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Having an eye for it: aesthetics, ethnography and the senses

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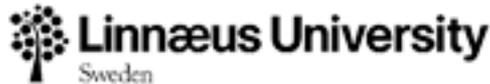
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Having an eye for it: aesthetics, ethnography and the senses

Aesthetics,
ethnography and
the senses

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to discuss participant-led photography as a response to the author's need for an “aesthetic approach” to ethnography during fieldwork, including the importance of an embodied, sensory orientation to ethnography in organizational contexts.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper reviews a range of literature and draws on the author's experiences to support a conceptual argument.

Findings – There is currently scant attention to the sensory dimension of ethnographic practice and the paper puts forward an agenda for future research.

Research limitations/implications – Suggestions are made as to how aesthetic and/or sensory ethnography can support changing landscapes of organizational research.

Originality/value – In drawing together multidisciplinary literature, the paper advances the agenda of ethnographic research in organizational life.

Keywords Organizational ethnography, Research work, Photography, Sensory perception, Senses, Aesthetics, Consumption

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

This paper discusses participant-led photography as a response to my need for an “aesthetic approach” to ethnography during fieldwork carried out in 2001. Despite starting my research career with an organisational ethnography, I would now locate myself as an organisation studies scholar who is inspired by the ethnographic family of fieldwork approaches, and not an ethnographer “by trade”. Yet, every time I undertake a “non-ethnographic” research project, I find myself drawn somehow into the messy minutiae of my participants' lives, wishing I could get to know them better and spend more time in the worlds they inhabit. As Sally Sambrook, one of the participants at the 2011 Ethnography Symposium in Cardiff rather nicely put it, perhaps if I were a stick of rock, you could cut me open and “ethnography” would be written inside through and through – even if it is not so visible from the outside.

I begin with a manifesto for why ethnographers should pay attention to aesthetic issues before considering what it means to do ethnography aesthetically, interweaving the material world, the senses and judgements of taste. I then introduce my take on visual ethnography as a practice, and explain how I have found participant-led photography useful in generating sensory data through which to explore the aesthetic dimensions of organisational life despite ocularcentric critiques. I conclude the paper by noting recent innovations in sensory methodology and reiterating why paying ethnographic attention to the sensory, aesthetic character of everyday life will become increasingly important in the future.



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Making a case for aesthetics

“So what?” is a question I am very fond of. I use it regularly with my students, colleagues and in relation to my own work. It comes from my pragmatic belief that generating knowledge should be worthwhile, and so I shall begin by asking “why should ethnographers be concerned with aesthetics?”

First, “ethnographies of aesthetics” are necessary because we are living in times (in the developed “west” at least) where matters of style, beauty and refined taste are prime carriers of value (Böhme, 2003). As we become cut loose from traditional markers of identity, such as gender role expectations, secure occupational status, sexuality and perhaps even class, it is to the sphere of consumption that we have increasingly turned in order to craft our “selves” in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Bauman (1998) coins the term the “aesthetic ethic of consumption” to make sense of all sorts of choices beyond the sphere of shopping. Before him, Featherstone (1991) made a case for a postmodern take on “the self as a work of art” crafted from scraps of “lifestyle resources” as one might make a collage. This “aestheticisation thesis” finds voice in more popular writing too (Postrel, 2004; Gosling, 2008; Belk, 1988; Ziller, 1990; Appadurai, 1986; Miller, 1987, 2010). But here I wish to extend the argument that, as organisational ethnographers, we should pay attention to these developments as a form of work, based on aesthetic criteria.

The desire, selection, acquisition, display, longevity and disposal of the objects we surround ourselves with is something we often think long and hard about, even in seemingly simple consumption decisions. It takes a lot of effort, which Willis (2000) refers to as “symbolic work”. As he explains, people’s identities in consumer societies are characterised by the extent and nature of the “symbolic work” they do within their particular cultural context:

[...] the selection of objects and items from countless possibilities, and their placement in personal mises en scene, in precise micro-circumstances, material and symbolic, of use and consumption (Willis, 2000, p. 72).

Willis also goes on to argue that this “expressive labour power” (2000, p. 80) demands the attention of organisational ethnographers because these pressures are coming together in new constellations of work, leisure and identity – or as Welsch (1997) has put it, the birth of “homo aestheticus”. This feeds into contemporary debates about the significance of “immaterial labour” in driving advanced capitalist economies (Hardt and Negri, 2004). This labour is described as “immaterial” because it happens outside formal organisational mechanisms through the ways in which consumers take up and use an organisation’s products, brands or even the organisation itself within their symbolic practices. Thus the organisation effectively outsources much of its marketing activity, brand and even product development and its consumers – knowingly or unknowingly – become devotees whilst simultaneously playing out their own identities (Arvidsson, 2007; Land and Taylor, 2010). To my mind, however, the label “immaterial”, here, is ironic since the mobilisation of material “things” is a large part of its enactment through the generation of affect and desire for the commodity (see Freeman, 2007; Arthur and Halliday, 2011; Rodgers, 2001).

The fervour around such events generates “hype”, leading to what is now commonly termed the “experience economy” (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) in which the highest value is generated by intense emotional/aesthetic experiences for the consumer who is delighted and enthralled.

So, to sum up, paying attention to aesthetics is important because “an aesthetic way of life” is a developing cultural form – a new form of work – that is changing the face of organisation (in advanced consumer societies at least). And before I continue further, I offer a working definition of “aesthetics” in order to underpin my arguments in the rest of this paper:

- aesthetic experience is evoked through the body: it is about making sense;
- our senses mediate between the internal and external world, therefore aesthetic experience cannot be just cerebral contemplation: aesthetic experience results from an encounter with the material world; and
- beauty (or any other aesthetic category) is not entirely in the eye of the beholder: we are talking about judgements of taste and taste is a culturally constructed category: aesthetic judgements are social.

Thus the traditional ethnographic tools of observation and asking questions need to be sharpened (blurred?) to carve out (feel?) the contours of material-social sensory experiences. It is this minutiae of sensory detail that, I contend, is so important in understanding Willis’s “symbolic work” – or any kind of work for that matter. Yet, as Fine (1996, p. 239, my emphasis) accurately observes: “We become so taken with the reality of the world that we have learned to experience that we forget to notice the world that we *are* experiencing”. The rest of this paper deals with how we can bring our own and others’ aesthetic experiences into our ethnographies by using “sensual methodologies” (Warren, 2008; Pink, 2009; Stoller, 1997) which, according to Robin Clair (2003, p. 92):

[...] asks ethnographers to set aside past dictates to categorise, compare and analyze, while taking up a rigorous and creative manner, a vulnerable, sensitive, dynamic and pulsating engagement with cultural ways of being in the world.

A practical dilemma

I first became interested in aesthetic approaches in ethnography during the fieldwork for my PhD in 2001 when I was faced with this challenge of trying to capture, for want of a better word, the “feel” of the things – specifically, the organisational space I was researching. My PhD was an exploration of a “fun” workplace culture, and it seemed to me that the material environment of the workplace was a crucial tool (Barsoux, 1993). Put people in a “fun” setting and they cannot fail but to have fun, surely? I was intrigued as to the deterministic character of this assumption, along with the wider “truism” that underpinned my research – “the happy worker is a productive worker” – and so I needed to draw the “material environment” into my research as a “unit of analysis”. I was trying to understand how the people using the space “felt” about it and, at that time, it seemed there was very little help around for a novice researcher in the form of methodological advice on how to go about doing this, save for Taylor’s (2002) helpful consideration of how to overcome “aesthetic muteness” with research participants.

I had brought a camera with me when I arrived to conduct my PhD fieldwork. I am the daughter of a photographer, so taking pictures of anything and everything is as natural to me as making written notes. However, faced with the decision of what to photograph, I began to question why my aesthetic judgements about this space were important, and so decided to ask my participants to take photographs of what was important to them instead. Specifically, I asked them to take photos to “show me

how it feels to work here” and, at a later date, we sat down together to view their pictures on my laptop and discuss them. The participant chooses what to take photos of – foregrounding their subjectivity right from the start – so, during the interview, they explain why and, usually, how they took the pictures, prompted and probed in the usual fashion by the inquisitive ethnographer. I later discovered this approach was becoming established in the social sciences – particularly health and social care – as “photo-voice” following the work of Wang and Burris (1993, 1997). In the photo-voice field, the purpose of undertaking research is to bring about social and/or policy change in the lives of the participants, who are usually marginalised groups in society, and I have written elsewhere about the ethico-political merits of using images to give research participants “voice” in management and organisational research (Warren, 2005). I have also written elsewhere about the more “practical” benefits of using participant-led photography in fieldwork, such as foregrounding participant subjectivity, speeding rapport, generating rich conversation, personalising the research encounter and also the useful depersonalising effect of the image as an object in interview settings (Vince and Warren, 2012; Warren, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2009). Here I want to concentrate on the sensual properties of using photographs, particularly within visual ethnography.

Visual ethnography: seeing what is invisible

In a casual Facebook chat very recently while writing this paper, a dear friend of mine remarked:

Visual ethnography sounds interesting. Or is it just lazy ethnography – i.e. I can’t be arsed to write this down so I’ll just take a pic and post it ha ha! Only joking, I’m actually intrigued – especially if it’s about how you capture and represent behaviours etc. (personal communication, 8 August 2011).

He makes an important point with his comment. If ethnography is fundamentally about observing people and things in the field, why would we want to take photographs?

To return to the “so what?” question with which I opened this paper, if you are claiming to be using innovative methods to generate worthwhile knowledge, there should be a good reason for doing so. In other words, they enable you to do or understand things that would otherwise be more difficult, or even impossible, to do. “Because we can” is, to my mind, not acceptable and often just represents a “repackaging” of existing practice to appear to be making a “new and improved” contribution in an academic culture of “publish or perish” and/or to get research grants where “innovation” is rewarded (Travers, 2009 and, as Tilley, 2001, p. 259) simply asks: “[...] if I could say it, why would I dance it, or paint it, or sculpt it?”

So, with that in mind, I am defining visual ethnography as an approach grounded in the research context but which uses technologies to make aspects of research sites and topics explicitly visible. From a pencil sketch to a documentary film, what characterises my kind of visual ethnography is the way it generates data that are qualitatively different from those you could otherwise access yourself – by doing “ordinary ethnography” (e.g. Vince and Broussine, 1996; Stiles, 2004; Scarles, 2010). More practically, participants can (and usually do) take photographs at times and in spaces where the researcher physically cannot go – such as private meetings, in their homes or during encounters that would be too sensitive for the researcher’s presence. Frith and Harcourt’s (2007) photo-elicitation study into women’s

experiences of chemotherapy for treating breast cancer is an excellent example of this.

Sensing what you see

Pink's (2007, 2009) research using video and her earlier work with still photographs is noteworthy here since she argues how it can be used to conduct not just visual enquiries, but sensual ones too. Visual researchers, and the privileging of sight in knowledge more generally, often come under fire for being ocularcentric – a product of enlightenment obsessions with separating the rational mind from the passionate body (Kavanagh, 2004; Corbett, 2006). Sight, with its objectifying, detached character, was rather good at supporting this project and language – especially organisational language – is littered with ocular metaphors: seeing the big picture, visionary leadership, corporate image, gaining a sense of perspective, and insight, for example. These taken for granted metaphors demonstrate the grip that vision, as a conceptual tool, has on the way we even think about what is valuable knowledge in organisations. I do not disagree with these charges at all – and I return to this below in discussing innovative developments in sensory research – but, for now, I want to reclaim images, and especially photographs, as sensory artefacts.

The “realist” technical character of photographic equipment appears to represent the subject or scene in a photograph “as it was” through the iconographic power of the image to stand as evidence (Harper, 2002). Unlike other visual arts, we see through the medium of the photograph as if we were gazing at the subject and/or scene itself. Although we may know that this is a carefully selected, composed, framed construction based on the photographer's aesthetic and political preferences (consciously or not), we nonetheless treat the photograph as truth – when we first see it at least. This is a contentious point and originates from the early visual anthropologists' colonial use of the camera to document and exoticise foreign cultures (e.g. Bateson and Mead, 1942). Quite rightly, the photographic image as a contested cultural/political site is now commonly taken almost as a “baseline” in contemporary visual methods texts to introduce the need for a more reflexively critical stance towards images. For example, Rose (2007, p. 26) states “visual imagery is never innocent” as the first summary point of her leading introductory text on visual methodologies and Spencer (2011, pp. 12-16) asks “is seeing believing?” to prompt the very first discussion in one of the latest books on visual methods in the social sciences. Yet none of this theorising gets us away from the fact that the phenomenological act of seeing a photograph has the effect of providing a window onto reality – whether close to home, far removed, in the present, or the past. Whether we like it or not, seeing really is believing in most people's intuitive, everyday experiences.

This turn toward the iconic power of the image (Moxey, 2008) seems somewhat heretical given all that social scientists have done to wrestle photography from the clutches of realists (Berger, 1972), but I contend that suggesting the image is iconic is not the same thing as reducing that iconography in any essentialist way, or ignoring the socio-cultural-political circumstances of its production. Iconography does not mean “objective”. Indeed, as Barthes (1981) would have it, even the most “realist” of images are, despite what they ostensibly are, photographs of – a tree, house, coffee cup, child or whatever. There will be some detail of the image that “punctures” the viewer and this will be different for every viewer as they bring their own habitus and dispositions to the image (cf. Bourdieu, 1984). But, importantly for my argument here, this detail – the “punctum” – is still contained within what Barthes calls the “studium”

of the representational details of the photograph. It is the very “lifelike” quality of the studium – its iconography – that produces the subjective experience. Mitchell extends this by arguing that, when viewing, we have silent conversations with images as if they were real and, if we doubt the truth of this, we should try cutting out the eyes from a photograph of a loved one and observe our horrific, emotional response (Mitchell, 2005).

The fact that photographs engender emotion is hardly a Promethean claim, but it does pave the way for the argument that photographs may also conjure up other sensory feelings. When we encounter things in lived space and time (as opposed to imagining them or looking at them in a photograph), all our senses are activated at the same time. Pink refers to this as being emplaced (Pink, 2009). Western culture, at least, has historically conceptualised the “five” senses, training us to think of them as discrete rather than one holistic embodied sensation (Vannini *et al.*, 2012, p. 7). As Ingold (2000, p. 261) reminds us: “looking, listening, and touching, therefore, are not separate activities, they are just different facets of the same activity: that of the whole organism in its environment” (cited in Pink, 2009, p. 27). So, given that photographs seem to instinctively “transport” us into the scenes we are viewing because they appear so real, I suggest that they evoke sensory recollections similar to “being there” too. I do not mean this in any synaesthetic way, where one actually experiences a taste, smell, sound or sensation on one’s skin, but, through an empathetic engagement with the image, one imagines the sensations (cf. Strati, 1999). For example, consider this photograph which was taken through my study window during a typical English summer afternoon while I was writing this paper (Plate 1).

I have no idea exactly what your sensory perception of it will be, but since you have probably looked out through a window at a grey rainy day at some point in your life, I am guessing the sensory experiences evoked by this image might be at least approximate to mine. You may even “hear” the raindrops hitting like pin-tacks against the glass, “see” the boughs of the lilac trees flailing about in the squall or even feel the room temperature drop a degree or two as the storm blew up, much as I did. But, nonetheless, you probably are not just looking at this photograph – you are looking through the window with the photographer and imagining yourself there, senses and all.

Beyond sight to site: sense-itis ethnography

When I was conducting my PhD fieldwork and experimenting with photography, there was not much talk about “sensory methods” and so using photographs to evoke and communicate aesthetic experiences through sensory empathetic engagement was quite novel – in organisation studies especially. However, in the past ten years, there has been an explosion in interest about how to make our research methods better reflect the embodied character of “real life” and, importantly in the context of this paper, the embodied aesthetic character of “real working life”. In the UK, a research council funded project has been running since 2005 concerned with “real life” methods and projects that “capture the combination of vital, tangible and intangible dynamics in the way that personal relationships and relationalities are lived” (Realities, n.d.).

These methodological developments are, in turn, responses to calls for fresh attention to what Hockey and Allen-Collinson (2009, p. 232) refer to as “the complex sensory practices that underpin everyday, occupational task-based routines”, as well as the broader relationships between the senses and social life advocated by the new journal launched by Berg Publishers in 2006: *Senses and Society*. A “sociology of the



Plate 1.
Through the window: do
you feel what I see?

senses” is well underway, that calls for greater theoretical attention to how embodied experience in society and culture is actually played out without recourse to cognitive theories of perception or subordination of the engaged body (smell, touch, proximity, temperature) to the more distancing senses of sight and even hearing (Ingold, 2000; Vannini *et al.*, 2012).

Sensory methodological innovations are in part enabled by technological advances that allow the simple, cheap capture of images, sound and movies and the mapping of movement using GPS technology. Associated, are new opportunities for publishing, sharing and “tagging” media on the internet and through mobile devices, that have exploded in popularity in recent years, along with blogs that make the dissemination of multi-media research easy and accessible for researchers and research participants alike. Fascinating developments in scent diffusion have also enabled high-quality aromas to be impregnated into paper and even transmitted through code programmed into web sites and digital cameras that instruct portable units connected to home computers to emit scents (Exhalia, n.d.) and so the future of sensory research looks to be full of technological promise (Twilley, 2010).

The same technologies mean this is likely to become a far more important dimension to organisational ethnography than in the past. In addition to the more

general call for attention to symbolic work, immaterial labour and aesthetics issues in organisational life that I began this paper with, recent developments in sensory technologies threaten to change the aesthetic landscape of people's everyday lives as both consumers and workers (Riach and Warren, 2011). These began with the office makeovers and artistic architectural engineering of workspaces that my PhD research set out to explore (e.g. see Becker and Steele, 1995; Nathan and Doyle, 2002; Myerson and Ross, 2005) but have now extended into more sensorally invasive practices through the perceived power of "sensory branding" that plays on the whole sensorium of customers and employees alike (Derval, 2010; Lindstrom, 2010). Sounds, smells, textures are all engaged in the sensory branding experience in retail spaces, hotels, restaurants and shopping malls as commercial organisations try to harness the power of the senses, often at levels below conscious awareness (Classen *et al.*, 1994; Bradford and Desrochers, 2009). These developments seem to rest on dubious neuro-scientific claims of consultants. To my mind, images of glowing parts of brains that legitimate "doing away with" the need to interpret consumers' experiences is precisely a reason for ethnographers to pay serious attention to how people experience these hybrid spaces of labour-production-consumption.

Conclusions

Notwithstanding the above, the "aesthetic ethnographer" is still faced with the very real challenge of sensory fieldwork. As noted above, through a process of acculturation, we are simply not accustomed to noticing much of the sensory stimuli we are continually immersed in. Kathleen Riach and I are conducting research on the social role and import of office smells and, before our participants joined the study, they apologetically warned us that "their workplace didn't smell of anything". Yet, after completing "smell diaries" during their normal working week, it transpired that every single participant's workplace was a veritable riot of scents, stinks, smells and aromas – it was just that, as Hockey and Allen-Collinson (2009) put it, they needed to "switch on" their senses in order to realise just how much of a smellscape exists in their everyday working worlds (Riach and Warren, 2011). Even once we have noticed our "sense-scapes", how do we go about recording and disseminating aesthetic data in ways that retain some semblance of the sensory character of such encounters? Vannini *et al.* (2012, p. 74) suggest that "writing sensuously" means to abandon the traditional formats of scientific papers in favour of descriptions that draw the reader into the text – not to try and reproduce some reality outside the text, but to engender empathic engagement – much as I have argued in relation to my use of photographs in this paper.

Yet it is this "empathic engagement" that lies at the heart of the potential of photo-voice and related methods to connect with a number of contemporary research agendas. As I briefly note above, photo-voice is a participatory action research method intended to raise awareness and/or effect change in the lives of the participants, who are usually excluded from mainstream debates and policy making. The emancipatory potential of photo-voice within critical ethnographies is considerable – from helping participants become more aware of their taken-for-granted working life, to communicating aspects of their experiences to those in power and control of the organisation (Warren, 2005). In our research with accountants on their professional identities and career trajectories, we found participants valued the chance to reflect offered by the method, and were so engaged with the task that their professional body agreed to credit them with hours towards their annual "professional development" commitment for taking part in the study.

However, participatory research that utilises the visual, and the arts more generally, has far more potential for change in organisations than this small example (e.g. see www.active-art.org/ and www.photovoice.org for just two examples), which connects with the pressing need to make management and organisational research more relevant and impactful on the communities we investigate. Research councils often now only fund projects with a commitment to ensuring users beyond academia see some benefit from the research (e.g. see Research Councils UK (RCUK), n.d. for an example from the UK) and, in the UK, the impact of academic research on non-academic beneficiaries will be assessed by the government for the first time as part of the “Research Excellence Framework” used to distribute public money to universities (Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), 2011).

By way of a final conclusion, then, within this potential for impact, is the seemingly mundane yet immensely powerful minutiae of data evoking the aesthetic and sensory character of organisational lives that is so powerful. As the “Realities” (n.d.) project seeks to highlight, methods that explore the everyday lived experiences of ordinary people can be tools to puncture the powerful (cf. Barthes, 1981) with the personal tales of those they control. Institutional power rests on the impersonal to flourish (e.g. Bauman, 1991), the right of managers to control others is legitimated in the impersonal machinery of Weber’s ideal-type bureaucracy and, in relation to the senses, power is deodourised (Classen *et al.*, 1994) – bodily smells in particular indicate low status, intelligence and a poor attitude to the regulation of everyday life that has become engrained as a result of civilising processes and, latterly, the ascendancy of managerialism as a leitmotif of society (Hancock and Tyler, 2009).

Ethnography has always sought to tell richly grounded evocative tales, as we know, but visual methods in particular add another layer to this – they can show others how it feels to work, manage, consume, or otherwise be affected by organisational action, not only to the ethnographer during fieldwork, but via exhibitions, installations, video online and physically. Given the rapid developments in digital photographic and publishing technologies and channels, the inception of the *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* seems an excellent opportunity to take advantage of the opportunities visual methodologies can bring to a sensually grounded, aesthetic approach to ethnographies of organisation.

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