

# Aesthetic Style as a Poststructural Business Ethic

John Dobson

**ABSTRACT.** The article begins with a brief history of aesthetic theory. Particular attention is given to the poststructuralist ‘aesthetic return’: the resurgence of interest in aesthetics as an ontological foundation for human being-in-the-world. The disordered individual-as-emergent-artist-and-artifact, who is at the centre of this ‘aesthetic return’, is then translated into the ‘dis’-organization that is the firm. The firm is thus defined in terms of its primal sensory impact on the world. It invokes a myriad of aesthetic relations between its disorganized self and others: its essence resides within these relations; its power of being is determined by its ability to project a unified aesthetic ideal – a ‘mirror fantasy’. The firm thus emerges as a style: where style is defined as an organizing – a sculpting – of aesthetic chaos. In order to achieve a grand style, the firm projects itself through time as a unified aesthetic ideal; as an ongoing work of art. The article concludes with a discussion of how this aesthetic theory of the firm relates to other accepted theories of the nature and purpose of business organizations.

**KEY WORDS:** poststructural ethics, aesthetics, style, theory of the firm

...what is required...is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance, to believe in form, tunes, words, in the whole Olympus of appearance. Those Greeks were superficial – out of profundity.

Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* ([1882], 1974, p. 38).

## Introduction

The history of the study of aesthetics is vast and diverse. Theories concerning the importance of aesthetics stretch back to the origins of philosophy (Nehemas, 1998). Recently, the study of aesthetics has been embraced by architecture, art theory, literary criticism, musicology, film theory, and

psychology; rather than a unified narrative, aesthetics “is a set of discourses we have inherited” (Herwitz, 2008, p. 171). Pre-Socratic origins of the word are etymologically derived from the Greek equivalents ‘to gasp’ or to ‘breath in suddenly’ (Onians, [1951], 1988); the word is also linked to ‘play’ and being ‘beyond time’:

Phenomena which manifest or appear with the impact of a prominent or memorable emergence...provoke the involuntary intake of breath...A gasp of this order ‘stops’, as it were, time itself – one is invariably ‘breathless’ before the emergence of the authentically beautiful...It goes without saying that such provocations to our everyday are more than just “smart and pretty” (Postrel, 2003, p. 182), at the very least they launch a thousand ships. [Chytry, 2007, p. 40]

In the context of the foundational and pre-contextual nature of aesthetic judgment, Chytry notes “the vital discovery that Schiller borrowed and expanded from Kant of the aesthetic as focused on the ‘free play’ of human faculties whenever understanding and imagination are in a state of spontaneous openness or ‘indeterminability’ prior to being ‘constrained’ either toward adopting a cognitive or a moral stance” (p. 37).

In terms of developing a ‘general theory’ of aesthetics, Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* is generally viewed as seminal (Herwitz, 2008; Nehemas, 1998). Kant defines aesthetic appreciation in terms of “the faculty of estimating an object or a mode of representation by means of a delight or aversion apart from any interest. The object of such delight is called beautiful” ([1790], 1952, p. 139). ‘Apart from any interest’ implies that aesthetic judgment does not rest on ulterior utilitarian motives: the “aesthetic attitude [is] the disinterested (with no ulterior purpose) and sympathetic attention to and contemplation of any object of awareness

whatever, for its own sake” (Stolnitz, 1960, p. 32). Kieran provides an arboreal illustration:

We might look at a tree in the garden and be interested in it in terms of what species it is (theoretical interest) or whether it is blocking out the sun and should be cut back (practical interest). However, we might just sit back and attend to the contours of the trunk and branches, their stratification, the way the leaves rustle and sway gently in the wind, the dappled shadows cast on the bough, the bent-arm-like crook of a branch as it stretches out. In this case we’re disinterested since we look at the tree and, if we’re lucky, so doing will afford us pleasure. [2005, p. 67]

Nietzsche, anticipating Freud, recognizes aesthetic attraction as pre-cognitively *sensual*: “every perfection, all the beauty of things, revives through contiguity this aphrodisian bliss [*die aphrodisische Seligkeit*]” ([1888], 1967, p. 1). Recently, Genette has returned to Kant in emphasizing its contemplative nature: “an experience of intransitive, rapt attention on any object which may elicit interest” (1999, p. 20). Thus any object, and not just objects officially labelled as ‘art’, can be evaluated on the basis of aesthetic quality: “Aesthetics shows rather than tells, delights rather than instructs. The effects are immediate, perceptual, and emotional” (Postrel, 2003, p. 6). Murdoch emphasizes the ability of aesthetics to transcend personal ego, and to present the viewer with an objective vision of reality:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious to my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering Kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared...Good art reveals what we are usually too selfish and too timid to recognize, the minute and absolutely random detail of the world, and reveals it together with a sense of unity and form. Good art shows us how difficult it is to be objective by showing us how differently the world looks to an objective vision...It is a kind of goodness by proxy. [1980, pp. 84–87]

Murdoch’s linking of aesthetics with morality and with our basic *being* in the world invokes the most foundational aesthetic narrative: the notion of a human life *itself* as a work of art. In this narrative, subject and object converge. We are individually

both the artist and artefact, sculptor and sculpture; “the artist as his own spectator” (Lamb, 2005, p. 46). The projection of our being through time is a process of continual creative self-transformation; a “sculpting of the self” (Peters and Michael, 2005, p. 383). In *The Art of Living*, Nehemas describes this aesthetics-as-ontology: “As in the acknowledged arts, there are no rules for producing new and exciting works. As in the acknowledged arts, there is no best work – no best life – by which all others can be judged...[But] that does not imply that judgment is impossible, that every work is as good as every other...[A]esthetic difference and multiplicity...enriches and improves human life” (1998, p. 10). As Nehemas notes, this notion of aesthetics as central to human *being* has a long pedigree stretching back through Aristotle to early classicism. It has been revived recently by a group of philosophers loosely labelled as ‘poststructuralists’ (Cazeaux, 2000; Herwitz, 2008). In order to develop an aesthetic theory of the firm, it is to narrative that the remainder of this article turns.

## The aesthetic return

In the introduction to *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, Cazeaux observes that “[a]esthetics has undergone a radical transformation in the last hundred years”. He continues:

Traditionally, the subject [of aesthetics] has always occupied the margins of philosophy, for the simple reason that it deals with those aspects of experience which are the least amenable to categorization, i.e., art, beauty, emotion, and the ever-changing delights of the senses. However, the divisions imposed on reality by modern reason and changes brought about by the industrialization of experience have necessitated a rethinking of the relationship between the individual and reality. Gone are notions of a distinct self in receipt of a mind-independent world and, in their place, are theses to the effect that consciousness and reality are interconnected at a fundamental level...The aesthetic, formerly exiled from mainstream attention, assumes centre-stage as the region to which we can turn for new cognitive possibilities and a sensibility that is critical of the divisions exercised by modern thought. [2000, p. xiii]

Nietzsche anticipated this aesthetic return by centring his philosophy on aesthetics: “we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art – for it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified* –” ([1888], 1967, p. 449). Following Nietzsche, Foucault wonders, “couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?” (1973, p. 350). Following Foucault, the central question posed in this article could be summarized as ‘Why should the lamp be an art object, but not the firm that produced it?’ Again, this casts the firm in the aesthetic role of both subject and object. It also means, as Cummins observes, “the acceptance of a human individual as a metaphor for organization” (2000, p. 162). However, this metaphor already exists in the poststructuralist rendition of the decentred individual (Cazeaux, 2000, pp. 367–383). Indeed, the essential process of the aesthetics-of-existence is to use art as a means of ordering and harmonizing the disparate human psyche. Thus, the human is already decentred; the human is a (dis)-organization of emotional drives: “To become master of the chaos one is; to compel one’s chaos to become form...that is the grand ambition here” (Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, [1882–1888], 1967, p. 444).

This organizing and directing of disparate drives is captured by the concept of a *stylization* of existence: “The creation of unity out of diversity is given [by Nietzsche] the name ‘style’. Style is the coordinated exploitation of powerful instincts...Grand style, as demonstrated by classicism, is the effect achieved through the harnessing of violent and varied passions, and their placement under the rule of a predominant drive” (Thiele, 1990, p. 63). Indeed it is this concept of style as an organizing, enhancing, and directing force – as developed particularly by Nietzsche, Foucault, and Derrida – that provides the basis here for an aesthetic theory of the firm. Within such a theory the *power* of the firm – in the sense of the impact through time of the firm on our world – originates not in any material property (size, profitability, etc.) nor in some measure of moral worth, but rather in the firm’s *style*. Style is the *essence* of the firm: the grander the style the greater the *initiatory* impact of the firm: the more powerful the firm’s *being*.

## Style as the *Essence* of the firm

Essence, from the latin *esse* ‘to be’ delves beneath affective characteristics of the firm: Is the firm profitable? Is the firm ethical? It plumbs the depths of being in the Heideggerian ([1927] 2008) sense by simply asking: *Is the firm?* What is the fundamental impact of the firm on our sensory awareness of it?

Ongoing experimental research in psychology indicates that aesthetic impact in general has a powerful influence on both our perception of the world, and how we act in the world. Temporally, aesthetic impacts can be long and contemplative, or pre-attentively instant. For example, a recent study by Olson and Marshuetz (2005) finds that we are aesthetically impacted by an object even though it is shown to us for just a fraction of a second; indeed we are not even aware, consciously, that we have seen it. These aesthetic impacts also influence our non-aesthetic evaluation of objects: “Improving the aesthetics of a system can have many benefits which extend beyond affective issues...[U]sers of an automated teller machine perceived the system to be easier to use based solely on its aesthetic appearance;...attractive things work better” (Bauerly and Liu, 2008).

Today, the origin of much of these aesthetic impacts – whether intentionally or unintentionally – is the firm. We are awash in business-originating aesthetic stimuli: logos, products, advertising, architecture, even the phonetic impact of the firm’s name, flood our senses daily. Therefore, again to borrow from Heidegger, we are *thrown* into an aesthetic relation to the firm. This fundamental and ongoing sensory relation of us to the firm that renders the firm, at its essence, a work of art. As Genette observes: “it is not the object that makes the relation aesthetic, but the relation that makes the object aesthetic” (1999, p. 11). Our most fundamental relation to the firm is an aesthetic relation through time. What determines the power of this aesthetic relation? What unites it and intensifies it around a given firm?

The power of these myriad aesthetic relations between us and a given firm is unified and intensified by the cultivation of a corporate *style*: aesthetically, the firm projects itself as a style; the grander the style the stronger the attraction of the firm to us, strengthening the aesthetic relation. Thus, within this

aesthetic theory of the firm, the firm itself is at its core an idealized assimilation of aesthetic chaos. Thus, central to this aesthetic theory of the firm is the notion of the *firm-as-style*. Therefore, the normative implication here is of the firm willing toward a *grand* style. However, what exactly is meant here by the notion of the firm's aesthetic style?

The firm's style is the *essence* of the aesthetic relations it invokes. Style is the essence both in the above sense of *esse*, of fundamental being; but also in the sense of a unified and intense force that permeates – that flavours (to use a culinary metaphor) – these myriad aesthetic relations. To illustrate, consider the following passage from Nietzsche's *Joyful Wisdom*, quoted by Derrida in *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*:

Here I stand in the midst of the surging of the breakers, whose white flames fork up to my feet; –from all sides there is howling, threatening, crying, and screaming at me, while at the lowest depths the old earth shaker sings his aria hollow like a roaring bull; he beats such an earth shaker's measure thereto, that even the hearts of these weathered rock-monsters tremble at the sound. Then suddenly, as if born out of nothingness, there appears before the portal of this hellish labyrinth, only a few fathoms distant, – a great sailing ship gliding silently along like a ghost. Oh, this ghostly beauty! With what enchantment it seizes me! What? Has all the repose and silence of the world embarked here? Does my happiness itself sit in this quiet place, my happier ego, my second immortalized self? .... But still! But still! My noble enthusiast, there is also in the most beautiful sailing ship so much noise and bustling, and alas, so much petty, pitiable bustling! The enchantment and the most powerful effect of woman is, to use the language of philosophers, an effect at a distance, an *action in distans*; there belongs thereto, however, primarily and above all – *distance!* [In Derrida (1978) 1991, pp. 357–358].

In the context of an aesthetic theory of the firm, Nietzsche's "great sailing ship" is the *firm-as-style*. The firm's style/stylus (Nietzsche's sailing-ship's *pro*) penetrates the turbulent chaos of aesthetic stimuli in which we are adrift: "breaks up the waves...[leaving a]...trace, wake, indication, mark" (Derrida, pp. 355–356). If powerful, the firm-as-style appears – necessarily at a distance – as an enigmatic but nonetheless desirable temptress, a veiled truth-of-being: something we wish to get

closer to, to form a relation with, to board. However, why necessarily at a distance?

Distance is required because style encompasses the totality of the individual's/firm's being on the world: to see the sailing ship as beautiful we must see its *totality*, which requires distance. I may admire the laptop on which I am currently typing as possessing aesthetic worth: its soft colours, flowing curvelinearity, imaginative logo, may elicit pleasure (perhaps even Nietzsche's 'aphrodisian bliss'). However, for the firm that produced and/or marketed it to have *style* would require that whatever aesthetic qualities this laptop possesses permeates every sensory projection of this organization. In order to determine this requires that the firm is experienced, and indeed experiences itself, from a distance. Here, 'distance' is not geographic, although physical space is an aspect, but rather psychological: the distance of non-prejudicial disinterestedness, of experiencing the firm as a unified aesthetic object, of objectifying the firm as a surface relation. As Genette observes "objectification constitutes aesthetic appreciation" (1999, p. 89).

Consider, hypothetically, that I objectify Nike Inc. through a perceived style of 'athletic grace and prowess'. Note that this being-in-the-world of Nike Inc. only exists in the interstices of *my* aesthetic relation to it; "these are only – *my truths*" (Nietzsche, in Derrida, p. 374). Nike Inc. in its physical presence of employees, corporate offices, financial statements, etc. is a style-less nexus of contracts with its "petty, pitiable bustling". However, when I sensually experience Nike's logo, advertising, products – when I don my Nike running shoes – I aesthetically distance myself from this 'Nike-as-nexus-of-contracts'. I do not *see* this latter physical and intellectual presence. What I *see* is myself reflected in Nike's stylistic prism of athletic-grace-and-prowess: I see "my happier ego, my second immortalized self". Thus, at the most basic sensory level Nike Inc. is this stylized projection of myself: "In art we are given what we seek: a mirror through which we may see ourselves in the form of a more glorified other..." (Lacan, [1977], 2008, p. 153). Through my sensory interaction with – my aesthetic relation to – this pair of shoes I try to board the "great sailing ship".

In Lacanian terms, a powerful style plays on our "insatiable appetite for otherness" (in Cazeaux, 2000, p. 496). This *style* should not be confused with product *design*: the latter exists as a physical charac-

teristic of the shoes; the former resides purely in my aesthetic relation to them. Therefore, a pair of shoes may possess certain distinctive design characteristics – e.g., stitching configurations, fabric combinations, logo positioning, colour combinations, etc. – but it is only in *my* aesthetic relation to this pair of shoes that the style of ‘athletic-grace-and-prowess’ emerges. From the designer’s perspective, the challenge is to invoke the desired style; but the style itself is what Genette terms an “emergent property” (p. 92): Nike’s-style-as-athletic-grace-and-prowess does not exist physically within the design of the shoe, ‘grace’ and ‘prowess’ are “evaluative predicates” (*ibid.*) that I use to describe Nike’s style. This style is, in turn, my most fundamental conjuring of Nike Inc. as a phenomenon of my experience in the world.

Thus Nike’s, or any firm’s, fundamental being resides in its myriad aesthetic relations with individuals. Whether these relations coalesce into a *style*, or even a *grand style*, depends upon whether the emergent properties of the firm’s sensory projections are consistently interpreted: Do the same evaluative predicates apply from multiple perspectives? Or (returning to Nietzsche’s metaphor), on the churning seas of aesthetic chaos, does the firm coalesce as an identifiable and objectifiable sailing ship?

However, this ship is only distinct from a distance. As Derrida observes, this style both veils and reveals in the sense that it reveals the “non-truth of truth” (1991, p. 359): “All the attributes, all the traits, all the attractions that Nietzsche saw in woman – seductive distance, captivating inaccessibility, and infinitely veiled promise, the transcendence that produces desire, the *Entfernung* – belong indeed to the history of truth as history of an error” (p. 368). The great-sailing-ship-as-stylized-ideal exists to ‘reveal’ to me the ‘truth-as-non-truth’ of my aesthetic relation to Nike: in ‘truth’ neither I nor Nike Inc. are athletic-grace-and-prowess. This firm’s essential being in my relation only to exists behind the ‘veil’ of aesthetic distance.

These hypothetical Nike-running-shoes-as-stylistic-cipher play a conceptually similar role to the pair of peasant shoes in Heidegger’s description of art-as-truth-put-to-work in a painting by Van Gogh. Heidegger argues that Van Gogh’s painting *un-conceals* some fundamental *truth-of-being* of peasant life: “From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth”

([1935–1936], 1971, p. 33). Unlike Nietzsche and Derrida, Heidegger’s revealed truth of the peasant woman was a truth-as-such, rather than a truth-as-an-error, but the conceptualization of art ‘un-concealing’ is similar. Nietzsche’s style/stylus reveals a *fantastical* truth – a non-truth: “The sense of penetration is ever present, but the core is never reached” (Thiele, 1990). The power of Nike Inc.’s style over me is to beguile me with the Lacanian (1977) ‘mirror fantasy’. A firm that conjures a style that ‘works’ – that puts (non)-truth to work – has conjured a *telos*: Nike Inc.’s grand style of athletic-grace-and-prowess provides for me an ideal, an excellence, a vision of human flourishing, to which I strive through my relation to the firm.

### **Normative implications for management**

Clearly a firm would wish its style to be enticing and beguiling. However, to what extent do managers exert power to sculpt their respective firm’s style? It is true that this style is a seductive fantasy – a beautiful “ghost ship” – and as such a deception or mask that arises in the aesthetic relation between me and the firm. However as Thiele, in summarizing Nietzsche’s *Politics of the Soul*, observes: “the point of wearing masks is not so much to deceive as to grow into them” (1990, p. 65). Therefore, the firm must grow into its style: “Style is the exhibition of a self-overcoming...[It can]...lend the appearance of unity to a plurality” (pp. 64–65). Therefore, to return to Nike Inc., if I perceive Nike’s style as athletic-grace-and-prowess, I should see that reflected in all my aesthetic relations with this firm. Whatever sensory impacts this firm projects – through product design, marketing, press releases, logos, the company name itself – should hold up to me a mirror of my ‘fantastical’ projection: “Even the smallest fragment of the individual’s activity, like a broken piece of holographic plate, can be projected to yield an image of the whole” (p. 213).

However, style clearly is not entirely within the control of the firm. It is, as defined earlier, an “emergent property” arising from my aesthetic relation to the firm: Nike may want to project a unified style, but it is ultimately up to the subject to ‘read’ Nike as it wants to be read. For example, you the reader of this article have some aesthetic relation to Nike Inc.; you have no choice (even if you do not

‘own’ any aspect of Nike, you see the products, maybe see the advertising, see the logo, hear the name). However, you may not ‘read’ Nike as I do: your aesthetic relation to this firm may not elicit the grand style of athletic-grace-and-prowess. Far from the great-sailing-ship, the aesthetic impact of Nike Inc. on you may be merely a dissonant clamor of flotsam and jetsam. If you are typical, then this firm would not constitute a grand style; its being in the world would be compromised. Its truth-as-non-truth would be *too* heavily veiled; the mirror fantasy too clouded and distorted.

In addition, as beings-in-the-world firms exist through time. The mirror fantasies shift with the seas of aesthetic chaos. Compare, for example, the modernist gravitas of corporate names such as International Business Machines, and Hewlett Packard, with the postmodern playfulness of Yahoo! and Google; as Herwitz observes: “Aesthetics is always of its time, in spite of its universalizing claims. ... Art expresses the aspirations of the age in idealized form” (2008, pp. 125 and 153). Thus, whatever Nike’s stylistic projections, both it and me are thrown into an aesthetic relation in a pre-existing and evolving cultural milieu: the “aspirations of the age” will ebb and flow. Likewise Nike’s, or any firm’s, ability to project a grand style – a great sailing ship – will ebb and flow.

This temporal and indeterminate nature of style will also add to the challenges of a firm that strives to alter its style. Indeed, the grander the firm’s original style the more resistant this may prove to alteration. Also, a broad diversity of aesthetic relations – as experienced by a conglomerate such as GE or Unilever – will clearly add to the challenges of projecting a unified style; in such cases the style may attach more to a particular brand or subsidiary than to the firm itself. For example, if I enter into an aesthetic relation with Ben&Jerry’s website homepage – deriving pleasure from its bright colours and faux-bucolic artistry – I am experiencing a style projected by Ben&Jerry’s. The fact that legally Ben&Jerry’s is a wholly owned subsidiary of Unilever in no way affects my aesthetic relation. Whether we attach this relation to the ‘word’ Ben&Jerry’s, or the ‘word’ Unilever, may matter legally or economically, but not aesthetically. What matters is that the colourful and faux-bucolic style enticed and beguiled me; it revealed – in a veiled

fashion – the essential truth-as-non-truth of which is ‘labelled’, in the sense of being signified by the word Ben&Jerry’s. The economic challenge for the managers of Unilever is to ensure, to the limited extent it is within their power, that the style projected by the word/brand ‘Ben&Jerry’s’ endures through time (which is presumably why the word ‘Unilever’ is absent from Ben&Jerry’s homepage).

The examples of Nike and Ben&Jerry’s above have focused on the aesthetic impact of the firms’ products-logos-websites; I am cast in the role of the ‘consumer’. This seems reasonable given that the vast majority of our sensory relations with firms are through contact with products-logos-websites. However, presumably if I were an employee of, say, Nike Inc. my aesthetic relation with the firm would be much deeper, encompassing my experience of physical buildings, co-workers, interior and exterior designs, provision of food and drink, etc. Indeed, in *The Aesthetics of Organization*, Strati goes ‘inside’ the firm and assigns the label ‘aesthetic’ to “personal idiosyncrasies, specific modes of interpreting events, different views of what to do and when to do it, and the ceaseless negotiation of values, symbols and organizational practices” (1999, p. 1). Here, Strati is clearly stretching the aesthetic label beyond the definition of ‘sensory relation’ that I use here; but suffice to say that, for those ‘within’ the organization, the aesthetic relations become more numerous and nuanced.

However, again the central premise remains: the richness, the beauty of my aesthetic relation with Nike Inc. will depend on Nike’s style of athletic-grace-and-prowess permeating my relation; enabling me to distance myself and objectify the firm as an aesthetic whole. The buildings, furnishings, decorations, food and drink, etc. should possess – to my sensory perception – the emergent property of athletic-grace-and-prowess. If this is the case, then Nike Inc. has achieved a grand style; the firm is a work of art.

## Conclusion

Nietzsche famously quipped that “with three anecdotes, it is possible to convey the image of any individual” (Miller, 1993, p. 366). The aesthetic theory of the firm developed here could be defined by paraphrasing Nietzsche: ‘with three emergent properties, it should be possible to convey the image

of any firm'. If this is the case, then the firm is a *grand style*. How does this theory of the firm as grand style relate, if at all, to more conventional notions of the nature and purpose of business?

In the case of the *nature* of business, theories from various perspectives tend to coalesce around the notion of the firm as a theatre of human interaction: serving human needs, whether economic, psychological or social (Etzioni, 1988; Newton and Ford, 2004; Solomon, 1994). Perhaps the most succinct conceptualization is that first delineated by Jensen and Meckling, building on the work of Coase (1937). This is the notion of the firm as a “legal fiction...[serving]...as a nexus for a set of contractual relations among individuals”. They go on to note that “viewed in this way it makes little or no sense to try to distinguish those things which are ‘inside’ the firm from those things that are ‘outside’ of it. There is in a very real sense only a multitude of complex relationships...” (1976, p. 311). The aesthetic-theory-of-the-firm outlined here bears some notable similarities to Jensen and Meckling’s conceptualization. Both theories recognize the conceptual boundaries of the firm as porous: the firm exists in relations, whether contractual or aesthetic. Both theories recognize the ‘fictional’ nature of the firm, whether in terms of law or in terms of aesthetic subjectivity. Where the theories clearly differ in their philosophical grounding: their fundamental presupposition of the impact of the firm on the world. With Jensen and Meckling this fundamental impact is legal/economic: the relations are ‘contractual’ relations, both explicit and implicit. With the aesthetic-theory-of-the-firm the fundamental relations are aesthetic: the firm’s emergent *being through time* is its immediate sensory impact on individuals. To some extent, therefore, this aesthetic approach bridges the gap between economic and social notions of business: the firm-as-style taps into human needs at the most fundamental sensory level, both preceding and subsuming the economic and social.

In the case of the *purpose* of the firm the divergence of opinion again tends to focus around the perceived economic role of the firm versus its social role: colloquially, stockholders-versus-stakeholders (Bowie and Freeman, 1992). However, again the aesthetic theory of the firm tends to subvert this divide: here the purpose of the firm can be defined as the achievement of a grand style that will fulfil the ‘mirror fantasy’

need/desire of individuals for beauty. This beauty-prerogative taps into moral imperatives of the firm such as to provide meaningful work and a sense of craft or vocation (Bowie, 1991; Klein, 1998; MacIntyre, 1984). Also, in the oft perceived connection between the beautiful and the good (Murdoch, 1980; Nehemas 1998; Stewart 2005), this *firm-as-style* taps into broader notions of corporate moral responsibility.

Therefore, as an attempt to locate the fundamental *being* of the firm – to address the question: ‘Is the firm?’ – the aesthetic-theory-of-the-firm outlined here provides another perspective on what Jensen recently noted as the “remarkable division of opinion about the fundamental purpose of the corporation” (2001, p. 8).

## References

- Bauerly, M. and Y. Liu: 2008, ‘Effects of Symmetry and Number of Compositional Elements on Interface and Design Aesthetics’, *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction* **24**(3), 275–287.
- Bowie, N. E.: 1991, ‘Challenging the Egoistic Paradigm’, *Business Ethics Quarterly* **1**, 1–21.
- Bowie, N. E. and R. E. Freeman (eds.): 1992, *Ethics and Agency Theory* (Oxford University Press, New York).
- Cazeaux, C.: 2000, *The Continental Aesthetics Reader* (Routledge, London).
- Chytry, J.: 2007, *Organizational Aesthetics: The Artful Firm and the Aesthetic Moment in Contemporary Business and Management Theory*. Working Paper, University of California, Berkeley.
- Coase, R. H.: 1937, ‘The Nature of the Firm’, *Economica New Series* **4**, 386–405. Reprinted in *Readings in Price Theory* (Irwin, Homewood, IL).
- Cummings, S.: 2000, ‘Resurfacing an Aesthetics of Existence as an Alternative to Business Ethics’, in Linstead and Hopfl (eds.), *The Aesthetics of Organization* (Sage, New York).
- Derrida, J.: 1991, ‘Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles’, in P. Kamuf (ed.), *A Derrida Reader* (Columbia University Press, New York), pp. 353–377.
- Etzioni, A.: 1988, *The Moral Dimension* (The Free Press, New York).
- Foucault, M.: 1973, ‘On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress’, in H. L. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow (eds.), *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: U Chicago).
- Genette, G.: 1999, *The Aesthetic Relation* (Cornell University Press, London).

- Heidegger, M.: [1927] 2008, *Being and Time* (trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson) (Harper Collins, New York).
- Heidegger, M.: [1935–1936] 1971, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (trans. A. Hofstadter) (Harper Collins, New York).
- Herwitz, D.: 2008, *Aesthetics* (Continuum, London).
- Jensen, M.: 2001, 'Value Maximization, Stakeholder Theory, and the Corporate Objective Function', *Journal of Applied Corporate Finance* **14**(3), 8–21.
- Jensen, M. and W. H. Meckling: 1976, 'Theory of the Firm: Managerial Behavior, Agency Costs, and Ownership Structure', *Journal of Financial Economics* **3**(4), 305–360.
- Kant, I.: 1790, *Critique of Judgment* (trans. J. C. Meredith) (Clarendon Press, Oxford), [1952].
- Kieran, M.: 2005, *Revealing Art* (Routledge, London).
- Klein, S.: 1998, 'Don Quixote and the Problem of Idealism and Realism in Business Ethics', *Business Ethics Quarterly* **8**(1), 43–64.
- Lacan, J.: 1977, *Écrits* (trans. A. Sheridan) (Norton, New York).
- Lamb, K.: 2005, 'Foucault's Aestheticism', *Diacritics* **35**(2), 43–64.
- MacIntyre, A.: 1984, *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN).
- Miller, J.: 1993, *The Passion of Michael Foucault* (Harper Collins, London).
- Murdoch, I.: 1980, *The Sovereignty of Good* (Cambridge University Press, England).
- Nehemas, A.: 1998, *The Art of Living* (University of California Press, Berkeley).
- Newton, L. H. and M. M. Ford: 2004, *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Business Ethics and Society* (McGraw-Hill/Duskin, Guilford, CT).
- Nietzsche, F.: 1882, W. Kaufmann (ed.), *The Gay Science* (trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale) (Random House, New York), 1974.
- Nietzsche, F.: 1888, W. Kaufmann (ed.), *The Will to Power* (trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale) (Random House, New York, 1967) para 1067, pp. 449–450.
- Olson, I. R. and C. Marshuetz: 2005, 'Facial Attractiveness is Appraised at a Glance', *Emotion* **5**(4), 498–502.
- Onians, R. B.: 1988, *The Origins of European Thought* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge), [1951].
- Peters, M. A.: 2005, 'Foucault, Counselling and the Aesthetics of Existence', *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling* **33**(3), 383–396.
- Postrel, V.: 2003, *The Substance of Style* (Harper Collins, New York).
- Solomon, R. C.: 1994, *The New World of Business* (Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, MD).
- Stewart, S.: 2005, *The Open Studio: Essays on Art and Aesthetics* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago).
- Stolnitz, J.: 1960, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art Criticism* (Boston: Houghton Muffin), pp. 32–42.
- Strati, A.: 1999, *Organization and Aesthetics* (Sage, London).
- Thiele, L. P.: 1990, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of the Soul* (Princeton University Press, Princeton).

John Dobson  
California Polytechnic State University,  
San Luis Obispo, U.S.A.  
E-mail: jdobson@calpoly.edu