In organisations, aesthetics aggregate and discriminate among individuals and groups because they are socially constructed through the negotiations in which organisational actors engage. Beauty and ugliness, the graceful and the grotesque, the elegant and the kitsch, the sacred and the tragic, often represent more a locus of contention that the attainment of stable harmony among the organisational actors. What implications, therefore, do organisational aesthetics have for issues concerning organisational democracy?

This is the question that will be explored and discussed in this chapter, through the illustration of the principal sociological issues raised in the recent study of organisational aesthetics. These issues are related to both the rich theoretical debate and the intense methodological controversies developed since the cultural or linguistic turn, which occurred in the social sciences during the 1980s. In the following two to three decades diverse and innovative approaches and research styles in the sociology of organisations and organisation theories were invented, constructed, and disseminated, and they greatly enriched the already highly diversified array of perspectives on organisational analysis.

Amid that flourishing of new approaches to organisational analysis, and in sharp polemic with organisational studies inspired by the rationalist

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and structural-functionalist paradigm, there also arose the strand of organisational analysis which examined the art and aesthetics characteristic of everyday working life in organisations.

Yet the attention paid to the aesthetic dimension in organisations should not be taken to mean that working practices always use aesthetic language, nor that there is invariably a taste for the beautiful and disgust at the ugly in everyday organisational life. By way of example, consider someone who enters and leaves a beautiful building every day, or someone who works as a picture framer—in short, people who work in close contact with materials and settings that conventionally have a certain aesthetic value. These people may have no aesthetic appreciation in regard to the organisation for which they work. They use materials and they work in settings whose beauty or ugliness they take for granted. Or it may be that the materials are beautiful but the organisation is not, and neither is the work that takes place within it. Be that as it may, what we may observe with regard to the sociological contribution of the study of the aesthetic dimension in organisations is that there is a new awareness in organisational research: namely that scholars should pay due attention to the fact that organisational life, in its materiality of interacting bodies and artefacts, can be aesthetically experienced, and therefore judged, at the level of sensible knowledge, and that this is a sociologically important element for the social construction of the theoretical discourse on the organisation.

This point is now developed with an empirical example drawn, not from organisational research in the field, but from a novel. The example will illustrate the significance for sociology of the fact that an organisational event or phenomenon may be grotesque, beautiful, ugly, tragic, sacred, kitsch, comic, graceful or, indeed, disgusting.

Organisational Aesthetics: Negotiation, Aggregation and Discrimination

The event considered is one illustrated by the novelist David Lodge when describing the first visit of the university researcher, Robyn, to a foundry in England. Robyn is there to conduct research as part of the ‘Industry Year Shadow Scheme’, a cooperation programme between Robyn’s university and local manufacturing industry. Robyn has arranged to ‘shadow’ the managing director, Vic Wilcox, for a certain period of time. She will observe his activities

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