

# Influence of the Aestheticized Work Environment on Managerial Life in Sri Lanka's Corporate Sector

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I examine how the lives of managerial workers are being affected by the rapid aestheticization processes that are happening in contemporary work organizations. Using the photo-elicitation technique as the primary data generation and analysis method, fieldwork was conducted in the factory and office spaces of a well-established manufacturing company in Sri Lanka. The study's findings show that workplace aestheticization affects managerial workers in the organization differently: in the factory environment, where the nature of work is monotonous and stressful, an aestheticized work environment affects managerial life positively. In such a work context, aestheticization becomes a means of 'seduction', which draws managers away from the tediousness of factory life. Yet, in the office workspace, experiencing aesthetics or becoming involved in practices that generate aesthetic pleasure creates a sense of 'shame' in managerial workers, as such an association is considered as deviating from the 'appropriate behavior' expected of a manager. In conclusion, I argue that aestheticization has a dual effect on managerial life—which is imbued not only with managerial workers' assumptions about the role of a 'Manager' but also with the spatial and contextual dimensions at work.

**Keywords**— Aesthetics, Aestheticization, Aesthetic Experience, Managerial Life, Work, Work Environment

## INTRODUCTION

Aestheticization—of work/managerial life—is a reality in contemporary organizations in the Global North as well as in the South. Aestheticization blurs the boundaries between 'work' and 'leisure' and hence between work life and social life, although it allows organizational actors to gain aesthetic experience while being at work. As such, it is argued that aestheticization makes work life more 'pleasurable' and 'productive.' As explained by Bauman (2004, p. 34), "Like life's other activities, work now comes first and foremost under aesthetic scrutiny. Its value is judged by its capacity to generate pleasurable experiences". In other words, human beings who work in organizations look for aesthetic experiences within the organizations, similar to those which they have outside it (Warren, 2002). Therefore, contemporary organizations are keen to incorporate aesthetic values into work life.

This aesthetic trend has gained the attention of researchers in management and organizational studies, particularly in the Global North (De Molli, 2019; Taylor & Hansen, 2005; Warren, 2002; Wasserman et al., 2000). The literature on the subject shows that aestheticization affects the lives of organizational actors—both managerial and non-managerial workers—in various ways, as their body and sensorium are placed within an 'aestheticized work environment' for a considerable amount of time in their everyday life (van Marrewijk, 2009; Wasserman et al., 2000; Wasserman and Frenkel, 2011). However, despite this scholarly preoccupation with 'aestheticized work/managerial life'—in contemporary organizations in the Global North—the literature is silent on the effects of aestheticization on work life in Global South organizations. Yet, like their Global North counterparts, organizations in the Global South also show a keen interest in the aestheticization of the work environment.

Against this backdrop, this paper discusses critically how the work life of organizational actors, particularly

of managerial workers in Sri Lanka's corporate sector, has been affected by the reality of the aestheticization of the work environment. In this attempt, I analyze critically the feelings, emotions, aesthetic experiences, and judgements shared by a set of managerial workers of a Sri Lankan corporate sector work organization in relation to organizational spaces, places, and artefacts. Through this analysis, I intend to shatter the apparent silence on the aestheticization of the managerial life of corporate sector work organizations in Sri Lanka by uncovering the story of the aestheticization of their work lives.

To achieve this objective, the paper is structured into five main sections. The first section discusses the literature in relation to the concept of aesthetics. Then it brings a succinct account of the literature which observes the trend towards workplace aestheticization in the contemporary context and scholarly findings on its effects on organizational actors. The methodology, in the next section, explains the research approach adopted, how the fieldwork was carried out and the manner in which the generated data were analyzed. This is followed by an analysis of the research findings and a discussion on how managerial life in the Sri Lankan corporate sector is being affected by the phenomenon of workplace aestheticization. Finally, the paper presents the conclusions arrived at based on the findings of the study, and multiple avenues for further research in relation to the research phenomenon.

## LITERATURE

### A. Conceptualizing Aesthetics

The term aesthetics originated from the Greek term *aesthetics* (Wasserman et al., 2000) to express things with pleasing appearances and beauty. The origin of the conceptualization of aesthetics in the West is found in the work of the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1750-1758). Baumgarten understands the term 'aesthetics' as a particular branch of philosophy and claims that "...*things known* are to be known by the superior faculty as the object of logic; things perceived are to be known by the interior faculty as the object of the science of perception, or aesthetic" (1954, p. 78). In the view of Baumgarten, aesthetics is the science of sensory cognition, which is different from rational cognition. Based on Baumgarten's definition of aesthetics, Carr and Hancock (2003) explain aesthetics as a sort of systematic investigation of the sensual and affective dimensions of human experience. Giambattista Vico (1725), an Italian philosopher, has also differentiated rational cognition from aesthetic cognition and viewed it as a superior form of knowledge transmitted by myth and knowledge, as opposed to rational cognition (Gagliardi, 2006). In other words, "[it] is the study of sensory knowledge [which] is apprehended directly through our five senses, directly through our experience of being in the world" (Taylor & Hansen, 2005, p. 1213).

As the notion of aesthetics is conceptualized from multiple perspectives, it is difficult to come up with a straightforward definition of the term. Drawing attention to the elusive nature of aesthetics, Welsch (1996) argues that the term aesthetics can be used to refer to different things such as beauty, sensuality, nature, art, perception, judgment or knowledge. Historically, the theorization of organizations has reflected the division of our reality into three distinct spheres of existence, namely, instrumental, moral and aesthetic (Taylor & Hansen, 2005). The earliest organizational theorizing was concerned with the *instrumental sphere*—the instrumental questions regarding efficiency and effectiveness—and the *moral sphere*—the study of business ethics. In recent times the *aesthetic sphere* of existence has captured the attention of organizational theory. With this tendency, aesthetics has been defined in various ways by scholars in the area of organizational theory. Harding (2003) emphasizes the very looseness of the concept of aesthetics by pointing out the different approaches taken by various scholars in defining aesthetics. According to Harding (2003), the term aesthetics is conceptualized by scholars from four perspectives. The first refers to artwork within or the physical surroundings of organizations, while the second is the understanding of aesthetics as a study of different organizations which are engaged in constructing aesthetic objects. Thirdly, Harding (2003) states

that the term has been profoundly understood as a research method to study organizations. Fourthly, it has been recognized as a “form of knowledge based on the senses” (Harding, 2003, p. 116).

The fourth perspective of aesthetics, which is much more prevalent in the academic field, is profoundly informed by Baumgarten’s conceptualization of aesthetics (Gagliardi, 2006; Harding, 2003; Strati, 1999, 2000, 2010). The two senses of aesthetics could be distinguished as “the judgment about taste, where aesthetics is the property of some object and, thus, is external to the individual” and the other as “the emotional response experienced by an individual in relation to some externality, where the aesthetics are a property of the individual rather than the externality” (Harding, 2003, p. 117). There are academic debates that have been going on for hundreds of years regarding the concept of aesthetics being entirely subjective responses or significant forms pertaining to particular objects (Warren, 2008). According to Warren (2008), aesthetics always implicates an external object or event, which is defined as a trigger, while aesthetics itself is an oscillation between subjective reactions and material objects. Subjective reactions suggest aesthetic experiences or judgments.

Italian organizational sociologist, Antonio Strati, also adopting the view of Baumgarten, defines aesthetics as a “form of knowledge” and states:

...it is not art; rather, it is concerned with sensory perceptions acquired through vision, hearing, smell, touch, and taste. It is aesthetic judgment, or in other words, that which is affected by the beautiful, feeling disgust, having sublime sensation, etc. These are specific forms of knowledge, that do not belong to the intellectual domain... (Strati, 2000, p. 54)

Here, Strati distinguishes between intellectual knowledge and aesthetic knowledge. The first is determined by a desire for clarity, objective truth and usually instrumental goals, and the latter is determined by a desire for subjective, personal truth, usually for its own sake (Taylor & Hansen, 2005). Gagliardi (2006) also subscribes to the view of understanding aesthetic experience as a form of sensory knowledge and states that it is difficult to express aesthetic experience through language or words. Instead, it takes the form of an expressive action which derives from feelings or desire. It is understood as a form of communication that expedites exchanging or sharing sensory knowledge or feeling with others. This view reveals the challenging nature of researching organizational members’ aesthetic experiences.

## **B. Aestheticization of Work Organizations**

Workplace aestheticization has received the attention of scholars in the arena of organizational aesthetics (Gagliardi, 2006; Strati, 2016; Weggeman et al., 2007). Aestheticization of organizations is understood as a sensory experience which provides significance to the representation of the organization (Strati, 2016). Within contemporary work organizations, organizational actors are exposed to sensually appealing experiences. It is argued that people tend to work more productively in such organizations, and that thereby, aestheticization leads to enhancing the performance of the organization (Gagliardi, 2006; Schmitt & Simonson, 1997; Weggeman et al., 2007). Aestheticized artefacts and activities within an organization are accepted as capable enough to detract organizational members from the boredom and stress engendered by the rigid nature of work and its intensity.

Moreover, aestheticized work organizations engender an impressive image within the minds of their clients, customers, and workers, and act as a mode which expresses the organization’s unique identity to outsiders (Witz et al., 2003).

This distinctive image created by the aestheticized work environment promotes the identification of organizational members in relation to the outside world (Gagliardi, 2006). Recent theoretical contributions on organizational aesthetics demonstrate that, workplaces, technologies used by people, relationships among

workers, managerial strategies and organizational decisions “arouse aesthetic feelings ranging from pleasure to disgust” (Strati, 2016, p. 253).

The aestheticized environment, which is constructed by the management of the organization, further acts as a means which sways the feelings and desires of organizational members and keeps them engrossed in the organization. Schultz (1992), who supports this view, informed by the postmodern criticisms of organizational culture, argues that different aesthetic forms of organizational culture, such as rituals, symbols and artefacts, become a seductive force to guide the behavior of organizational members and such aesthetic efforts keep the members strongly attached to the organization.

To motivate people and to boost their commitment to the effective performance of the organization, managers are responsible for creating an environment which is conducive to work (Warren, 2002). Incorporating aesthetics in designing the physical layout of the organization, and introducing activities, such as musical shows and talent shows which generate aesthetic pleasure, could be identified as new managerial attempts to keep subordinates continuously motivated to work (Warren, 2002). This could be observed as an attempt made by contemporary organizations to keep their organizational members insensible to the exhaustive everyday reality of working life.

## METHODOLOGY

### A. Research Approach

This research study uses a qualitative research approach. Owing to the purpose of exploring the effect of aestheticization on work/managerial life in the Global South, a corporate sector work organization in Sri Lanka was selected as the venue in which to carry out fieldwork. The chosen organization, which is termed *Apple Power* in this paper, manufactures and distributes electrical accessories to the local and international markets. Apple Power was selected as the fieldwork site, as it has undergone a radical change in workspaces to make the organization an aesthetically attractive workplace. The photo-elicitation technique conducted under visual research methods was used as the primary strategy of data generation. Data were also generated through observations and conversations that had with the organizational members during my stay at each research site. Prior approval was obtained from the organization to gather data through these methods.

### B. Generation of Data through the Photo-Elicitation Technique

The aesthetic experiences of organizational members are challenging to explore by using language (Gagliardi, 2006; Taylor, 2002; Warren, 2002; 2008). Direct interviewing is accepted as insufficient to inquire into the deeply sensed aesthetic experiences of organizational members. As Taylor (2002) insists, organizational members are unwilling to talk (are silent) on their aesthetic experiences in relation to routine organizational activities and organizational artefacts as there is no ‘legitimate discourse’ on expressing feelings in corporate life except a legitimate discourse on ‘thinking’. This ‘aesthetic muteness’ is being stressed as a significant problem that needs to be overcome in research on organizational aesthetics. However, it is challenging, but not impossible, to break this ‘silence’ (Clair, 1998 cited in Taylor, 2002). Using aesthetic methods when studying organizational actors’ aesthetic experience is suggested as a means of overcoming such aesthetic muteness (Taylor, 2002). Besides, Warren (2002) asserts the difficulty of communicating aesthetic experience through language due to the personified and sensuous nature of the aesthetic experience. She puts points out that, there should be an alternative method to grasp the inner experiences of organizational members, which will “capture the ‘gestalt’ of aesthetic experience, the simultaneity of sensory, visceral and cognitive experience” (Warren, 2002, p. 235).

Therefore, I identified the photo-elicitation technique, which is a visual research method, as an effective method for exploring the sensory perceptions of aesthetic experiences (Harper, 2002; Richard & Lahman,

2015; Warren, 2002). Photo-interviewing has been identified as an effective interview technique which is helpful in evoking responses from informants, as it allows them to narrate their own stories spontaneously (Choo, 2023; Collier & Collier, 1986; Warren, 2002). The photo-elicitation technique, when used as a research interviewing method, allows the elicitation of a stream of information in relation to “personalities, places, processes and artefacts” (Collier & Collier, 1986, p. 105). Prior to beginning fieldwork, it was intended to use participant-led photographs (photographs captured by the research participants—managers) as it would effectively reflect their aesthetic preferences. However, as the fieldwork went on, it was recognized that the participants themselves were reluctant to take photographs. As indicated through the conversations, such reluctance was caused by their busy work schedules, the culturally bound nervousness of being observed by other employees in the organization and perhaps due to aesthetic muteness. To overcome this barrier, I had to rely on researcher-led photographs during the research study, and I conducted ten semi-structured photo interviews with the managers at the two research sites. The sample of research participants was selected purposively (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Campbell et al., 2020) on the basis of their ability to contribute towards the theoretical understanding of the research phenomenon. The sample included participants from varying functional specialties such as Marketing, Finance, Human Resource Management, Sales, Legal and Production.

Fieldwork was carried out in two research settings of the same organization—the head office and the factory—for a period of eight days. The factory was situated 20 km away from the head office. Five days were devoted to carrying out fieldwork at the head office, where fifteen managers and around a hundred and fifty administrative staff worked. Then three days were spent at the factory premises where four managers and around a thousand factory employees worked. The working environment of the research participants was studied during the first two days in both research settings. While roaming around the workspaces, I was able to have conversations with a few research participants. This led to insights into the places and spaces of Apple Power, insights into where employees liked to spend their time and what they perceived as being beautiful and attractive or aesthetically appealing to them. In keeping with these ideas, photographs of several workspaces of Apple Power were captured by a digital camera, and subsequently, were used during the research interviews to elicit the feelings, emotions, experiences, and judgments of managerial workers towards their aestheticized workspaces and places. Questions were raised contextually in order to draw out their experiences of being in the aestheticized workspaces and to understand the kind of influence it has had on their lives, while allowing them to talk freely about the way they felt about their own workplaces, which were aesthetically embellished.

### **C. Methods of Analyzing Data**

Data generated during fieldwork were subjected to qualitative analysis from which key themes were established. Coding was first done of photographs by considering the spaces and places visually represented by the pictures. In this task, I gave priority to the terms used by the research participants to refer to the places. Consequently, transcribing was done by integrating the codes with the meanings assigned by the research participants to the photographs (Shortt, 2015). In the process of deriving themes from the data sets, all transcripts were read literally, interpretively as well as reflexively (Mason, 2018). In this effort, special attention was paid to identifying themes which emerge from the data (an inductive approach) as well as to the researcher’s prior theoretical understanding of the phenomenon (a priori approach)—aestheticization (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Themes were established by considering the techniques suggested by Ryan and Bernard (2003) for discovering themes and sub-themes in texts. At the end of the analytical process, which went through several cycles of reading, a few broad themes were derived which enabled the researcher to discern how the aestheticization processes and practices of Apple Power have had an impact on the lives of organizational actors—in particular, the lives of managerial workers.

The next part of the paper is separated into two sections in order to present the findings at two research sites.

Both these sections first describe the way in which work life is aestheticized at each research setting. The description of each site is followed by a discussion on the influence of aestheticization on the lives of managerial workers at each site of Apple Power, based on the findings from the analysis of generated data.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### A. Aestheticization of Work Life at Apple Power—Head Office

Once a person enters the head office of Apple Power, what they will notice first is the statue of the Lord Buddha (see Fig. 1), which is located very close to the gate.

**Figure 1: Lord Buddha's Statue at the Entrance**



The workspaces inside the building had a pleasing appearance, with colorful and comfortable furniture, a neatly arranged work floor with workstations and colorful wall hangings with motivational quotes (see Fig. 2).

**Figure 2: Wall Hangings**



A separate place—named the 'plug base'—which had an attractive look with colorful walls, furniture and wall hangings, had been created for employees to engage in recreational and religious activities (see Fig. 3). Workers, irrespective of the position they held within the organization, could play carom or chess during office hours, or they could participate in Yoga, Karate or Angampora (a traditional Sri Lankan martial art) programs after office hours. This place is also used to conduct meditation programs for employees after office hours.

**Figure 3: Plug Base**

The research and development division of the organization had a different ambience with a more pleasing aesthetic appearance compared to the other sections of the work floor. Altogether, the organization had made a considerable attempt to give the work environment an aesthetically appealing appearance where its employees could be exposed to aesthetic experiences. Managers, as well as other staff-level employees, work amidst this aestheticized environment in their daily routines. The photographs that I took during fieldwork at the Apple Power head office were presented to the managerial employees with the intention of eliciting their aesthetic experiences. In the following section, I offer the way in which the research participants reacted to and interpreted the aesthetically embellished workspaces, based on their lived experiences within such spaces.

*1) Familiarity Creates Anaestheticization Towards Aestheticization:* The participants at the head office of Apple power demonstrated an absence of sensibility towards the presence of such workplaces with assigned aesthetic meanings. One of the senior managers explained his felt sense towards the aesthetically appealing organizational environment, as follows:

These things might be very impressive to you as you are a stranger to this organization. But if we take these slogans which are hanging on the wall, we have seen these things so many times. Isn't it? So, it's like 'the comb of the cock we see often is white' [*hamadama dakina kukulage karamala sudui wage* — Sri Lankan proverb].

This brings a different insight into the aesthetic sensibility of human beings at work. Aesthetic sensibility is organizational members' capability to evaluate and value the aesthetic quality of an organizational artefact (Weggeman et al., 2007). The ability of the organizational design to arouse the experience of beauty or aesthetic pleasure is highly determined by the aesthetic sensibility of the employees. As the research participant pointed out, the aesthetic quality of an organizational artefact creates excitement for people who experience it for a short period of time with its novelty of form. However, when the environment becomes very familiar, they become insensible to its appearance, and this creates a feeling of 'indifference' among organizational members (Gagliardi, 2006).

A similar view to that of the above participant was shared by the Research and Development manager of Apple Power. He described the way he perceived the environment as follows:

Hmm [he takes a while to think]. It's like this. We see these things every day and all five days a week. It creates a certain feeling. Here we are in a place which is surrounded by glasses [...] Really speaking, we don't read these sayings every day.

The above participant's view suggests that he does not notice or has ceased noticing the aestheticized environment surrounding him. At the place of work of the above manager (see Fig. 4), there was a boat, and

a grey colored dull ambience was given to the appearance of the place. Symbolizing the influence of postmodern culture in contemporary organizations, designers use ‘unusual objects’ such as the boat at Apple Power. The literature suggests that such initiatives influence in constructing organizational identity and creates a sense of pride among organizational members. It is asserted that the aestheticization of the organizational environment with postmodern artefacts are supposed to keep organizational members attracted to the organization (Schmitt & Simonson, 1997), and are thereby believed to enhance employee productivity.

**Figure 4: Research & Development Space Designed with a Boat**



However, as the managers at Apple Power Head Office indicated, the sight of the aestheticized environment did not generate such pleasurable feelings as to keep these managers attached to the organization. As Dale and Burrell (2003) claim, any aesthetic development of an organization is attached with an “anaesthetization” factor (p. 157). Thus, aesthetic developments sometimes tend to desensitize people who live and work daily within an organization. In light of the views of Strati (1999) about organizational actors becoming insensible to the beauty of the organization in their everyday life, Dale and Burrell (2003) argue that “art[aesthetics] may stimulate sensibility into insensibility by transforming the “everyday” into the “special” by decoration, hedonism and the creation of illusion”(p. 157). These are identified as means to “anaesthetize” organizational members. This would make it difficult for members of the organization to understand the everyday reality of organizational life and make them insensible to workspaces attached with beauty (Strati, 1999). This idea has also been elaborated by Welsch (1997), who stated that over-excitement makes organizational members indifferent to beauty and pleasurable sensation caused by it. “Over-stimulus gives way to the nervous system shutting down, nothing seems beautiful anymore, and the sensuous gives way to desensitization” (Dale & Burrell, 2003, p. 157).

2) *Aesthetic Experience Restrained by Managerial Assumptions:* Within the work context of Apple Power’s head office, managerial views demonstrated manager’s detachment from experiencing the aesthetic aspects of the organization. This detachment is found to be caused by the assumptions that they hold related to the acceptable behavior of a manager in a work organization. Managerial perceptions of the ‘plug base’, which is conceived with the intention of allowing organizational members to engage in recreational activities, signifies this detachment clearly. When managers were asked about the influence that this conceived space makes on their lives as managers in the organization, one of the senior managers responded as follows:

If I tell the truth, we go for these things rarely. As managers, when we finish one duty, we move to another. We continuously follow up on our duties or organize something. We even just have a small chat with each other only during the lunch break. But I know some employees [non-managerial] finish their lunch soon and go there to play, yet I have never seen a manager playing carom there.

A quite similar view to this was expressed by a sales manager when the photograph of the plug base (see Fig. 5) was viewed at the interview.



**Figure 5: Non-managerial Employees Playing Carom**



He described his perception of the engagement with the plug base as follows:

In fact, I don't have time to play carom. If I tell you the truth, I don't go to this place. Especially, personnel like managers look to secure the job and perform well. [...] When considering the managers' level, their tendency for misappropriation is very small [...], and they do not get tempted by wrongdoing because their job is big in terms of money. Otherwise, they can't maintain their families. Take, for instance, a person below my level. Let us take a Sales Representative; maybe he is more interested in casual entertainment than in his job. [...] they are more interested in a playful life.

In the above comments respondents make a compelling remark on the influence of power hierarchy in sensing aesthetic pleasure. They distinguish their 'life as managers' from rest of the organizational members who belong to lower hierarchical levels. The engagement of managers in activities which generate 'aesthetic fun' (Carr & Hancock, 2003) is identified as an undeserving thing or a misbehavior that should not be engaged in by a responsible manager. As they suggest, a 'playful life' or entertainment, which is a form of 'wrongdoing', is only appropriate for lower-level employees. Here, the assumed role of a manager—being serious, thoughtful, and responsible—transcends the inducement of the organization for them to engage in such activities by conceiving spaces for leisure. Thus, managerial behavior at Apple Power's head office is governed by managers' unconsciously shared assumptions on the acceptable behavior for a manager. These assumptions have led to the detachment of managerial-level employees from the spaces of the organization which offer aesthetic experiences. Thus, managers are not willing to dilute the assumed 'superior identity' that they have as 'managers' unlike lower-level employees, by permitting bodily desires for pleasurable feelings.

While demonstrating detachment from the aestheticized organizational environment, managers admitted that such places support them to keep their subordinates motivated to work. Vidath, a senior manager of the organization, expressed his view with regard to this matter as follows:

We have created this place (plug base) and introduced these activities to keep our staff motivated to work. We all work as a team. For my team members to perform well in their duties, we should create a good environment for them. If they do not perform well, I won't be able to survive [as a manager/team leader] here.

A duality in managerial views could be discerned here, as the same places have become unacceptable for managers and acceptable, indeed even desirable, for their subordinates. At the surface level, an aestheticized environment is deployed as a means of providing relaxation to employees.

However, this attempt is not as 'above board' as it seems. As the managerial views indicate, it is a deliberate attempt to control the behavior of subordinates towards the achievement of organizational objectives. Thus, the aestheticized environment is being utilized by management as a rational tool to keep their subordinates motivated to work. Indeed, their very existence within the organization as 'managers' is dependent on the

ability of the aestheticized environment to alleviate the monotony associated with the work life of non-managerial workers.

### **B. Aestheticization of Work Life at Apple Power—the Factory**

In the factory of Apple Power, the outer environment had been aesthetically landscaped by utilizing the natural beauty which existed in the land as it was in the countryside. The entrance of the factory was quite different to that of a typical factory. A pond with water lilies could be seen at the entrance (see Fig. 6). The waterfall near the factory building was one of the most beautiful scenes within the factory premises (see Fig.7). This waterfall was visible to any person who looked outside the factory building.

**Figure 6: Entrance to the Factory**



**Figure 7: Waterfall**



A gravel path could be seen very close to the factory building. When one passes through this gravel path, a ground area can be found, which is surrounded by huge rocks. There is a thatched hut in this ground area which is appealing to an observer (see Fig. 8). This place was used by the managers to spend their leisure time. Moreover, a meditation program is carried out at this ground area for factory workers twice a week by an outside consultant. Inside the factory building, a typical factory could be seen with machines and assembly lines arranged on every floor. In contrast to the outside landscaping, there were very few places which could be found which were aesthetically embellished inside the factory building.

**Figure 8: The View of the Thatched Hut at the Ground Area**



A) *Aestheticization—a Means of ‘Seduction’*: Quite contrary to the findings in the head office site, the aestheticized environment at the factory of Apple Power was found to be perceived by the managers as a strong means which provides mental relaxation for the burdensome role they have to play within the factory. They were eager to express the mental fatigue associated with the routine work that they performed when the photograph presented below (see Fig. 9), which portrays an outer space of the organization which is aesthetically appealing due to natural beauty, was shown.

The role of a manager, prominently in a factory context, requires much mental effort, and that effort can be quite draining. As is conveyed by the research participants, their daily routine inside a factory creates a huge amount of pressure which engenders a strong desire for mental relaxation.

**Figure 9: Ground Area with the Thatched Hut**



The production manager narrated the nature of his life at the factory and his engagement with the aesthetically appealing environment as follows:

Generally, a managerial position comes with stress. That is, it is a job that causes one to become mentally stressed. Generally, with regard to a person, there are two aspects, mental and physical. When it comes to us, more than getting physically fatigued, we get fatigued mentally. Therefore, in an environment like this, one could mentally relax. Most of the time, we use this place to have a leisurely walk in the evening. Or else, we walk and come back. Sometimes when we have free time, we go there to spend some time.

A quite similar view to this was expressed by the finance manager of the factory.

When we are highly tense, we go to the grounds and do a round and come back. Otherwise, we do some exercise for half an hour or one hour on the grounds. When we go there, that stress is gone. I personally believe in that... When there is something related to the MD [Managing Director], even if there is a meeting, when we come in the morning, then the stress level is high. Then, after finishing it and before starting work here, it is best to go for a round and start doing the work. It provides great mental benefits.

The physical reality that a worker inside a factory comes across is comprised of many unpleasant experiences as such a place would be filled with machinery and assembly lines. The turbulence of the factory only creates tension both physically and mentally. Thus, their quest is for the rarest sensory experiences that they could get within the factory environment or else being at work. Amidst this harsh reality, research participants have conveyed their desire for pleasurable experiences, even a pleasure such as ‘silence’. This desire unconsciously guides them towards the aesthetically appealing outer spaces of the organization. A production manager expresses desire for sensory experiences whilst being at work, in the following manner.

The next thing is stress; the surrounding is very silent in this type of environment. That means we are going there within a short period of time. Within two or three minutes, we go from the factory to a place in which

we feel that there is no factory nearby. When we reach there, we wonder whether we were really in a factory five minutes ago. With that, a feeling of relaxation is created within us. We feel it even physically.

The comparison that the participant expresses between the factory and the silent environment highlights managers' strong need, even eagerness, to avoid the sense of the factory environment. They are very pleased with the capacity of the aestheticized environment to counteract the unpleasant reality of their managerial life on the factory floor. Therefore, the aestheticized environment acts as a mask and leads organizational members seductively towards a state where they forget the distasteful experience of being in an industrialized environment, and allows them, as well as factory floor workers, to detach themselves from their dull, everyday routines. As Baudrillard (1990, p. 81) puts this, "...to be seduced is to be turned from one's truth. To seduce is to lead the other from their truth." Thus, this seductive capacity is used by the management of the factory to keep factory floor workers bound to the organization. This is echoed by the eagerness of managers to convince me of the positive effect of the aestheticized environment on the lives of factory workers.

Informed by Baudrillard, I argue here that the ownership of the organization has used the aestheticized environment as an apparatus to counteract the agony of work life, which is the apparent weakness within the factory. As Baudrillard (1990, p. 162) asserts, "We seduce with weakness, never with strong powers and strong signs. In seduction, we enact this weakness, and through it, seduction derives its power". Seduction through aestheticization becomes effective as it addresses the exhaustion produced by life at the factory. Another example of such initiatives is the meditation program implemented by the top management for factory workers. The research participants at the factory, who represented the management of the organization, narrated how they have conjoined the aestheticized environment with the religious feelings of the Sri Lankan people.

...now, at 5:00 [p.m.], when the work is over, he [trainer of meditation] will take one hour and take 20-30 workers and give them a small meditation session. Now, they [factory workers] will be taken in the gravel path, will stay in the ground area for a while, there is a pond here [pointing to a place in Fig. 9], looks at that. By the time they come here [pointing at the hut in picture], they are given a demonstration for releasing stress. Then, when you see it from this aspect, there is more of an impact on the factory workers than on us.

The meditation program could be identified as a 'deliberate attempt' to use spirituality to release factory workers from the stress caused by work pressure. The aestheticized environment acts as an ancillary, which allows management to carry out the meditation program in a successful manner. In a context within which the materiality of factory workers has been formed to work like 'machines' from morning until evening and to fix around 12,000 components of a bulb, switch, or socket, an aestheticized work environment is ancillary to their work, and creates a desire for spiritual pleasure. Unfortunately, in this attempt, Buddhism, which is the dominant religion in Sri Lanka, has become mere dogma, and the organization excludes people who have beliefs other than Buddhism. Indeed, within this context of aestheticization combined with spirituality, have become "rational tool[s] of management control" (Alferoff & Knights, 2003, p. 71) at Apple Power factory, and aestheticization supports management to fulfil its own purposes by controlling the behavior of subordinate employees.

## CONCLUSION

This paper presented how work/managerial life is aestheticized in a corporate sector work organization in Sri Lanka and the effect of this aesthetic mimicry of the workplace, on the lives of managerial workers. Based on data gathered and generated from two work contexts—factory and office—of the organization termed Apple Power, through photo-elicitation interviews, observation, and informal conversations, I argue

that the aestheticized work environment creates a dual effect on organizational actors. In a factory context, it can be concluded that aestheticization becomes a means of seduction (Schultz, 1992), which keeps organizational actors tightly bound to the organization. The aestheticized environment seductively conceals the everyday reality (Baudrillard, 1990, 2001) of workers' lives, and acts as a powerful tool which creates 'disengagement' from the materiality of work life, which is most often unpleasant and stressful. This disengagement is further bolstered by deploying aestheticization as a means of presenting a path to a 'spiritual life,' which disguises the agony in the industrialized work environment. However, this bestowed path to spirituality is not entirely above board per se, but a management agenda conceived to control employee behavior, without employees being aware of it.

However, in the office context, an aestheticized work environment is not able to seduce managerial workers—as it does in the factory milieu. Instead, it creates a sense of 'shame' among managerial workers, as they consider that enjoying life—via aestheticized means—is somehow unacceptable. Thus, there seems to be a low level of permeability between the boundaries of work and play (Alferoff & Knights, 2003) in the life of managers. Collectively shared managerial assumptions on the desired behavior of a 'manager' govern the behavior of managers in the head office of Apple Power. This shared set of 'values and beliefs' acts as a strong force which makes the managerial body resist aesthetic pleasures generated through the aestheticized work environment.

Against this backdrop, the findings suggest that the dual effect of the aestheticized work environment of Apple Power is permeated not only by managerial workers' assumptions about the 'Manager' but also by the nature of their work in the company—whether it is comparatively less stressful office work or monotonous and stressful factory work. The effect of the aestheticized environment on managerial life is dependent on the nature of work that employees perform within organizational spaces. Yet, in any work context, aestheticization of the work environment is believed by managers to be an effective tool which enhances the labor productivity of non-managerial workers or factory workers. However, the effect of aestheticization on such work categories remains under-researched in the Global South context. Further, the empirical findings of this study discovered a novel area for further research by foregrounding the role spirituality plays within organizations in Global South countries such as Sri Lanka, where religion plays a vital role in shaping individual behavior. By critically exploring the effects of organizational aesthetics on managerial life in two distinctive work contexts, this study enhances the understanding on the relationship between an aestheticized work environment and the lived experiences of managerial workers within such work contexts. Thereby, this paper contributes broadly to the fields of management and organizational studies.

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