

# **New and Speculative Organisational Aesthetics**

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## **Abstract**

The paper attempts to raise the question whether human perception is still central to organisational aesthetics, especially if we start to give a stakeholder position to artificial systems and when organisational designs and processes have ceased to rely only on human agency. Algorithmically driven, autonomous agents like high-frequency trading (HFT), already exist and are acting within the timeframes (milliseconds) and space (global market) that are unreachable for human perception. All that calls for serious consideration whether emerging philosophical trends, such as Speculative Realism, Object-Oriented Ontology, New and Speculative Aesthetics have their impact on organisational perception and design.

**Keywords:** organisational aesthetics, speculative realism, new aesthetics, speculative aesthetics, organisational design.

## **New and Speculative Organisational Aesthetics**

It is now frequently acknowledged that aesthetic objects, judgement, attitude and experience play a significant role in almost all aspects of organisational practice. Not only as a part of general aestheticisation of the world and transdisciplinary evolution of "aesthetics beyond aesthetics" (Welsch, 1997), but also because all the major, polysemantic meanings of aesthetics, namely perceptive (aesthetic), cultural (artistic) and beauty related (callistic) (Welsch, 1996), have their relevant impact on modern organisations. Consequently, the studies on organisational aesthetics appeared (e.g. Strati, 1999; Linstead & Höpfl, 2000; de Monthoux, 2004; Taylor & Hansen, 2005; Hatch, Kostera & Kozminski, 2005). It means that organisations are no longer considered as aesthetically neutral and that aesthetics could be used to conceptualise an organisation as a form of creative expression, prone to various aspects of human perception, interpretation, reception and reaction. As it turns out, the principles derived from the theory of perception or Gestalt (Biehl-Missal & Fitzek, 2014) can be directly translated into the functions, structures and strategies of modern organisations. It is illustrated by the list of exemplary aesthetic criteria which are incorporated within the idea of the aesthetics of management (Neumeier, 2009, 71):

- Contrast: How can we differentiate ourselves?
- Depth: How can we succeed on many levels?
- Focus: What should we not do?
- Harmony: How can we achieve synergy?
- Integrity: How can we forge the parts into a whole?
- Line: What is our trajectory over time?
- Motion: What advantage can we gain with speed?
- Novelty: How can we use the surprise element?
- Order: How should we structure our organisation?
- Pattern: Where have we seen this before?
- Repetition: Where are the economies of scale?
- Rhythm: How can we optimise time?
- Proportion: How can we keep our strategy balanced?
- Scale: How big should our organisation be?
- Shape: Where should we draw the edges?
- Texture: How do the details enliven our culture?
- Unity: What is the higher order solution?
- Variety: How can diversity drive innovation?

Of course, those aesthetic categories cannot serve as sole and universal indicators of effectiveness or efficiency. However, they could be useful when analysing and trying to attribute the meaning to the issues like order and proportion of the organisational design, rhythms and motion within office space, patterns and harmony of employees' behaviour or scale and shape of relationship networks. Consequently, aesthetics could help us to understand organisational changes as the effects of changes in the stakeholders' perception of reality. As it turns out, this perception is now frequently challenged.

### **New organisational aesthetics**

A good example of the changes in organisational perception could be found in the idea of virtual organisations. Based on the complexity theory, as well as entrepreneurial, contractual and behavioural theories of management, these structures are deconstructing the classical definition of an enterprise and are redefining the traditional notion of ownership, control and goals. Virtual organisations are open and temporary coalitions of independent and usually geographically dispersed economic entities, whose structure is being constantly reorganised, whereas the scope and aim of the performed activities depends on the emerging market opportunities. These organisational forms

deconstruct the value chains through the extensive use of ICT technology, outsourcing and global networking (Dzidowski, 2011). Virtual organisations cannot operate without systems like MRP (Material Requirements Planning), ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning), DSS (Decision Support Systems) or BI (Business Intelligence). Concurrently data mining, expert systems, neural networks and genetic algorithms are commonly incorporated into the daily activities of many corporations. With that in mind we should ask ourselves a question whether human perception is still central to organisational aesthetics. Especially if we are starting to give a stakeholder position to the artificial systems. Algorithmically driven, autonomous organisational agents like high-frequency trading (HFT), statistical arbitrage or trend following software already exist and act within the timeframes (milliseconds) and space (global market) that are unreachable for human perception (see: [youtu.be/L5cZaIZ5bWc](https://youtu.be/L5cZaIZ5bWc)). MRP and ERP systems are actively shaping the organisational structures of the enterprises by choosing the best business partners within e-commerce platforms, based on automated negotiation procedures. Production processes are automatically surveilled by sensors operating within infrared, thermal, high-speed or x-ray vision. Business reports are generated and formatted automatically, fed with database queries and descriptive metadata. The most interesting question right now is whether and how we should consider the sensitivity of non-human agents in organisations.

This question is in close relation to the discussion that started somewhere in 2011-2012. In 2011, James Bridle wrote a blog post entitled *The New Aesthetic* (Bridle, 2011), followed by a Tumblr feed (see: [new-aesthetic.tumblr.com](http://new-aesthetic.tumblr.com)). His idea and an associated collection of images were set out to document "a new aesthetics of the future". The examples of glitches, pixelations, render ghosts, GPS anomalies and other digital artefacts serve to introduce alien and synthetic visual forms, created by non-human actors, but also by humans incorporating "new" forms of perception. Similarly to Filippo Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto* from 1909, Bridle started a heated discussion over the idea of "new aesthetics". A New Aesthetic panel took place at South by Southwest (SXSW) conference in 2012 and concluded with *An Essay on the New Aesthetic* by Bruce Sterling, concerned with an inevitable "eruption of the digital into the physical", but also trying to push the idea forward, beyond the initial bedazzlement and avoid the problem that "the New Aesthetic is trying to hack a modern aesthetic, instead of thinking hard enough and working hard enough to build one" (Sterling, 2012). A debate continued in a series of responses at *The Creators Project* blog (Watz et al., 2012; Kaganskiy et al., 2012) and dozens more contributions around the web. The conclusions were omnidirectional. Some authors believe that the New Aesthetic should be compared to the breaking of the fourth wall in Brechtian theatre and the New Wave of French cinema (Aima, 2012) and is a new way of envisioning the relations between things in the world, an inquiry into the objects' visual agency (Borenstein, 2012) that connects itself to a philosophical trend concerned with the experience of objects (Bogost, 2012b). Others argue that the "new" part is deceptive and digital glitches are the same "as the graininess of film or the bad colors of Polaroids" (Watz, 2012) and that the New Aesthetic is "a disappointingly stuffy name for a potentially vanguard development in the tweeted and post(ed)-Modern world" (Gannis, 2012) or just the latest name for remediation, computability and media archaeology (Berry, 2012a). Ultimately the debate "has spanned everything from feminist critique of the machine gaze to electric anthropology to alien toaster pastry to cats" (Kaganskiy, 2012).

From the organisational point of view the most relevant comment should be the one contributed by Michael Betancourt, in which he discussed the New Aesthetic in relation to digital automation and Karl Marx's discussion on machines in *The Fragment on Machines*:

What the "new aesthetic" documents is the shift from earlier considerations of machine labor as an amplifier and extension of human action – as an augmentation of human labor – to its replacement by models where the machine does not augment but supplant, in the process apparently removing

the human intermediary that is the labor that historically lies between the work of human designer-engineers and fabrication following their plans. (Betancourt, 2013)

With these considerations we are approaching general philosophical questions of ontology and epistemology. The concept of Object-Oriented Ontology is especially relevant here. Ian Bogost, one of the scholars involved in the development of this approach (among others, like the originator of the term – Graham Harman or Levi Bryant), provides the following definition:

Object-oriented ontology (“OOO” for short) puts things at the center of this study. Its proponents contend that nothing has special status, but that everything exists equally – plumbers, cotton, bonobos, DVD players, and sandstone, for example. In contemporary thought, things are usually taken either as the aggregation of ever smaller bits (scientific naturalism) or as constructions of human behavior and society (social relativism). OOO steers a path between the two, drawing attention to things at all scales (from atoms to alpacas, bits to blinis), and pondering their nature and relations with one another as much with ourselves. (Bogost, 2009)

Object-oriented ontologists argue that we must no longer privilege humans within ontology, but move to a “democracy of objects” and develop a notion of “flat ontology” in which hierarchy is banished (Berry, 2012b). However, flat ontology is not necessarily about the destruction of all hierarchies, but rather acknowledging the other ones. As Levi R. Bryant explains “the point is not to stop thinking about humans (...) but rather to start thinking about the role nonhumans play in organizing our social relations in particular ways” (Bryant, 2012).

Interestingly, when taking into account the digital, synthetic and artificial organisational systems, some authors argue that the OOO and modern philosophy are hugely influenced by ICT itself. As it is noted by David M. Berry:

I would argue that it is no surprise that object-oriented ontology and object-oriented programming have these deep similarities as they are drawing from the same computational imaginary, or foundational ideas, about what things are or how they are categorised in the world, in other words a computational ontotheology – computability. (Berry, 2012c)

The issue was developed further by Alexander Galloway:

For example, set theory, topology, graph theory, cybernetics, and general systems theory are part of the intellectual lineage of both object-oriented computer languages, which inherit the principles of these scientific fields with great fidelity, and for recent continental philosophy including figures like Deleuze, Badiou, Niklas Luhmann, or Latour. Where does Deleuze’s control society come from if not from Norbert Wiener’s definition of cybernetics? Where do Latour’s actants come from if not from systems theory? Where does Levi Bryant’s “difference that makes a difference” come from if not from Gregory Bateson’s theory of information? (Galloway, 2013, 362)

Subsequently, just like cybernetics, systems theory and theory of information influenced the organisational theory (with the concepts of information society, knowledge economy, networked and virtual organisations), the relevant philosophical and aesthetical reflection is recursively influenced. It seems there is no accident that the question of how to study modern organisational structures could be found in Latour’s actor-network theory. Whereas when one wants to study modern organisations from the aesthetically-oriented perspective, the answer might be found in the convoluted works by Gilles

Deleuze, who together with Félix Guattari, was dealing with the notions of wrenching duality of aesthetics:

Aesthetics suffers from a wrenching duality. On the one hand, it designates the theory of sensibility as the form of possible experience; on the other hand, it designates the theory of art as the reflection of real experience. For these two meanings to be tied together, the conditions of experience in general must become conditions of real experience (Deleuze, 1990, 260).

Consequently, the new organisational aesthetics recognise the possible experience of non-human agents. However the related considerations do not settle with mere identification. Another trend, called speculative aesthetics, pushes the idea even further by asking what the alien experience could be like. That question resonates not only with the already mentioned new forms of organisational perception, but also with the troublesome ideas related to contemporary organisational design.

### **Speculative organisational aesthetics**

Speculative aesthetics, just like Object-Oriented Ontology, is a part of a wider philosophical trend, the Speculative Realism (Bryant, Srnicek & Harman, 2011; Mackay, 2012). Speculative Realism is a movement in contemporary philosophy which defines itself against the dominant forms of post-Kantian philosophy. The attempt is to overcome "correlationism" as well as "philosophies of access", which both represent forms of anthropocentrism. The correlationist trap, described by Quentin Meillassoux in *After Finitude* is "the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other" (Meillassoux, 2008, 5). Philosophies of access are any of those philosophies which privilege the human being over other entities, however, as Graham Harman states, "the human/world relation is just a special case of the relation between any two entities whatsoever" (Harman in Bryant, 2009).

Speculative aesthetics, as a new concept, has been simultaneously developed by several scholar groups. The *Speculative Aesthetics Working Group* at Duke University has stated in their description:

The working group will examine the central texts of speculative realism through the question, "What kinds of aesthetics and materialities can speculative realism generate?" In addition to the works of the speculative realist philosophers, we will read works that gesture toward this question of speculative aesthetics: Reza Negarestani's post-horror fiction; Steven Shaviro's work on philosophers Deleuze, Whitehead, and Kant; Ian Bogost's object-oriented "alien phenomenology"; China Mieville's "New Weird" fiction; and Dominic Fox's theorization of dejection and dysphoria. (Blas & Rhee, 2010)

Concurrently, the participants of the *Speculative Aesthetics Research Project* at University for the Creative Arts have described their efforts in the following manner:

Our research emphasises the requirement for novel modes of thinking aesthetics that refuse to hypostatize human experience as the master-category through which the world is to be interpreted. To this end, the speculative dimension regarding aesthetic thought, as well as art and design practice, may well involve a productive tension between the levels of phenomenal experience, metaphysical speculation and scientific description, whilst, nonetheless, refusing a return to naïve realism, reified subjectivity, or (new) materialisms. (Trafford, 2014)

In 2014, two books established a broad field for speculative aesthetics – *Speculations: A Journal of Speculative Realism // Issue V: Aesthetics in the 21st Century* (Askin, Ennis, Hägler & Schweighauser, 2014) and *Speculative Aesthetics* (Mackay, Pendrell & Trafford, 2014). The remaining problem is that the very definition and etymology of aesthetics put the human perception at its centre. That causes a critical problem for the concept of aesthetic experience, as the perception of inanimate objects goes beyond our understanding. That problem was somehow addressed in *Aesthetics as First Philosophy: Levinas and the Non-Human* by Graham Harman (2012), but as Katherine N. Hayles (2014) comments on it:

The essential move here is to identify aesthetics with “enjoyment” (Levinas’s term) or “allure” (Harman’s) so that the sensual qualities of objects in which other objects “bathe” is understood as an essentially aesthetic response. Thus aesthetics is generalised so that it applies not only to humans but to all objects, including inanimate ones. A problem with this approach is that we have no idea of what this “enjoyment” might consist; for instance, in Harman’s example of the cotton and the flame, what is the nature of the aesthetic “allure” each experiences in the other? (Hayles, 2014, p. 159-160)

It is not only a problem of understanding, which Wittgenstein famously remarked in the quote “if a lion could talk, we could not understand him” (Wittgenstein, 1953, 223), but mainly a problem of acknowledgement. According to the speculative turn, relations are not confined to human perception or even consciousness. As Steven Shaviro states:

For panpsychism, everything is mindful, or has a mind; but this does not necessarily entail that everything is “given” or “manifested” to a mind. (...) If we are to reject correlationism, and undo the Kantian knot of thought and being, no middle way is possible. We must say either (along with Harman and Grant) that all entities are in their own right at least to some degree active, intentional, vital, and possessed of powers; or else (along with Meillassoux and Brassier) that being is radically disjunct from thought, in which case things or objects must be entirely divested of their allegedly anthropomorphic qualities. (Shaviro, 2011)

However, it seems that anthropocentrism may be inescapable. This means that in order to grasp an alien form of perception we cannot ask what it is, but only what it is like or rather what it could be like. In *Alien Phenomenology or What It’s Like to Be a Thing* Ian Bogost writes:

In short, all things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally (...) the only way to perform alien phenomenology is by analogy (...) If we take seriously Harman’s suggestion that relation takes a place not just like metaphor but as metaphor, then an opportunity suggest itself: what if we deployed metaphor itself as a way to grasp alien objects’ perceptions of one another (...) in metaphorism we recognize that our relationship to objects is not first person; we are always once removed. It is not the objects’ perceptions that we characterize metaphorically but the perception itself, which recedes just as any other object does. (Bogost, 2012a, 11, 64, 67)

What is especially relevant from the point of the organisational speculative aesthetics is that Bogost attempts to link OOO and New Aesthetics by a notion of “Alien Aesthetics”:

[T]his Alien Aesthetics would not try to satisfy our human drive for art and design, but to fashion design fictions that speculate about the aesthetic judgments of objects. If computers write manifestos, if Sun Chips make art for Doritos, if bamboo mocks the bad taste of other grasses - what do these things look like? (Bogost in Jackson, 2012)

As Katherine N. Hayles concludes:

(...) the way to escape anthropocentrism is precisely through an imaginative projection into the worldviews of other objects and beings, based on evidence about their ways of being in the world, although with the important caveat that these are analogies and should not be mistaken for an object's own experience. (Hayles, 2014, 178)

That kind of imaginative projection could be especially interesting from the organisational point of view. Today, the whole business ecosystems start to resemble alien life forms. For example, a starfish model (Brafman & Beckstorm, 2006), where diseconomy of scale, network and edge effects within decentralised and self-replicating structures serve as a main strategic advantage (mimicking the regenerative features that some species of starfish possess). Taking this analogy further, it means that if we want to explore the new territories, the unknown market spaces, untainted by competition, like the "blue oceans" known from the *Blue Ocean Strategy* book written by Kim and Mauborgne (2005), we should take into account the perception of the "native species". If this metaphor is to be fruitful from the perspective of organisational aesthetics and innovative ways of perception, maybe we should refer our consideration to the experience of deep sea creatures. Not only those creatures question our depiction of "natural aesthetics", but also open our minds to alternative forms of perception and communication. Vilém Flusser's *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* philosophical discourse on the vampire squid could serve as an inspiring example:

The world that humans comprehend is firm (like the branches that we had originally held). We have to "undergo" it – perambulate it – in order to grasp it, for the ten fingers of our "grasping" hands are the limbs of a bygone locomotive organ. The Vampyroteuthis, on the contrary, takes hold of the world with eight tentacles, surrounding its mouth, that originally served to direct streams of food toward the digestive tract. The world grasped by the vampyroteuthis is a fluid, centripetal whirlpool. It takes hold of it in order to discern its flowing particularities. Its tentacles, analogous to our hands, are digestive organs. Whereas our method of comprehension is active – we perambulate a static and established world – its method is passive and impassioned: it takes in a world that is rushing past it. We comprehend what we happen upon, and it comprehends what happens upon it. Whereas we have "problems", things in our way. It has "impressions". Its method of comprehension is impressionistic. (Flusser & Bec, 2012, 39)

Although partly a spoof and partly a fable, considerations presented in *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* give an interesting perspective when we want to imagine the aesthetical dimensions of new, agile and fluid organisational designs, as well as the perception of new organisational agents. Concluding the oceanic metaphor, it is worth noticing that the recent idea of liquid organisations (Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2014) make a strong resemblance to sentinel, oceanic surface of the planet Solaris in Stanisław Lem's science-fiction book under the same title (see: [english.lem.pl/index.php/works/novels/solaris](http://english.lem.pl/index.php/works/novels/solaris)). Interestingly, the book explores man's anthropomorphic limitations and inadequacy of communication between human and non-human species, long before Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology did. Additionally, almost all of the troublesome ideas related to contemporary organisational design could be once again found in the works of Deleuze and Guattari, who also dealt with virtuality and multiplicity, deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, rhizomes and flows (Shields, 1997; Olkowski, 2012). All that calls for serious reconsideration of the relations between organisational aesthetics, agency, purposefulness, environment and structure.

## Conclusions

While new aesthetics is concerned with what is new, speculative aesthetics should be concerned with what it is like to be different. For example, the reflection on the perception of the existing non-human agents could bring us closer to the understanding that software algorithms base their choices on completely different stimuli than ours and they could also be deceived (Nguyen et al., 2015). Additionally, the introduction of autonomous robots, like self-driven cars, showed us that our own world could be perceived as matrix-like (see: [youtu.be/dk3oc1Hr62g](https://youtu.be/dk3oc1Hr62g) and [youtu.be/75yJUW91ITs](https://youtu.be/75yJUW91ITs)). It is also high time we acknowledged that QR codes placed on posters, leaflets or business cards are the first examples of how the digital aesthetics is taking over ours. These harsh, black-and-white patterns are not devised for us and their perception lies beyond our cognitive abilities, at the same time being perfectly readable for computer scanners or smartphone cameras.

It also means that the imaginative role of speculative organisational aesthetics cannot supersede its critical potential. Just like good science fiction is not only about imagining cars, when we are still riding horses, but also about predicting traffic jams, pollution and fuel problems, the speculative organisational aesthetics should subversively prototype the new relations between organisational agents, systems and environment. As a result, the new, disruptive forms of organisational design could emerge. Dunne and Raby (2013), in their book *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming*, ask whether it is possible for industrial design to operate outside of the market place, but at the same time for the sake of consumer society. In opposition to affirmative design (design that reinforces the *status quo*), speculative design acts as a catalyst for social reflection and debate about the present state, as well as the future of humanity. To do so, speculative design concept spans across futurism and foresight methods, incorporating tools like concept art, design fiction, culture-jamming, futurescaping, scenarios, horizon-scanning, science fiction, or even gonzo and new journalism (Pickard, 2011). A similar approach seems to be relevant in organisational design. The challenge for speculative organisational design is to critically reflect on the future organisational structures that are operating within new social models and moreover are shared with non-human agents.

It is worth mentioning that many of the recent developments within organisational structures, like networked or virtual, were pure speculations at the point of time they were introduced. The advent of the Internet and related IT technologies made these projections real. The problem is that today's entrepreneurial designs have caused severe sensemaking issues (Dzidowski, 2014). Many employees, especially in high-tech and creative industries, are highly empowered. However, the degree of self-awareness that is required in the new organisational designs is unprecedented, since employees have been left without predefined structures and procedures and have to fit into that open systems on their own, self-chosen conditions. This idea of self-governance has been taken to extremes in the recent speculations about future organisational design. Fractal organisations, based on the self-organising principles of nature and self-similarity of geometrical shapes that repeat themselves regardless of scale, serve as a model for ultimate adaptability, where a department, a team or even a single employee could be treated as an autonomous company (McMillan, 2002). Although fractals that represent the higher order geometry often have a cross-cultural and universal aesthetic appeal (Spehar et al., 2003), unfortunately it is not the aesthetical qualities that are of interest to managers. Fractal organisations emerged as a consequence of lean, agile and computational approaches. That is why the problem of the perceptive difference between us and non-human agents is still unresolved. The modern organisational structures are often misaligned with social ones because they are rooted in synthetic calculations, in which ICT systems feel at home, but human beings do not. Aesthetically, fractals do depict the beauty of mathematical objects, but humans do not want to be treated as a part of equations.



Maybe the imaginative projections of synthetic existence and artificial perception could eventually conclude with organisational designs that somehow reconcile tensions between humans and machines. Some of the future organisational designs might be decision-driven organisations (Blenko, Mankins & Rogers, 2010), but designed with the inclusion of autonomous Decision Support Systems, like a computer algorithm called Vital, appointed to the board of directors in Deep Knowledge Ventures (see: [www.bbc.com/news/technology-27426942](http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-27426942)). However, in such hybrid organisations it will be no longer possible to separate the technical procedures from the organisational activities, what calls for the reconceptualisation of organisational information systems and software agents implementation (Schulz-Schaeffer, 2011). Other forms of speculative organisational design could be based on the open structures of companies like Uber or Airbnb that merely (however very profitably) provide interfaces for participants to collaborate. Many of these open systems would be based on so-called "organisational APIs". Application Program Interface (API) is a technology widely used in ICT systems to interact and share information with programs, databases etc. In the same manner, organisational APIs could be used to replace the traditional process of negotiation and transform business alliances and partnerships through ubiquitous accessibility, scalability, flexibility and fluidity. While APIs alone will probably not replace all legal agreements, they will revolutionise the access to organisational assets and processes. Eventually, some API-based companies would move from finding partners to letting partners find them, by reducing the act of launching collaboration to the simple (and even automated) choice of plugging in (Iyer & Subramaniam, 2015).

It seems that future organisational designs would either let us gracefully withdraw from organisational areas where our perception is simply unnecessary or insufficient, or they would ultimately motivate us to defend the remnants of human agency in a more and more artificial world. We must be aware that the evolution of Speculative Realism (tellingly proceeding mainly within blogs, forums and downloadable publications) concluded not only with "democracy of objects", but also with "Ben Woodard's 'dark vitalism,' Reza Negarestani's 'dark materialism,' and Eugene Thacker's 'horror of philosophy' (...). For these thinkers, the world-without-us is alien and actively hostile to human life and thought" (Shaviro, 2011). Let us hope that flat ontology will not lead us to non-humanitarian one. Autonomous manufacturing plants are already here, but the intuitive fear of autonomous organisations seems to be well justified. Our open, but watchful imagination of the things to come is especially needed today. Eventually "it is the business of the future to be dangerous, and it is among the merits of science that it equips the future for its duties" (Whitehead, 1926, 259).

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