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Aesthetics, Emotions, and Logics

Steven S. Taylor

Editor-in-Chief

Twenty years ago, when I was working on my PhD dissertation and I told people that I was focused on aesthetic experience I often got the response, “don’t you just mean emotion?” I worked very hard to explain how the aesthetic response was not just emotions, how it was more complex and included a perceptual and cognitive component as well as an emotional component (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990). I spoke about how it was holistic and integrated and I am pretty sure that I didn’t really convince any of the “don’t you just mean emotion?” folks. The question has not gone away, but over the last few of years I have developed a new response.

Damasio (1994) tells the story of Phinius Gage, who survived having a large iron rod driven through his brain. The accident left Gage without emotions. The fascinating result was that Gage was unable to make simple decisions, such as when a good time to meet would be. Damasio draws the conclusion that our emotional response to the world frames our cognitive response and without that framing, Gage was unable to know which cognitive framework should be employed to make the decision. In short, the critical question was why do we employ one logic rather another logic in a given situation and the answer was that our emotional response to a situation determined which logic we employed. In this view, emotions were temporally prior to cognitions and drove them. That was a radical view for the main stream academic world that privileged cognition above all else.

I have always liked the idea that our emotional response determined which of many possible logics we used in a given situation. It has face validity for me. And perhaps because I liked it, I never asked the next question – why do we have a particular emotional reaction in a given situation? I know that I am capable of having very different emotional reactions to very similar things and that others can have very different emotional reactions than I do to the very same thing. Why is that? What determines our choice (albeit unconscious and usually automatic in the same way that our choice of logic is unconscious and usually automatic) of a particular emotional response in a given situation? As you have probably already guessed, the answer is aesthetics. Or to use the language I have been developing with Doug Creed and Bryant Hudson (Creed, Taylor, & Hudson, under review), it is our personal aesthetic.

Our personal aesthetic develops over our lifetime as we learn how to respond to various sensations. At some age we learned that a sunset was beautiful and at perhaps another age we developed an appreciation for certain gender specific features of our peers. We also learned that feces were disgusting and farts were funny – of course, until they weren’t and then perhaps they were again. It is not just those rare moments when we catch our breath and experience beauty (Burke, 1767) that are driven by our personal aesthetic, it guides the mundane quotidian moments in our life as well. It is our personal aesthetic that allows us to see (and hear, taste, smell, and feel) with meaning. It is what makes “land become landscape” (Gagliardi, 2006).

While we can describe logics in terms of rules for reasoning and we can name and generally agree on well-established emotions, such as anger, joy, fear, and surprise; we don't have an established way to talk about personal aesthetics. Until we have language for naming and describing something, there is little hope for empirical exploration. Luckily there is another promising stream of research that may well provide the answer – Claus Springborg's (2018) conception of sensory templates, which I believe are describing particular instances of a personal aesthetic.

Springborg draws on work in embodied cognition to argue that we understand social situations as analogs to concrete, sensorimotor experiences. He refers to these sensorimotor experiences as "sensory templates" and his research shows how changing which sensory template is engaged in a specific situation changes a person's emotional reactions and cognitive understanding of the situation. In his research, Claus conducted workshops that used various arts-based methods to reveal the sensory templates and then explore alternative sensory templates. Let's take a look at one of his case examples to illustrate how this works.

The employees in the customer service department were very frustrated. They told Becky that they felt they were the part of the organization that was least valued and that employees in the other departments had the opinion that the customer service employees were easily replaceable. ... Becky described employees in the customer service department as extremely competent. ... When she spoke about the problem, she described it as a kind of Sisyphus work. Raising the employees' self-worth or sense of being appreciated was like pushing a boulder up a mountain only to watch it roll back down. This description is a direct description of the sensory template she used to comprehend the situation.

Using this sensory template to comprehend the situation, made Becky ask questions like: How can employees in customer service understand and feel that they are an important and valued part of the organization? How can I raise their self-worth? She had tried a number of things to raise the employees' self-worth and sense of appreciation, including investing in new equipment, giving them communication course, arranging events where they could tell the employees from the other departments about their work, and so on. However, it seemed impossible to keep the boulder from rolling back down the mountain.

During the workshop Becky took pictures, wrote a poem, and made a drawing to illustrate the situation. From this work emerged an alternative sensory template. To illustrate the problem, Becky took a picture of a bicycle wheel. When she spoke about this picture she said that the problem was also like riding your bicycle with the hand-break on: There is friction in the system.

Using this new sensory template to understand the situation, Becky began to ask: Where is the friction? Asking this question, Becky found a very interesting answer. The friction was created by the department manager, and not by the employees' lack of self-worth. She realized that the manager of the customer service department demanded that all decisions should be approved by him. Thus, the employees were not allowed to make decisions they were fully competent to make. This gave them very little influence on their own work life and contributed to their frustration and sense of not being valued. However, they were very loyal to the manager, and had not talked about this as a problem.

This made Becky realize that she could deal with the situation simply by talking to the manager about his leadership style and insisting that he would

give more responsibility to the employees and in this way acknowledge their competency and value them. She was very relieved about this realization. In our last interview, she said: "It's a completely different issue, than what I thought it was ... it is much more accessible and tangible". (Springborg, 2018: pp 105-106)

We can work backwards to understand Becky's initial understanding of the situation with the service department. Her logic was that her employees felt like they weren't valued by the rest of the organization and had internalized that sense, thus she had taken action to increase their own sense of their self-worth. It didn't work and she was left believing the problem was unsolvable, which within her logic it was – she couldn't change how the rest of the organization behaved towards her employees and her own logic suggested that was the source of the problem. Her emotional state isn't included, but we can imagine she was frustrated, perhaps even angry. The feelings of frustration and anger directed her to chose that particular logic, that is to say the logic is a post facto explanation of her emotional state. The emotional state in turn comes from the sensory template that she has engaged, that of continually pushing a boulder up a hill, only to watch it roll back again and again. It is her personal aesthetic that has felt the situation as pushing a boulder up a hill. This chain of reasoning begs the questions, where does her personal aesthetic come from, why did her personal aesthetic engage in that way (rather than with the sensory template of feeling friction in the system)? These are the questions that institutional aesthetics (Creed, Taylor, & Hudson, under review) provides a framework for exploring.

When you look at just one example, you might argue that Springborg has simply found a clever way to help people reframe their problems. I encourage you to look at the totality of the research and I think you will be convinced the cognitive reframing is a consequence of identifying the sensory template and replacing it with a different sensory template (and it doesn't happen in those cases where the sensory template isn't successfully identified). Different sensory templates lead to different emotional reactions and different cognitive understandings of a situation in the way that I have come to believe that different personal aesthetics lead to different emotional reactions and different logics being employed.

This is what makes me think that sensory templates might be a useful way to articulate personal aesthetics. Harkening back to Baumgarten's (1750/1936) original conception that aesthetics was the study of sensory knowing, it seems reasonable to suggest that we can describe an aesthetic in terms of the sensory template that is engaged in response to a complex and ambiguous social situation. Springborg's work also resonates with my own thinking in that it shows that we have many different aesthetics available to us – learned from our history of being part of many different social groupings, from family, to friends, to larger institutional and cultural contexts. It takes a fair amount of work to learn to recognize which sensory template is in play in a problematic situation and chose a different one (a process that sounds a lot like reflexivity to me), but it can be learned.

I find this idea so exciting because it brings together embodied, arts-based approaches with the more cognitive approaches (such as institutional theory) that have dominated organizational studies for many years. I also see it as a path forward for bringing together the focus on particular and individual that is a strength of an arts-based approach with the focus on the context and social structures that is a strength of most social science. In short, I am thrilled to think that sensory templates (2018) might offer an empirical way of operationalizing institutional aesthetics and am hopeful that the scholarly world might take this forward.

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About the Author(s)

Steve Taylor is a professor of leadership and creativity and the interim dean at the WPI Foisie Business School. His research is focused in two areas: organizational aesthetics and reflective practice. The former applies art-based scholarship and practice to management and organizations. The latter focuses on the ability to analyze our own actions and learn how to be more effective, ethical, and artful as managers and leaders. His research has been published in academic journals including *Organization Studies*, *Leadership Quarterly*, *Leadership*, *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, and *Journal of Management Studies*. Taylor is the author of the books: *Leadership Craft*, *Leadership Art; You're a Genius: Using Reflective Practice to Master the Craft of Leadership*; and *Staging organization: plays as critical commentaries on workplace life*. He is also the founding editor of the journal *Organizational Aesthetics*. Steve is a playwright, whose plays have been performed in England, France, Poland, Canada, Denmark, New Zealand, Italy, Australia, and the United States. He received a PhD in management from Boston College; an MA in performing arts from Emerson College; and a BS in humanities from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.