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David Mark Atkinson\*

# Aesthetic Judgement and Responsible Management: A Material Entropic Dynamics Perspective

(research article)

## Abstract

Contemporary management scholarship increasingly recognises the importance of aesthetics – emotion, meaning, perception, and imagination – in organisational life. Yet these dimensions can still be positioned as supplementary to analytical and instrumental forms of decision-making. This paper offers a conceptual contribution by drawing on Material Entropic Dynamics (MED) to reconsider aesthetics as a condition of responsible management practice. Using a conceptual and theoretical analysis, the paper develops a dialogue between organisational aesthetics, humanistic management, and MED. It suggests that aesthetic attunement helps organisational actors recognise constraint, possibility, and the consequences of commitment before decisions become irreversible. In this sense, aesthetics is not merely concerned with expression, atmosphere, or style, but with how people perceive the range of viable futures available within a given situation. The paper contributes to humanistic management by linking aesthetic judgement to responsibility, dignity, and the preservation of possibility in organisational life. It offers a way of understanding some organisational failures not simply as technical or procedural breakdowns, but as failures to perceive constraint and possibility with sufficient care before action is taken.

**Keywords:** Organisational aesthetics; Humanistic management; Aesthetic judgement; Material Entropic Dynamics; Decision-making under uncertainty; Responsibility; Dignity; Organisational failure

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\* York Business School, York St John University, United Kingdom, ORCID iD 0000-0002-2179-1652, [d.atkinson@yorksja.ac.uk](mailto:d.atkinson@yorksja.ac.uk).

## Introduction: Aesthetics, Judgement, and the Limits of Instrumental Management

In recent years, management scholarship has increasingly turned toward aesthetics as a way of understanding organisational life beyond purely instrumental or technical accounts. Attention to emotion, meaning, perception, and imagination has enriched how scholars and practitioners engage with leadership, culture, and decision-making (see, for example: Linstead & Höpfl, 2000; Strati, 1999, 2019). Within the humanistic management tradition (Szostak, 2024), this shift reflects a broader concern with dignity, flourishing, and the lived experience of organising, positioning management not only as a science or technique, but as an art (Atkinson, 2007; Szostak, 2024). Within this framing, the “art of management” concerns not only creativity or expression, but the perceptual capacities through which organisational actors recognise what forms of action remain possible.

Anecdotally, one only has to consider an executive board making an early commitment to a restructuring based on initial indicators, only to find that alternative pathways – visible but not recognised at the time – would have preserved both capability and morale. Similar patterns are documented in the restructuring literature, where cost-focussed “defensive restructuring” prioritises immediate survival through labour shedding, closure of lines, and divestment of assets, without necessarily articulating a strategy for reorienting the enterprise under new conditions. In Grosfeld and Roland’s (1996) analysis of Central European enterprises, defensive measures are widespread and often successful on their own terms, yet “...[success] in defensive restructuring does not necessarily mean that the enterprise will (or even can) be able to successfully reorient its business activities” (Grosfeld & Roland, 1996, p. 6) and may culminate in the end of all activity and enterprise closure. Taken together, these insights highlight how early, narrowly framed restructuring commitments can erode organisational capabilities and foreclose alternative configurations that might otherwise sustain both performance and employee commitment.

Despite growing interest, the role of aesthetics in management remains, in many cases, conceptually underdeveloped. Aesthetic dimensions are often treated as expressive or interpretive layers – shaping how organisations are experienced, narrated, or represented – rather than as integral to how decisions are recognised and enacted under conditions of uncertainty. As a result, aesthetics can appear as

supplementary to what is generally taken to be the “real work” of management, which is still frequently framed in terms of analysis, optimisation, and control. Within applied behavioural science and organisational theory, managerial decisionmaking continues to be predominantly conceptualised in terms of instrumental rationality, emphasising ends–means calculations, short-term evaluative criteria, and control-oriented notions of effectiveness (Shrivastava et al., 2017). Against this backdrop, Shrivastava et al. propose “aesthetic rationality” as a value-oriented complement that completes the commonly held, instrumentally rational view of organisations, arguing that existing concepts of rationality are too narrow to support sustainability and must be expanded rather than simply refined. In this sense, aesthetic concerns – emotion, perception, imagination, and sensibility – are not merely decorative additions to managerial practice, but name a different mode of rationality whose relative marginalisation reflects the dominance of instrumental frames.

This paper suggests that such a positioning is insufficient, particularly in complex environments where decisions carry irreversible consequences. In these contexts, the challenge is not simply to select the optimal course of action from a clearly defined set of options (March & Heath, 1994; Simon, 1955), but to recognise what options are meaningfully available in the first place. This involves perceiving constraint, sensing possibility, and appreciating the implications of commitment before action is taken. These are not purely analytical tasks; they are perceptual and interpretive in nature. This paper therefore:

1. Reframes aesthetics as a pre-judgement perceptual mode that conditions what counts as a viable option, rather than as expression or post-hoc interpretation (see, for example: Dewey, 1934/2005; Strati, 1999).
2. Introduces Material Entropic Dynamics (MED)’s triad – constraint, entropic latitude, and collapse (Atkinson, 2026) – to provide a conceptual vocabulary for understanding how *aesthetic attunement* operates under uncertainty and irreversibility.
3. Reinterprets certain organisational failures as failures of early-stage perception (misrecognising constraint and possibility, mistiming collapse), not just failures of analysis or execution.
4. Suggests research and practice directions (e.g., studying near-miss decisions; designing conditions that preserve entropic latitude where appropriate).

The argument developed here is that aesthetics plays a more foundational role in management than is commonly acknowledged. Rather than being confined to questions of style, expression, or atmosphere, aesthetic judgement can

be understood as a means through which the structure of an organisational situation can be apprehended prior to decision. In this sense, aesthetics is closely tied to judgement under uncertainty, where the range of viable futures is not fully specified and must be discerned. Here, reframing aesthetics as a condition of judgement supports humanistic concerns: it foregrounds how decisions preserve or foreclose meaningful futures for persons and groups, and thus affects dignity (see, for example: Kostera & Woźniak, 2020; Nussbaum, 2011).

To develop this claim, the paper brings organisational aesthetics into dialogue with MED, a conceptual framework that examines judgement and commitment in conditions of uncertainty. While MED is not itself an aesthetic theory, it provides a language for understanding how constraint, possibility, and irreversible action are related. By placing these perspectives in conversation, the paper proposes that *aesthetic attunement* enables actors to perceive the range of admissible futures before decisions become fixed, and that failures in management are often rooted in a loss of this sensitivity.

Despite the richness of existing work in organisational aesthetics and humanistic management, a specific gap remains. While these literatures offer valuable insights into how organisational life is experienced and interpreted, they provide only a limited account of how actors discern the range of viable courses of action under conditions of uncertainty, or how the timing of commitment is recognised. This paper addresses that gap by arguing that aesthetic judgement operates as a pre-analytical mode of perception through which constraint and possibility are apprehended prior to decision. Drawing on MED, it develops a conceptual account in which '*aesthetic attunement*' enables the recognition of admissible futures and the timing of irreversible commitment.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the state of the art in organisational aesthetics and humanistic management, highlighting both their contributions and their limitations in addressing decision-making under uncertainty. It then develops a conceptual reframing of aesthetic judgement, before introducing MED as a complementary perspective. Subsequent sections explore the implications of this reframing for leadership, organisational life, and failure, and consider how aesthetic judgement may be more explicitly incorporated into humanistic management practice.

## State of the Art: Organisational Aesthetics and Humanistic Management

Despite the growth of organisational aesthetics and humanistic management scholarship, the relationship between aesthetic perception and decision-making remains under-specified. The study of organisational aesthetics has developed as an important counterpoint to purely rational or instrumental accounts of management. Early contributions emphasised that organisational life is not only structured through formal processes and measurable outcomes, but is also experienced through the senses, emotions, and imagination (see, for example: Gagliardi, 1992; Strati, 1999). Scholars such as Pierre Guillet de Monthoux (2000) have argued that organisations are aesthetic fields in which actors continuously interpret and respond to their surroundings through embodied and affective forms of knowing. From this perspective, understanding organisations requires attention not only to what is done, but to how it is perceived, felt, and made meaningful.

Building on this foundation, research in organisational aesthetics has explored themes such as beauty, harmony, and form (Guillet de Monthoux et al., 2007; Strati, 1999) as well as their counterparts in kitsch, fragmentation, and dissonance (for example: Szostak, 2025). These studies demonstrate that aesthetic qualities are not peripheral to organisational life, but are deeply embedded in everyday practices, shaping how individuals engage with their work and with one another. In parallel, work on aesthetic leadership highlights the importance of sensitivity, intuition, and expressive capacity in guiding organisations, suggesting that effective leadership involves more than analytical competence (for example: Guillet de Monthoux et al., 2007; Hansen et al., 2007).

Within the broader field of humanistic management, similar concerns have emerged. Humanistic approaches emphasise the centrality of human dignity, well-being, and social flourishing, challenging models of management that reduce individuals to resources or variables within a system (Melé, 2016). Viewed from this perspective, aesthetics plays a role in cultivating forms of organising that are life-conducive, fostering environments in which individuals can find meaning and develop their capacities (for example: Kostera & Woźniak, 2020; Szostak, 2024). The aesthetic dimension is thus linked to ethical concerns, as the way organisations are experienced has implications for how people are valued and treated.

At the same time, both organisational aesthetics and humanistic management have been influenced by critical perspectives that question the dominance

of instrumental rationality. These critiques argue that corporate power and an overemphasis on efficiency, optimisation, and control can lead to forms of organising that are dehumanising or unsustainable (for example: Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Deetz, 1992). Aesthetic inquiry, in this context, offers a way of resisting such tendencies by reintroducing ambiguity, reflexivity, and imagination into management practice, opening space for alternative ways of perceiving and articulating organisational realities.

However, while these literatures have made significant contributions, they tend to focus primarily on the experiential and interpretive aspects of organisational life. Less attention has been given to how aesthetic perception relates to decision-making under conditions of uncertainty, particularly where actions have irreversible consequences. Aesthetics is often associated with how situations are understood or expressed, rather than with how the range of possible actions is recognised and evaluated prior to commitment.

This creates a specific gap in the literature: the relationship between aesthetic perception and decisionmaking under conditions of uncertainty, particularly where actions are irreversible, remains weakly theorised. If management is to be understood as an art, it must account not only for how organisations are experienced, but also for how decisions are formed in situations where knowledge is incomplete, and futures cannot be fully known or specified in advance (Atkinson, 2023; Weick, 1995; March & Heath, 1994). In such contexts, the ability to perceive constraint and possibility becomes critical. Without this, decision-making risks becoming either overly rigid – foreclosing viable options too early – or excessively open, failing to commit when action is required.

Addressing this gap requires a conceptual shift in how aesthetics is understood. Rather than viewing it as a domain concerned primarily with expression or evaluation, it is more appropriate to consider aesthetics as a mode of perception that precedes and conditions judgement. This opens the possibility of linking aesthetic inquiry more directly to questions of responsibility, commitment, and organisational action. Here, responsibility is not only for outcomes but for the way possibilities for dignified action are preserved or destroyed through the timing and manner of collapse (Atkinson, 2026; Nussbaum, 2011).

Taken together, three strands dominate the current literature: organisational aesthetics as embodied and affective knowing, aesthetic leadership as sensitivity and expression, and humanistic management as a normative commitment to dignity and flourishing. While each contributes important insights, they do not yet provide a clear account of how organisational actors discern the range of

admissible futures within a situation, nor how the timing of commitment is recognised under conditions of uncertainty.

Table 1 provides an overview of the Dominant vs. Proposed Framing of Aesthetics and Decision-Making discussed here. Thus, for example, Strati (1999) identifies aesthetic knowing but does not systematise decision under uncertainty, while Hansen, et al. (2007) discuss aesthetic leadership, again without a full decision-theoretic treatment. Addressing this limitation builds on the conceptual shift outlined above: from viewing aesthetics primarily as expression or interpretation toward understanding it as a mode of perception that conditions what is recognised as possible prior to action (Atkinson, 2007). The following section develops this reframing, and sets the stage for introducing MED as a complementary perspective on judgement under uncertainty.

**Table 1.** Dominant and Proposed Framing of Aesthetics and Decision-Making

| Focus                      | Dominant view                                | Proposed reframing                                                   |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Aesthetics                 | Expression, atmosphere, narrative layers     | Perceptual attunement to constraint and possibility before judgement |
| Decision under uncertainty | Analytical choice between predefined options | Perception of admissible options and timing of commitment            |
| Failure                    | Technical or procedural breakdown            | Failures of early-stage perception and mistimed commitment           |

Source: own elaboration.

## Conceptual Framing: Aesthetic Judgement under Uncertainty

This section extends the role of aesthetics beyond expression and interpretation. It is therefore necessary to reconsider what is meant by aesthetic judgement in organisational contexts. Building on philosophical treatments of management practice and earlier work in organisational aesthetics (Atkinson, 2007; Strati, 1999), this paper advances a more foundational view of aesthetics. Rather than treating aesthetics primarily as a matter of taste, style, or symbolic meaning, aesthetic judgement is understood as a mode of perception through which organisational actors apprehend the structure of a situation prior to decision. In this sense, aesthetics is not an addition to managerial reasoning, but part of the condition under which reasoning becomes possible.

Organisational life frequently unfolds under conditions of uncertainty in which the set of available options is not fully specified in advance. Decision-making in such contexts cannot rely solely on analytical techniques that assume stable parameters and clearly defined alternatives (for example: Kochenderfer, 2015). Before analysis can proceed, actors must first recognise what constitutes a viable course of action within a given situation. This involves sensing constraint – what is materially, socially, or institutionally possible – as well as perceiving the range of trajectories that remain open (Weick, 1995). Such recognition is not reducible to formal analysis; it is mediated through perception, interpretation, and felt understanding, resembling Schön's (1991) account of reflection-in-action, where practitioners respond to unfolding situations before they can be fully codified.

Aesthetic judgement can therefore be understood as the process through which this recognition takes place. It operates in the space prior to formal decision, shaping how a situation is apprehended and how its possibilities are imagined. It does not primarily evaluate options; it conditions what is recognised as an option (Schön, 1991; Strati, 1999). Through *aesthetic attunement* (Jackson, 2016) – closely related to earlier notions of *aesthetic sensibility* (Atkinson, 2007) – actors develop a sensitivity to coherence, tension, imbalance, and emerging patterns within organisational environments. These qualities are often difficult to articulate in purely propositional terms or formal models, yet they play a decisive role in how situations are interpreted and how subsequent actions are framed.

This perspective also invites a reconsideration of the relationship between aesthetics and time in organisational decision-making. Here, for example, naturalistic accounts of aesthetic perception suggest that aesthetic evaluation has a preparatory and anticipatory function: it orients perceivers toward possible future interactions, assessing what an object or situation might afford relative to their goals and standards. From this perspective, aesthetic judgement is already temporally inflected, as it evaluates not only what is, but what could be enacted (Xenakis & Arnellos, 2014). Furthermore, empirical work on aesthetic judgement treats evaluation as a temporally extended process, in which aesthetic responses adjust over sequences of experiences as perceivers tune their sensory-cognitive systems to present and anticipated input (Brielmann et al., 2023).

Although developed outside organisational settings, such accounts underscore that aesthetic evaluation is both anticipatory and processual, rather than a single, instantaneous verdict. They reinforce the idea that aesthetic judgement is inherently temporal, unfolding alongside, and helping to shape, how situations

are construed over time. Thus, under conditions of uncertainty, the future is not simply a set of probabilities to be calculated, but a field of possible futures that must be discerned through perception and judgement. At any given moment, multiple trajectories may be admissible, though not all are equally viable. Aesthetic judgement contributes to this process by enabling actors to perceive not only what is currently present, but what may become possible or foreclosed depending on how a situation is engaged (Dewey, 1934/2005). In this way, aesthetics is implicated in the anticipation of consequences, particularly where decisions involve commitments that cannot easily be reversed.

Importantly, this reframing does not position aesthetic judgement in opposition to analytical reasoning. Rather, it suggests that analytical approaches presuppose an initial act of perception of the kind foregrounded in organisational aesthetics and humanistic management, through which the relevant features of a situation are brought into view. Without this prior attunement, analysis risks operating on an incomplete or distorted understanding of what is at stake. Aesthetic judgement thus complements analytical reasoning by shaping the conditions under which it is applied.

From this standpoint, some organisational failures may be understood not only as errors in analysis or execution, but as failures of perception at an earlier stage (for example: Reason, 2009; Turner, 1976). Where aesthetic attunement is limited or suppressed, actors may misrecognise the constraints they face, overlook viable alternatives, or commit prematurely to a particular course of action. Such failures are not always visible within conventional evaluative frameworks, as they occur before formal decision criteria are fully articulated. Nevertheless, they can have significant consequences once actions are taken and become difficult to reverse.

Reframing aesthetics in this way opens a pathway for connecting it more directly to questions of judgement, responsibility, and organisational action. It suggests that the capacity to perceive constraint and possibility with sensitivity and care is a critical component of responsible management, particularly in complex and uncertain environments. The following section now introduces MED as a complementary conceptual framework, providing a more explicit account of how constraint, possibility, and irreversible commitment are structured in such contexts.

## A Material Entropic Dynamics Perspective on Aesthetic Judgement

The reframing developed in the previous section positions aesthetic judgement as a perceptual activity through which organisational actors apprehend constraint and possibility prior to decision. This section now develops the explicit notion of irreversible collapse, placing emphasis on the structured relation between constraint, latitude, and timing, rather than only on ongoing sensemaking. Following earlier work (Atkinson, 2007), aesthetic judgement is understood as a mode of perception through which organisational actors apprehend the structure of a situation prior to formal decision. In this sense, to make an aesthetic judgement is to make a judgement in advance of “rule or precept” (Atkinson, 2007, p. 189).

To deepen this account, this section introduces Material Entropic Dynamics (MED) as a complementary conceptual framework. While MED (Atkinson, 2026) is not an aesthetic theory, it offers a way of articulating the structural conditions within which aesthetic judgement operates, particularly in relation to uncertainty, commitment, and consequence. MED is used here as a conceptual vocabulary rather than a formal model, providing a way of articulating the structure of constraint, possibility, and irreversible commitment.

At its core, MED examines how decisions are formed in situations where outcomes are not fully determined in advance and where actions carry irreversible effects. One way to conceptualise this is as a branching set of admissible trajectories shaped by constraint, where commitment selects a path and renders alternative futures inaccessible. Three interrelated concepts are central to this perspective: constraint, entropic latitude, and collapse. Constraint refers to the conditions – material, institutional, social, and temporal – that shape what is possible within a given situation. These constraints do not simply limit action; they define the structure within which action can meaningfully occur. Entropic latitude describes the range of admissible futures available prior to decision, capturing the plurality of trajectories that remain open and can be perceived as such. Collapse, in turn, denotes the moment of commitment through which one trajectory is realised at the expense of others, rendering the decision effectively irreversible.

From a MED perspective, judgement involves recognising this structure before collapse takes place. It requires an appreciation of both the constraints that govern a situation and the extent of latitude that remains available for action.

This recognition is not purely analytical; it depends on perceptual and interpretive capacities. While formal methods may assist in modelling certain aspects of a situation, they cannot fully capture the open-ended and context-dependent nature of possibility under uncertainty. Instead, judgement depends on a capacity to perceive how a situation is configured and how it might evolve.

It is at this point that the connection to aesthetics becomes more explicit. If aesthetic judgement is understood as the perceptual attunement to coherence, tension, and emerging patterns, then it can be seen as the means through which the structure described by MED becomes accessible to organisational actors. In other words, aesthetic attunement enables the recognition of constraint and entropic latitude – that is, the space of *admissible possibility* – prior to collapse. It allows actors to sense when a situation is narrowing over time, when alternatives are being foreclosed, or when new possibilities are emerging.

This perspective also clarifies the significance of timing in decision-making. Because collapse entails irreversible commitment, the moment at which action is taken is critical: acting too early may result in premature closure, where viable alternatives are foreclosed before they have been adequately considered, while acting too late may allow constraints to tighten, reducing the range of available options. Aesthetic judgement contributes to navigating this tension by providing a sensitivity to the evolving structure and space of the situation, supporting more considered engagement with the timing of commitment.

Importantly, MED does not prescribe specific decisions or outcomes. Rather, it offers a way of understanding the conditions under which decisions are made and the responsibilities associated with them. In this sense, it aligns with humanistic management's concern for responsibility and dignity. Where organisational actors hold the authority to commit to a particular course of action, they also bear responsibility for the consequences of that commitment, including the alternatives that are foreclosed and the futures that are thereby closed off for others.

By integrating MED with the reframing of aesthetics developed earlier, the paper advances a view in which aesthetic judgement is not peripheral to management, but central to the recognition of what is at stake in decision-making. It provides a way of understanding how actors perceive the space of admissible possibility prior to action, and how this perception shapes the quality of judgement. The following section explores the implications of this perspective for leadership, organisational life, and the dynamics of failure.

## Application: Organisational Judgement and Failure

This section applies the integration of aesthetic judgement and the MED perspective to organisational practice under uncertainty. If aesthetic attunement enables recognition of constraint and possibility prior to commitment, then its presence – or absence – directly shapes leadership, everyday organisational life, and the dynamics of failure. This section explores these implications across three interrelated domains.

### *Leadership: Perceptual Sensitivity and the Timing of Commitment*

Leadership, from this perspective, involves sensitivity to the evolving structure of constraint and entropic latitude, particularly in relation to the timing of commitment. Within much of the management literature, leadership is often associated with vision, decision-making capability, and the ability to execute strategy (for example: Sinnaiah et al., 2023; Steptoe-Warren et al., 2011). While these remain important, the perspective developed here suggests that an earlier and less visible capacity is equally critical: the ability to perceive the structure of a situation before committing to action (for example: Guillet de Monthoux et al., 2007; Hansen et al., 2007). Aesthetic judgement, understood as perceptual sensitivity to constraint and possibility, enables leaders to discern how a situation is unfolding and what forms of action remain viable. This involves recognising when a context is narrowing, when alternatives are being foreclosed, or when new pathways are emerging. Such sensitivity – an *aesthetic attunement* closely related to earlier notions of *aesthetic sensibility* – is not reducible to intuition in a purely subjective sense, nor to analysis in a purely technical one; rather, it reflects an attuned engagement with the organisational environment and its entropic possibility space.

This has particular relevance for the timing of commitment. Leaders are frequently required to act under pressure, where delaying a decision may carry its own risks. At the same time, acting too quickly can result in premature closure, where potentially viable alternatives are not fully explored. Aesthetic attunement contributes to navigating this tension by supporting a more considered sense of when a situation has developed sufficiently to justify commitment, and when further openness is warranted.

From this perspective, leadership involves not only deciding *what* to do but also perceiving *when* and *under what conditions* action should be taken. The

quality of judgement is therefore closely linked to the quality of perception that precedes it.

### *Organisational Life: Shared Aesthetic Fields and the Perception of Possibility*

Organisational life is constituted through everyday practices that either preserve or prematurely narrow the range of possibilities available for action. Meeting formats, KPI regimes, and escalation routines all shape how organisational actors perceive and respond to unfolding situations (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Jarzabkowski & Paul Spee, 2009). Beyond individual leaders, organisations operate as shared aesthetic fields in which patterns of perception are distributed across actors, practices, and routines (Guillet de Monthoux et al., 2007; Strati, 1999). Culture, in this sense, is not only a set of values or norms, but also a way of collectively sensing and interpreting situations (for example: Küpers, 2013). It shapes what is noticed, what is ignored, and how possibilities are framed.

When aesthetic attunement is cultivated within an organisation, actors become more finely sensitised to the “aesthetic dimension” of everyday organisational life, including shifts in atmosphere, mood and the often-suppressed “pathos” of work. Although set in a management-learning environment, Mack’s (2015) study of organisational aesthetic encounters shows how such attunement emerges through embodied, sensory engagement with organisational narratives and artefacts, enabling participants to notice previously overlooked details, contradictions and “signs of life” that disturb taken-for-granted, purely rational depictions of organisations. As students engage in “wayfinding” rather than following prescribed, navigational routines, they learn to question dominant assumptions, to recognise tensions between official images and lived experience, and to experiment with alternative forms of representing and responding to organisational situations. This suggests that when actors are aesthetically attuned, they are more likely to remain sensitive to emerging tensions, to resist premature closure in their sensemaking, and to keep multiple possible courses of action in view, thereby enhancing the organisation’s capacity to recognise shifting constraints and respond adaptively. This does not imply a lack of structure or direction; rather, it reflects a balance between openness and commitment, where possibilities are explored before they are narrowed.

Conversely, where aesthetic attunement is diminished, organisations may exhibit a form of perceptual rigidity. Established routines, metrics, or narratives

can dominate to the extent that alternative interpretations are overlooked. In such contexts, the perceived range of viable futures becomes artificially constrained, not because the situation itself lacks possibility, but because those possibilities are no longer recognised. Decision-making may then proceed on the basis of a narrowed understanding, increasing the risk of suboptimal or inappropriate commitments.

This perspective highlights the importance of cultivating organisational environments in which aesthetic sensitivity is supported rather than suppressed. Practices that encourage reflection, dialogue, and engagement with ambiguity can contribute to maintaining awareness of possibility, even in the presence of strong institutional constraints.

### *Organisational Failure: Premature Closure as Aesthetic Failure*

Near misses and organisational crises can be reinterpreted as failures in the perception of constraint and timing, rather than solely as failures of execution; post-incident reviews emphasise design that looks at “what could still have been done” at earlier points (for example: Cannon & Edmondson, 2005; Reason, 2009, 2016). For example, drawing on Cannon and Edmondson’s account of “small failures” and near misses as early warning signs, we can reread near misses and crises less as instances of bad execution and more as episodes where organisations misperceived their room for manoeuvre and the timing of possible interventions. Their analysis of cases such as the Columbia disaster suggests that structured post-incident reviews should ask what additional actions could still have been taken at earlier points, rather than simply identifying who failed to execute existing plans.

The relationship between aesthetics and failure thus becomes particularly visible when considering how organisations arrive at decisions that later prove problematic. Conventional analyses of failure often focus on errors in judgement, deficiencies in information, or breakdowns in execution. While these factors are important, the perspective developed here suggests that some failures originate at an earlier stage, in the way situations are perceived.

From a MED-informed standpoint, failure can be associated with premature closure: the commitment to a particular course of action before the structure of constraint and possibility has been adequately recognised. In such cases, viable alternatives may be foreclosed not because they were unavailable, but because

they were not perceived as admissible within the prevailing understanding of the situation.

Aesthetic judgement plays a role in this process by shaping how that understanding is formed. Where aesthetic attunement is limited, actors may misread the signals of a situation, overlook emerging tensions, or fail to appreciate the implications of their commitments. The resulting decisions may appear coherent within a restricted frame of reference, yet prove inadequate as conditions unfold.

Importantly, this account does not suggest that failure can be eliminated through improved perception alone. Uncertainty cannot be fully resolved, and all decisions involve some degree of risk. However, recognising the aesthetic dimension of judgement allows for a more nuanced understanding of how failures emerge, highlighting the role of perception in shaping the range of possibilities that are considered prior to action.

Thus, the above applications, when considered together, suggest that aesthetic judgement is not an optional or peripheral aspect of management, but a central component of how organisations engage with uncertainty. Drawing on Strati (1999) and Dewey (1934/2005) aesthetic experience can be understood as pervasive both within and beyond organisational life rather than as occasional or exceptional phenomena. It influences how leaders perceive situations, how organisations collectively interpret their environments, and how decisions are formed and enacted. The final section draws these insights together, considering their implications for humanistic management and the cultivation of responsible organisational practice.

## Possible Verification and Research Implications

This section discusses avenues for further work. The perspective developed in this paper is conceptual, yet it lends itself to several avenues through which its claims may be explored, refined, and, where appropriate, empirically engaged. If aesthetic judgement is understood as a mode of perception through which organisational actors recognise constraint and possibility prior to commitment, then its presence and effects should be observable – albeit indirectly – within organisational settings. Particularly, for example, if aesthetic attunement supports the preservation of entropic latitude, then organisations that institutionalise reflective dissent and ambiguity-tolerant dialogue should exhibit fewer instances of premature closure in high-stakes decision contexts.

One potential line of inquiry lies in qualitative studies of decision-making under uncertainty. Ethnographic or process-based research could examine how actors describe and interpret situations in advance of formal decisions, paying attention to the language, metaphors, and evaluative cues they employ. Such studies may reveal how aesthetic sensibilities – expressed through notions of coherence, tension, fit, or unease – shape the framing of options and the timing of commitment. In particular, moments of hesitation, disagreement, or reconsideration may provide insight into how alternative possibilities are perceived or overlooked.

A related approach would involve the analysis of near-miss decisions and organisational turning points. Rather than focusing solely on outcomes that resulted in failure, examining situations in which different courses of action were considered but not taken may offer a more nuanced understanding of how entropic latitude is recognised and narrowed. Retrospective accounts, including post-incident reviews or reflective interviews, could be used to identify points at which alternative trajectories were available but not fully appreciated at the time.

In addition, research on leadership practice may provide a context for exploring aesthetic judgement more directly. Studies could investigate how experienced leaders articulate their sense of when to act, when to wait, and how to interpret evolving situations. Attention to the role of intuition, tacit knowledge, and embodied awareness may help to illuminate the perceptual dimensions of judgement that are often difficult to capture through formal models. Such work would contribute to a more grounded understanding of how aesthetic attunement is developed and exercised in practice.

Beyond empirical investigation, the paper also has implications for organisational design and development. If aesthetic sensitivity, understood in MED terms as attentiveness to constraint and possibility, helps preserve entropic latitude by recognising possibility before irreversible commitment, then practices that support reflection, dialogue, dissent, and engagement with ambiguity may improve the quality of judgement. Such practices include structured opportunities to surface tension, explore scenarios, and delay closure where premature commitment is a risk (for example: Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015; Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2014; Edmondson, 1999). Conversely, environments that prioritise speed, certainty, or rigid metric adherence may suppress the perceptual conditions required for responsible action by accelerating premature closure and reducing entropic latitude. In contemporary organisational settings, the increasing use of generative AI strengthens the case for keeping human judgement at the point of commit-

ment, limiting AI to sensing and surfacing functions that expand alternatives while avoiding representationally driven premature closure of possibility (Atkinson, 2026), and preserving meaningful human judgement at points of irreversible commitment, in ways that respect how constraint is exercised over others' futures and thereby support dignity, autonomy, and noninstrumental treatment of people (Szostak, 2024; Kostera & Woźniak, 2020).

Finally, the perspective offered here invites further theoretical work at the intersection of aesthetics, judgement, and responsibility. In particular, it suggests the value of integrating insights from organisational aesthetics, humanistic management, and decision theory in ways that more explicitly account for uncertainty and irreversibility. Material Entropic Dynamics provides one possible framework for this integration, but its application to aesthetic inquiry remains open to development and critique.

Taken together, these avenues do not constitute a single research programme, but rather a set of directions through which the relationship between aesthetic judgement and organisational action may be more fully explored. By making this relationship more explicit, future research can contribute to a deeper understanding of how organisations perceive, decide, and act in complex and uncertain environments.

## Judgements and Conclusions: Aesthetic Attunement and Responsible Management

This paper has argued for a reconsideration of aesthetics within management, not as a supplementary concern with expression, atmosphere, or symbolic meaning, but as a condition through which organisational actors perceive and engage with situations prior to decision. By placing organisational aesthetics in dialogue with MED, it has proposed that aesthetic judgement enables the recognition of constraint, the sensing of possibility, and an appreciation of the consequences of commitment before action becomes irreversible.

This reframing has several implications for how management is understood within a humanistic perspective. First, it suggests that responsible management depends not only on the outcomes of decisions, but on the quality of perception that precedes them. Where actors are able to recognise the range of admissible futures within a situation, they are better positioned to act with awareness of

what is at stake. Conversely, where this perceptual sensitivity is diminished, decisions may be formed on a narrowed understanding of possibility, increasing the likelihood of premature or inappropriate commitments.

Second, the paper highlights a close relationship between aesthetic judgement and responsibility. In contexts where organisational actors hold the authority to commit to particular courses of action, they also participate in the foreclosure of alternative possibilities. Responsibility, in this sense, extends beyond the immediate consequences of a decision to include the trajectories that are no longer available once a commitment has been made. Aesthetic attunement contributes to this responsibility by supporting a more careful and considered engagement with the structure of possibility prior to action.

Third, the argument connects aesthetics to the humanistic concern for dignity. If dignity involves recognising and respecting the capacity of individuals and groups to pursue meaningful courses of action, and if human flourishing requires more than mere existence or instrumental function, then dignity becomes closely linked to the preservation of possibility within organisational life. Decisions that unnecessarily constrain or foreclose such possibilities may be experienced as diminishing, even where they are procedurally justified. By contrast, practices that maintain openness where appropriate, and that engage thoughtfully with the timing and nature of commitment, can support more life-conducive forms of organising.

These considerations also point to the limits of purely instrumental approaches to management. Analytical techniques, metrics, and optimisation frameworks can play valuable roles in supporting decision-making, but they cannot substitute for the perceptual work through which situations are first apprehended. Without attention to this prior stage, there is a risk that analysis proceeds on the basis of an incomplete or overly simplified understanding of what is possible. Aesthetic judgement, as described in this paper, does not replace analysis, but conditions its relevance and application.

Taken together, the argument advanced here invites a modest but significant shift in emphasis. If management is to be understood as an art, this is not only because it involves creativity or expression, but because it requires a form of attunement to the unfolding structure of organisational situations. Such attunement supports the recognition of constraint and possibility, informs the timing of commitment, and underpins responsible action in the face of uncertainty.

In bringing aesthetics, judgement, and responsibility into closer alignment, the paper contributes to ongoing efforts within humanistic management to re-

frame organising as a practice oriented toward dignity and flourishing. It suggests that cultivating aesthetic sensitivity is not an optional refinement, but an integral aspect of how organisations perceive, decide, and act in complex environments. In this sense, aesthetic attunement is not simply an enrichment of management practice, but a condition of responsible and genuinely humanistic management.

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