'Fit for the Job': A Programmatic Inquiry
on Style and Aesthetics in the Workplace

Frédéric Dion
Department of Communication
Université de Montréal

Abstract:
This article showcases central aspects of an operationalizable notion of 'style' that aims at studying the aesthetic dimension of organizational life. An example of the agency of aesthetic experiences in organizational processes, taken from the author's background in the service industry, is first presented as a mean of problematization. A number of theoretical imports from rhetoric, sociology and discourse analysis are then considered in their potential to help make sense (Weick, 1976) of the processes accounted for (Garfinkel, 1984) by the author. The relevance of the resulting framework is then evaluated in light of this preliminary data, before further research is considered.

Corresponding Author: Frédéric Dion – frederic.dion.2@umontreal.ca

It is well known among students in Montreal that being a server often represents an incredible windfall of financial resources, especially in relation to the minimal formal qualifications that most of those positions require. A server position can represent earnings sometimes two or three times larger than what is usually expected from other types of student income. This order of magnitude does a lot for the attractiveness of this particular professional occupation among this specific population. As such, a lot of people want in, even though the world of service in Montreal is, in another way, a rather closed world: most restaurants require experience for server positions, and few are willing to train from the ground up.

One of the restaurants where I worked for the biggest part of my career as a server was an exception to that. Relatively unattractive working conditions had made it quite usual to hire inexperienced people as kitchen staff and have them move up to a server position when one became available. Critically, the selection of whom was to get promoted to the service team was often done without regard to the simple order of seniority. Rather, people were judged on a plethora of ill-defined, certainly flexible, criteria that were supposed to be indicators of an ability to sell products, represent the company and build customer loyalty. Where one teammate could sometimes be selected on the basis of having proven in previous professional experiences that they should be able to accomplish the diverse tasks associated with the position, another candidate was construed and considered in their alleged property of being visually appealing (unsurprisingly, considering certain tropes about the alleged general handsomness of servers). Another person, maybe less perceived as answering to canons of physical beauty, could nonetheless cut the line of promotion because, for those in command, that person's behaviour simply showed that they "had it[1] .

What I would like to examine in this paper is the undefined nature of these criteria. Clearly, in the cases just mentioned, the body "spoke" (Kirby, 1997), as management made sense of its marks, tokens, and the other discrete signs that it would be brought to bear: A piercing could be taken as the mark of certain ideological sympathies, a linguistic accent as the mark of a particular social upbringing, etc. But the bodies weren't only speaking, in the stricter sense of producing conventional

[1] This paper shall not reproduce the view that a category of people generally perceived as beautiful is in any way homogeneous, coherent, or conclusively discernable, nor that any generality could be said about the members of such a category, whatever it could be found out to be. However, the issue of appearances is nonetheless problematized in many spheres of social life and is oftentimes decried as being very active and consequential.

meaning. They were also producing other kinds of effect – certain impressions left by an hardly properly readable "magma" of trace-signs (Galinon-Mélénec, 2011). To get a sense of who would be suitable for the job and who would not, managers mobilized complex interpretive protocols that included rationalization, instinct, experiential knowledge of what a server is supposed to look like and how they are supposed to act, and inferences about the clientele's expectations and biases. The questions I would like to ask, then, are as follow : How can we, as social researchers, describe or understand such methods? And what do these methods entail, strategically and morally, for social actors using them or being subjected to them? What does it tell us about the possible ways in which humans make sense of their surroundings and their peers?

The following sections present an overview of some classical answers to this longstanding question (Ewen, 2002) of appearances and the nature of their effects in social processes. The rhetorical notion of ethos is first considered, and criticized for its logocentrism (Peters, 2000). We'll see that although it is conceptualized as the aspect of a discursive act related to the body and a speaker's "character" (Maingueneau, 2016, p. 95), the notion is lacking as a heuristic device for an inquiry on the aesthetic dimension of social life, a dimension that does nevertheless imply said bodies and characters. In an attempt to sidestep this shortcoming, section 2 turns to explicit approaches of aesthetics, one stemming from the field of organizational aesthetics, and the other from art criticism. In a third and final section, a synthesis is attempted between these reflections on the aesthetic dimension of (organizational) experience and the rhetorical emphasis of appearances and style as a symbolic mean of discursive and therefore ethical action (Fairclough, 1992).

Rhetoric of style

As mentioned previously, the selection of candidates for server positions in the restaurant I was working for was based on other things than easily identifiable marks and tokens of demonstrable skills, although those would of course also come into play. My contention is that this selection was operated from a form of aesthetic experience of others. The question was "would they fit or not?" in the picturesque conception of "our" table service that the managers had to constantly redraw.

I contend that *style* is one of the ethnomethods (Garfinkel, 1984) by which this aesthetical experience of self and others is thematized in ordinary language. Personal style is indeed the site of recurrent injunctions. As Nickson et al. (2001) point out,

Aesthetic skills are clearly the key skills demanded by designer retailers, boutique hotels and style bars, cafés and restaurants, not just in Glasgow but across the UK. Employees who look good and sound right are commercially beneficial, these companies believe (p. 23).

Considering this, I refer to style as the modalization of an action or an appearance, which through repetitive perceived occurrences, can become a habit (Peirce, 1903c). In the case at hand, the selective constitution of a restaurant's staff, such a "habit", traceable in the candidates bodies, influences the abductive sorting out of potential candidates by grounding hypothetical answers to sensible questions such as : is it foreseeable that they will appropriately model "the sell," "the table service," "the brand?" To get access to this job, a person needs to show that they can appropriately modalize such typical actions as "selling" "serving" and "reprensenting" in a way coherent with the restaurant's own operational and relational goals.

Indeed, appearances have frequently been thought of as support of a content aimed at persuading (here, of one's proficiency for waiting tables). This instrumental notion of appearances, mobilized intentionally in public performances of persuasion stems from a long tradition initiated by Aristotelian rhetoric (Vivian, 2002), namely its complex conception of ethos, the character that a person develops for themselves in speech to make it more persuasive. Modern rhetoric, from Perelman (1955) onwards, then expanded the domain of the argumentative function to eventually all verbal utterances (Ducrot, 1980; Grize, 1996; Maingueneau, 2002), giving rhetorical style (and therefore, aesthetics) a broader sphere of action.

Ricoeur (1975) has shown, in his seminal analysis of metaphorical speech, that this renewed, more pervasive, notion of argumentation still does not account for the extent of the constitutive, world-generating, function of aesthetic experience. Since self-presentation has at least some aesthetic component to it, the lack observed by Ricoeur there (in the analysis of language games) might be reproduced when analyzing other forms of semiotic behaviour. We should therefore be cautious that a argumentative perspective might not exhaustively account for appearances' agency in human experience and the constitution of social facts (Garfinkel, 2002). In order to illustrate what is meant by this lack in the argumentative (or rhetorical) perspective, let us turn to Ricoeur's (1975) argument. As he points out, metaphors do not simply "decorate" speech, nor are they only an alternative way of designating a relation of resemblance or analogy between its two poles (i.e.: "the man wore a flower on its head," where "flower" equates a part of the form of a hat with a part of the form of flowers). Metaphors also have a rather generative power, in the same way a synthesis, in its stronger, properly dialectical acceptation has: the meaning content of "flower" in the preceding example is a literally non-existing quality present in both flowers

and the man's hat. It is a resonance between the two items, a quality that exists neither in the man's hat, neither in flowers, yet somewhere in-between, in a space radically opened up by discourse and/or by the original phenomenological experience that that discourse attempts to express. Metaphorical truths (such as "it is true that (for me) the man wore a flower on his head") exist in a kind of tension between being and not being (Ricoeur, 1975, p. 313). Metaphors are ways of expressing propositions, but express more than that. As aesthetic acts of conceptual arrangements, metaphors also express some other things, some "alive things" (hence, the original French title of Ricoeur's book, *La métaphore vive* : "The Live Metaphore").

> Metaphor is living not only to the extent that it vivifies a constituted language. Metaphor is living by virtue of the fact that it introduces the spark of imagination into a 'thinking more' at the conceptual level. This struggle to 'think more,' guided by the 'vivifying principle,' is the 'soul' of interpretation. (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 358)

The aesthetic qualities of metaphors are not simply signals of an attention given to oratorial prowess, or a social identity as a trained speaker, nor are they shallow, nearly inconsequential adornments worn by a sentence's components that could have just been more simply stated. They can be meant to be used in such decorative or persuasive fashion, but their potential exceeds such instrumentalization. It is in this way that metaphor can show us how intelligibility might actually not be a relevant property of meaning.

A similar argument can be made out of Currie and Frascaroli's (2021) failure to argue convincingly in favour of an absolute possibility for any poetic meaning to be communicable through paraphrases. Some contents might not be paraphrasable at all (not being definite phrases to begin with). In the face of those "elusive" contents of communication (p. 435) lingering among the more explicit meanings of any given text the authors recognize the circularity of the argument they have been led to make in order to sustain their position that paraphrase is a possibility :

> One might take the view that we have done no more than rearrange the labels on things. You want to insist that there are no ineffable meanings? It is simple: rule out things which look dangerously ineffable by declaring them not to belong to meaning. We are aware that our proposal needs further support and that other plausible pathways might lead to a different conclusion (p. 436).

Although one can't help but take seriously Currie's and Frascoli's (2021, p. 434) advice that "it is wise, once again, not to be dogmatic in this area [of the limits and nature of what we call 'meaning']," I can find no reason to take the pervasiveness

of non-propositional meaning as an opportunity to exclude it from our general notion of what meaning is. This leaves open the possibility, against what the authors are advocating, that part of the meaning of a poetic discourse might not be expressible in paraphrases; some of it might reside at the limits of intelligibility, somewhere along the domain of the barely accountable firstness (Peirce, 1903c, p. 268). A focus on semiosis (Peirce, 1907) that would attempt to account for all types of interpretive processes and their interplay, proves simultaneously more economical and less arbitrary than a focus on meaning contents[2] ; a focus that for some reason would justify sorting out which thoughts or impressions can be said to be meaningful, and which cannot. Furthermore, once meaning is understood as relational, we're bound methodologically to study semiotic processes, and not semiotic objects (Hjelmslev, 1984, p. 36). The distinction between "determinants" and "constituents" of meaning (Currie's and Frascoli, 2021, p. 434), a substantialist one, does not hold to this. Again, the result is that non-propositional contents mediated by any type of object – be it a poem or a body – shouldn't be excluded from the realm of meaningfulness.

These two polemics regarding the superseding potential of metaphorical meaning and the liminalities of paraphrases are just some examples of the kinds of (redhibitory, in my view) difficulties awaiting a conception of meaning too much focused on the symbolic communication of propositional content. Considering this, one should question if the notion of ethos really suffices to account for the agency of appearances in social situations. The presentation of self (as considered in the influential work of Goffman [1956] or Bourdieu [1979]) always seems reducible to a statement: "I am well-to-do," "I am professional," "I am a musician," "I am trustworthy," "I am not one of those who worry about their appearance." Ethos is said to be "what speaks as the speaker utter words" (Barthes, 1970, p. 212). But appearances don't always speak – not a language, at least.

Ethos has demonstrated its relevance for the analysis of many types of social processes in a plethora of works and disciplines (Baumlin and Meyer, 2018). Through the lenses of ethos, self-presentation appears as a symbol indexed to some value in a normative system, whether ideological, moral or positional. It is a mediator between these symbolic systems and the logics of action that they motivate or explain (Bédard, 2015), but self-presentation and appearances in general play a larger range of

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[2] As one might see from the reference to Peirce (1903), this argument is nothing new. It also parallels Quine's (1992) thesis of the impossibility of translation and indeterminacy of meaning.

semiotic functions than that. The notion of ethos alone cannot, from what we've seen, exhaustively account for everything that might contribute to the kinds of selective processes we mentioned earlier ongoing in the organization of a staff team. Following this, ethos should not be thought of as synonymous with "the presentation of self," as Amossy (2010) puts it, referring to Goffman (1956), because the presentation of one's self displays more than just ethos. It at least also implies a style. The new server must not only be trustworthy and competent and signal these traits through various performances: they must fit in physically, noticeably (which implies semiosis), with the overall aesthetic of the particular space they are trying to integrate. It is in this regard that the notion of style can contribute to a reflection on the aesthetical dimension of social processes.

A notion of aestheticism

In the case of organizations, aesthetics (Strati, 1999; 2018) has already been considered as an important factor in the transmission of tacit knowledge (Ewenstein and Whyte, 2007), the permanence of characteristic "trademark" practices (Bazin and Korica, 2021; Dobson, 2010), the specificities of intra-organizational intercultural communication (Louisgrand and Islam, 2021), and, in general, a number of specific tasks often overlooked and now researched under the heading of "aesthetic labor" (Mears, 2014). For Gagliardi (2006), a major representative of this subfield of organizational studies called organizational aesthetics, aesthetic experience participates in organizational life by serving three interrelated roles:

1) As a type of knowledge (to be distinguished from an "intellectual" knowledge). It is gained from aesthetic experiences of one's environment (typically, though not exclusively, when artworks are part of that environment) and it is, critically, not fully translatable in language.

2) As a form of action: disinterested, formed by an impulse that seeks to express itself, such as the act (before it is commodified) of drawing a figure on a latte, of wearing those prettier shoes to work, of choosing to play this music in the desks area, etc.

3) As an act of communication, because actions become perceptible and objects of further knowledge, in a logic similar to the idea developed in Watzlawick et al. (2011) according to which any behaviour is communication.

This three-step definition of "aesthetic experience" allows us already to consider it in a host of effects. I would simply revise this definition by freeing it from the remnants of an overly constraining association between art and aesthetics, an association that ties the latter to canonical notions of beauty or expressive authenticity as its higher general principles. Consequently, I don't think that the term "intellectual" is necessarily the right one to oppose to aesthetic knowledge. It echoes anti-intellectual tropes of the "sanguine, exuberant and driven artist[3]," as when identifying disinterestedness as a characteristic of aesthetic action. Not only does aesthetic experience concerns everyone, and not just artists, but even in their case, the assumption seems debatable. As Dewey (1995) points out, "The odd notion that an artist does not think and a scientific inquirer does nothing else is the result of converting a difference of tempo and emphasis into a difference in kind" (p. 15).

Working out the distinction between artistic value and aesthetic value, partly from Dewey's stance on the subject, Goldman (2013) points us to a "broader," much more essential and intricate notion of aesthetic experience. One that does not need an intervention of the sublime and that can therefore apply to many daily situations: "Sensuous perception, informed by cognition, enlarged by imagination, and prompting emotional response" (Goldman, 2013, p. 233). Before an artwork is given artistic, social or performative value, it simply is, in itself, the depositary of its own qualia, its own disposition to affect that is the source of emergence of all possible value (Massumi, 2018). Any aesthetic experience, because of its ubiquity, its banality (Carnevali, 2020), its totalizing presence in human experience, can be resituated and should be thought of as a radically ethical dimension of experience. As an embodiment of the knowledge (at times ineffable, at times more explicit) gained from this essential dimension of experience, style intervenes in a critical way in the organization of our social relations.

Furthermore, as shown by Foucault (1985), style contributes to a process of constitution of the subject, not as a moral subject in relation to an ethical standard, but as an aesthetic subject (Foucault, 1985), existing in the world both as a certain aesthetic response and prompt to it. This brings us to the aesthetic possibility of a project of the self which is no longer based on an introspective relation to the soul but

[3] This idealized figure was described in passing by Barthes (1957) as being, in his time, notably attainable by unrepentant intellectuals through the ritual act of drinking cheaper popular wine, which made them "drop the act," leave the glamorous and snobbish atmosphere of "expensive cocktails" and renew themselves as sharing the bond of the wine with the average French person.

on the realization of an individual's potentialities, which they discover along the way and which emerge from the contact with themselves and their environment. This is the possibility that Foucault (1985) tried to open up, inspired by Nietzsche's (1900; 1901) reflection on the moral constitution of the subject.

The relation of aesthetics to the senses thus implies an important relation of aesthetic experience to the material conditions of its emergence. Not anyone can be a "gruff giant," for example, that is, the aesthetic project that one can try to formulate and embody is affected by the material one is working with. Aesthetic experience becomes therefore the focus of an individuation (Macé, 2016). Each one perceives, expresses and acts in their own way and can (if not must) thus formulate in their own way their own project, their own becoming. Additionally, if the relation to oneself can be aesthetic so too can be the relation to others. The Goffmanian logic of the actor who knows that the others are also actors extends until there (Goffman, 1957). This also opens the possibility of a political aesthetic where certain judgments of taste become conventional, and can take on an imperative dimension (Ferguson, 2007).

The problematic relation between aesthetics and ethics

Having laid some foundations for a notion of style operationalizable in an empirical study of social processes, we can come back to the notion of ethos in order to formulate a more definite distinction between the two. Broadly speaking, ethos is the self-expression of the constitution of individuals as subjects of moral conduct. It is a set of indexical signs that serves the function of indicating in contingent, devisable ways which conduct to expect from any one person. Aesthetics can inform this relationship to self and others, according to "affective intensities" (Massumi, 2018). Importantly, whereas ethical norms and principles are designable through the use of linguistic symbols, aesthetic knowledge might not be as easily represented or signified.

According to Peirce (1903a), aesthetics supersedes ethics because the aim of ethics, electing an adequate idealized course of action, can only be achieved after having discerned what ideal ends are possible in the first place, which is, according to him, aesthetics' function as a "normative science." This sheds some light on the ethical character of aesthetic experience mentioned before. This ethical nature is entailed by aesthetic experience's potential to reveal or hint at new ideals and, therefore, new courses of action oriented towards these ideals. Aesthetic knowledge is consequentially ethical. Pictured as normative sciences, ethics and aesthetics are proper types of knowledge-constituting endeavors. Both produce their own type of

knowledges which can be invested in future behaviours or thoughts about behaviours or state of beings (Peirce, 1903b).

What is interesting for the organizational ethnographer is that the resulting appearance, working as a singular media for both forms of knowledge, exhibits them both simultaneously, entangling them in such a way that complicates any analytical distinction one could try to make on the basis of phenomenal data. Such data – the resulting appearances of a behaviour modalized by style and ethos – can then be mobilized by lay actors, just as it is by social scientists (Schutz, 1972b; Lemieux, 2018) for future reference in the course of action or reflection, modalizing new appearances and so on, in a circular relationship such as the one represented in figure 1.
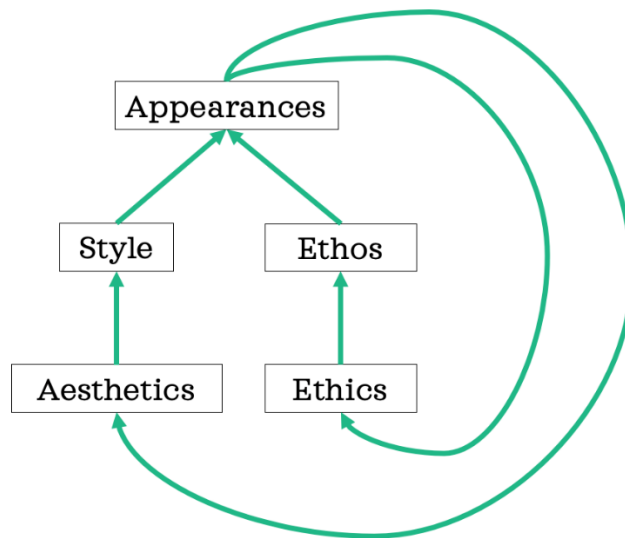

Figure 1A proposition of the location of style in relation to aesthetics and ethics

Aesthetics-as-modalized-in-style   and   ethics-as-modalized-in-ethos   are simultaneously mediated in a synthetic appearance. On one hand, this interweaving could be an explanation for appearances' recurrently unsatisfactory treatment in modern thought (Carnevali, 2020), as their holistic value was rarely considered but by some (see Carnevali's [2016] argument regarding Simmel's perceptivity on the matter, for a counterexample). On the other hand, it could also explain why aesthetics has been overlooked by large parts of philosophical and social research (Ewen, 2002; Macé, 2016), or only reluctantly considered as a serious matter by social actors (Carnevali, 2013, Taylor, 2002).

Conclusion: Making sense of organizational practices

Yet, it is clear that style is part of social dynamics. Style is not simply a possible aesthetic project that each and every one of us can give ourselves, but a project that can then be apprehended, affected, confronted and problematized by others. On this subject, an interesting approach is the one that Gagliardi (2006) suggests, where bodies could be thought of as artifacts, accomplishing a function of stabilization of meanings in collectives (Caronia, 2018), and susceptible therefore, as other artifacts, to be aestheticized by organizations. Style is not an individual project because many things enter in its composition. It is also not a project that only interests the individual, but can also be interpellated by many.

Bringing us back to the organizational dynamics of staff selection, it seems that these theoretical considerations may help us reframe the experience that I recounted in the first part of this article. The new server must not only be trustworthy and competent: they must fit in physically, noticeably, with the overall aesthetic of the particular space they are trying to integrate. Their presence must be adjusted, as much as possible. And so, the intuition (justified or not) that such a person "would not do" can be enough to disqualify them. Gifted with an aesthetic intelligence, a person can try to appear appropriate for a position. It is possible to try to embody an aesthetic that will potentially designate one as the next in line. Even after being chosen, we still need to realize that aesthetic. We trade the kitchen shirt for the service shirt, we take a black tablier instead of a red one, we liven up our movements and sharpen our repartee. All these are ethnomethods (Garfinkel, 1984; 2002) that actors use in order to elicit certain responses or impressions in their surroundings, or just as a way of being in a way that suits them because it seems or feels appropriate. As ethnomethods, they contribute to social facts in the making and therefore should not be left unattended. Although it is true that documenting tacit knowledge, ineffable experiences as I described above might pose serious methodological problems for the social scientist, the work of Garfinkel (1984) and Schutz (1972a) opens up a tried and proved way of tackling these. The essential characteristics of any given aesthetic experience do not need to be defined – and, in fact, do not even need to be definable – for an inquiry on the social effects of such an experience to be possible. What matters is that these experiences matter for actors and that they somehow account for themthrough any kind of behaviour. From there, it's all about paying a close attention to what actors do with and about these considerations. An ethnography of the organizational practices of a restaurant's staff is just one way of doing this.

After considering tendential oversights in the rhetorical tradition regarding the semiotic potential of appearances, we introduced some elements of definition inspired by organizational aesthetics. The instrumentalization of appearances as symbolic tools in social performances, "cynical" or not (Goffman, 1956), is attested by

many authors (Brummett, 2010; Hariman 1995) and it is not this paper's aim to deny the existence of these practices. By drawing from the work of authors attentive to aesthetics' phenomenological centrality, we showed how parts of the story might still be missing. The aesthetic dimension of experience is irreducible to symbolic acts of communication, even though it can contribute to these. Peirce (1903c) insisted on the variability of semiosis. It is a process that links many different types of things to many others, through a relation that itself fluctuates in its nature. We briefly illustrated what kind of organizational phenomena could be illuminated by such an aesthetic approach, most notably through the notion of style, the effective embodiment of aesthetic knowledge by social actors. What's left to do is to demonstrate how well this theoretical frame will hold when put to the task of an empirical study of organizational phenomena. Running such a test shall not only allow us to revise the prototypical theory of style described above, but will also contribute to a decried lack of empirical studies in aesthetic studies (Ladkin, 2018).

Yes, the server's clean shirt, opposed caricaturaly to a dirty t-shirt, might grossly amount to saying "I'm a well-kept, orderly and trustful person." But the way that shirt is worn and is integrated to the rest of the person's appearance and cadence, and to the whole context, might tell a completely different story, made of impressions, feelings, analogies and rhythm. Only in regard to all of this might you get that person's "groove", or not. Isn't this consequential?

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