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Disappearing into the object: Aesthetic subjectivities & organizational control in routine cultural work

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Abstract

Taking a labor process approach to organizations in cultural industries, this article compares expressive and routine workers ((audio engineers and studio attendants) within a U.S. music-recording organization. I describe a practical control strategy that aims to reproduce the pleasurable feel of expressive work among routine cultural workers. Because this strategy depends upon workers aesthetic experiences of technological objects, I term this strategy *aesthetic enrollment*. Drawing upon theories of aesthetic experience and Callon and Law's enrollment processes, I theorize this strategy as a form of control. Engineers come to love their ability to express creativity at work and appear captivated by the organization's aesthetically compelling technical artifacts (music equipment or 'gear'). Among studio attendants, management provides similar aesthetically appealing, expressive technologies. These objects afford experiences among routine staff that resemble those found in more expressive occupations, providing opportunities for creativity in the context of routine, task-oriented work. This strategy manages the 'feel' of work and thus incorporates employees by way of their relationship with technical artifacts - part of the organization's aesthetic landscape.

Keywords: Organizational control, Labor process theory, Work, Aesthetic experience, Aesthetics, Technology, Cultural industries, Creativity, Ethnography

Introduction

As a core feature of cognitive-cultural or knowledge economies, the body of research on organizations and labor processes in cultural industries continues to grow (see Lingo and Tepper 2013 for review). Studies of cultural labor processes tend to emphasize the most visible cultural workers – focusing on artists, musicians, script writers, web-designers, fashion models, media executives, and audio engineers (e.g. Lingo & O'Mahony, 2010; Mears, 2011; Ross, 2004). With few

exceptions (e.g. Caldwell, 2008; Frenette, 2013), studies of cultural work tend to be studies of expressive workers – rendering invisible the labor processes of routine cultural workers. This article addresses this lacuna by focusing on the routine work of studio attendants and comparing their work to that of expressive audio engineers.

Routine work in creative or cultural industries remains under-examined and under-theorized with research presenting contradictory findings. For example, Caves claims that ‘humdrum’ workers in cultural industries ‘do not care who employs them or what task they are asked to undertake’ (2000, p. 4). Elsewhere, these workers have been found to accept low or no wages because cultural organizations possess the attractive lure of ‘cool’ (e.g. Chen, 2009). In this article, I argue that the former appears implausible whereas the latter requires an unpacking of material experiences associated with creative organizations’ supposed ‘cool.’ By unpacking these experiences, I explain how routine cultural workers come to be affectively attached to these industries’ least visible and least expressive jobs and how routine cultural work might be both experientially pleasurable and objectively exploitative.

With little theorization of routine cultural labor processes, I draw from research on expressive cultural work and posit two potential paths toward an explanation of routine cultural labor processes. On one hand, cultural explanations suggest that neo-liberalism’s participatory strategies of management articulate themselves with ‘bohemian’ cultural frames (Ross, 2004). Thus the cultural trope of the starving artist (Lloyd, 2006) and the cultural dichotomy that separates the pursuit of economic gains from art (Bourdieu, 1993; Gibson, 2003) frame exploitation as the pursuit of an economically disinterested passion. On the other hand, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) suggest that expressive workers experience autonomy at work, proximity to fame, and the ‘pleasurable absorption’ of engaging in creative acts. Worker experience compensates for negative structural features of cultural industries such as low pay, precarity, and radical labor market

uncertainty. Similarly, Menger (1999) argues that cultural workers rationally maximize subjective utility with regard to affective wages that include autonomy, low degrees of routine, feelings of self-actualization and community, a pleasing work environment, and positive social recognition. These affective wages, however, cannot be taken for granted and may not apply to routine cultural workers.

More importantly, organizational control's central place within labor process theory appears neglected in studies of cultural organizations. In particular, management often appears absent (Thompson, Jones, & Warhurst, 2007). While Ross's (2004) study of creative industries' post-bureaucratic, 'no-collar' workplaces stands out as a notable exception, even Ross fails to conceptualize control in the cultural labor process beyond 'self-exploitation' and 'fixing' how workers *feel* through extravagant organizational rituals (i.e. parties). More recent research suggests that managers feel no need to control employees (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011).

More generally, organizational control in post-bureaucratic, post-Fordist organizations manages through feelings, normative communities, identity, and, more recently, attempts to structure the labor process so as to foster an unsettled situation requiring continual learning (Sallaz, 2015) and to focus knowledge accumulation (Sewell, 2005) through objects (Rennstam, 2012). Extending these theories, I argue that management exercises control among routine cultural workers by managing the feel of work through technical artifacts and this strategy focuses knowledge accumulation.

Insofar as I focus on control, this article addresses labor process theory (LPT) – a subfield of critical management studies (CMS) – wherein control remains a central problematic. Despite recovering “the full subject” (Thompson & O’Doherty, 2011), LPT research rarely focuses on control's aesthetic dimension. LPT often ignores this “fourth dimension” of control (Gagliardi, 1996) and instead focuses on identity and organizational culture (e.g. Alvesson & Willmott, 2002;

Willmott, 1993). This article focuses precisely upon control's felt, aesthetic dimension in order to expand the subject within LPT and to include technology as a component of organizational aesthetics. I do so by highlighting the aesthetic dimension of technical artifacts and by illustrating how these objects facilitate managerial control over the labor process. Differing from extant studies of organizational aesthetics that emphasize architecture and organizational ephemera, I argue that technical artifacts may, under certain conditions, appear as sensually pleasing, aesthetic objects to employees. The sensual experience of these objects, I argue, enrolls workers into managerial projects of knowledge accumulation while distracting workers from low wages. Drawing from the social scientific study of art and ANT's enrollment processes, I term the process underlying this control strategy *aesthetic enrollment*.

Empirically, I find that routine workers experience aesthetic pleasure vis-à-vis technology in ways similar to expressive cultural workers. This experience explains why workers in my focal case (studio attendants) claim to 'love' their work despite low wages and perceived opportunities in more lucrative occupations. In order to explain routine workers, I provide a comparative case (audio engineers) within the same organization. Through comparison, I argue that supposedly inherent pleasures of cultural work depend upon technical artifacts. Engineers tend to enjoy projects that allow them to fully express themselves and demonstrate mastery over technologies. In that these technologies appear inseparable from their expressive capacity, engineers experience distinctive aesthetic pleasure vis-à-vis technology. Among routine workers, similar technical artifacts reproduce the 'feel' of expressive work. I argue that management fosters this experience as a practical strategy of control that directs knowledge accumulation. Management achieves this by placing these expressive technical artifacts throughout the workplace and encouraging their use during downtime. While interacting with these objects, studio attendants experience moments of 'absorbed pleasure' (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011, p. 132) while accumulating technical knowledge that benefits the

firm. As part of the organization's aesthetic landscape, these technologies afford actual and imagined forms of creativity or aesthetic agency and so I argue that these objects serve as an aesthetic mediation between management and employees.

In what follows, I first discuss LPT approaches to organizational control and research on cultural work. I then discuss data collection before proceeding to present qualitative data drawn from participant observation. Finally, I recapitulate my argument and conclude by discussing my findings in relation to research on organizational control and organizational aesthetics.

Control over the labor process and aesthetic experience

Control and consent to managerial authority constitute the central research problematic within the labor process tradition (Jermier, 1983; Warhurst, Thompson, & Nickson, 2008). Broadly, control includes techniques and strategies that managers employ in order to elicit desired behavior and effort, thus aligning workers' interests with those of management (Edwards, 1979, p. 17). Though initially focused on the 'objective' conditions of work (e.g. Braverman, 1974), labor process research now often includes subjective (i.e. symbolic, emotional, and experiential) aspects of organizing work (Smith 1994; see also O'Doherty and Willmott 2000). These subjective control mechanisms include managing workplace sociality through 'games' (Burawoy, 1982), the subjective and embodied aspects of work such as emotions (Hochschild, 2003 [1983]), identities (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), and structuring the pathways to meaning by shaping organizational culture (Kunda, 1992). This subjective trajectory has made great strides in resolving labor process theory's lack of a 'full subject' (Knights, 1990, p. 297) by incorporating many experiential facets of work into analyses of the labor process. Still, there exists a clear tendency to focus on the labor process's discursive or say-able aspects – especially in studies of control focused on organizational culture (see, e.g. Allaire & Firsirotu, 1984; Alvesson, 2002 for review).

In focusing on clearly articulable identities and contested, often discursive meanings, the subjective trajectory sheds less light on the relationship between management and organizational life's aesthetic, sensorial components – what Gagliardi (1996) terms the ‘fourth dimension of control.’ Inhabiting post-bureaucratic organizations includes positive, linear relationships to *feeling* ‘creative’ and positive workplace affects (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller, & Straw, 2005), ‘flow’ experiences wherein employees *feel* wholly engaged (Quinn, 2005), *desire* for technologically mediated information (Cetina & Bruegger, 2000), and *desire* to master complex technological systems (Boutang, 2011). In post-bureaucratic organizations, managerial control presumably recedes into the background. In lieu of managerial control, normative communities of trust, market mechanisms, and organizational products serve as probable control mechanisms (Adler, 2001). These studies suggest a workforce regulated through prior socialization, shared affective and aesthetic experiences, and the demands of the labor market.

Within cultural industries, consent to organizational control relies upon similar mechanisms. As mentioned earlier, I draw from research on expressive cultural work due to the dearth of research on routine cultural workers. Explanations from the study of expressive work often depend upon socialization or rewards external to the workplace. Examples include self-exploitation stemming from art's romantic ideology that separates the profane (economic activity) from the sacred (art). Thus the romantic ideology of *art pour art* (Bourdieu 1993) trickles into the workplace, providing ideological support (Arvidsson, Malossi, & Naro, 2010; Gibson, 2003) for the long hours, low wages, and precariousness that typify cultural labor (Sengupta, Edwards, & Tsai, 2009).

Alternatively, *expressive* workers pursue affective wages (Menger, 1999). These affective wages include autonomy, self-actualization, using a wide-range of skills, community, low-routine, and social recognition (Menger, 1999, p. 555). Autonomy with regard to the planning and execution of tasks appears across numerous case studies as a consistent feature of cultural work. Among expressive

cultural workers, managers claim that expressive workers are best left alone and autonomy supposedly stems from the unmanageable quality of creative activity (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). Among expressive workers, autonomy tends to result in satisfaction, the pleasure of doing what one considers to be good work, learning new skills that enable creativity, and feelings of self-actualization (Barley & Kunda, 2011; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Lloyd, 2006, p. 184).

The other sources of affective income appear plausible in *expressive* cultural work but remain underexplored and untheorized with regard to *routine* workers in cultural industries. For example, Caves suggests that ‘hum drum’ workers in cultural industries such as salespersons, office workers, accountants, and event-coordinators are ‘just in it for the money’ (2000, p. 4), while others suggest that workers are initially attracted to ‘cool’ industries (Chen, 2009). The remaining affective wages (i.e. a way of life, social recognition) lie outside the workplace. Within the workplace itself, there remains the proximity to fame and art along with the potential, though improbable moments of ‘pleasurable absorption’ associated with the sensorial, aesthetic experience of creative activity (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011, p. 132). Given a modicum of autonomy, one expects to find either proximity to cultural objects or an experiential, absorbed pleasure at work. These aspects of cultural work appear plausible, if not probable, in routine cultural labor processes.

If even the most mundane work contains a distinct aesthetic dimension (Fine, 1992), then, perhaps, mundane workplace objects elicit aesthetic experiences. As conceptualized by various theorists, aesthetic experience tends to elude discursive elaboration and remain rather autonomous from calculative forms of cognition or reason (e.g. Marcuse, 1979; Strati, 1999). Aesthetic experience appears similar to contemporary theorizations of affect or the ‘visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing’ that ‘drive us toward movement’ (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 1). In the study of organizing, aesthetic tends to refer to sense experiences elicited by organizational artifacts (Gagliardi, 1996). In this article, I focus on technical artifacts to which

employees ascribe beauty. Throughout this article, I use affective and aesthetic in similar ways however, I consistently use aesthetic with regard to objects and affective with regard to the emotional tenor between human actors.

Beginning with Gagliardi's 'aesthetic landscaping' (1996) and continuing with Hancock's 'aestheticization of work' (2003), organizational aesthetics research argues that aesthetic experience may function as a form of control. Here, I wish to extend this aesthetic dimension of control by borrowing concepts from the social-scientific study of art: Gell's technologies of enchantment (1992, 1998) and DeNora's related concept of aesthetic agency (2000). Notably, Gell's work provides a point of articulation between theories of control and material, semiotic theories of aesthetic experience (Hancock, 2005).

Gell proposed that aesthetic objects - emically defined as beautiful - serve as technologies that constitute social relationships and groups (1992, p. 43). He refers to this as enchantment. Enchantment depends upon the inability of group members to fully understand the means by which beautiful objects come into existence (e.g. marveling at the production of a painting). In eliciting aesthetic experiences, objects act as indexical signs of human agency (Gell, 1998). Thus the interaction between objects and individuals constitutes a social relationship between human agency embodied in objects and a sensing subject. As Gell states, the aesthetic object

...is inherently social in a way in which the merely beautiful or mysterious object is not: it is a physical entity which mediates between two beings, and therefore creates a social relation between them, which in turn provides a channel for further social relations and influences (1998, p. 52)

The interaction results in captivation which consists of being confronted with an object that displays a 'spectacle of unimaginable virtuosity' that elicits deep fascination or 'becoming *trapped within* [emphasis added] the aesthetic object (Gell, 1998, p. 71)¹. While aesthetic objects may contain 'unimaginable' actions for untrained observers, those possessing a degree of knowledge regarding their production or use may infer creative processes congealed in or afforded by the object.

Observers may not, however, have imagined these processes prior to the encounter. Gell's captivation requires modification in order to explain relations between technical artifacts and workers. In considering workers or spectators with some degree of artistic inclination or training, I take Gell to mean that aesthetic objects invite observers to imagine processes that produced the object.

Extending Gell, I contend that aestheticized *technical artifacts index processes that the object may enable*. Thus technical artifacts index the agency of the observer. Because the observer had not previously imagined these processes, the object captivates, constituting a social relation between actors mediated by the object. Technical artifacts appear to workers as subjectively beautiful while also enabling aesthetic agency or their human capacity to be expressive, exerting control over the sounds and sights encountered in daily life (DeNora, 2000, p. 20).

Rather than abducting another's expressive activity (the process that produced an aesthetic object), I argue that enchanting technical artifacts invite employees to imagine their potential aesthetic agency or the process of producing *with* an aestheticized technical artifact. In that firms own these technical artifacts, this constitutes a relationship between firm and employee mediated by the objects that facilitate the production of knowledge, information, or, in this article, culture. The imagined, potential, and indeterminate expressivity afforded by these technical artifacts provides for what I term *aesthetic enrollment*. Here, I refer, implicitly, to Callon and Law's concept of enrollment (1982). Enrollment refers to any process by which one set of actors attempts to translate or transform the interests, 'desires, motives, and wishes' of another set of actors (Callon & Law, 1982, p. 622). Successful enrollment processes result in temporary stabilizations of control or order within some domain of social life. Turning back to the study of art objects, aesthetic enrollment yields a tentative control by 'aligning particular, specific actors with generic and non-specific modalities of action' (DeNora, 2003, p. 126).

Given a workplace suffused by technical artifacts that employees' consider 'beautiful' and that enable aesthetic agency or expression (i.e. music equipment), I argue that routine employee interaction with these technical artifacts serves as a form of control predicated upon the underlying aesthetic enrollment process. Among routine cultural workers, the technology of cultural production serves as a mediation between firm and employee by creating a social relationship between these two groups. A positive outcome of this process depends upon worker subjectivities that render the object(s) intelligible. The organization depends upon subjectivities produced elsewhere (e.g. education, social milieu) that are re-produced at work through interactions between employees and objects. These interactions provide for and temporally precede the procurement of affective wages and provide a sensual basis for the *art pour art* ideologies highlighted elsewhere (e.g. Lloyd, 2006; Ross, 2004). Furthermore, this differs sharply from common experiential control mechanisms (i.e. games; see, e.g., Burawoy, 1982; Roy, 1953; Sallaz, 2015) in that experiences provoked by these objects do not appear bolstered by competition or strictly economic rational self-interest. As such, I argue that managerially fostered aesthetic experiences vis-à-vis technical artifacts explain how routine cultural workers come to enjoy work.

Methodology

Given my focus on experiential and processual aspects of organizations, ethnography and in-depth interviews appeared best-suited for data collection. My ethnographic data stems from six months of participant observation conducted in 2013 at Creativity Inc (CI) – a rehearsal and recording studio in Los Angeles, California. I gained access through one of CI's managers whom I had approached about doing research within his firm. The manager allowed me to take on a role within the workplace as an unpaid assistant to CI's 26 all male, mostly part-time employees. I worked alongside attendants and shadowed engineers.

Conceptualized as distinct cases, I present each occupation with attention to work's

objective features (e.g. wages, skill requirements) and experiential relationships between workers, management, and artifacts. I spent two to three, eight-hour shifts per week in CI's office among attendants. While having an ethnographer around the studio's office raised few concerns, engineers felt that my presence during recording sessions might make clients anxious, so I spent significantly less time directly observing engineers. I observed seven sessions and supplemented this observation by conversing with engineers in between sessions and through interviews with both engineers and attendants.

The data presented here stems mostly from participant observation and less formal conversations. Interviews supplement ethnographic data. Twelve staff members and CI's three owner-managers (managers) were interviewed. Interviews ranged from 60 to 153 minutes in length. In addition to questions about observed activities, interviews covered personal and work history, social origin, and education. Employee ages ranged from 21 to 33. Generally, engineers and attendants possessed comparable levels of training and education with most holding certificates in music production or performance.

Theorized as pre-discursive, pre-rational, felt experience and characterized as separate from cognition (see, e.g., Strati, 1999; see also Hancock, 2005 for critique), aesthetic experience vis-à-vis objects should not be easily conveyed through words by informants. This suggests that informants may use metaphors or find verbal explanation difficult (Warren, 2008, p. 561). As such, Warren (2008) advocates a 'sensual methodology' that documents organizational landscapes (e.g. photographs, audio recordings) and uses said documentation to elicit discussions of experiences during interviews. Following this strategy, I closely observed daily life among routine and expressive workers and captured behavioral data through fieldnotes. Data included interactions had by workers and myself with technical artifacts as well as the everyday metaphors used by workers to describe these interactions. Additionally, I photographed and recorded workplace sounds to capture CI's

aesthetic landscape. These observations, photographs, and recordings guided further observation and the development of interview questions. Based on these data sources, I then formulated questions intended to elicit grounded discussions of workers' felt experiences and associated metaphors.

Following what Timmermans and Tavory (2012) refer to as abductive analysis, I entered the field in search of anomalies to a variety of potentially relevant theories in order to guide an otherwise grounded approach. Methodologically, this represents a compromise between the theoretically-driven deduction of extended-case methodology (Burawoy, 1998) and grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Using qualitative analysis software, I coded fieldnotes using extant theoretical categories and inductively generated categories. In order to 'test' my interpretation of observed behavior at work and the explanations provided by my informants, I provided an initial draft of this article to workers at CI and, following the approval of employees, with CI's management. Both groups' comments were considered in refining my analysis.

Routine and expressive work at Creativity Inc.

CI's managers give substantial autonomy to supervisors of horizontally differentiated departments and prefer to manage through careful hiring choices rather than direct control. Each division draws from Los Angeles's standing reserve of music professionals as its pool of potential employees. Characteristic of post-bureaucratic organizations, engineers comprise a network of workers at the organization's boundaries with audio engineers typically working in CI's recording department in addition to a patchwork of 'gigs' at other studios. Attendants tend to work at CI as a 'day job' that subsidizes their often unpaid or intermittent employment as musicians or engineers. Like the majority of US workers, CI's workers are non-union. Table 1 below displays core features

of the two cases examined in this article. I elaborate upon the experiential components of work later. Here, I discuss skills, wages, and benefits.

Table 1. Comparison of expressive and routine cultural work at CI

Case	Expressive cultural work	Routine cultural work
Occupation	Audio engineer	Studio attendant
Components of work	Interaction work Interpretive, cognitive labor	Interaction work Service & manual labor
Requisite skills	Requires specialized technical knowledge	Requires specialized technical knowledge
Wages	\$15-\$30/hour	\$10-\$12/hour
Fringe benefits	Personal use of firm-owned technologies	Personal use of firm-owned technologies
Type of autonomy	Autonomy in completion of projects	Autonomy in completion of tasks
Relation to technology	Aesthetic pleasure of essential tools	Aesthetic pleasure of non-essential tools
Creativity	High creativity in use of essential work technologies	Low creativity in tasks; "Feel" of creativity afforded by management as control

Both occupations require technical and tacit skills gained through formal education and practical experience. While management recognizes engineers' skills, managers claimed that attendants required 'few skills' despite comparable levels of education and training vis-à-vis engineers. Consistently, managers compared attendants to food service workers. While undervalued, attendants' subjectivities and skills were not wholly unrecognized. Discounting the specificity of attendant knowledge, a manager stated that, 'Someone that works [in a coffee shop] has about the same amount of experience needed to work at CI.' He then acknowledged the skills and training involved in service occupations, noted their low wages, and stated, 'we pay at least a little bit more than that.'

According to this manager, roughly 33% of all revenue at CI goes toward labor costs – the largest of any of its expenditures. As he said, 'If I had a real chief operating office, they would tell me to lower salaries.' Both CI's engineers and attendants receive less than the median wage for either position within the U.S. music industry. (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). Employees do

not receive additional benefits such as healthcare. As another manager stated, 'I know the pay is low, but there are other benefits that they get' such as free access to CI's arsenal of music equipment, the recording studio, and free use of the rehearsal studios.

In terms of wages and benefits, neither attendants nor engineers have what Kalleberg (2011) terms a 'good job,' yet these workers frequently claimed to love work at CI while simultaneously citing potential job options in more lucrative service and white-collar occupations such as barbering, waiting-tables, market research, and clerical work. Even one of the few vocally unhappy employees felt conflicted.

Look at me. I'm still here working for chump change. So the owners [managers] figured out a way to create this community and create this thing that all these guys are fine with making pennies. They're along for the ride and whole-heartedly devoted to it.

I argue that the aesthetic experience or sensual feel of the workplace explains - if only partially - the employees' affective attachment to work. Before detailing engineers' and attendants' working days, I turn to management.

Management's 'creativity'

Upon first meeting with a manager at CI, he said that CI offers clients 'a truly *creative* space.' Specifically referencing Richard Florida's *Creative Class* (2002), he stated that the interior and exterior décor of the building represented the 'critical mass of creativity' that laid within. The studio's brochure describes the space as a 'creative space that feels creative,' inviting clients to rehearse and record music in CI's 'magical places.'

This extends to CI's strategy of managing. As a manager stated, the company attempts to make employees 'feel creative' at work. As he expanded upon this statement he said 'We just really have to encourage creativity in the work environment.' This creative strategy included 'Managing people in a way that they *feel* empowered and are empowered on some level, but still things get done that need to get done [emphasis added].' Later sections of this article illustrate the technical artifacts

through which CI manages this 'feel' that encourages creativity in humdrum jobs. In terms of ensuring that things 'get done,' management tends to be physically absent from the workplace. Instead, they leave the day-to-day supervising of tasks to departmental supervisors.

Managers advise these workers to 'take ownership' and use their department as a platform for their own 'creativity.' As a manager said, 'Instead of believing that I know the best way to get things done, I'd rather give them goals. Ok, your division needs to cover its expenses and be profitable.' He further elaborated his anti-managerial approach to management:

I respect the fact that most people don't like being managed. That's part of the hiring process. I'm trying to ascertain 'is this someone that can really take ownership of their job or is this a guy that the second something goes wrong they're going to pick up the phone and call me.' That's not helping anybody. Those two things: the hiring and the managing are really tied to that personality type. [I'm looking for a person] who can be a fixer.

In practical terms, managers appear to not want to be bothered with the running of the business. They grant supervisors decision-making authority and allow them to implement changes in the material arrangement and aesthetic adornment of organizational spaces.

How the managerial invitation to 'be creative' extends to non-supervisory workers still appeared less clear. Toward the end of fieldwork, I inquired about the relationships between technology and workers that I describe later. Specifically, I asked managers if they were aware of how attendants interacted with technology. They acknowledged and concurred with my observations. As one said 'Yeah, Yeah. For better or for worse, my managerial style is to provide guidelines and encourage creativity in work' and then went on to elaborate upon this topic of creativity. He extended this strategy to non-supervisory employees, stating that

I'm not going to micromanage how you do it, but just go. If you're fucking around with synthesizers or whatever, that's cool. It's helpful for us. We need someone that knows how to use those things and you're doing it. For me it's all about making sure that people are lined up with the things that they're doing whether it's directly like the supervisor of the store or indirectly like the front room guys [attendants] being able to fuck around with synthesizers.

Management affords workers a good deal of autonomy in the execution of tasks and the completion of projects. This applies ‘directly’ to supervisors and indirectly to their subordinates. Before showing how the material instantiation of management’s ‘creative’ strategy depends upon the aesthetic experiences elicited by technical artifacts, I turn to audio engineers’ technologically immersive, expressive work. Among engineers, managers do not control the feel of work.

Engineers and their tools

Requiring formal education and apprenticeship, audio engineering demands extensive knowledge of sound frequencies, complex technologies, and interactional skills. Engineers serve not only as mediating nodes in team-based projects (Lingo & O’Mahony, 2010), but as mediators between musicians and technologies. As such, studios often advertise their arsenals of equipment – what informants called ‘gear’ – rather than engineers’ expertise (Kealy, 1974, p. 102).

Beholden only to their clients, audio engineers possess a high degree of autonomy with little to no managerial oversight during typical recording sessions. Management, however, controls the allocation of desirable sessions (‘gigs’). Desirable sessions tend to allow for engineers’ creative use of equipment in the service of high-profile clients. These desirable sessions tend to be those that allow engineers to deploy their expertise at work. For example, the engineers buzzed excitedly when a well-known rock group was scheduled to record. I expected the engineers were excited because they were fans, yet an engineer explained to me that he looked forward to the session because the group had booked a week of studio time.² Extended time, coupled with a full band (guitar, bass, drums, synthesizers, and horns) enabled engineers to more fully employ their skills and exercise judgment in the use of a wider array of equipment and sounds. Lengthier, more complex sessions tended to generate more talk around the studio than simply working ‘a pop’ (pop music session) that required

only one microphone for vocalists singing atop pre-recorded music. For engineers ‘pops’ were ‘easy money,’ but not particularly desirable gigs.

A typical 14-hour session begins an hour before the arrival of musicians. Alone with the gear, engineers perform setup tasks such as testing equipment and choosing potential microphone placements. Following these tasks, engineers open digital audio workstation software (DAW) on a computer and adjust the DAW to record signals from microphones that he has just set up. When musicians arrive, engineers ask them to play their instruments or sing while carefully adjusting various interfaces linked to the DAW through a complex assemblage of rack-mounted subsystems and cabling.

Musicians ask engineers to modify their recorded sounds using rather abstract language such as ‘make it more like a dance kick,’ ‘make it more blue,’ or even ‘make it pillowy.’ Engineers quickly translate these abstract commands into concrete technical adjustments through various mechanical and virtual control surfaces. A veteran engineer explained that he had become so close to his gear that ‘When I hear something, my brain formulates decisions.’ Thus the engineer functions as mediating agent between musicians and complex technologies that extend and enable engineers’ and musicians’ aesthetic agency.

Fully immersed in the flow of work, engineers rarely pause to comment upon the studio’s aesthetic landscape of LEDs, multi-colored microphones, and rack-mounted audio processing equipment. Here the engineer knows what this equipment does and exercises considerable control over the objects’ affordances. Physically immersed, engineers operate music technology with all four of their limbs by using the aforementioned control surfaces and a set of footswitches. Fully integrated with these machines, engineers employ skills developed through years of practical experience and education. To use my informants’ words, engineers ‘disappear’ into the equipment

insofar as the technology extends their expressive capacities or aesthetic agency. As I show later, engineers appear enchanted by these machines.

Further exemplifying this human/machine integration, engineers often give visual cues to musicians through a control room window. These cues are not primed by engineers' familiarity with songs, but by experiencing the song as mediated by a computer display that depicts multi-colored visualizations of sound waves for each recorded instrument. 'Reading' this sound graph as the song plays, the engineer can 'see' drumbeats, chords, and singing in ways that the musicians, experiencing the sound immediately, cannot. The music production process thus depends upon this fluid human/machine interaction and these objects provide for the engineer's aesthetic agency, circumscribed by client interests.

Sessions often consist of the social scene described above, however, many sessions consist of interactions between an isolated engineer and studio equipment. Emmerich, CI's senior engineer, often works alone producing and editing music for use in advertisements and television in a small, dimly lit studio. He said the lighting sets the appropriate 'mood' as he compiled pieces of songs recorded by distal musicians located in other U.S. states and reassembled these sounds into modular, interchangeable song parts (i.e. chorus, verse, etc.). Other people are not present and so the engineer orients himself toward equipment. Thus, these moments may best be described as 'post-social' interactions between engineer and equipment wherein 'it appears unclear whether...other persons are indeed the most fascinating part of their environment' (Cetina & Bruegger, 2000, p. 142).

In this post-social moment, Emmerich edited and 're-timed' performances through the computer-assisted manipulation of each beat and note of every performance. Software analyzed each musician's performance and attempted to predict the proper rhythm of each performance based upon algorithmic calculations. Using a 'click track' (digital metronome) and the software's grid overlay, Emmerich attempted to make each note of each performance perfectly match the tempo.

This allowed him to craft 'perfect' performances by virtually assembling a technically perfect whole from fragments of multiple performances. Software enables quick assessments of technically specified quality and permits him to produce an objectively 'perfect' song wherein each note can be made to occur on the computer-defined beat. Not wholly slaves to the machine, engineers exercise judgment by allowing for occasional deviation from the unwavering grid.

Software and its accompanying haptic machinery enable and extend the engineer's abilities - allowing him to manipulate technical and affective qualities of performances. Through this technology, engineers possess the ability to exercise aesthetic agency, producing music used by consumers in their daily lives or by other cultural producers farther downstream in music production processes. Much like the previous example, direct managerial oversight appears largely absent from this project-centered work. Engineers orient directly to technology and the demands of clients or their profession, producing skillfully constructed recordings that showcase their skills.

Given work processes wherein aesthetic agency appears inseparable from technology, gear becomes an enjoyable, even lovable, object of desire. Echoing the feeling of being 'turned on' by studio equipment found elsewhere (Kealy, 1974, p. 85), one engineer said, 'We truly love that stuff. The gear is the fun part. It's the porn side of the job. I'm for real about that'³. When asked whether the equipment affected his desire to work at CI, another engineer said, 'Yeah, it does actually. Like I love the possibilities of what something can bring me.' During breaks engineers frequently pointed out specific items that they were excited about such as a gold-plated microphone, 'symphony quality' microphone stands, various analog and digital synthesizers, and computer programs that modify sound by adding effects such as reverberation (echo) and dynamic volume adjustments (compression).

Engineers particularly enjoyed elaborate, expensive, or rare gear. As one engineer played back a recording after a lengthy session, he said, 'I had like \$60,000 worth of microphones rigged up

during this session. It sounds great!' He then isolated the song's lead vocals and said, 'That's what a \$20,000 microphone in front of your face sounds like. [It's] beautiful.' Beyond dollar value, the engineer explained that he enjoyed the session because the musicians took direction well, allowing him to exercise judgment by selecting microphones and microphone placements.

Engineering work includes close interaction and integration with equipment and so engineers develop emotional and aesthetic attachments with gear (i.e. 'I love them,' 'they're beautiful'). Expression and creativity appear inseparable from these objects, and so gear comes to be seen as fun, enjoyable, or, more often, ineffably 'cool.' In that the firm owns these technologies, the engineers lack ownership over their technologically mediated means of expression while feeling subjectively attached to 'gear.' Interactions with technology constitute the sensorial 'feel' of engineers' creative work. This aesthetic subjectivity - developed through expressive work - serves as a precondition for management's creative control strategy among rehearsal attendants.

'Disappearing' attendants

As a mixture of what a manager referred to as a 'musician's pro shop' and a typical office with filing cabinet, phone, computer, and desk, the rehearsal office functions as check-in for the studio's rehearsal rooms and as showroom for on-sale equipment. Loud and cacophonous, up to 10 musical groups rehearse simultaneously in nearby rooms. Mexican norteño clashes against electronic dance music and punk. Attendant work in the rehearsal office consists of four service and clerical tasks: checking-in clients, trouble-shooting equipment, cleaning or 'resetting' rehearsal studios, and downtime wherein attendants answer phones, reserve rooms, sell sundry items (i.e. guitar plectrums, drumsticks), and maintain inventory.

In order to knowledgeably troubleshoot equipment and maintain rehearsal space functionality, attendants use knowledge developed in the context of work or training as engineers or

musicians. To provide proper service to customers, attendants must know about amplifiers, studio equipment, various aspects of instrument repair, and the common needs of musicians and engineers. Beyond this, the office supervisor stated multiple times that he looks for ‘affable’ people who will not be ‘bitter about being a musician serving other musicians.’ Others in management stated that this sort of interactional work is crucial for the studio’s ability to provide ‘a creative space’ to clients. Management populates this space with knowledgeable employees by hiring from the studio’s intern pool, its customers, and employees’ social networks.

Managers and employees often cited the great, gear-centered benefits offered by the studio – using the facilities and equipment at no charge – as an alternate form of compensation. Employees bemoaned the rarity of these moments due to their work schedules. During my observation, employees had their scheduled use of facilities moved or removed from the studio’s schedule without their knowledge. Supervisors – rather than lower level employees – tended to be the benefits’ majority users. Absent these perks, the work objectively consisted of clerical and service tasks.

Despite this, employees saw a congruity between their aspirations and their working lives. As an attendant named Sam said to me,

Even if I'm up front answering phones, adjusting the PA, wrapping cables, or trying to fix a guitar amp, at the end of the day, I'm still doing something musical. I don't know. This place is just, well, the easy answer would be to just say that I like the people, but really, it's just a cool place.

While Sam and others cited the social context of the workplace as a crucial component in explaining their job satisfaction, they also frequently made statements suggesting an assemblage of ineffable qualities of organizational life that exceed any explanation provided by theories limited to strictly social relations in production. In stating, ‘it’s just a cool place,’ Sam suggests this ineffable excess. Moreover, the material objects associated with creative work make this a ‘cool’ space – one

that does not *feel* like work. While stocking a vending machine in the studio, Arnold described the tasks of procuring these items as follows

I'm ordering all this gear, some input/output Symphony boxes, new compressors, and then we've got these pre[amp]'s, you know EQ[ualizers], preamp strips for microphones. I mean putting in orders for this stuff and getting it all set up, that's not work to me. It's great. Some kid here was like 'yeah you've got a cool job' and I'm thinking like 'Yeah, well I'm restocking a vending machine right now [it's not that cool when I'm doing this].'

Arnold suggests a certain distance from his work. He finds restocking to be unpleasant, yet ordering equipment does not seem like work. Even an employee who left CI stated that, despite hating the job because of low wages, CI did not 'feel' like work. As in the quote above, the 'cool' part of work, the part that does not 'feel' like work tended to be linked to the office's technical artifacts or 'gear.'

In conjunction with the workplace's social context, these objects demonstrate a partial causal effect in terms of pleasure on the job. Attendant work includes a fair amount of predictable downtime. As an attendant said,

It's pretty predictable. I don't like predictability in my life, but in my time that I sell to someone else I like as little stress as possible. I prefer to use my body [rather] than head because my head is reserved for more important and expensive endeavors [like art and music].

Attendants often fill downtime by playing creative games or, less frequently, by working on their own songs in preparation for auditions. Playing a game appears comparable to the sort of games found in classic labor process studies (e.g. Burawoy, 1982; Roy, 1959); however, games at CI include a non-competitive musical twist. Attendants engaged in a composition game similar to the artistic composition technique called the 'exquisite corpse.' In this game, one person begins to create an artwork and several people finish the process of creation. Attendants on one shift would compose a partial song using the office computer and leave the unfinished song for co-workers to complete on the next shift. Suggestive of an attempt to focus these creative efforts, a manager removed these songs from the office computer. While this action seemed to contradict CI's general managerial strategy of 'encouraging creativity at work,' management redirects their employees' tendency to play

creative games by providing objects that make the job ‘not feel like work.’ These objects tend to be for sale and thus more closely linked to revenue generation. This is highlighted by the arrival of high-end synthesizers manufactured by Moog.

After a manager informed Robert (a supervisor) that the Moog equipment would be returning from a corporate-branded art gallery, both Sam and Robert became excited. Office conversation revolved around the equipment’s return for the remainder of the day. Robert even began to play songs that featured Moog device on the office stereo. As a supervisor, he repeatedly emphasized the exchange value of these items and client desires. Regular employees, on the other hand, emphasized how they would be able to use these devices in the studio and play with them while at work. ‘Oh man that's going to be so cool to play around with later. There's a Theremin in there. You know what those are?’ asked Sam.

When the manager returned with a box full of sleek, white Moog devices, the office’s affective tenor suddenly changed to that of Christmas morning. Attendants explained to me that these devices were limited editions and that they typically only came in black. ‘Here's your toys, guys!’ said the manager as he unveiled the gear – a managerial performance that I had seen before at CI. In other instances, this manager invited employees to gaze upon equipment, rhetorically asking, ‘Aren’t they beautiful?’

Everyone immediately dropped whatever it was that they were working on in order to assemble the Moog equipment for display in the office and for use in the studio. Sam, an attendant, said that the gear has ‘beautiful knobs that are so cool.’ After assembling the items, Robert, the supervisor said, ‘I know just the guitar to test these babies out!’ and he left to grab a guitar. Meanwhile, Sam and I assembled the Theremin – a device that generates sound through bodily manipulation of invisible electro-magnetic fields. Once assembled, the device emitted high-pitched

squeals and low frequency wobbles as we gestured frantically above its metal poles; our manual wizardry conjuring sounds from thin air. “This is so cool!” Sam exclaimed.

The aforementioned gear-bearing manager stated in an interview that these items are as important in making the workplace ‘cool’ for employees, as they are potential sources of revenue.

He stated,

That Moog deal was just as much about everyone at the company being like ‘this is cool’ as it was about a [sales] partnership. In the work environment we have to encourage creativity. To me it’s all about making sure people are lined up with what they’re doing.

This lining-up of organizational demands and worker creativity comes in the two forms. Supervisors were encouraged to take control of their divisions and lower-level employees were encouraged to play with equipment because CI rents and sells these devices to clients. Additionally, an employee informed me that a supervisor sent out a company-wide email asking employees to tinker with the equipment. The message half-jokingly concluded, ‘If you don’t already want to [play with this stuff] you have no soul.’

Here, the organization leverages the aesthetic pleasures of the object in order to focus and make use of pre-existing tacit skills. This object-anchored ‘cool’ serves as a control mechanism, enrolling workers through the reproduction of the sensual experience of expressive work. This reproduction of this sensual experience serves as a delicate, precariously placed bandage that enrolls attendants while capturing knowledge produced in the course of techno-social interaction.

In the months following the introduction of this hardware, employees frequently took breaks to experiment with synthesizers or play instruments through the limited edition audio manipulation devices. This occurred most frequently during the slowest shifts wherein few clients appeared on the rehearsal schedule and little administrative/clerical work needed to be done. One evening, an employee brought a homemade cigar-box guitar with him. He intended to play this homemade instrument through the office’s impressive array of timbre altering devices. During

downtime, he approached the devices and realized that the amplifier necessary for him to use his homemade guitar had been removed from the display. 'Where'd the [amplifier] head go to?' he asked rhetorically. 'Hmm, they must've sold it.' The amplifier had only been removed for repair.

Though he shook this off in a way that suggests that the absence of his distraction held little importance to him, he appeared noticeably curt with clients and visibly distressed for the rest of the shift. He repeatedly looked around for the missing amplifier and re-stated to co-workers that he planned to play his homemade guitar through the equipment. It is important to recall that in the context of engineer work, equipment such as this appears as inseparable from work's pleasures of creativity and skill deployment. If the firm's objects enable aesthetic agency, then the denial of these objects denies the promise of 'dispensation from a life that is always too little' (Adorno, 2004 [1970], p. 14) afforded by aesthetically pleasing objects that alter the sensible 'feel' of work. This 'feel' reproduces the pleasurable absorption associated with expressive occupations – albeit in a partial way.

Another new synthesizer arrived during a quiet shift: the \$5000, Moog Voyager XL. Intended to replicate the look and feel of vintage technology from the 1970s, the large, wood paneled Voyager possesses nearly limitless sound-generating capabilities. It includes multiple control interfaces and a 'patch-bay' that enables further manipulation through the manual routing of electronic signals via an array of cables. Marcus, an attendant, was working in the front office that evening. He said, 'I'm working up here, but [the manager] want me to figure out how that thing works so I got a bunch of patch cables for the patch bay. [That synth] makes you want to smoke some weed and disappear into that thing.' Earlier, Sam and another attendant named Arnold had made similar comments about how they had spent a lunch hour 'lost inside' a similar device.

In an interview, Marcus explained disappearing as 'hyper-focus where time is irrelevant and hunger or going to the bathroom are [irrelevant] too' akin to 'reading a novel and not wanting to put

it down, that kind of immersion.’ Another employee called this ‘being in the zone’ that ‘does not feel like work.’ In other words, the experience afforded by these objects reproduces a commonly found experience among workers in more expressive occupations such as the engineers described earlier. These comments appear similar to the ‘flow’ states found among information technology workers (Chun, 2005; Quinn, 2005) and cultural workers (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011, p. 132) wherein workers ‘stop being aware of themselves as separate from the activity they are performing’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 53).

Days later, I heard strange electronic sounds emanating from inside the front room. Through the doorway I saw Marcus in front of the synthesizer. Not touching any of the device’s keypads, Marcus simply inserted cables into the patchbay’s numerous holes. He had found the ‘hold’ function that he had been searching for previously. This allows for the manipulation of tonal parameters without depressing any keys on the device. He pointed to a button on the device and said, ‘Yeah man, it's right here. Man, this is fun.’ As I left the studio several hours later, Marcus remained in the same place making even more bizarre sounds. He flashed me a mischievous smile. He was having fun.

Returning back to the theory presented earlier, attendants appear captivated by the potentials for aesthetic agency perceived as immanent to gear. In other words, they imagine the sounds that they might create with the equipment and proceed to search for and enact these processes (e.g. finding a ‘hold’ function, altering timbre of homemade guitars, etc.). In these moments of captivation, they gain a moment of dispensation from work. This contributes to the ‘love’ for the job. As a source of pleasure, gear distracts from the sheer boredom of work and provides a fleeting respite from the wounds of low wages and interactional status conflicts. This should be understood as a probable tendency rather than a guaranteed outcome⁴. This distracting strategy appears similar to the practice of encouraging ‘authenticity’ at work in order to mask more rigid technical control

mechanisms (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011). CI's strategy offers avenues for aesthetic agency rather than identity expression; simultaneously managing work's feel and the accumulation of knowledge. Developing knowledge of these particular objects rather than playing composition games aids in performing trouble-shooting and sales duties for clients.

Gear's felt, interactional pleasures and ineffable 'cool' provoke captivation and enroll the employees into the organization. These objects, in the context of employees' extra-work lives as engineers and musicians, constitute the means by which they enact their individual projects outside work. The aesthetic subjectivities formed through training as musicians or engineers render these objects legible. The objects' physical positioning within the office affords repeated interactions.

Similar to engineers who enjoy technologies with infinite expressive possibilities, attendants tend to be captivated by equipment when they are only partially familiar with the object's capabilities or by its innumerable expressive possibilities. This captivation stems from the act of imaginatively inferring their potential aesthetic agency. Unlike the uncertainty that once compelled factory workers to engage in competitive, economically rational assembly-line games (Burawoy, 1982, p. 87), these technologies of enchantment captivate employees by way of their perceived beauty and uncertain uses. In other words, they may know about the brand name (e.g. 'oh, it's a Fender model' or 'oh, dude Moog!'), but not the precise limits of the object's functionality (e.g. 'I don't even know all the kinds of stuff you can do with it'). This differs from clearly delineated functions of less enchanting equipment (e.g. this amplifier is used for the bass player to play through tonight, or this microphone is best used for quiet singing under specific conditions). The former appears as a bundle of imagined potential uses while the latter appears as a specific, technical function. The object, perceived as a bundle of imagined uses, captivates the employee, offering imagined avenues for aesthetic agency. As they said, in some cases, they 'disappear' or lose themselves inside the object.

This follows very clearly from the theoretical explanation proposed earlier. Keep in mind that employees ostensibly receive free access to gear free of charge as a fringe benefit and so this activity is only economically rational with regard to attendants' interests as musicians and engineers outside the labor process. In the labor process, this appears aesthetically rational with regard to the experiences afforded by material objects. In that the firm owns these objects and these objects lie beyond the employees' purchasing power, this imagining on the part of the employee remains, at all times, circumscribed by the managers of the firm and their particular, overarching entrepreneurial projects. In this sense, the work performed by these objects is that of mediation between organization and employee. Manager statements presented earlier and the instances wherein a manager alerted employees to new gear and later dramatically unveiled it, highlight the ways by which CI's manager encourage employee/object engagement and thus employ aesthetic enrollment as a practical managerial strategy of control (Friedman, 1990) rather than a formal technique. Here the subjective experience of work in another, expressive context (i.e. musicians or engineers) is reproduced and leveraged by management in the context of routine work. As control, this strategy benefits the firm by providing a supply of cheap labor with requisite forms of tacit knowledge.

To summarize, engineers and attendants differ in fundamental ways including components of work, forms of autonomy, wages, and forms of technologically mediated creativity. In both cases, management affords workers the use of their arsenal of gear – the symbolic equipment that enables CI to 'feel creative.' In the case of attendants, management retains control over this feel during the course of the working day. To borrow from Paul Willis, rehearsal attendants work for little money 'amid provided commodities' – the instruments of cultural production – and in addition to their small wages they receive management's '...essential, rare, irreverent gift: creativity' (1978, p. 178).

Concluding discussion

I now recapitulate my argument to elucidate the above-presented findings' theoretical implications. In particular, I focus on organizational control and aesthetics. Engineers and attendants both possess forms of autonomy with minimal direct managerial oversight. Contrary to previous research on cultural industries, routine and expressive cultural workers share similar backgrounds, skills, and everyday experiences. These employees *are* managed and, crucially, aesthetic experience is an important feature of routine cultural labor processes.

For engineers, management controls access to desirable, expressive, and technologically intensive work projects. Desirable projects afford access to the 'beautiful' technologies to which an engineers' aesthetic agency is bound. Among routine workers, management structures the organization's material environment by populating the workplace with objects that invite a similar aesthetic pleasure ('they're beautiful') and creative explorations of aesthetic agency perceived as immanent to the object ('disappearing'). Among attendants, these fragmentary moments at work appear similar to the sorts of 'pleasurable absorption' or 'flow' experiences among various kinds of employees within cultural and information industries (Chun, 2005; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011, p. 132). For routine workers, these aesthetic experiences act as temporary bandages applied to the wounds of relative deprivation, reproducing the sensorial experience of expressive occupations. Here 'beautiful' technology modulates the feel of the organization, affording socially and culturally structured sensations that enroll workers.

As stated earlier, attendants abduce or imaginatively infer their aesthetic agency through interactions with the technologies of cultural production. Insofar as workers imagine what they could do with these 'beautiful' objects, the relationship between technology and worker appears similar to the relationship between subject and aesthetic object put forth earlier in my modifications to Gell's 'technologies of enchantment' (1998). 'Disappearing' into the object, routine employees experience otherwise mundane, tedious, or exploitative work as pleasurable due, in part, to these

objects that enable creativity. By affording real (potential) aesthetic agency, these objects align workers' desire for expression with the interests of management. Drawing upon the social scientific study of art and enrollment processes (Callon & Law, 1982), I refer to this strategy as *aesthetic enrollment*.

As a managerial strategy, aesthetic enrollment requires **1)** hiring practices that guarantee particular employee dispositions, cultural knowledge, and training. This renders the processes afforded by technical artifacts (gear) legible. Management then grants **2)** autonomy at work and **3)** the interactional availability of these objects. Speculatively, I add that in other cases workers may resist this crafted environment depending on the degree to which they exercise aesthetic agency while retaining autonomy over their tasks. Lastly, the importance of being aesthetically enrolled may be inversely related to monetary compensation.

Control over the labor process

This article contributes to labor process theories of organizational control by attending to aesthetic subjectivities at work. Focusing on aesthetic experiences differs markedly from the sort of work experiences first emphasized by Roy (1953) and later theorized as control by Burawoy (1982). In both of these classic studies, workplace games produce what Roy, drawing on John Dewey's aesthetic theory, called '*an experience*' (1953, p. 510) – a memorable experiential moment amid undifferentiated tedium. In Burawoy, these experiences – bolstered by economically interested competition among co-workers and the machinations of management – serve as a form of social control at work. For Dewey '*an experience*' differs from aesthetic experience which he defines as follows:

... no such distinction of self and object exists in it, since [experience] is aesthetic in the degree to which organism and environment cooperate to institute an experience in which the two are so fully integrated that each disappears (2005[1932], p. 259).

This definition appears instructive in explaining the experiences described by my informants and draws a sharp line between the experiential forms of control delineated in earlier research (i.e. Burawoy, 1982; Roy, 1953) and the labor process described above.

This article's focal case (routine cultural workers) differs from these classic theories in two ways. First, economically rational self-interest appears absent in the 'porn side of the job' wherein employees 'disappear' into technical artifacts. These may be aesthetically rational, sensually pleasing actions, but they do not directly affect the employee's wages. Second, these experiences lack reinforcement through competition among co-workers. In this sense, they appear more post-social than social in that the interactions take place primarily between worker and technical artifact. Management does appear active, albeit at distance, in the construction of these experiences. These findings provoke a rather serious question for labor mobilization: how might workers organize against power exercised through objects that afford immersive, aesthetically pleasing experiences?

Similar to post-bureaucratic, object-centered control strategies (Rennstam, 2012) that focus knowledge accumulation (Sewell, 2005), the machines among attendants focus workers' creative energies toward the generation of knowledge about products sold by the organization. In extant theory, the knowledge being sought tends to be in regard to economic or scientific 'objects of knowledge' (see also Rennstam, 2012; see also Cetina & Bruegger, 2000). While artifacts described above do appear to workers as objects of knowledge or perpetually open-ended, unfolding 'processes...rather than definitive things' (Cetina & Bruegger, 2000, p. 149), objects of knowledge do not, as currently theorized, elicit judgments of aesthetic beauty. Above, workers ascribed beauty to objects that afford immersive, creative experiences. Thus technology is an object of felt, *aesthetic* knowledge in addition to economic or scientific knowledge. 'Disappearing' workers are immersed in the open-ended, unfolding processes afforded by *aesthetically pleasing*, technical artifacts. This suggests that objects do more than simply draw our attention to economic and scientific forms of knowledge.

Here, objects provide a basis for sensual, embodied meaning that orients workers toward knowledge accumulation. This appears similar, in outcome if not strategy, to the invitation to express ‘authentic’ selves at work in order to develop social competencies (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011) and decrease turnover (Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013). Considered together, these strategies suggest that contemporary labor processes invite expression in order to efface the boundaries between workers’ organizational and private lives. Broadly, these strategies aim at creating an ‘authentic’ experience of organizational life. Thus management asserts control not through rigid cultural ideologies (e.g. Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993), but through everyday creativity and expression – traditionally absent from labor processes (e.g. Marx, 1978 [1844]; Braverman, 1974). Rather than focusing on ‘being yourself,’ the strategy described above activates the aesthetic component of subjectivity – what Maurizio Lazzarato calls the ‘pre-personal, pre-cognitive, and preverbal forces (perception, sense, affects, desire)’ (2014, p. 31). Drawing on autonomist thought, Lazzarato argues that productive technologies in the labor process provide the basis for ‘...subjectivity centered on desire - desire on which even knowledge, information, and cultural production depend’ (2014, p. 52). In other words, technical artifacts afford the felt experiences that guide knowledge production and provide a basis for verbal or discursive forms of meaning (identity, ‘being yourself,’ ‘being creative,’ ‘cool,’ et al) may be built.

In emphasizing the material, aesthetic, or sensual aspects of the labor process, this article highlights aesthetic experience’s absence within labor process theory and studies of culture as organizational control (e.g. Alvesson, 2002). Interactions between organizational artifacts and employees form a material basis upon which more fully elaborated discursive constructions of identity – the focus of LPT’s reclamation of a ‘full subject’ – may be built. It should be noted that organizational artifacts produce highly contingent effects – technology in particular (Barley, 1986;

Grint & Woolgar, 1997) – and so empirical generalization to other social, cultural, and organizational contexts requires further empirical research.

Organizational aesthetics

Empirical studies of organizations' aesthetic 'landscapes' (Gagliardi, 1996) tend to exclude technical artifacts, focusing instead on architecture (e.g. Kersten & Gilardi, 2003), office design (e.g. Wasserman & Frenkel, 2011), corporate art (Barry & Meisiek, 2010), or corporate ephemera such as 'mission statements, recruitment brochures, web sites, [and] multi-media advertising' (Hancock, 2003, p. 187). My findings suggest that technical artifacts – ubiquitous in contemporary organizations – contain a distinctly aesthetic element beyond mere technical utility. Rather than reducing worker experience to 'the deadened apprehension of the sterile landscape' (Hancock, 2003, p. 193), these objects afford the possibility of a rather lively aural, aesthetic landscape. My findings suggest that capitalist organizations possess the capacity to simultaneously captivate and exploit rather than render workers numb. Future research might fruitfully explore the sensorial experience of organizational technologies in different empirical contexts.

Theoretical generalizability

In terms of generalizability, ethnographic research typically sacrifices breadth for depth. These findings may or may not be typical, however, *aesthetic enrollment* provides a transposable and thus *theoretically* generalizable concept for circumstances wherein management or dominant organizational actors attempt to mask otherwise undesirable, tedious, or boring tasks by recreating the sensorial experience of more desirable activities. For example, enterprise communication systems often mimic the look and feel of social media and digital leisure activities. Data analysts – the backbone of market research and state surveillance – may even 'disappear' within the interfaces

through which they exercise control over information. In these examples object-mediated work experiences afford an imagining of possibilities beyond the rather limited organizational roles inhabited by routine workers in cognitive-cultural economies.

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The author knows of no conflicting interests that may affect the production of this research.

Notes

¹ Metaphorical immersion and disappearance are common features in the aesthetic theories of Gell, Dewey (2005 [1934]) and Adorno (2004 [1970]).

² I consistently found myself to be more enamored by my proximity to fame than any employee.

³ Asked why he chose to pursue a career in engineering, an informant said, 'Just a feeling, It's hard to describe. It all turned me on. Course all I saw was the glamor, I didn't see the pitfalls then, I knew what it was what I wanted to do. The music board, the recording console looked very impressive. It all turned me on' (Kealy, 1974, p. 85)

⁴ Though most employees appeared captivated, two employees were not and withdrew from work duties by withholding their emotions in service interactions. Discussing such resistant instances lies beyond this article's focus.

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