Aesthetics and Leadership

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Abstract: In 2016 the so-called 'Coiffeurgate' scandal exploded in France. (BBC, 2016a) The socialist, and quite bald, President of the French Republic had been discovered paying (out of the public purse) 9,985 euros per month for cutting his hair. Almost twelve thousand US dollars at today's exchange rate, that is, a cost of $400/day. Why would one make such an extravagant expense? Because of aesthetics. This chapter reviews what aesthetics says about leaders and how they organize the perceptions of those they lead to try to become more attractive. This chapter suggests that aesthetics operates at a deeper and more fundamental level than many other epistemological considerations; and that attending to how aesthetics operates informs much about how leadership works. The chapter concludes that to counter the successful aesthetic projects of populist leaders, based on simplification, the challenge for opponents is to craft an aesthetics of clarity.

Keywords: Clarity, Simplicity, Trump, Beauty, Wall

Introduction

In September 2016, President Donald Trump stated

"*We will build a great wall along the southern border, and Mexico will pay for the wall… They don't know it yet, but they're going to pay for it. And they're great people and great leaders but they're going to pay for the wall. On Day One, we will begin working on intangible, physical, tall, power,* ***beautiful*** *southern border wall*." (Morin, 2019)

Chapter to be published in *Leadership, Psychoanalysis, and Society.* Michael Maccoby & Mauricio Cortina, Eds., Routledge 2021. Review copy only.

This chapter examines the use of the term 'beautiful' in that statement, indeed the very notion that the wall was meant to be a thing of beauty (Cillizza, 2019). The aesthetics of the presidency was also mobilized to assess the process which determined whether it would continue on to a second term or not. Thus, in its September 5th, 2020 *The Economist* described the November 2020 US presidential election as 'ugly' with their cover story titled "America's ugly election: How bad could it get?"

After the election had taken place, the (again, British) daily *The Guardian's* 'Fashion' page published a piece titled 'Bye-Don: a farewell to the Trump aesthetic' where Cartner-Morley (2020) underlined how much looks mattered to Trump, and she suggested that "when populism is centre stage, then style, show and swagger are at the heart of politics". So unsurprisingly, when Reilly wrote about how Donald Trump had exaggerated his credentials while introducing him, and he asked Trump why he had done this, the president responded that "it sounded better." (Reilly, 2019).

Leaders—populist or not—have forever attended to aesthetics, whether in terms of pageant, uniforms, and official settings for government, or in '*grands travaux*' such as French President Mitterand remodelling of the Louvre (more recently) or Emperors designing and building great pyramids in Egypt and Mexico (earlier). Well before social media enabled widespread application, the Nazi party's leadership developed what Dege (2019) aptly called 'aesthetics for the masses'; and unsurprisingly, the Soviet leadership also resorted to aesthetics to occupy the mental and physical spaces which their political ambitions sought to master (Dobrekno et al. 2004). Eidinow and Ramirez (2016) argued that deploying aesthetics can be usefully seen as a technology with which one articulates arguments which are taken in as plausible. They contrasted this technology of aesthetic storytelling (for manufacturing

plausibility) to that of the spreadsheet (used to calculate probabilities). Kay (2013) showed how very important plausibility is in determining outcomes in settings such as courts of law. So, the suggestion from Eidinow and Ramirez is that leaders who articulate aesthetics may often do so to manufacture plausible narratives, which have been shown to be effective even if the narrative ends up taken to be absurd (Capellaro et. al, 2020).

Studies Relating Aesthetics with Leadership

Assessing leadership as aesthetic is not unproblematic. English and Papa (2020) underlined how contrarian to established views on leadership it can be to propose considering leadership as aesthetic. In their case this took place in the context of educational administration and leadership, where they tell us that an aesthetic take is considered too emotional and too unscientific. Yet treating leadership through the lens of aesthetics is not novel.

In a paper studying the aesthetics of 'beau geste' acts by leaders (such as one where CEO's may donate their bonus to charity), Bouilloud and Deslandes (2015) summarized the situation in the field as follows:

> "*To start with, let us note that aesthetics emerged at a fairly recent period in the development of leadership studies (Gautier, 2011; Guillet de Monthoux, Gustafsson, & Sjöstrand, 2007; Hansen & Bathurst, 2011; Hansen, Ropo, & Sauer, 2007; Strati, 1992, 1996, 2000; Ten Bos & Spoelstra, 2011).*
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> *Nonetheless, this specific work tended to remain apart from mainstream lines of research on leadership: development of leaders and/or leadership (Day, 2000; Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014; Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009), personalities and leadership (House, Shane, & Herold, 1996), importance of feedback (Atwater &*

Waldman, 1998), evaluation of their skills (Mumford, Campion, & Morgeson, 2007), charismatic or non-charismatic leadership theories, ethical and gender dimensions, influence of contexts, diversity, emotions, etc. (Dansereau, Seitz, Chiu, Shaughnessy, & Yammarino, 2013; Day et al., 2014; Dinh et al., 2014). Despite this intellectual effervescence, no scholar is truly interested in the aesthetic dimensions potentially present in the actions performed by leaders in the 29 approaches to leadership that were listed by specialists (Dionne et al., 2014) or the 'web of belief' of leaders (O'Connell, 2014).

As a matter of fact, current developments in research on aesthetics and leadership generally adopt two distinct approaches.

... the first one focuses on analysing the experiences of aesthetic sensations within organizations in connection with the perceptions of leaders by their followers (Hansen et al., 2007); ...

... it otherwise views sensations as mechanisms that produce representations of organizations or generate a specific relationship to space, etc. (Linstead & Höpfl, 2000; Ramirez, 1991; Strati, 1992, 2000)

.... the second one refers to art, for instance describing the figures of leaders as artists (Degot, 2007 Dobson, 1999; Hatch, Kostera, & Kozminski, 2004).

Contrary to such approaches, the purpose of this paper is to analyse the behaviour of leaders in an aesthetic perspective (Brady, 1986; Kersten 2008; Ladkin, 2008; Taylor & Elmes, 2011). Accordingly, instead of relying on the common notions of aesthetic sensory experiences and the model of leaders as artists, our intention is to engage forcefully and specifically in an exploration of 'beau geste' viewed as a specific behaviour. (p. 1097)

As is stated in their summary of the field, my own work has been on the aesthetics of organizations, not on the leader's own work, nor on the specific behaviour of a given leader.

Yet the Trump presidency can be thought of as an organization, organizing the upper echelons of the US federal government, the Republican states, the Senate and other institutions. In this vein the Trump presidency can therefore be considered in aesthetic terms: as attractive (as it was to over 74 million American citizens who voted to re-elect him in November 2020, only to be thwarted by 81 million who did not) or as an 'abomination', in the words of the above cited article by Cartner-Morley. Back in 2016, democratic candidate Hillary Clinton already referred to Trump supporters in aesthetic terms – according to her half of them were a "basket of deplorables" (BBC, 2016b). This aesthetic assessment most likely did not earn her any votes.

The choice of field in which I have worked on with aesthetics—that which concerns the beauty (or ugliness) of given organizations and the clarity of strategy, does not mean that I take the alternative approaches Bouilloud and Deslandes offered to be without interest—on the contrary. Thus, in the second type of study proposed by them I like books such as the one by Daas (2015) on how the second longest term president of MIT, Charles M. Vest, focused so much of his attention and work to architecture, as "*the architecture of an organization is a fundamental organizational artifact that provides the most tangible, spatial, and material continuity for an organizations' mission, identity, and meaning*" (p.5). In the same way, the book *The Art Firm* by Guillet de Monthoux (2004) examined people like Wagner, who created firms to create art. Guillet de Monthoux examined the 'Shwung' (as he called them) pendulum relations swinging back from substance to form and from the real to the ideal, and also among the audiences, culture, artists and technicians with which art firms work. He suggested that two extremes of how artworks work are totality and banality—this very much affects (in my view)

how one might consider the aesthetics of leadership. Let us take each in turn. Social media has helped with totality-approximating 24/7 messaging in ways that Nazi propaganda could only dream of, appearing in every screen (PC, laptop, phone) several times per hour, with the average American being exposed to media 11.8 hours per day (Illing, 2019). Stanley (2015) suggested that news as propaganda now takes up a near-totality of one's attention, and that this endangers democracy. As to banality, one might suggest that the piece by Cartner-Morley cited above, considering Melania's role in the Trump presidency's aesthetics, offers a good example of how this works today:

> *"But soon after, she switched to a soldierly wardrobe that intensified the combative mood music around Trump. A vague air of abrasiveness turned sandpaper-rough in June 2018, when she wore a Zara jacket with a faux-graffiti slogan reading "I Really Don't Care, Do U" to visit a shelter for unaccompanied children. Black and olive green became her signature colours. Had you not known that the woman standing next to the president was his wife, you might have assumed – when she was wearing a pith helmet or a severe Alexander McQueen suit in army green with snap-button pockets – that she was a military leader, on stage to remind the audience of the muscle behind the government machine."*

Ladkin (2008) explored "the territory of leading as an embodied activity through the lens of the aesthetic category of 'the beautiful', considering the linking of leading between followers and leaders in those terms (p. 32). That perspective can be built into the design of leadership development activity, as Carroll and Smolović Jones (2017) did when they assessed leadership development as an aesthetic project – as

> "*a felt experience, where any leadership concepts are known and experienced through the lens of a vivid milieu of affective, visceral, sensory, embodied and relational*

processes, which aesthetically shape what participants come to recognise as leadership (p.187)."

Taylor (2007) assessed the extent to which leaders attend to the aesthetics as artists might, displaying this facet of the practice alongside those implied by other roles that are more widely used in the literature. I now want to return to how aesthetics might consider Trump's leadership during his presidency.

Not Just a Question of Taste

The Trump presidency manifested deep divisions across the United States. These divisions in turn manifested as a very polarized set of views on Trump's leadership. Many pundits have proposed the difference to be one of values (big State vs. small State, centralised vs. devolved political power, internationalist vs. nationalist, etc.). An aesthetic reading would propose that such differences, real as they might be, are dependent on a deeper difference in aesthetics. Such differences are not a difference only of 'taste', differentiating those who like cowboys who gallop into town and take over the ageing sheriff from those who dislike macho sexists who break up institutions and norms.

In his book *La Distinction*, Bourdieu (1979) suggested that a given group might like the opera while another group in society might like attending dog races, and that such preferences distinguishing one group for another were manifested as tastes. What is interesting for my reading of aesthetics is not that there are differences in taste which distinguish one group from another—differences which Trump's leadership style reinforced and more violently contrasted; but that *all* groups, and *each* group, and that *each individual* in those groups or even outside them, finds something—*some thing*—beautiful.

Yes, the flashy aesthetics which Trump favoured may have made his tastes hard to hide, but it is not the taste itself nor its manifestation which matter for an aesthetic reading of leadership. Instead, an aesthetic reading of leadership will contend that what matters is how the underlying aesthetic shapes a particular taste, as this taste articulates values, shapes preference, informs priority, and forms action.

A good example of how this more fundamental level upon which taste depends works in practice was offered by Schalg's (2002) study on how judges interpret American law. He suggested that if a given individual judge thinks of the law as a field of forces, while a different judge is one who considers the law to be a question of what category a particular case fits into, the distinct way each judge will interpret what to me, a priori, might appear to be the 'same' case will be defined accordingly. Each judge will interpret what for a third party might look like the same case in a distinctive manner that differs, fundamentally from that of the other because, Schalg contends, they have an underlying aesthetic of the law which determines these contrasting outcomes, and the ethics and tastes which each aesthetic entails. Schlag's proposal is that it is the underlying aesthetic which shapes the ethics and values and priority-making entailed in judging. In the same manner, I contend in this chapter that this also applies to one's leadership style ('style' itself being an aesthetic construct, to be noted).

I think of this aesthetic foundation as a 'framing' device, where one's aesthetics frames one's understanding of the world, one's experiencing of that world, that to which one gives most importance, and the forms one will bring forth to in-form oneself. If one's actions affect those of others, as is the case of judges and leaders, this forming will be not only an in-form-ation to oneself but will also give forms that which affect (and can indeed, shape) the lives of others (Ramirez, 1987, 1991).

Aesthetics as Framing

Building on Schlag's propositions, if aesthetics is the foundation of how any individual accesses and manifests and produces and shares form, leaders are those who manifest form(s) in ways that resonate for their followers. If they have many followers, they are considered effective (or 'great') leaders.

One might argue that it is this very re-framing which makes leaders significant. That is certainly what my colleague Richard Normann proposed in his book 'Reframing Business: when the map changes the landscape' (2001); and which my colleague Angela Wilkinson and I suggested in our book 'Strategic Reframing' (2016). We must note that such reframing is not always for the good, even if it can manifest a 'great' leader. In a damning editorial in *The Financial Times* Martin Wolff (2020) suggested at the beginning of his piece that

> *"Historians will view Boris Johnson as one of the UK's more significant politicians. In terms of his impact on his country, for good or ill, he may rank not far behind Clement Attlee and Margaret Thatcher among post-war politicians."*

He ended the piece by stating that

> *"Mr Johnson is not a serious man. He is unlikely ever to govern competently…. Mr Johnson has already broken big things that cannot be put back together again. This has made him a truly important politician, but a damaging one, alas."*

The aesthetic which undergirds Johnson's premiership and upon which Trump's presidency was based is one where what had become established is something that needs to be brought down; where accepted norms must be disregarded or, if possible, broken; where politeness can be (or must be) ignored or trampled upon. The image it conjures for me is that of the cowboy (not necessarily from out of town) who takes over the frontier town by force or

might. In 2016 many Americans (though, let us remember, not the majority of those who voted) welcomed the cowboy and cheered him to take on the role of sheriff. In the same way, Johnson won an eighty-seat majority in the House of Commons.

The aesthetic that drove these two individuals to power is one of simplicity, where 'too complicated a world' assessments can be swept aside and replaced with simple slogans such as "Make America Great Again" and "Get Brexit Done." This aesthetic is also the aesthetic upon which conspiracy theories are based, according to an opinion piece posted by Harari (2020) in *The New York Times*.

Conclusion

Gareth Morgan (1986) suggested, based on reading *Vico*, that one's images of organisation are inevitably themselves premised on an underlying figure or form. This guiding figure plays the role of metaphor and organizes our cognition and experience—in his case, of organization. This too applies to organizational phenomena such as leadership and hierarchy and office designs and uniforms, which at a very fundamental level we take in as disgusting or beautiful (Ramirez, op. cit.).

Trump was perhaps rawer in manifesting the aesthetic of his presidency, via Twitter and power suits and orange-tinted skin and golf courses, than more subdued leaders might manifest that of their own leadership. His brash style embodied and outwardly manifested what he stood for and—as the basis of other more superficial (in the sense of closer to the surface, not in the sense of 'shallower') forms of cognition, as Schlag identified them—this strident style provoked a more primary reaction from opponents than policy documents or budget announcements might. To call ugly walls beautiful and fail to issue any comments when his wife wore a coat that read 'I do not care, do you?' when visiting border detention facilities where children of migrants were

separated off from -and caged away from- their parents, is an aesthetic of '*there is a new sheriff in town who does not care for the old order'*.

The Democrats failed to provide an aesthetic that was as appealing to their own supporters and which manifested what they stood for, as did the anti-Brexit pro-European 'remainers' in the UK. Both decried the aesthetic of simplicity and both failed to manifest an alternative aesthetic that was as attractive to their own supports as that of their opponents was to their own teams.

The big challenge for those opponents is to create a compelling aesthetic that takes in complexity (instead of rejecting it in over-simplistic one-liners or slogans fitting Twitter word limits, as Trump and Johnson have done). My proposal is that clarity rather than simplicity will be a potential avenue in this regard (Ramirez, 2008). Let us hope that in times affected by rising inequality among and within countries, climate change imperatives, ageing and still growing populations, increases in armed capabilities, and massive debt issued to avert the worse effects of COVID-19, new leaders will manage to muster an aesthetic of clarity that is as convincing and riveting as that of simplicity has been in the last few years. They might get inspired by reading the beautiful books authored by Edward Tufte (readers are directed to the website he curated – https://www.edwardtufte.com/tufte/), to avoid their aesthetics being about either totalities or banalities.

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