



## **Hail to the auteur? Why 'aesthetic management' cannot save design management**

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# **Hail to the *auteur*?**

## **Why “aesthetic management” cannot save Design Management**

Paper for International DMI Education Conference:  
“Design Thinking: New Challenges for Designers, Managers and Organizations”  
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### ***Abstract***

This paper reviews how scholars within “aesthetic management” have critiqued mainstream, marketing-led Design Management. The text argues that while this approach does have its merits, it ultimately fails to create the kind of creative economy that it purports to endorse. Rather, by stressing the unique and transcendent creative powers of the *auteur*, it simply invents yet another authority that yields economic hierarchies.

The authors thus propose that the discipline of Design Management ought to follow recent developments within business and the arts, in which innovation and creativity is described in ways that do away with traditional notions of authorship. Doing so would enable the discipline to explore how non-hierarchical, “meshworked” economies can be created around the practices of individual designers.

## ***Introduction***

Mainstream Design Management has been subject to different forms of criticism. One particular type of critique focuses on the ways in which Design Management developed as a sub-discipline of marketing (cf. Cooper & Press, 1995; Bruce & Cooper, 1997), reducing the designer to an instrument for product differentiation. Critics have also pointed to the use of management and control techniques that, ultimately, serve to curtail creativity. While such criticisms have been presented in different ways, a circle of Scandinavia-based researchers who are exploring the links between aesthetics and management, “aesthetic management”, have been most eloquent in doing so. (cf. Guillet de Monthoux & Sjöstrand, 2003; Guillet de Monthoux, 2004; Guillet de Monthoux, Gustafsson & Sjöstrand, 2007; Thornqvist, 2005)

Among these scholars, Clemens Thornqvist is one of the more explicit critics of mainstream Design Management. In his fascinating study of the creative genius of Robert Wilson and Vivienne Westwood, *The Savage and the Designed*, he argues that the marketing bias of the discipline has usurped the aesthetic nature of creative work. Thus,

the fundamental approach of design management sets out from the same [...] perspective as brand management, in the context of Corporate Design or Corporate Identity, without any consideration to transcendence, virtuality and movement in a fetishized thing-relation called for in a creative relation. (Thornqvist, 2005: 148)

He therefore calls for a Design Management that puts a greater emphasis on understanding the nature of creativity, as it is actualised in and around designers. More specifically, there is a need for an approach that focuses on “the exclusive creative powers of the *auteur*” (136).

This paper will argue that while this “aesthetic management” approach does have its merits, it ultimately fails to create the kind of creative economy that it purports to endorse. Rather, by stressing the unique and transcendent creative powers of the *auteur* designer, it simply invents yet another authority that yields economic hierarchies. Indeed, as we argue elsewhere (von Busch & Palmås, 2008), the great challenge for Design Management is to get away from the view of design as a process that invariably unfolds under the auspices of a hierarchical organisation. Design Management should indeed shift its focus, but from the current “molar” to a “molecular” perspective. In other words, rather than studying design from the perspective of the unitary organisational hierarchy, it should study various forms in which individual designers can create economies around their work.

In the next section, the field of aesthetic management will be surveyed, followed by a section that argues that focusing on the “creative powers of the *auteur*” is somewhat anachronistic given the recent debates on authorship, creativity and innovation. Following a section that describes some examples of non-*auteur* creativity in contemporary culture and economy, the text is concluded by a case study of designers who are working within economic ecologies that are not dependent on traditional notions of authorship. These case studies are drawn from Otto von Busch's exhibition “Hackers and Haute Couture Heretics” at Garanti Gallery in Istanbul during the fall of 2007.

### ***Aesthetic management***

The notion of aesthetic management is located in the interstices of artistic and business practice. Largely based on the original work of Pierre Guillet de Monthoux, it features descriptive, prescriptive, and critical elements. First, on the level of description, it proposes that scholars can view companies as works of art (ie. “art firms”), that the practice of management can be seen as a form of aesthetics, and that managers (or, more generally, leaders) can be described as artists. These propositions were first put forward by Guillet de Monthoux (1993), and subsequently expanded in Guillet de Monthoux (2004).

More specifically, the notion of the “art firm” is the merger of two forms of aesthetics. Guillet de Monthoux starts from Kantian aesthetics, in which the artist is

seen as an inspired medium revealing or disclosing archetypes [...] Thus, intuition, feelings, and imagination play crucial roles in these processes of creation. [...] In the aesthetic experience, then, one reaches “transcendence”. (Guillet de Monthoux & Sjöstrand, 2003: 320)

The art firm emerges when such an inspired medium is placed in the context of an organisation, as demonstrated by the contextual view of aesthetics proposed by Gadamer. An effective artist leader is, then, someone who “fuses rational calculative control with a passion for the aesthetic and the sublime” (322). Here, there is a perfect symmetry between the artistic practice of Robert Wilson and the managerial practice of Swedish industrialist Pehr G. Gyllenhammar: the great artist and the great manager “share aesthetic leadership talents that hold the key to transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary” (Guillet de Monthoux, Gustafsson & Sjöstrand, 2007). Moreover, the aesthetic management scholars argue that this symmetry is increasingly reflected in the training of artists and corporate leaders: “thanks to the growing aesthetic awareness of postmodern management scholars”, the “differences between art and business schools” are diminishing. (Guillet de Monthoux, 2004: 348)

On a prescriptive level, aesthetic management argue that corporations that allow managers to act like “artist leaders” will become more creative and innovative. Thus, an increased management focus on “passion, playfulness, improvisation, intuitive judgement, beauty, and sensuality” (Guillet de Monthoux, Gustafsson & Sjöstrand, 2007) will support long-term profitability of a corporation. This rings particularly true for contemporary enterprises that rely on a strong brand identity. Indeed, building “brand value” is construed as a matter of forging ties with the transcendent. For instance, Guillet de Monthoux describes how the Prada brand is “threatened by banality” (2004: 350) as it grows into a large conglomerate of disparate sub-brands. Nevertheless, by “cleverly” drawing on projects that reconnect the brand with aesthetics, it has managed to “regain some of its earlier transcendence”.

Beyond the level of the corporation, “aesthetic leadership [has a] universal capacity to create an economy mindful of human needs and desires”. (Guillet de Monthoux, Gustafsson & Sjöstrand, 2007) However, organisations in contemporary market economies generally fail to incorporate aesthetics into their practices. The critique posited by these scholars thus concerns the tendency for contemporary market societies to head down the slippery slope towards banality. As contemporary organisations all too often fail to embrace and harness the exclusive creative powers of great artist leaders, our economy tends to propagate the trivial rather than the extraordinary.

It is on this point that the critique towards mainstream Design Management is formed. The line of critique presented above, in the quote from Thornquist's *The Savage and the Designed*, can be traced back to Guillet de Monthoux (1993). Here, the discipline is denounced as a means to exercise control through organisation – a move that relegates the artist to the “colporteur of the ordinary” (5). Therefore, Design Management needs to be reformed:

In the dominant design management discourse [...] there are few accounts of an approach [...] that can fully articulate on the one hand *the exclusive creative powers of the auteur* and on the other and industrialized design-managed process. (136, italics added)

However, as we shall see in the coming sections, the very notion of authorship is under renegotiation. In the arts, as well as in business, new perspectives on creativity and innovation are emerging – perspectives that do away with notions of authorship and exclusive creative powers. Before moving on to these perspectives, the text will briefly outline the perils of glorifying the individual genius of an *auteur*, engineer or manager.

## ***Hierarchical heroes***

In another paper (von Busch & Palmås, 2008), we deploy Manuel DeLanda's (1991; 1997; 2006) Deleuze-informed ontology of the economy in order to discuss the current state of Design Management. DeLanda describes the past couple of centuries as a shift towards a more hierarchically structured economy; more and more aspects of economic activity have been internalised into corporate entities. (DeLanda, 1997: 25-99)

Design Management feeds into this process, as it has focused primarily on how design can be incorporated in large organisational hierarchies. This holds true for mainstream, marketing-derived Design Management, but also – which is the point in this paper – for the aesthetic management scholars mentioned above. Guillet de Monthoux' object of description is, after all, an “art *firm*”; aesthetic management is, after all, a tool for corporate managers. However, these two schools of management feed into the hierarchisation of the economy in different ways. While mainstream Design Management is concerned with the hierarchical ordering of creative processes, aesthetic management serves to cement hierarchies in a manner that is more related to discursive elements.

As originally described by Deleuze and Guattari (1988), hierarchisation follows a two-step recipe – first, a collecting and sorting operation, then an operation of “cementing together”. This “double articulation” is elaborated upon in Deleuze's (1999) analysis of Foucault's (1977) analysis of panoptic institutions. The panoptic prison consists of *both* material architectures that collect and sort “raw materials” (ie. the prison building, the prisoners etc.), *and* discourses that cement structures together (ie. penal law, the concept of delinquency etc.).

Similarly, the organisational recipe of the modern corporation can be described in terms of a double articulation. First, it consists of material architectures, such as the M-form corporate form and the ranks of middle managers described by Chandler (1977), and the corporate R&D labs described by Noble (1977). Secondly, it also involves expressive components, such as the idea of the rational and objective professional, theories of management, the myth of the genius lone inventor, and so on. (Palmås, 2008) In the above-mentioned paper, we explore how mainstream marketing-led Design Management assists in creating the material, architectural components of corporate hierarchies. In this paper, however, we will focus on how the notions of the *auteur* or the great “artist leader”, celebrated by the “aesthetic management” scholars, serve as expressive components that stabilise organisational hierarchies. (It is, however, important to note that the material and the expressive components always work in conjunction – our separation of this double articulation is merely a pedagogical manoeuvre.)

In a review of the historical formation of the modern corporation, heroes with a near-mythical status have played an imperative role. Chandler's (1977) account of the rise of the “visible hand” of the modern corporation highlights how large-scale economic organisation is dependent on the separation of ownership and management. However, in order for owners to hand over operational control over their assets, a new mythical figure had to be invented – that of the objective, rational, professional manager. Indeed, as discussed by Bruno Latour in *We have never been modern*, the modern economy could only be created through the invention of the idea of a mythical “soulless, agentless bureaucracy”, which “offers the mirror-image of the myth of universal scientific laws”. (Latour, 1993: 121) Mythical though it may be, this discursive formation has been highly effective: it was the ideal of the modern corporate manager – a dehumanised, objective maximiser of profit – that originally made capitalists willing to invest in the new breed of incorporated business organisations.

A second mythical figure, just as important to the evolution of the modern corporation, is that of the corporate engineer. In his text on the rise of corporate capitalism, Noble (1977) argues that the rise of the modern corporation also involved the incorporation of knowledge creation, and the rise of a patent system that encourages intra-corporate R&D. The emergence of structures such as Bell Labs can thus be seen as an early instance of the large-scale commercialisation of knowledge, as well as the starting point of the policing of the spread of productive knowledge. As in the case of the separation of management and ownership, this “architectural” development dovetails with the creation of a mythical figure that serves as an “expressive” component that cements the structure. This figure was the engineer in the corporate lab, wearing a white lab coat, possessing a wealth and depth of knowledge unattainable to the layperson.

Katherine McCoy (2003) notes that historically, this same “white coat” ideal loomed large within the design profession. In the late 1960s, the designer was – like the manager or engineer – supposed to be an objective professional: “impartial”, “dispassionate”, and “disinterested” (4). As such, designers were wearing white lab coats at work:

These white lab coats make an excellent metaphor for the apolitical designer, cherishing the myth of universal, value-free design – that design is a clinical process akin to chemistry, scientifically pure and neutral, conducted in a sterile laboratory environment with precisely predictable results. (McCoy, 2003: 3)

These mythical figures – the professional manager and the white coat engineer or designer – share

fundamental traits with the modern scientist described by scholars within science studies (cf. Haraway, 1997; Latour, 1993). Thus, just like the modern scientist described by Haraway and Latour, the professional manager and the corporate engineer or designer are somehow connected to a transcendent nature – either the natural laws of the market economy, or the laws of physics and technology. In both cases, this supposed link to the transcendent realm served not only to cement their position inside a hierarchy, but also to cement the hierarchy as such: The hierarchisation of the economy was premised on the fact that capital was better placed, and that knowledge was best turned into innovations, inside corporate hierarchies.

Arguably, the *auteur* or “artist leader” sketched by the “aesthetic management” scholars may become yet another invented heroic figure that serve to cement hierarchies. As in the case of the professional manager or the genius corporate engineer, status is claimed from a supposed link to the transcendent realm. However, rather than professional objectivity or the ability to invent divine products, the artist leader hero supposedly uses exclusive powers to provide imagination, creativity and vision. This invention does not lead Design Management away from its affinity with hierarchical organisation, but rather reinforces hierarchical modes of creativity and innovation.

Fortunately, the *auteur* model of creation is not the only one around. Rather, as will be shown in the next section, recent developments in business as well as the arts increasingly lead us towards views of innovation and creativity which have transcended the notion of the *auteur*.

### ***Innovation and creativity without the auteur***

The proposition mentioned above – that the “lone genius” model of corporate lab engineer is a myth – has recently been put forward by leading innovation management scholars such as Eric von Hippel (2005) and Sonali Shah (2005). According to this body of research, many of the innovations that we see coming from corporations are in fact results of users or consumers engaging in the innovation process. This kind of “user innovation” has been around for a long time: There are many of examples of not-so-recent innovations – for instance within the automotive and sports equipment industries – that have emerged from users' tinkering with products.

However, as Shah notes, this form of innovation has been hidden from view in the modern economy. Citing Noble (1977), she argues that the rise of the modern corporation implied that *all* innovation was assumed to emanate from corporate labs.

Firms and entrepreneurs are generally recognized as the primary agents of product change and



economic progress [...] The consumer's role is a passive one: producers, not consumers, innovate and consumer preferences do not change without producer influence. [...] In broad and oversimplified terms, this is what is taught to students in management, marketing, economics, and engineering. [...]

The relatively low visibility of user-innovators may have also prevented us from noticing their activities or viewing them as more than mere anomalies: while firms are likely to heavily promote their innovations to the mass market, consumer innovations are more likely to be diffused through word of mouth. (Shah, 2005)

In this way, the "user innovation" scholars argue that consumers and amateur hobbyists – not the great corporate engineer – are the knowledge-producers that drive innovation. Traditional models of understanding innovation – the white-coated professional engineer who creates something out of nothing – underestimate the impact of open (Chesbrough, 2003), democratic, user- and amateur-led innovations.

However, it is only within innovation management that scholars are attacking the perspective of creativity as something that can be punctualised into a single, individual genius who creates something out of nothing. Within the arts, particularly in discussions on electronic culture, much has been said about the highly creative cultural scenes that have emerged through the practices of sampling, mixing and "co-creating". One eminent art theorist, Nicolas Bourriaud has discussed the notion of "post production" – producing works of art through the reassembly of previous works of art – as key to understanding contemporary arts practices. Bourriaud (2002) therefore celebrates the "semionaut" – a figure who recognises artistic creativity to be a navigation through the meanings of already existing works, and therefore has let go of the pretensions of being a lone genius who creates something out of nothing. We thus see the "emergence of a new cultural configuration, whose emblematic figures are the programmer and the DJ" (35).

Thus, the traditional notion of the great artistic genius, acting as a medium to the world of transcendence, seems somewhat anachronistic in relation to contemporary culture. Following recent discussions on how copyright regimes are stifling creativity (cf. Lessig, 2005; League of Noble Peers, 2007), there are now calls for traditional ideas of authorship to be scrapped. As the Critical Art Ensemble writes,

the distinguished art object draws its power from a historical legitimation process firmly rooted in the institutions of western culture, and *not from being an unalterable conduit to*

*transcendental realms*. This is not to deny the possibility of transcendental experience, but only to say that if it does exist, it is [...] *relegated to the privacy of an individual's subjectivity*. (Critical Art Ensemble, 1997: 87. Italics added.)

In other words, we are not arguing that the romantic notions of authorship – espoused by aesthetic management scholars – have to be abolished. On an individual basis, everyone should be free to worship any designer, artist, or corporate manager that s/he deems to be a genius. However, in a culture based on postproduction, we cannot allow such mythical figures to claim ownership over ever-larger chunks of meanings and knowledge.

There are several examples of thriving cultural scenes and knowledge communities that have detached themselves from the notion of the *auteur* with exclusive creative powers. Open source computer programming is one such example: indeed, this was the case that originally attracted the attention of the innovation management scholars mentioned above. These communities thus served as laboratories for exploring the “self-organising” logics of user innovation. (Palmås, 2006: 71) Regarding the understanding of such logics, it is striking to note that corporations have already started to devise strategies for creating competitive advantages in a business world in which technological development is driven by such swarms of users (Dahlander & Wallin, 2006).

Another example of a setting that functions without traditional notions authorship is the “grime” music scene that evolved in east London in the early years of this century. In this scene, music was made on a Do-It-Yourself-basis, using inexpensive equipment such as Playstations. This low barrier of entry created a swarm of producers, who worked together, shared material and sampled each other in a prolific manner. The result was a vibrant scene that evolved quickly and enrolled a large number of users/producers.

The grime scene represents a perspective on creativity that constitutes a polar opposite of that represented by the “aesthetic management” scholars. Here, it is important to note that “grime” – even though it is a DIY scene that does not foster great *auteurs* – can hardly be denounced as banal. As Leadbeater and Miller (2004) argue, it is becoming difficult to differentiate between amateurs and professionals. Professional amateurs – pro-ams, “networked amateurs working to professional standards” (9) – are increasingly making contributions to contemporary culture, economy and science. Thus, if we are to believe Leadbeater and Miller, the coming century will be one in which the influence of pro-ams will increase.

Organisationally speaking, structures such as the grime scene are not arranged through the

hierarchy-yielding double articulation mentioned above, but rather through self-catalytic reactions (Kauffman, 1995) among the interacting agents, yielding self-organising “meshworks”. (DeLanda, 1997) Key to the self-organisation of the scene was not only the low barrier of entry, but also – more importantly – the free sharing of (musical) material. These twin properties served as a protocol (Galloway, 2004; Galloway, 2006) for the self-organisation of the grime scene. As we argue elsewhere (von Busch & Palmås, 2008), the notion of protocol is crucial for furthering the understanding of how meshworked structures can be triggered in the context of design economies.

In the following section, we will study two examples of how these perspectives on creativity and innovation can be brought to bear on Design Management. In what ways is it possible to create design economies based on the meshwork organisational logic, and on the semionautic principle of creation?

### ***Case studies: Swap-O-Rama-Rama and SHRWR***

In the fall of 2007, the Garanti Gallery in Istanbul hosted the exhibition “Hackers and haute couture heretics”, curated by Otto von Busch. One of the events arranged during the exhibition was a Swap-O-Rama-Rama – a public clothes swap and do-it-yourself workshop. At these events, participants come to swap clothes and modify them at the spot, assisted by designers and friends. The shared infrastructure – sewing machines and other equipment – is provided by participants, who bring their own resources. The swaps are big public events, often gathering over a thousand visitors, all sharing clothes, skills and ideas to create new skins out of the old ones. The Istanbul event attracted around 500 visitors.

As the inventor of the Swap-O-Rama-Rama events, Wendy Tremayne, could not make it to the workshop, the event followed Tremayne's written method. This is constituted by a loose set of instructions, licensed through creative commons and thus open and free to use everywhere and beyond her control. The existence of this method has made the Swaps mobile – they are indeed organised all over the world. Tremayne, based in the south of US, does nevertheless assist from a distance: The organisers feed information and images back to Tremayne, who uploads them on the Swap-O-Rama-Rama website.

The Swap-O-Rama-Rama method follows a very simple procedure. Briefly stated, it consists of the following script:

1. As visitor, bring at least one bag of your unwanted clothing – this is your entrance ticket to the event.
2. When entering, put your clothes into the collective pile of clothing, consisting of all unwanted clothing of all who attend. This is the raw material of the event, and everyone is welcome to dive in and find his or her next new/used items.
3. After you have chosen your new clothes slide on over to one of the sewing stations and attend a workshop (sew, embroider, bead, fix, repair, knit).
4. Swap-O-Rama-Rama also offers on site DIY (do it yourself) with skilled artists to help you get started. You'll find professional designers with sewing machines ready to teach you how to make modifications to your new/used duds.
5. Prepare yourself for the catwalk that will present the highlights from the Swap.

At the core of the Swap-O-Rama-Rama is the sharing of material, ideas and skills within a community. In these meshworked situations, ideas are cross-pollinated as participants experiment with new forms created out of discarded objects. As such, the Swap is an idea- and skill-expanding event where people experience a collective empowerment. Actually, they together form a temporary and complementary fashion scene; the lonely fashionista remaking clothes at the kitchen table is no longer secluded but in the crowd of similar-minded friends.

The event is organised by a loose group with the aim of triggering an autocatalytic loop, turning the Swap-O-Rama-Rama an actual fashion event (though outside of the hierarchical fashion system). Instead of focusing on commodities and the exchange of money, the Swap is free, functioning on the basis of an exchange and expansion of skills. By forming an own scene the people at the Swap can form an own expression, share it and build a congregation with its own format, protocols and doctrine of fashion. This was intensified as the swap was arranged in conjunction with the "Istanbul Street Style" party, a monthly club event hosted at various nightclubs in the city showing fashion and street art from unestablished designers and artists. With models and DJs the event came to be a celebration of small scale creativity but with an glamorous framing, creating a fashion world in itself.

Another workshop taking place at the exhibition was organised by the Swedish design group SHRWR. The foundation of their practice is the notion of "Public Domain Clothing"; garments purposefully "liberated" from all forms of ownership, thus subject to sharing. In their workshop, they liberated clothing by adding a label to them. This label read:

this is sharewear  
owned and paid for by no one  
do with it as you see fit  
keep things free  
because ownership of out of fashion

The SHRWR group also screen printed garments with their designs and offered open source patterns for visitors to use or copy on paper. The atmosphere in the gallery was however different from the previous workshops. The SHRWR group worked somewhat isolated from the gallery visitors, but still offered the outcome from their work for free. This strategy had its drawbacks, as visitors proved uninterested in getting garments for free. They were nevertheless enthused about doing the printing or re-sewing of garments themselves. Thus, however well intended, the free clothing of SHRWR did not attract the same kind of wide participation as the Swap event. For the participants in the workshops, sharing the *actual garments* created less intensity than the sharing of *skills and ideas*. Whereas the former is a mere gift exchange, the latter builds a community and triggers catalytic reactions. This raises interesting questions regarding what is it that “wants to be free” – information and skills, or material property.

It is, then, interesting to note that the Swap event brought out the strongest commitment on the part of the participants. Co-authorship was also more convincing at the Swap, as it facilitated a deeper involvement, with participants engaging in expanding their aesthetic skills. Through the sharing of resources and material, the Swap becomes a radical democratic event where all build on an allocated pool of assets. This challenges one of the foundations of fashion – the celebration of absolute inequality and exclusivity. In stark contrast to this, the Swap allows wide participation and the shared luxury of advancing one’s aesthetic craft skills.

As fashion events, both the Swap-O-Rama-Rama and the SHRWR workshop are however interesting inasmuch as they are purposefully designed to function *without* any reference to great artists or *auteurs*. This does not mean that they do not produce creativity, or even economies. In particular, the meshworked structure of the Swap provided new means for designers to create economies around their work. The Swap is thus one out of several structures that a “molecular” Design Management ought to study.

## ***Conclusion***

While we are sympathetic towards the aims of the “aesthetic management” scholars, we fear that a deeper focus on the exclusive powers of the designer *auteur* would have adverse effects. The invention of yet another mythical figure, supposedly connected to the transcendent realm, simply buttresses the organisational behemoths (Thomas, 2007) that already stifle creativity and innovation in contemporary culture and economy. Unlike the traditional molar perspective on Design Management, shared by both mainstream Design Management and its critics within aesthetic management, a molecular perspective would lead us towards a departure from traditional notions of authorship. With a more realistic perspective on the nature of creation and innovation, we can explore how new economies can be created around design, from a bottom-up perspective.

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