed so smoothly that I was taking it for granted, I had to try to get outside of my participating self and struggle again to explain the things that seemed obvious.

How may it be possible to develop this ability in the researcher? In the first place, we must admit that to some extent it requires a capacity for self-reflection that cannot be acquired if one does not have a minimum of talent and natural bent. For the rest, the best training is to 'try one's hand' under the guidance of able people. There are no recipes or handbooks, and the only really useful literatures, in my opinion, are autobiographical reports on ethnographic research, such as the splendid appendix to *Street Corner Society*, from which the quotation above is taken.

Finally, the drafting of the report will rigorously follow logico-analytical methods, but it will be useful if at least in part – and without any pretence to the production of literary artifacts aimed at communicating only or mainly on the aesthetic plane – 'eloquence' goes along with the 'logic' and visual reporting with the verbal reporting: we shall be more certain of not having lost too much along the road, the long journey whereby knowledge is generated and passed on. And perhaps we shall learn, little by little, to share a richer, more unitary and decidedly more attractive conception of organizational knowledge.

## Notes

1. The translation is my own.
2. The Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism – an independent work group within the European Group for Organizational Studies (EGOS) – devoted its Third International Conference (Milan 1987) to 'The Symbolics of Corporate Artifacts'. A selection of those papers which concentrated on all the elements that go to make up the physical setting of corporate life – buildings, objects, images, forms – has been published in an edited book (Gagliardi 1990b).
3. In Baumgarten's definition, aesthetics are the *scientia cognitionis sensitivae*, the science of sensory cognition, as distinct from rational cognition. Giambattista Vico (1725), who waged a deliberate assault on Cartesian philosophy, distinguished and opposed rational cognition to aesthetic cognition, which he viewed as a higher form of knowledge transmitted by myth and poetry.
4. The birth of 'special aesthetics', as a sub-discipline of philosophy which speculates on the nature and forms of

beauty, was, according to Eagleton (1990), an attempt by Enlightenment man to colonize sensible experience in the name of and through reason and to bend it to the logic of intentional action.

5. Huizinga (1964) has claimed that the eighteenth century is that which took itself and the whole of creation most seriously.

6. My translation.

7. My translation.

8. My translation.

9. My translation.

10. Translated by Michael Sullivan.

11. Langer's distinction between discursive and presentational language corresponds to that of Goodman (1976) between *articulated* language – in which the characters, as the letters of the alphabet, are separate and differentiated without ambiguity, with a univocal correspondence between syntactic and semantic unity – and the *dense/exemplificatory* language – in which the inverse procedure to notation is followed, i.e. one goes not from the label to the object but from the object to the label.

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