

REFLECTIONS ON STYLE AND STRATEGY: AN INTERVIEW WITH ANTONIO STRATI

Antonio Strati

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1. How can we conceive of the interface between the aesthetic and strategic domains? Can beauty be a source of competitive advantage?

The interface between the aesthetic and strategic domains can consist of several characteristic elements of both domains, given the profound complexity of each of them. The interface that I would like to highlight here is that constituted by ‘critical reflexivity’, the relevance of which seems to me crucial both on the strategy and management level and on the aesthetic level, when it is based on the intertwining between these two different domains.

I’ll explain it with an example that has aspects of both organizational legend – and therefore has a mythical aura that lends itself well to aesthetics – and high organizational performance in terms of technological, artistic, social and ethical innovation in Italy and in the world for more than half a century. This is Olivetti, a company where, as it is known, in the last century, typewriters and computers were conceived, designed and manufactured for which beauty has constituted an intrinsic dimension so important that it has become an icon of Italian Industrial Design. Art and industrial design have transformed the creation of artifacts, without limiting themselves only to making them more attractive, to their makeup. Art and beauty have characterized the ‘total’ organizational communication of the company, going from the products made to the organizational strategy aimed at creating continuity, rather than separation, between work and private life, to managerial ethics inspired by the enhancement of human dimension of people at work and community feeling.

Could we argue that beauty was not a competitive advantage for Olivetti, given the international successes in both the aesthetic and strategic domains?

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What I want to underline is that critical reflexivity has characterized both aesthetic and strategic domains at the same time and has constituted a very important interface. Because, while strategy and management have also innovated thanks to aesthetics, it was thanks to strategy and management that both the typewriter and the computer forged the ‘artification’ of Italian Industrial Design that is exhibited in prestigious museum collections in the world.

2. Do you think the role of beauty in strategy and management has become more or less important over the last few decades?

Beauty in strategy and management has certainly become more important over the past few decades, although academic studies seem reluctant to become aware of it. If we look at working life in organizations or at private life so much permeated by the world of organizations, we cannot disagree with those philosophers,

sociologists or economists who have critically emphasized the extent to which beauty and well-being have become social and organizational imperatives. To such an extent that we can find ourselves anesthetized, that is, deprived of the critical skills due to the activation of the perceptive-sensorial and aesthetic judgment faculties that are the basis of our personal knowledge at work and in daily private life.

But, if beauty has become a 'must' in our societies and has permeated everyday aspects and dynamics, at the same time new intellectual currents have innovated and transformed the way in which the relationship between art and aesthetics was theorized, highlighting the mundane daily life of style and beauty. This occurred, for instance, in philosophy with *Everyday Aesthetics*, in sociology with *Cultural Studies* and in organizational and management studies with *Organizational Aesthetics Research*, as well as it affected other areas of social sciences. That is to say that, in the last decades, important transformations of knowledge have taken place, even if they do not constitute the so-called 'mainstream'. They are important because they make us aware of the intrinsic social manipulation of strategy and the management aimed at the aestheticization of social phenomena, their embellishment and their maquillage.

3. James March espoused a vision of scholarship as containing aesthetic elements that approach it to art, encouraging the pursuit of beauty as well as of truth and justice. What is the 'value' of beauty in scholarship and how can we make science more beautiful?

If I can afford a personal reference, I have always found acute the considerations on the value of aesthetics in scholarships made by James March during our conversations. Yes, we can make social sciences more beautiful by observing our daily research practices, as well as our styles to communicate the results of the research and by taking in due account the aesthetics of our teaching. Something has certainly changed in recent decades in this regard; important interconnections have been created between art and social research methods, between artistic and didactic performance and between image, sound and written word.

However, we still tend not to consider the relevance for our research practices of our passions, our tastes, our personal inventiveness and our specific talents, which instead deeply influence our research and studies since the beginning,

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i.e., from the choice of topics to investigate and from the adoption of the privileged theoretical and methodological framework. While both the analytical rigour and the ethical-social value of our research practices are often highlighted, it is much rarer to notice references to the forms in which the scholar has learned, developed or even invented a specific taste of doing research and of the ways in which this specific taste was collectively and socially reconstructed. However, one could scientifically explain the fact that the researcher sees, hears, smells, remains fascinated and is bored. Thus, the theoretical-methodological framework of research could be enriched by highlighting the affective, emotional and aesthetic dimensions of research, as well as cognitive and rational ones.

The relevance of aesthetics in making science and making it more beautiful, therefore, goes beyond makeup, cosmetics and embellishment, thanks to captivating graphics and the use of illustrations. On the contrary, aesthetics becomes an integral part of the analysis methodologies, the construction of the theories that emerge from the study conducted, the communication of the results gradually achieved, the strategy and the management of research.

Precisely on this point, the empirical research on the basis of which I proposed, years ago, the aesthetic approach to the study of organizational life was very important. In fact, I was struck by what emerged from studying organizational cultures in one of the three departments of a large university in Central Italy, that of mathematics. Not so much for the fact that beauty had emerged as one of the key aspects of the mathematician's scientific production, because this thing was already known, but for the fact that beauty was one of the crucial keys for managing the power relationships that structured the daily life of the department, from symbologies to organizational control. Beauty lies in pure mathematics and

ugliness in the mathematics based on the great computational power of the computer. The iconography of the dominant aesthetic in the department was represented by the image of a work done in an elegant and essential way because it uses only a sheet of white paper and a pencil, a work that brings out the scholar's personal talent, who, while doing science, is making art.

4. *If you have the necessary time and resources, what kind of research related to style and beauty would you engage in?*

I would like to engage in a research related to the issues of social change that will follow the exit from the health emergency due to the pandemic created by the COVID-19 virus. What fascinates me is the epistemological debate relating to the definition of the human person in medicine, a debate that I presume will accompany European initiatives aimed at reconstructing daily social, economic and cultural life both in organizational contexts and more generally in society. What features will characterize the reconstruction of the individual's corporeality due to health strategy and management? What aesthetic sensibilities will mark the exit from the 2020 health crisis? How will the relationships between style and beauty, on the one hand, and democratic life, health, safety at work, respect for the environment and quality of daily life, on the other, be configured? I would therefore be interested in research that examines the epistemological issues that will emerge in the theoretical and methodological debate that could characterize the strategy and management of the aforementioned desires and

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images of social change with particular reference to how style and beauty will influence this debate in medicine. Will this debate be able to mitigate and correct the dependence of social policy management on the aura of science surrounding medical knowledge? Will it be able to put the aesthetic epistemologies that oppose the neopositivistic paradigm that transpires in the domain of scientific thought and quantitative analysis of social phenomena at the centre of the strategic initiatives that will follow this terrible crisis? Will it be able to highlight the aesthetic difference that distinguishes each individual and each collectivity and to contrast the new massification of practices in the organizations and society to which COVID-19 has accustomed us? And what configurations will be outlined, thanks to beauty and style in the management of the electronic body of the patient, and what effects will they have on the aesthetics underlying the conceptualizations of organizational citizenship and of the human being in general?

This is the research I would be passionate about because it focuses on the contribution of aesthetics, style and beauty to the epistemological and philosophical debate of the social sciences that will probably accompany the reconstruction of postcoronavirus daily life in different organizational contexts and in different societies in Europe.

Antonio Strati, Senior Professor at the Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Trento, Italy, and Chercheur Associé at the Centre de Recherche en Gestion (i3-CRG), CNRS, École Polytechnique, IP Paris, is both a sociologist and an art photographer. He is a founder member of the Research Unit on Communication, Organizational Learning and Aesthetics (RUCOLA) at Trento and also a founder member of the SCOS, the Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism. His book *Organization and Aesthetics* (Sage, 1999), one of the founding texts of the field, has been translated in several languages. He is also author of *Theory and Method in Organization Studies* (Sage, 2000) – published also in Italian (NIS, 1996; Carocci, 2004) – and co-author (with Silvia Gherardi) of *Learning and Knowing in Practice-Based Studies* (Elgar, 2012). In 2018 he co-edited a special issue of *Organization Studies* on “Organizational creativity, play and entrepreneurship”, and has just published *Organizational Theory and Aesthetic Philosophies* (Routledge, 2019). His artistic research in conceptual photography, Photopoesia, has been published in books and photographic journals, and collected at museums and international collections.