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The Labour of Aesthetics and the Aesthetics of Organization

articles

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Abstract. This article develops the conceptualization and analysis of aesthetic labour in two parts. The first part focuses on conceptualizing aesthetic labour. We critically revisit the emotional labour literature, arguing that the analysis of interactive service work is impeded by the way in which its corporeal aspects are retired and that, by shifting the focus from emotional to aesthetic labour, we are able to recuperate the embodied character of service work. We then explore the insights provided by the sociological perspectives on the body contained in the works of Goffman and Bourdieu in order to conceptualize aesthetic labour as embodied labour. In the second part, we develop our analysis of aesthetic labour within the context of a discussion of the aesthetics of organization. We discern three ways in which aesthetics is recognized to imbue organization: aesthetics of organization, aesthetics in organization and aesthetics as organization. We contend that employees are increasingly seen not simply as 'software', but as 'hardware', in the sense that they too can be corporately moulded to portray the organizational aesthetic. We ground this analysis in a case study from research conducted by the authors. *Key words.* aesthetic labour; aesthetics; embodied work; emotional labour; organization
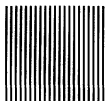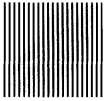
The analysis of aesthetic labour developed here (see also Nickson et al., 2001; Warhurst et al., 2000) foregrounds the stylization of workplace performances, and particularly the ways in which new modes of workplace embodiment are currently being produced and valorized, most notably—although by no means exclusively—in new forms of interactive service work. The labour of aesthetics is, we suggest, a vital element in the production or materialization of the aesthetics of a service organization and particularly of the 'style' of service experienced or consumed by customers. The increasing mobilization of aesthetic labour is particularly evident in the 'style' labour market of design- and image-driven retail and hospitality organizations. Since the 1980s, these organizations have sought market differentiation via image, initially through design interiors, but increasingly through 'making-up' (du Gay, 1996) the embodied dispositions of employees. These employees are thus increasingly regarded by employers as an integral—literally animate—component of the service produced.

Even within the growing literatures on the aestheticization of economic and everyday life (for example, Lash and Urry, 1994; Welsch, 1996), aesthetics and organization (for example, Gagliardi, 1990, 1996; Linstead and Hopfl, 2000; Strati, 1990, 1992, 1996, 1999) and on the body and organization (for example, Bahnisch, 2000; Hassard et al., 2000), the importance of stylized workplace performances or aesthetic labour is noted, yet still awaits fuller exploration, particularly empirically. There are some exceptions to this comparative neglect, with a recognition of 'body work' in organizations in the works of Adkins (2000), Crang (1994, 1997), McDowell (1995), Taylor and Tyler (2000), Tyler and Abbot (1998) and Hancock and Tyler (2000), all of whom focus on service work. However, the conceptualization of the aesthetic components of labour in all these works is primarily induced by a interest in sexuality and gender. For example, McDowell focuses her analysis around how 'one's body, sexuality and gender performance is part of the job' (1995: 93). The same is true of Hancock and Tyler (2000: 109), who assert there to be an 'integral relationship between the aesthetic, the corporeal and the gendered nature of work and employment'.

Existing explorations of aesthetics in labour, with the major exception of Adkins (2000), fail to recognize its commodification. Even when Tyler shifts from her previous use of 'body work' to 'aesthetic labour' to account for the work of her subjects (compare Tyler and Taylor, 1998; Tyler and Abbott, 1998, with Hancock and Tyler, 2000), the exchange of aesthetics is a 'gift exchange' that is beyond contract. In the latter piece, the authors explicitly state it to be a 'somewhat "invisible" labour process . . . one which was neither remunerated nor particularly acknowledged as labour by management, clients or even the [flight] attendants themselves' (Hancock and Tyler, 2000: 120). We, however, point out how management intentionally mobilizes and develops aesthetic labour and emphasize how aesthetic labour valorizes embodiment, so need not be treated as a

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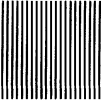
distinctive mode of exchange beyond contract. Moreover, while there are indeed important gendered and sexualized dimensions to aesthetic labour, it is by no means only female labour that is subject to commodification via aestheticization. The significance of the commodification of labour through its aestheticization and hence its valorization is indicated by our analysis of the *corporate production* of the labour of aesthetics as an animate component of the aesthetics of organization.

This article develops the conceptualization and analysis of aesthetic labour in two parts. The first part focuses on conceptualizing aesthetic labour per se. We critically revisit the emotional labour literature, arguing that the analysis of interactive service work is impeded by the way in which its corporeal aspects are retired and that, by shifting the focus from emotional to aesthetic labour, we are able to recuperate the embodied character of service work. We then explore the insights provided by the sociological perspectives on the body contained in the works of Goffman and Bourdieu in order to conceptualize aesthetic labour as embodied labour. In the second part of the article, we develop our analysis of aesthetic labour within the context of a discussion of the aesthetics of organization. Here, we discern three ways in which aesthetics is recognized to imbue organization: through the aesthetics *of* organization, aesthetics *in* organization and aesthetics *as* organization. Our main contention here is that employees are increasingly seen not simply as 'software', but as 'hardware', in the sense that they too can be corporately moulded to portray the organizational aesthetic in a manner similar to the way in which the identity of an organization is portrayed though its marketing material, product design and physical environment. Using the concept of 'material culture' we develop an analysis of aesthetic labour as the 'animate' component of organizational aesthetics that complements or sits alongside the 'inanimate' scenography. We ground this analysis in a case study of Elba Hotels, drawn from original empirical research conducted by the authors.[1]

Conceptualizing Aesthetic Labour

From 'Emotional' to 'Aesthetic' Labour in the Study of Interactive Service Work

Over the past two decades the study of interactive service work has come to be dominated by the emotional labour paradigm pioneered by Hochschild (1979, 1983). Our critical engagement with this paradigm is prompted by the way in which the somatic or corporeal dimensions of the emotional labourer are conceptually retired, both in Hochschild's work as well as in subsequent developments and applications of the concept (see Noon and Blyton, 1997 and, for example, Bulan et al., 1997; Leidner, 1991, 1993; James, 1989; Taylor, 1998; Taylor and Tyler, 2000; Wharton, 1993). We introduce the concept of 'aesthetic labour' in order to direct attention to how, increasingly, modes of worker embodiment are

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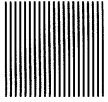
being corporately produced or 'made-up' (du Gay, 1996) in new and different ways in today's service economy.

In short, we feel that the concept of emotional labour foregrounds the worker as a mindful, feelingful self, but loses a secure conceptual grip on the worker as an embodied self. Embodiment is continually evoked, as in Hochschild's core definition of emotional labour as 'the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display' (1983: 7). Indeed, facial and bodily displays are crucial elements of the perform- ance of emotional labour—witness, for example, Hochschild's discussion of the 'war of smiles' (1983: 127). Yet the precise status of corporeality— these faces, these smiles and these bodies—in the managed production of feeling is analytically abandoned.

The roots of this corporeal disappearing act can be located broadly within Hochschild's own social constructionist framework for the study of emotion and more particularly in the conceptual antinomy Hochschild makes between 'surface' and 'deep' acting. Hochschild wants to develop a social constructionist theory of emotion that is more substantial than that offered by interactionist theorists such as Goffman (Hochschild, 1983: 27–83, Appendix A). In insisting that emotion is more substantial than it largely appears in the sociological imagination, Hochschild moves 'towards the soul' and invests the social actor with a greater depth of feeling. This move is achieved by making much of the antinomy between deep and surface acting. Hochschild's critique of Goffman centres on his allegedly exclusive focus on impression management or surface action, that is, 'his emphasis on how actors manage outer impressions rather than inner feelings' (Hochschild, 1979: 557). For Hochschild, surface acting changes 'how we actually appear' (1983: 35) and 'uses the body to *show* feeling' (1983: 247 fn. 2):

> As for Goffman, the action is in the body language, the put-on sneer, the posed shrug, the controlled sigh.
>
> In surface acting, the expression on my face or the posture of my body feels 'put on'. It is not 'part of me'.
>
> The body, not the soul, is the main tool of the trade. (Hochschild, 1983: 35, 36, 37)

In deep acting, by contrast, the display (those faces and those bodies) is the result of managed feeling, the *expression* of feeling. Pretence is never completely absent, but it is 'pretending deeply' that, in turn, leads to an alteration of the self. Hochschild's own counterposition of surface and depth engagement in workplace performances functions not only to evoke feeling as opposed to behaviour, but also to imply a depth and *authenticity* of feeling possessed by the inner-self engaged in deep acting. This conceptualization results in a hollowed-out sense of the somatic or corporeal as an ephemeral and *false* surface. Surface becomes synonym- ous with the body that is devoid of authenticity, where depth becomes synonymous with the soul as the authentic, feelingful core of the self. As

surface becomes less significant than depth, the embodied self is occluded behind the feelingful self.

Of course, Hochschild's point is that to become an emotional labourer is no easy, ephemeral accomplishment. It is not simply a staged performance of smiles, mannerisms and so one. It is an achievement—a deep rather than a surface pretence characterizes the work of the emotional labourer when parts of her or his emotional machinery are in commercial hands. It is not just one's face that takes on the properties of a resource to be managed, but one's very feelings too. This point is, of course, important to make. Yet, we would still maintain that, as she or he invests the emotional labourer with a greater depth of feeling, Hochschild loses a secure conceptual purchase on the embodied aspects of interactive service work, consigned as they are to a shadowy conceptual status of surface.

How, then, do we conceptually reassociate the 'flesh' and the 'feeling' and relocate that 'fleshy surface' within the power of the social that Hochschild redirected toward the inner, feelingful self? By developing a concept of *aesthetic labour* we seek to move beyond antinomies of surface and depth, outer bodies and inner-selves and refocus analysis of interactive service work so as to recapture its lost somatic or corporeal aspects.

We offer a working definition of aesthetic labour as the mobilization, development and commodification of embodied 'dispositions' (Bourdieu, 1984). Such dispositions, in the form of embodied capacities and attributes, are to some extent possessed by workers at the point of entry into employment. However, the point we wish to emphasize is that employers then mobilize, develop, and commodify these embodied dispositions through processes of recruitment, selection and training, *transforming* them into 'skills' which are geared toward producing a 'style' of service encounter that appeals to the senses of the customer (Warhurst et al., 2000). In other words, distinct *modes of worker embodiment* are corporately produced as aesthetic labourers are 'made up' (du Gay, 1996) in such a way as to embody the aesthetics of service organization.

The concept of aesthetic labour moves beyond the concept of emotional labour by foregrounding the sensible components of the service encounter and recuperating the embodied character of service work: the ways in which distinctive service styles depend as much upon manufactured and performative 'styles of the flesh' (Butler, 1990) as they do upon the manufacture of 'feeling' (Hochschild, 1983) or the 'making up' of self-identity (du Gay, 1996). While, for Hochschild, the notion of deep acting describes the stirring up or weakening of *feelings* to such an extent that we induce a *transformation* of feeling that might not otherwise have occurred, we want to suggest that modes of embodiment are subject to the same transformative depth as Hochschild reserves for feeling. Furthermore, Hochschild contends that deep acting can lead to a different relation to 'what we have thought of as ourself' (1983: 47). We would also

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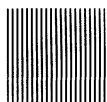
contend that the production of and engagement in aesthetic labour implicates the body in this transformation of the self; in other words, new regimes of the body are equally as likely to lead to the development of a different relation to what the aesthetic labourer comes to think of as himself or herself. How, then, do we begin to conceptualize aesthetic labour as embodied labour? We suggest that, first, it is possible to recuperate Goffman to capture salient aspects of the embodied perform-ance of aesthetic labour and, second, that it is also necessary to utilize Bourdieu's perspective on embodiment, which centres around the notion of 'dispositions'.

Aesthetic Labour as Embodied Labour

We saw above how Hochschild (1979, 1983) is critical of Goffman's interactionism for dealing too much with the surface, rule-following self and its surface, performative embodiment. Paradoxically, whereas Hochschild chides Goffman for subordinating the deep, feelingful self to surface behavioural enactments, Shilling (1993) argues precisely the opposite; namely that Goffman subordinates the body to the mind. Yet, in contrast to both Hochschild and Shilling, Crossley (1995: 134, 145) offers a quite different reading of Goffman as:

> . . . a pioneer of a form of social analysis which bases itself in an understanding of sentient and embodied social praxes . . . Goffman never refers to inner, ideational or spiritual realms but always to behaviour—behaviour which is visible and tangible because embodied. It suggests that, for him, behaviour is always meaningful, but that he never separates the meaning from the behaviour, so we regard it as disembodied.

For Crossley, Goffman maintains a clear sense of the actor qua embodied actor. For us, Goffman's sociology (for example, 1959, 1967, 1971) has proved enormously useful for interrogating the production and perform-ance of aesthetic labour, capturing its visual elements of 'face-to-face, body-to-body, seen-seer to seen-seer' (Crossley, 1995: 145) and its aural element of voice-to-voice; in short, alerting us to both the sentient and the sensible aspects of aesthetic labour.

For example, in the corporate production and control of the body regimes observed by shop assistants in a stylish retail store, Leviathan, the dramaturgical metaphor of stage and staging captures key elements of the embodied performance of aesthetic labour, with organizational pre-scriptions of embodied appearance, demeanour and comportment best illustrating this point. Work in the shop is staged and scripted: shop assistants are told where to stand, at what angle to the door, how to approach customers and what to say. Even the manageress patrols the shop at regular intervals according to a map of manoeuvre. The company has formally prescribed female and male 'model' employees: the 'Levia-than Girl' and 'Leviathan Boy'. This initiative involved the company ascribing and circumscribing the appearance of their employees. As one employee explained: 'If I was to have my hair done or anything . . . if

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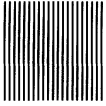
you're going to cut your hair in any way, well drastically or highlights, you've got to discuss it with the manager first.'

Leviathan workers are instructed in how to approach customers by 'reading' customers' signifiers, such as body language. Similarly, an employee of another stylish retail company, Donnatello, related how 'the supervisors do a wee act kind of thing and pretend they are a customer and say "This is a bad example" and "This is a good example" and the good example is when you smile at them as soon as they walk in'.

Working for Leviathan was described as being 'a bit like acting. I mean it's like being in drama school.' There is a 'front stage' and a 'back stage', and aesthetic labourers at Leviathan retreat to the 'back stage':

> . . . you've got to shed your skin. I mean behind the scenes where we are is just hilarity. I mean it's so hilarious . . . They swear like troupers and then they go out to the desk and do this [act professionally]. It can be hell, say, to . . . er . . . to be like those people who work in Disney and do it like that all the time. Obviously, you've got to shed it sometime.

Clearly evocative of Goffman's (1959) idea of creature releases and the welcome relief of the backstage where you can 'shed it', this is the daily experience of the aesthetic labourer. She is not wearing her heart on her sleeve, but is, as Crossley's (1995) reading suggests, manipulating her corporeal expressivity to foster and create impressions of self and subjectivity demanded by the exigencies of occupation. Using Goffman to inform an understanding of the production and performance of aesthetic labour reveals how there is a staged and scripted performance of the *embodied* self. The question of whether we feel 'at home' in this work must be begged as contingent. Indeed, 'in so far as awareness is something that can be put into play in a situation, it will be awareness relative to the demarcated concerns of that situation and not some separate capacity that you carry with you from one situation to another' (Fish, cited in du Gay, 1996: 50). It is not simply, or even, feeling that is being manufactured. It is the performing actor qua embodied self within the demarcated concerns of the work situation.

Although we have suggested that Goffman provides a useful lens through which to view the embodied and performative dimensions of aesthetic labour, nonetheless, an adequate concept of the social actor as embodied needs to address the question of how the social is carried in embodied being, thoughts and actions in order to carry out social interaction as embodied participants. It is to Bourdieu (1984, 1990) that we turn to develop our notion of aesthetic labour as mobilizing, developing and commodifying embodied *dispositions*. Bourdieu offers a way of investing the body with a greater depth of the social than Goffman, by moving beyond what Hochschild (1983) quite correctly identifies as the tendency toward 'situationism' in Goffman. But whereas Hochschild is in search of a depth of feeling, we are in search of a depth of embodiment.

The development and performance of aesthetic labour, then, as a situational mode of workplace embodiment is further conceptualized through Bourdieu's (1984, 1990) concept of embodied dispositions.

All fields of social action are peopled by actors equipped with a *habitus*: a socially constituted system of cognitive, motivating *and* embodied dispositions that guarantee the correctness of practices and their consistence over time (Bourdieu, 1990: 54–8, 66–9). This 'practical sense' that enables our ongoing engagement in the social and alignment with the demands of sociality is, for Bourdieu (1990: 66), 'a quasi-bodily involvement in the world'. Bourdieu provides a phenomenologically grounded sense of an embodied actor, insisting that relation to the body is a fundamental dimension of the habitus. Crucially, Bourdieu insists that 'what is learned by the body is not something that one has . . . but something that one is' (1990: 73). Embodied dispositions refer to durable ways of standing, speaking, walking and thereby of feeling and thinking (Bourdieu, 1990: 69–70). Elaborate techniques of body work, discipline, care and repair are in turn necessary to develop *new* bodily schemas of posture, movement and subjective state. Hence, bodily schemas or embodied dispositions are not fixed once and for all. To be effective, these require 'doxa'—a practical belief—that aligns embodied praxis with the habitus. Utilizing Bourdieu's conceptualization of the relation between embodied praxis and the habitus specifically within the arena of the workplace, we suggest that the corporate production of aesthetic labourers involves the inculcation of a corporate 'doxa'—that is, a new mode of embodied praxis that aligns with the organizational habitus.

Hence, key insights from Bourdieu's work lend themselves to the development of the concept of aesthetic labour. In Bourdieu's terms, it is simply not possible to reduce aesthetic labour to the immediate level of physical appearance, for even at this level the body is mediated by its social location. The body as it is apparently most immediately apprehended (its size, shape, bearing and so on) is *materialized* within fields of social relations and reveals the deepest dispositions of the habitus.

Bourdieu develops this analysis in relation to the body as the materialization of class practices, which he sees as having a profound effect on the way we come to inhabit our bodies as well as on the symbolic values attached to bodily forms—the physical capital (Shilling, 1993) that specific modes of embodiment carry. Bourdieu is right to note that modes of embodiment and their associated physical capital are signifiers of a class, gender or racialized 'habitus'. In analysing modes of production and exchange of physical capital, Bourdieu's central concern is with class reproduction. However, although a collective manifestation, physical capital is mobilized by individuals. Consequently, with analysis pitched at the societal level, analysis of the workplace is omitted and the possibility of organizationally—that is *corporate*, rather than individually—mobilized and developed physical capital, is overlooked. The concept of aesthetic labour opens up the possibility of seeing how,

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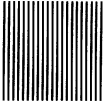
through the embodied performance of interactive service work, the physical capital of employees is valorized and converted into economic capital by and for organizations.
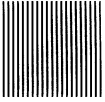
The corporate production of aesthetic labour mobilizes physical capital and may inculcate new modes of embodiment. The kinds of embodied dispositions that acquire an exchange value are not equally distributed socially, but fractured by class, gender, age and racialized positions or locations. There has traditionally been a close match between social location and those embodied dispositions which function as physical capital in the field of employment. Bourdieu (1984) himself emphasizes the significance of social practices—such as sports activities and food preferences—in materializing class-specific embodied dispositions, such as size and shape of the body as well as ways of comporting and composing the body such as the measured slowness of movement and speech that play a key role in equipping persons to occupy authoritative workplace positions. Typically middle-class modes of embodiment have clearly been of central importance in equipping individuals to assume these particular managerial and professional positions, as have the bearings and manners of masculinity. However, it is also the case that social fields are dynamic and subject to change, so the value attached to particular modes of embodiment changes over time (Shilling, 1993). For example, as the field of fashion changes, so does the symbolic value of styles of deportment, body shape and size, dress, demeanour, manner and so on. Furthermore, modes of embodiment are unfinished projects and therefore open to transformation as part of the reflexive project of the embodied self (Giddens, 1991; Shilling, 1993).

Thus, our notion of the corporate production of aesthetic labour suggests that embodied subjects are open to being remade, manufactured or 'made up' within specific institutional fields of action. As Bourdieu suggests, there is always a dialectic of expressive dispositions and instituted means of expression. Expressive dispositions describe not only logics of social action, but also embodied dispositions that enable us to recognize and comply with the demands immanent in the field (Bourdieu, 1990: 57–8). These embodied dispositions are, we suggest, more flexible than previous discussion has allowed. Locating the labour of aesthetics within the aesthetics of organization enables us to demonstrate the utility of Bourdieu's concept of embodied dispositions, as well as to substantiate empirically our central claim that embodied workplace performances are both commodified and valorized through aestheticization.

The Labour of Aesthetics and the Aesthetics of Organization

Organizational Aesthetics: From 'Hardware' to 'Software'

Aesthetics and organization are inseparable. Most obvious are the aesthetics *of* organization. These expressive forms, which signify the identity of an organization, are manifest in the 'hardware' of organizations,

such as marketing material, product design and the physical environment of workspaces or offices (Olins, 1991; Ottensmeyer, 1996; Schmitt and Simonson, 1997). Aesthetics are a key element of goods and services design, for example AEG electrical products, London Transport buses and Coca Cola's bottles. At the turn of the century, when UK banks were the largest in the world, their sense of importance was expressed in the physicality of their buildings that exuded 'strong' and 'rich' symbolism. A good example was Midland Bank's London headquarters. With changing banking culture, this physicality has also changed to offer a sense of participation and interaction with open-plan workspaces (Olins, 1991).

Three points are worth noting with regard to the aesthetics of organization. First, they are symbols and artefacts which are intended to influence the senses of people as either customers or clients: organizations 'use these symbols in a vivid, dramatic and exciting way, because they know that symbols have power to affect the way people feel' (Olins, 1991: 71). Second, they are intended to 'add value' to the organization: 'Generally speaking, when companies use identity expressed through design, they use it as a commercial tool; their purpose is to make greater profit out of what they do in the short term' (Olins, 1991: 53). Lastly, in highly competitive markets with little to differentiate most goods and services, aesthetics contribute to organizational distinctiveness: 'intangible, emotional . . . The name and visual style of an organization are sometimes the most important factors in making it appear unique' (Olins, 1991: 75).[2]

This aesthetic 'hardware' is complemented by an organizational 'software'. These aesthetics *in* organization comprise a range of behaviours, most usually associated with 'getting in' and 'getting on' in organizations for employees. Emphasis is placed on the physicality of potential and actual employees and the ways in which these individuals can present themselves through posture, gesture, use of personal space, facial characteristics and eye contact, for example, at interviews and during meetings (Huczynski, 1996; James, 1999). Within popular business literature great play is made of the way in which individual employees can manage their image by engaging in 'impression management' or 'non-verbal influencing' in order to negotiate socially their interactions with other organizational members. Such management of personal aesthetics is said to contribute to their career prospects by creating or sustaining individuals' employability. As Davies (1990: 75) suggests: 'in the way that manufacturers pay great attention to the packaging of products in order to get us to buy them, we need to attend to our "packaging" if we want to "sell" ourselves to others, and get them to take a closer look at what's inside'.

Not surprisingly, the aesthetics *in* organization literature is often offered as self-help material focused on how individual employees can use or manipulate aesthetics to express and portray themselves *for themselves*. Individuals are encouraged to regard themselves as software that can be moulded and marketed.

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There has been a conceptual development here, however, that needs to be appreciated. If the literature on aesthetics *of* organization indicates how organizations desire to express and portray themselves through their hardware for corporate benefit, we would argue that there is now a conflation of this 'hardware' and 'software'. At a very basic level, organizations are increasingly using corporate dress codes as a way of projecting a company image (see Income Data Services, 2001). We argue in the section below, however, that some service-sector organizations, appreciating the corporate potential of aesthetics *in* organizations, seek to mobilize, develop and commodify individual employees as physical capital, converting them into hardware intended to contribute to the valorization process with these employees now functioning as the embodiment of the style of the organization. Hence employees, as software, have become human hardware as they are configured by organizations both as part of the surplus-producing process of the organization and in order to be the *embodiment* of the organization's identity.

Recently, aesthetics *as* organization has become of interest within organization studies. Over the past decade there has been a growing literature which departs from the rationalist paradigm of organization and instead explores the aesthetic side of organizational life (see Gagliardi, 1990, 1996) or views organizations through the lens of aesthetics (see Strati, 1990, 1992, 1996). For Strati (1996), viewing organizations *through* the lens of aesthetics, is an approach distinguishable from the dominant rationalist paradigm.

We would suggest that there are 'weak' and 'strong' versions of aesthetics as organization. Working within the former, researchers might want to ask questions about 'aesthetics', but they are, in effect, 'adding on' a concern with aesthetics to a fundamentally rationalist and structuralist paradigm of organization. We might see this as a concern more with organization *plus* aesthetics, where the dominant paradigm of organization remains fundamentally rationalist, while the role and significance of aesthetics is also recognized, not infrequently for instrumental reasons. For example, the pursuit by management of efficiency and profits can be destructive for employees and so requires compensation. That compensation occurs through the acceptance of the importance within organizations of the seemingly 'non-rational'; made most obvious in the corporate culture strategies pursued in the 1980s in which rites, rituals and symbols were promoted as techniques to appeal to the sentiments of employees (see, for example, Deal and Kennedy, 1988). It might be said that such an instrumental approach sought to match scientific management with the 'art' of management, ending previous neglect of 'the emotive, expressive, experiential aspect of organizational processes' (Kuhn, 1996: 219). Such an approach accepts and compounds a dualism between the rational and the non-rational in which the latter is 'demoted' to a secondary interest.

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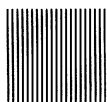
The strong version of aesthetics as organization obviates this dualism, and is most apparent in the work of Strati (1996) and Gagliardi (1996). Seeking to understand organizations through the lens of aesthetics involves, for Strati, opening up new questions concerning the experiences of organizational life. According to Strati, aesthetics yield organizational knowledge that is obfuscated by reliance on the rationalist paradigm for 'Aesthetics are a form of knowledge and they have their own truth' (1996: 216). Appreciating and analysing aesthetics, then, expands the study and improves the understanding of organization. We see this as making fundamentally new claims about the *ontology* of organization or ways of organizing. It is not an additive approach, but an approach that appreciates that organization *is* aesthetic.[3] A rationalist paradigm obscures this aesthetic ontology. As Gagliardi points out, '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 associated with an aesthetic—in the broad sense—experience' (1996: 571, emphasis in the original). For both Strati and Gagliardi, illustration of this approach can be made by analysis of that taken-for-granted artefact: the chair. Ordinarily, the chair is seen through the lens of functionality. However, the chair can be seen through a different lens, that is, through the lens of aesthetics, and doing so generates a different understanding of it and the organization. In this respect the chair is the signature of the organization, 'writing . . . the aesthetic code into the physicality of place' and writing that code 'into the eye' of the beholder (Gagliardi, 1996: 572). In other words, the chair is the materialization of the organizational identity and creates ways of seeing for the beholder. In a similar manner, we suggest that the labour of aesthetics should be viewed not simply through the rational lens of 'functionality', but also through the lens of aesthetics.[4]

Case Study: Elba Hotels

Based on a pilot study (see Nickson et al., 2001) that included a rapidly expanding hotel chain—Elba Hotels—we explore how the labour of aesthetics and the aesthetics of organization are components of the material culture of a service organization. Aesthetic labourers are the animate component of the material culture that makes up the corporate landscape. They are, as with the inanimate elements of the corporate landscape, corporately designed and produced. In effect, at least in the new 'style' niches of the service sector, aesthetic labourers are engaged in a staged performance that depends upon the deployment not only of technical skills and emotion work skills, but also of specific modes of embodiment or 'styles of the flesh' (Butler, 1990).

Elba trades in the aesthetics of style and is developing corporate ways of producing aesthetic workers who form a vital—in both senses of the word as essential *and* animated—component of the organizational aesthetic experienced by hotel and restaurant customers. Gagliardi's (1996)

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work proves particularly helpful in pushing forward our conceptualization both of the organizational aesthetic that characterizes Elba Hotels and in the role and significance of labour in producing this aesthetic. Indeed, our introduction of the term 'the labour of aesthetics' is geared toward helping us to see how aesthetic labour not only valorizes embodied work (just as emotional labour valorizes emotion work), but also functions to materialize the aesthetics of organization. We propose a framework for the analysis of the labour of aesthetics and the aesthetics of organization that builds upon the concept of *material culture*, which has a well-known pedigree in anthropology, but which is developed by Gagliardi (1996) specifically in order to explore the aesthetic side of organizational life.

The complex relationship between productive and symbolic practices that constitute the material culture of an organization is conceptualized by Gagliardi (1996: 570–2) as a 'corporate landscape'. The material culture or corporate landscape consists of the 'hardware' of architecture and interior design, of corporate artefacts and space (Gagliardi, 1990, 1996). Following Duby, Gagliardi distinguishes between 'land' and 'landscape': 'every productive practice is immediately a symbolic practice of appropriation of the world . . . and the signature through which an environment testifies to *this cultural requirement of survival* is called landscape' (Duby, 1986: 29, quoted in Gagliardi, 1996: 570, emphasis in the original).

Gagliardi suggests that we should regard the corporate landscape as 'the materialization of a world view, and strive to interpret the aesthetic code written into the landscape as a privileged pathway to the quiddity of a culture' (1996: 572). Land becomes landscape as it is aestheticized, and in two different ways: *in situ* (in the physical place) and *in visu* (into the eye): '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' (Gagliardi, 1996: 572).

Every corporate landscape has a scenographic element. It is, as Gagliardi explains, '"constructed to be seen". This setting displays and hides, provides backgrounds and close-ups, sequences and articulations' (1996: 572). The scenographic element of the corporate landscape materializes the aesthetic code into the physicality of place. So the labour of aesthetics performed by employees in Elba Hotels forms a vital part of the continual writing and rewriting of the aesthetic code into the physicality of place as it is experienced *in situ* by customers. This physicality of place, experienced *in situ*, is a corporate landscape populated by inanimate *and* animate objects. As aesthetic labour, employees are *part of* the materialization of the corporate idea, along with the architecture and interior design. In other words, the performance of aesthetic labour entails the manufacture of particular stylized, embodied performances

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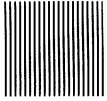
that comprise the animate components of the aesthetics of a service organization. Hence, the materialization of the corporate aesthetic entails the stylization of inanimate *and* animate components of the scenography. The aesthetic labourer is a figure in this scenographic aesthetic of a service organization experienced by the customer.

Gagliardi (1996) identifies a second mode of aestheticization of a corporate landscape. This is *in visu*: 'the writing of the aesthetic code into the eye'. With the customer's *in situ* experience of a service organization, the pleasure and satisfaction of the customer depends crucially upon managing to see things 'through the eyes' as they are designed to be seen and experienced. In other words, part of the process of consumption involves taking things in through the eyes as a sensory experience. The consumption practices of *in situ* consumers of a service involve particular ways of perceiving *and* 'feeling' reality—a 'pathos' that is part of the aesthetic experience by the customer of the organization. The pleasure and satisfaction of the customer are secured by aestheticizing a specific *pattern of sensibility*. In short, there is an 'Elba experience' that depends upon a particular pattern of sensible responses to the aesthetics of Elba as a *distinctive* way of organizing service.

Processes of *in situ* and *in visu* aestheticization, both in terms of the materialization of the corporate aesthetic into a physical space and the socialization of the customer into that corporate aesthetic, can be unpacked by analysing the hotel foyer of Elba Hotels. The hotel foyer is one scenographic element of the corporate landscape. As they enter, the hotel foyer is the first stage of the *in situ* aesthetic experience of customers. The scenography of the hotel foyer is composed of animate and inanimate artefacts. There is always a chair strategically positioned in the foyer, an artefact that connotes functionality. A chair is something to sit on. But not this chair. This chair is deliberately fashioned and placed. The chair *in visu* (to the eye) furnishes the customer not the foyer. It furnishes the customer with an aesthetic code through which to read the aesthetic experience that will be the experience of Elba Hotels—the style of the hotel bedrooms and of various other spaces is distilled into the design of the chair. This chair signifies the style of the organization in such a way as to educate the customer in the eye. It instructs customers in the unique style, the distinctive aesthetic of Elba, the way in which Elba will be experienced—the way in which, literally, Elba is *designed* to be experienced aesthetically. The chair is a corporate product in the sense that it is the materialization of ideas held by the corporate management working with the interior designer. It also symbolizes the aesthetic of consumption that drives and shapes the corporate culture. In short, the chair, as part of the material culture of Elba Hotels, functions as a key signifier of the aesthetic of the service organization. If labour is the animated aestheticization of Elba, the inanimate aesthetic can be seen in the chair, and both epitomize that which is 'Elba'.

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Aesthetic labourers are so much a part of the materialization of the corporate idea of Elba Hotels that they are corporately produced in order to coordinate or blend in with the aesthetic style of the corporate landscape; that is, their physical capital or embodied dispositions are mobilized and developed by the organization. In this respect, two questions arise. First, *what* is being produced? Second, *how* is it being produced? Two managerial strategies have been identified through which service workers are produced (Macdonald and Sirianni, 1996). One, the production-line approach of fast-food workers, has been well documented (see, for example, Ritzer, 1996; Leidner, 1993). These writers have more to say about work than workers, but do suggest that workers are produced through bureaucratic codification and so through routinization of behaviour and speech. The second strategy again highlights the same routinization of behaviour and speech, but also recognizes attitudinal shifts in 'workers' psyche' (Macdonald and Sirianni, 1996: 37). The second strategy, somewhat incautiously referred to as the empowerment approach (Bowen and Lawler, 1992) involves managers recruiting individuals with personal characteristics likely to make them interact or 'perform' spontaneously. It has been suggested that to implement this latter approach, 'managers must first select the right kinds of people for the job, often using gender, class, age and other status markers to serve as a proxy for required personality types' (Macdonald and Sirianni, 1996: 7).

We want to suggest that the process of selection and recruitment of aesthetic workers is, in fact, far more complex. This notion of mobilizing traditional status markers is inadequate, as employment at Elba illustrates. The owner and management at Elba want the right kinds of people. Ideal Elba employees are not regarded by the hotel management as people who simply want jobs. As the creator and owner of Elba Hotels explains:

> The sort of people we want to employ are not just looking on this as a job, but are in love with the industry. We are looking for people who understand the art of service, then apply . . . I don't want people employed by Elba to feel that they are just going to work. If they don't enjoy themselves, there is no way the guests enjoy themselves. (Sudjic, 1999: 14)

The recruitment and selection of new employees was therefore crucial. As the personnel manager at Elba Hotels said of its recruitment and selection:

> We actually didn't look for people with experience . . . because we felt that wasn't particularly important. We wanted people with personality more than the skills because we felt that we could train people to do the job. Personality was more important. How you handled the customers and how you related to people was more important than whether you could carry a plate or take an order.

Of course, in many routine interactive service jobs, person-to-person skills take precedence over technical skills. Here, those person-to-person

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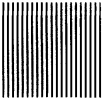
skills encompass not just the social, but also the aesthetic, as the personal manager continued:

> . . . thirteen key words summed up the type of people we wanted working at Elba . . . passionate, stylish . . . [points to job advertisement] . . . They had to be pretty attractive looking people . . . we wanted people to look good all the time . . . someone who's got, er, nice smile, nice teeth, neat hair and in decent proportion . . . they had to have the correct tone and a nice voice . . . well spoken. I don't want to say to look like an Elba person, but . . . yeah, there is probably a kind of Elba look . . . [the owner's] very sticky on the whole image thing and it had to be the right image.

Elba employees, then, are the animate components of the overall aesthetic of Elba. Elba's image suffused their recruitment material. The job advertisement (which interestingly was placed in the *Sunday Times*[5]) for waitering/waitressing work in the hotel cafe contained a picture of a young woman (in reality a model) who literally embodied the desired iconography of the company and its ideal aesthetic worker. For both men and women, the hotel was ideally looking for graduates between 19 and 25 years old. Nonetheless, as the personnel manager explained, the emphasis was on the *potential* aesthetic labourer who would materialize and so express the Elba style: 'people who you actually thought were very plain, but had that potential to look like an Elba person'.

The aesthetic labourers of Elba are not simply selected at the stage of recruitment; they are then *produced* to engage in a labour of aesthetics that forms part of the overall experience of the corporate aesthetic. Elba was keen to mould new employees into the desired personas *after* they entered employment. Elba employees are aesthetically produced in order to be constituent and expressive of the corporate landscape. After being selected, there was a 10-day induction in which extensive grooming and deportment training was given to the staff by external consultants. New employees were trained in *how* to wear the uniform. Such sessions also encompassed hair cuts and styling, 'acceptable' make-up, individual makeovers, how men should shave and the standards expected in relation to appearance. The personnel manager described parts of the induction programme in terms of 'the health and beauty people getting to work and totally revamping these people. And it was amazing, the transformation in some of these people . . . there were a couple of the girls who looked amazing after it and you were really kind of "Wow!"'.

A full day's induction was spent on an exercise in which the new recruits were given the 13 words that personified Elba and asked to walk around the city centre and take photographs that encapsulated those words. As the personnel manager explained: 'The word was maybe, em, . . . energetic, go out and take a photograph of an energetic person. Go out and take a photograph of a successful person.' The sessions were intended to relay 'this is want we want you to actually look like . . . you have to understand what successful looks like . . . what confident looks like'.

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Embodied workers are thus *transformed into* aesthetic labourers. It is not *what* they look like, but the look they have *about* them. It is not *how* they are; it is how they *could* be that provides the basis of the induction programme that employees undergo once they have been selected. Elba employees are transformed into aesthetic labourers in the sense that raw material is transformed into an artefact.

The emphasis during training was on educating new employees in how to look the part and generally 'getting the style right'. Aesthetic labourers are the embodied *materialization* of the corporate aesthetic of Elba Hotels; they are styled, transformed and made over during the induction and training period in order to function as the animate components of that corporate landscape. Appearance, gesture, mannerism and so on—all features of embodied dispositions (Bourdieu, 1984)—are 'made over' or 'made up' in specifically Elba ways.

Concluding Remarks

Our analysis of aesthetic labour indicates that a significant, yet over-looked, part of some employees' work in service organization is the way that inhabiting their jobs entails the mobilization, development and com-modification of *embodied dispositions*. Embodied dispositions, worked on and made up into skills, are of paramount importance in the daily perform-ance of work, at Elba Hotels for example, and this labour of aesthetics is part of the very production of the aesthetics of organization.

We do recognize that there are fascinating, and unexpected, historical references to the importance of personal aesthetics in work organizations. Arguing that 'the cultivation of appearances, even a certain theatricality—as a key constituent of organizational success is not a recent invention', Hopfl (2000: 197, 204) details the importance of the aural and visual characteristics of individuals in the Society of Jesus—the Jesuits—as long ago as the 16th century, as the Society sought to reaffirm Catholic 'truth' through its presentation. Candidates for the Society had to have 'a pleasing manner of speech and verbal facility and also good appearance in the absence of any notable ugliness, disfigurement or deformity. The point here was that the Society's members should not gratuitously put the public off.' Kinchin (1999) describes how at the turn of the 20th century, the famous Glasgow designer and architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh worked with Miss Cranston to create 'the perfect art-house tea-room', staffed by carefully selected 'pretty' waitresses also wearing Mackintosh uniforms. In 1930, the first air hostesses began to serve passengers. From the start, there were prescriptions on how these hostesses should look and behave, with an emphasis on grooming and poise training (Visser, 1997; Hancock and Tyler, 2000). In his work on middle-class 'white collar' workers, Mills (1951) noted the importance of 'salesgirls' in large department stores. Using a typology developed by Gale, Mills reviews the different types of salesgirls, including 'The

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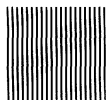
Charmer', who 'attracts the customer with a modulated voice, artful attire and stance' (1951: 175).

It is our contention that this labour of aesthetics is no longer an occasional initiative of sometimes idiosyncratic or exotic organizations, or even enterprising individuals, but a deliberate, managerially determined characteristic of an emerging subsector within services that involve face-to-face, voice-to-voice interaction between employee and customer. This 'style' subsector comprises designer retailers, boutique hotels and style bars, cafés and restaurants, for example. As a result, the labour of aesthetics now forms a vital part of the aesthetics of service organization as it is experienced by customers, whether dining in a restaurant, staying in a hotel, drinking in a café bar or browsing in a shop. This employment and work is particularly developed (through recruitment, selection and training) in the new 'style' sector of service organizations. However, it is not exclusive to these organizations, but is diffusing to more prosaic service organizations—a point elaborated upon further in Nickson et al. (2001).

In this article, we have emphasized how it is vital to appreciate the corporeal or embodied components of the stylized workplace performances that constitute aesthetic labour. We have suggested that Bourdieu's concept of dispositions furthers an appreciation of aesthetic labour's fundamentally *embodied* character and the sociological lens of Goffman facilitates an analysis of some key aspects of the *performance* of aesthetic labour. Importantly, the concept of aesthetic labour builds on, and significantly extends, the seminal work of Hochschild (1983) on emotional labour. Our critical evaluation of this concept leads us to argue that Hochschild (and subsequent writers using the concept) foregrounds the feelingful self at the expense of the embodied self. The concept of aesthetic labour, by comparison, is better attuned to foregounding the embodied dimensions of stylized workplace performances.

More generally, the labour of aesthetics adds another element to the relationship between organization and aesthetics. Through an analysis of case-study data from Elba Hotels, we have located the labour of aesthetics within this relationship, suggesting how the aesthetic labourer might be seen as an animate component of the scenographic aesthetic of a service organization as experienced by the customer. In this respect, we believe that it is an important empirical and conceptual development that, now recognized, needs to be further explored.

Notes

1 Empirical examples provided in this article are drawn from a study funded by the Universities of Glasgow and Strathclyde on *New Forms of Service Work in Glasgow* (1997–98). All organizational names are, for the sake of anonymity, pseudonyms.
2 We focus here on organizational aesthetics that affect the visual and aural senses. We are aware, however, that corporations also seek to affect the

olfactory senses of customers by imbuing organizational spaces with selected smells. The business-class lounge of British Airways, for example, is infused with the smell of the sea and freshly mown grass to 'uplift and 'stimulate' the senses of travellers (McQillan, 2001).

3 But which is not to deny that organization is also based upon structural inequalities, manifest, for example, in the asymmetries of power arising from race, gender and class.

4 We suspect that we do not go quite as far as Strati might wish in viewing service organization through the lens of aesthetics, as we do not use aesthetic understanding as an 'epistemological metaphor, a form of knowledge diverse from those based on analytical methods' (Strati, 1992: 569), but are still working within a broadly rationalist paradigm of organization, investigating how ways of organizing *produce* or *materialize* labour as an aesthetic intended to contribute to the process of valorization.

5 The jobs being advertised were for waitering staff, male and female. Ordinarily such advertisements might be expected to be placed in local evening newspapers. Similarly, a recruitment drive by Hotel Elba in another UK city included a television advertisement during the commercial break of the show *TFI Friday*—another media product with an affluent, young target audience.

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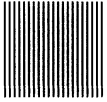
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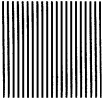
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