

ORGANIZATIONAL THEORY AND AESTHETIC PHILOSOPHIES

Routledge Studies in Management, Organizations and Society

ORGANIZATIONAL THEORY AND AESTHETIC PHILOSOPHIES

Antonio Strati

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Organizational Theory and Aesthetic Philosophies

Diverse philosophies constitute the theoretical ground of the study of the aesthetic side of organization. In fact, there is not a single unique philosophy behind the organizational research of the aesthetic dimension of organizational life. *Organizational Theory and Aesthetic Philosophies* will illustrate and discuss this complex phenomenon, and it will be dedicated to highlighting the philosophical basis of the study of aesthetics, art and design in organization.

The book distinguishes three principal “philosophical sensibilities” amongst these philosophies: aesthetic, hermeneutic and performative philosophical sensibility. Each of them is described and critically assessed through the work of philosophers, art theorists, sociologists and social scientists who represent its main protagonists. In this way, the reader will be conducted through the variety of philosophies that constitute a reference for aesthetics and design in organization.

The architecture of the book is articulated in two parts in order to provide student and scholars in philosophical aesthetics, in art, in design and in organization studies with an informative and agile instrument for academic research and study.

Antonio Strati is a senior professor of sociology of innovation and organization at the University of Trento, Italy, and chercheur associé at i3-CRG, École polytechnique, France.

Organizational Theory and Aesthetic Philosophies

Antonio Strati

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Organizational Theory and Aesthetic Philosophies
Antonio Strati

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Author Biography

Antonio Strati, senior professor of sociology of innovation and organization at the Department of Sociology and Social Research of the University of Trento, Italy, and chercheur associé at i3-CRG, École polytechnique, CNRS, Université Paris-Saclay, France, is both a sociologist and an art photographer.

He is a founder member of the Research Unit on Communication, Organizational Learning and Aesthetics (RUCOLA), University of Trento, and of the international network of academics and practitioners Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism (SCOS).

His academic work focuses on organizational symbolism and the aesthetic approach to study organizational life, while his artistic research focuses on conceptual photography.

He is the author of *Organization and Aesthetics* (Sage, 1999)—which also appeared in French (PUL, 2004), Portuguese (FGV, 2007) and Italian (Mondadori, 2008)—and of *Theory and Method in Organization Studies* (Sage, 2000).

He is co-author (with Silvia Gherardi) of *Learning and Knowing in Practice-Based Studies* (Elgar, 2012).

His artistic research in conceptual photography, Photopoesia, has been published in books and photographic journals, and collected at museums and international collections.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank, first of all, the artists, organizational scholars and practitioners who produced the rather vast literature and the vital debate regarding the aesthetic dimension of organizational life. I am particularly grateful for their inventive and playful debates to the AoMO (Art of Management and Organization) conferences organizers; to the participants in the web network Aacorn (Art, Aesthetics, Creativity, and Organizations Research Network); and to the students and scholars engaged “to do research for fun” in SCOS (Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism), the academic network that I had the pleasure to co-found.

I am indebted to my colleagues of the University of Trento and, in particular, to my junior colleagues of the Research Unit on Communication, Organizational Learning, and Aesthetics (RUCOLA) for the research conducted together on the subject of aesthetics and art in organization. I wish also to thank my colleagues of the University of Siena in Italy, of the École polytechnique (Paris, France) and of the Copenhagen Business School and Roskilde University (Denmark) for their encouragement and support of my research on aesthetics in organization. I also owe a considerable debt to my students in Trento, Siena and several other European universities. I wish also to express my gratitude for the technical and administrative support I received for my research and teaching from the persons devoted to the organization of institutional settings, technologies and spaces. Among them all, I would like to thank especially Per-Olof Berg, Sue Jones, Alessandro Cavalli, Jean-François Chanlat, Marta Calás, Adrian Belton, Eduardo Davel, Pierre-Jean Benghozi, Kristian Kreiner, Rosemary Nixon, Gianluca Mori, Vincent Dégot, Poul Bitsch Olsen, Linda Smircich and Pasquale Gagliardi. A special thought also goes to the memory of Antonio de Lillo, Heather Höpfl and Omar Calabrese.

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Prelude

Organizational Theory and Aesthetic Philosophies appears twenty years after *Organization and Aesthetics*, one of my books published with Sage, which was well received. In fact, this essay on the aesthetic dimension of organizational life and its study—that Sue Jones, University of Bath, in England, invited me to write for Sage—has become a point of reference for organizational aesthetic research, and has also been translated into French, Portuguese and Italian.

In French, it was for the initiative of Jean-François Chanlat, who was working at the Université Dauphine in Paris, France, and it appeared in 2004 with the Franco-Canadian publishing house Les Presses de l'Université Laval in Québec. In Portuguese, it was for the initiative of Eduardo Davel, who was working at the Université Téluq in Montreal, Canada, and was published in 2007 with the Brazilian publisher Editora Fundação Getúlio Vargas of Rio de Janeiro. In Italian it appeared some ten years later than the original publication by Sage, in 2008. It is a largely updated version that Omar Calabrese, who was working at the time at the same University of Siena where I have been teaching for fifteen years, asked me to publish with Mondadori-Università in Milan.

This book, observed Josef Chytrý (2008: 61), was “saturated in the literature of philosophical aesthetics”. Now, twenty years after, *Organizational Theory and Aesthetic Philosophies* documents once again my passion and taste for philosophical aesthetics, even though I am not a philosopher of aesthetics, nor an art critic and historian, but a sociologist of organization and an art photographer. This new book further illustrates my theoretical awareness that philosophy is highly relevant in organization theory and management studies. Which means, in particular, that aesthetic philosophies, as well as art history and social theories of art, are highly relevant if the organizational study is directed to understand the aesthetic dimension of organizational life. This is the principal continuity between the two books, but with a crucial difference.

Twenty years ago, in fact, with *Organization and Aesthetics*, I intended to give theoretical and methodological form to the aesthetic approach to the study of the organization; and for it, I explored, made reference

and discussed aesthetic philosophy, the sociology of art, the semiotics of art and art theory. On the contrary, now, with *Organizational Theory and Aesthetic Philosophies*, I focus directly on aesthetic philosophy and art social theory, since my intent is to investigate the philosophical and epistemological roots of organizational aesthetics, art and design. The crucial difference between the two books is, therefore, that the relationship between “organization” and “aesthetics” is reversed; that is, in this new book, philosophical aesthetics constitutes the principal figure of the scenario, while the aesthetic approach constitutes its background.

Returning to the similarities that characterize these two books, in addition to my sociological taste for aesthetic philosophy, it affects something that concerns the writing process and my research practices.

Twenty years ago, when I wrote *Organization and Aesthetics*, I was reflecting on a style of organizational research that could assign aesthetic quality to both inquiring and theorizing organizational life. The book followed my article “Aesthetic Understanding of Organizational Life”, which was published in the theoretical forum of the journal *Academy of Management Review* (1992) and dedicated to the new intellectual currents in organization theory, and which had been edited by Linda Smircich, Marta Calás and Gareth Morgan. In that article, I discussed the thesis of moving from the study of organizational aesthetics to an aesthetic study of the organization. When, a few years later, I wrote *Organization and Aesthetics*, my aim was to further inquire, theorize and give form to the aesthetic understanding of organization, and to characterize it in a distinctive way with respect to the various interpretative and qualitative approaches that flourished in those years in the sociology of organizations, organizational theories and management studies (Buchanan and Bryman, 2009; Clegg et al., 2006; Hatch, 2006; Strati, 1996).

Organizational Theory and Aesthetic Philosophies, too, has an essay at its origins—the chapter I wrote for the book on the philosophies and epistemologies of organization theory that Raza Mir, Hugh Willmott and Michelle Greenwood (2016) edited. In this work, I proposed to understand the philosophies, epistemologies and social theories that characterize the studies of the aesthetic dimension of organization thanks to three principal philosophical sensibilities: the hermeneutic sensibility, the aesthetic sensibility and the performative sensibility, which, in *Organizational Theory and Aesthetic Philosophies*, I further explore, describe and discuss.

At the end of that chapter, I wrote that an important future direction of organizational aesthetics research might consist in establishing a more explicit and direct dialogue between organization studies and aesthetic philosophy, art theory and social theory (Strati, 2016: 258). Something that has had few and rare examples, such as Mir, Willmott and Greenwood's *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy in Organization*

Studies mentioned above, or the collection of philosophical, sociological and anthropological essays on the aesthetics of ordinary beauty—and ordinary ugliness—in a transdisciplinary perspective edited by Janusz Przychodzen, François-Emanuël Boucher and Sylvain David (2010).

These are the origins of this book, dedicated to highlighting the philosophical basis of the study of aesthetics, art and design in the organization—that is, the diverse philosophies that constitute the theoretical ground of the study of the aesthetic side of the organization. In fact, there is not a single unique philosophy behind the organizational research of the aesthetic dimension of organizational life. As said, the book distinguishes three principal “philosophical sensibilities” amongst these philosophies: aesthetic, hermeneutic and performative philosophical sensibility. Each of them is described and critically assessed through the work of philosophers, art theorists, sociologists and social scientists who represent its main protagonists. In this way, the reader will be conducted through the variety of philosophies that constitute a reference for aesthetics, art and design in organization. From which philosophical viewpoint?

My philosophical lens concerning the aesthetic approach is grounded in the philosophical aesthetics created at the beginning of the eighteenth century, in Italian philosophy and in Simmel's sociology of the senses. These are Western philosophies that belong to European continental thought. More precisely, my philosophical point of view in writing this book is principally rooted in the “Logica poetica” of Giambattista Vico (1725) and the aesthetics of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1750–58), in the aesthetic sociology of Georg Simmel (1908), in the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1947) and the existentialist and hermeneutic aesthetics of Luigi Pareyson (1954), in the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1986), in the “weak thought” of Gianni Vattimo (Vattimo and Rovatti, 1983) and the “living thought” of Roberto Esposito (2010) that characterize, among other features, the Italian difference and specificity in philosophy and aesthetics.

I shall discuss these aesthetic philosophies and aesthetic social theories that characterize my philosophical lens through the various chapters of the book. Also, in this case—that is, in my “philosophical situation”—one distinctive character is emphasized: the fact that it is a plurality of aesthetic philosophies to constitute my philosophical lens, rather than a single philosophical tradition on art and aesthetics.

Six “Interludes” complete the book. They are made up of photographs rather than words—as, on the contrary, has been the case with the use of the “interlude” made by John Law in his book *After Method* (2004)—and are intended to evoke and discuss visually the relationship between the philosophical aesthetics and the organizational theory that characterizes my philosophical lens. They constitute the *trait-d'union*, which represents the passage from one chapter to another, from Part I to Part II, and from Part II to the Epilogue.

Design: An Epistemology of the Unseen" mentioned above. The aesthetic sensibility constitutes the principal distinctive character of organizational aesthetics, even if the hermeneutic and performative sensibilities are more common among the four approaches to the study of the aesthetic dimension of organizational life.

Chapter 4, "Aesthetic Philosophy and the Aesthetic Approach", begins Part II with a focus on the approach to the study of organizational life that I have introduced in organizational theories—the "aesthetic approach" (1992). The chapter will discuss the relations of the "aesthetic approach" with the philosophical and organizational themes of rationality and the sociological paradigm. This chapter also emphasizes the phenomenological and post-humanist awareness that characterizes the "aesthetic approach" and the philosophical importance of the debates concerning the post-humanist and aesthetic materiality of the corporeal relationships of all forms of life with the artifacts and the organization.

Chapter 5, "Practice and the Italian Aesthetic Philosophies", continues with a focus on the "aesthetic approach" and underlines the philosophical importance of the Italian philosophies regarding the topic of practice in the ambit of both art creation and worldly organizational creativity. The aesthetics of the practice is an important subject in the existentialist and hermeneutic aesthetics of Luigi Pareyson, which constitutes a reference for the "aesthetic approach" and for the "practice-based studies" in organizational theory. Chapter 5 also stresses that the other Italian aesthetic philosophies developed in the same period—futurism, Marxist and the phenomenological aesthetics—which opposed Crocean idealism, have investigated aesthetics in its production process, rather than just in the artwork, in continuity with the traditional interest in the "practice spheres" that has characterized Italian philosophy since the Renaissance.

Chapter 6, "Aesthetic, Hermeneutic and Performative Sensibility", highlights the principal philosophical foundations of organizational aesthetics research. It also acknowledges the wide variety of philosophies taken into due consideration in the study of aesthetics, art and design in organization. It illustrates the roots of the aesthetic discourse on organization in the thought of classic authors of philosophical aesthetics—Addison, Vico, Baumgarten and Kant—as well as in the German aesthetic sociology of Simmel, the French phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, the Italian philosophical aesthetics of Pareyson, and the semiotics of Barthes, Calabrese and Eco. Hence, Chapter 6 (1) begins with the topic of the sensible knowledge, which constitutes social relationships of sociological relevance; (2) explores the relationship between the creation process and its interpretation, and the active involvement of the "user" in hermeneutic process; (3) highlights the relationship between performance as an aesthetic practice and Polanyi's notion of tacit dimension of knowledge and Dewey's pragmatist philosophy; and (4) illustrates the principal

characteristics of the four approaches that articulate the study of organizational aesthetics, and concludes Part II by discussing their relationship with the three philosophical sensibilities.

In the Epilogue, I recapitulate the topic of the book, its treatment and its main contribution to organizational aesthetic research, and I conclude the book with a proposal to play with philosophy in the aesthetic study of organizational life.

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Interlude is a term whose etymology “derives from the medieval Latin *inter* (between) + *ludus* (play). An interlude may be an intervening episode, an entertainment between the acts of a play, or a short musical piece put between the parts of a longer composition” (Gherardi and Surati, 2017: 104). In this book, the Interludes are constituted by my “Photopoesia” (Belli, 1982), that is, by my art photography (Hitchcock, 2005; Zannier, 1986). The six photopoesms in black and white are printed each one full page to interrupt the rhythm of reading with their visual language. They are meant, in fact, to invite the reader to suspend the words-experience and instead to immerse himself/herself in the image-experience to feel its poetry and empathically live its evocative aesthetics. Photographs and words, thus, compose together the scenario of this book, and this represents another difference with *Organization and Aesthetics*.

Furthermore, art photography will represent the “leitmotiv” of my discussion of the relationship between philosophy and organizational theory. The aesthetic philosophies, as I said, comprehend such a plurality of visions, interpretations and styles of research that I felt the necessity to ground my reflections on the relevance of philosophical aesthetics on a “province” of the aesthetics—to use Alfred Schütz’s (1962–64) terminology—with which I have deep familiarity. Thus, art photography will be the research field where my philosophical intuitions on aesthetics will be rooted and, by hybridizing with photography in a broad sense, art photography will also constitute a metaphor of organizational aesthetics.

The architecture of *Organizational Theory and Aesthetic Philosophies* is articulated in two parts in order to provide student and scholars in organization studies, in philosophical aesthetics, in art, in art photography and in design with an informative and agile instrument for academic research and study.

The first part of the book introduces the reader to the main themes and issues debated around art and ordinary aesthetics in everyday working life in organizations and in society. The world of art photography, of business and commercial photography, and of daily mundane photography represents the organizational and the social context of the theoretical and methodological subjects treated to depict the relevance of philosophical aesthetics in the aesthetic understanding of organizational life.

The second part of the book is dedicated to the three philosophical sensibilities—*aesthetic*, *hermeneutic* and *performative*—which characterize the aesthetic discourse on everyday organizational life. These philosophical sensibilities have diverse philosophical grounds and show diverse modes of aesthetic understanding of organizational life that are specifically illustrated through a selection of philosophical works and authors. Part II closes with a chapter on the relationships between these three diverse aesthetic sensibilities and the four aesthetic approaches: the “archeological approach”, the “aesthetic approach”, the “artistic approach” and the “empathic-logical approach”.

In more detail, Part I, *Philosophy and Organizational Aesthetics*, is composed of three chapters that will introduce the reader to the core issues illustrated in the book and provide some basic information on the area of organization studies, called organizational aesthetics and its philosophical foundation.

Chapter 1, “Relevance of Philosophical Aesthetics in Organization Studies”, argues for the importance of philosophical aesthetics in the study of the aesthetic dimension of work and organization. It highlights three characteristics of the organizational aesthetics: “polysemy”, “mystery” and “intensity”. Drawing from empirical research, the significance of the categories of the aesthetics, such as the sublime, is stressed, as well as the fact that aesthetics provides the tacit dimension of knowing in organizational life with a language that does not violate its tacit character.

Chapter 2, “Organizational Lens, Art Photography and the Creation Process”, is focused on the relevant contribution of the theories of art to organizational aesthetics research, and highlights, in particular, the issue of the relationships between art practice, sensible knowledge, aesthetic philosophy and the creation process. The organizational context of the creation process is art photography. The chapter raises the issues of sensible knowing in the interaction with the digital environment, and of the corporeality of the “collective artist”, which is constituted by humans, robots, organizations and institutions. The chapter argues for the relevance of philosophical aesthetics in order to grasp the materiality of the creation process through the lens of the organizational study.

Chapter 3, “Art, Everyday Aesthetics and Organizational Theory”, concludes the first part of the book, underlining the philosophical foundations of the relationships between art and aesthetics in organization. The focus remains on art photography. Through the question of what makes a photograph be an art photograph, the chapter highlights the hybridizing relations between the “creation process of art” and the “creation process of aesthetics” in everyday photography. The reader, then, is led into a world, that of photography, where s/he is immersed, and that is familiar given the pervasiveness of the photographic image in contemporary society; while, at the same time, the world of photography aims also to represent a metaphor of organizational aesthetics. The last section of the chapter illustrates some main aspects of the art/aesthetics debate which are at the origins of the new philosophical movement of “Everyday Aesthetics” and shows their importance for the study of the aesthetic dimension of organizational life.

Part II, *Three Philosophical Sensibilities*, is composed of three chapters whose purpose is to illustrate and discuss the philosophical sensibilities that traverse the organizational aesthetics research. I introduced the concept of philosophical sensibility and the distinction in the aesthetic, hermeneutic and performative sensibility with my chapter “Aesthetics and

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Part I

Philosophy and Organizational Aesthetics

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