
27. Beauty of responsible management: the lens and methodology of organizational aesthetics

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter is dedicated to delineating how responsible management can be studied through the lens of aesthetics.

The aesthetic study of organizational life constitutes a branch of organizational theory and management studies that is rather recent as it has its roots in the philosophical debate developed in the social sciences with the crisis of the dominance of the rationalistic and positivistic paradigm, and with the “cultural turn” of the 1980s.

The origins of the organizational aesthetics research can be traced back in the symbolic and cultural approaches to the study of organization (Turner, 1990), and have taken the form of the organizational study of the aesthetic side of the organization (Gagliardi, 1990; Ramirez, 1991; Strati, 1990). But soon the study of organizational aesthetics was influenced by the new perspective of the aesthetic understanding of organizational life (Strati, 1992), the organizational aesthetics research has become more articulated both for the topics covered and for the styles of research (*Human Relations*, 2002; Guillet de Monthoux, 2004; King & Vickery, 2013; Linstead & Höpfl, 2000; *Organization*, 1996; *Organizational Aesthetics*, 2016; Strati, 1999; *Tamara*, 2002), and the aesthetic discourse on organization acquired deeper foundations in aesthetic philosophies (Strati, 2019).

Also the debate on responsible management is quite recent in moral philosophy and philosophical ethics. This philosophical debate is due to the recent development of applied ethics. The applied moral philosophies – remarks Adriano Fabris (2018: 11–13) – constitutes “one of the novelties in the field of philosophical reflection” that has developed to “address the specific issues and dilemmas caused by technological developments” highlighted, among others, by the German-American philosopher Hans Jonas (1979).

In this regard, Fabris (2008: 14) observes, with a warning, that

one could not speak of “application” in the sense of a transfer, in the various concrete contexts, of the basic principles that “general ethics” was called to articulate and justify. Rather, it was a matter of implementing a circular dynamic, in which the general principles themselves oriented action in concrete situations, and were in turn verified and adapted, legitimized and specified precisely thanks to the comparison with these contexts.

Therefore, even in dealing, as in this chapter, with the ethics applied to organizational life and, specifically, to responsible management, fundamental notions of moral philosophy such as the “good” remain at the center of the arguments.

The notion of good constitutes the central notion of moral philosophy, point out Monique Canto-Sperber and Ruwen Ogien (2004; Italian trans. 2006: 21–22): the good “is object of a movement” and makes it possible to conceive morality “as a form of the desirable” and

“includes numerous sectors of human life under the authority of morality”, such as, in our case, responsible management.

Ethics, thus, “is back in – if it ever actually left – organization studies” – writes Edward Wray-Bliss (2016: 52) – but “the ethics that we see in organization studies is itself a suspicious one”, and this is due, among other reasons, also to the fact that by “exploring ethical philosophy and ethics far less than it might, organization studies seems not to have developed the language or capabilities to talk about and valorize the good” (Wray-Bliss, 2016: 62). However, Alison Pullen and Carl Rhodes (2014: 782–783) underline that ethics “is enjoying a renaissance in the study of organizations” and that the ethics of organization – or organizational ethics:

are less focused on the ethics of business per se, attending instead to how ethics can be brought to bear on the complex institutional contexts in which members of organizations find themselves. The concern is with the ethics of the social and inter-personal relationships between people in organizations.

This is a point of view that resonates in how Laasch (2018) shapes the identity of the consolidated tradition of study regarding responsible management. There has been a shift in the unit of analysis which passed from the organizational level to the individual and group level, from the formal organization to the process dynamics in the organizational context, from the specialized management to the everyday “normal” management.

The “social practice lens” (Laasch & Gherardi, 2019) exalts this shift from the study of responsible management conducted at the organizational level towards the “situated responsibility” of responsible management: while “management studies pursue universal and de-contextualized principles, responsible managing, studied using a practice-based approach, focuses on the here and now of a (*in situ*) mode of ordering humans, nonhumans, tools technologies, rules and discourses that produce (or not) responsible effects in terms of sustainability, responsibility, and ethics”, write Oriana Milani Price, Silvia Gherardi and Marie Manidis (2020).

The situated “managing responsibly” is therefore grounded in a post-humanist theorization on practice (Braidotti, 2013; Diprose, 2009; Gherardi, 2017, Strati, 2019) that enhances the aesthetic dimension of the organizational life by focusing on the aesthetic materiality of the situated organizational experiences (Gherardi & Strati, 2012), on embodied ethics in organizational life (Pullen & Rhodes, 2014) and aesthetics of virtue (Hancock, 2008), and on organizational creativity, play and entrepreneurship (Hjorth et al., 2018).

In this chapter I will illustrate how responsible management is studied through the lenses of organizational aesthetics and I will emphasize, in the first part, the “anesthetizing aestheticization” of responsible management and the profound relationships between “beauty” and “good” in organizational life and in philosophy. In the second part of the chapter, I will focus on Olivetti’s “Italian industrial design” because it is an emblematic experience not only of Italian design, but of the design that is deeply interconnected with the beauty of responsible management. In the conclusion I will summarize the theoretical and methodological insights due to the aesthetic approach to the study of responsible management.

1. AESTHETIC APPROACH AND RESPONSIBLE MANAGEMENT

“It’s crazy what the world is beautiful”, writes the French philosopher Yves Michaud (2003: 7), and “if it’s not beautiful, it must be”, because “beauty reigns”, because “beauty, anyway has become an imperative: be beautiful or, at least, spare us your ugliness”.

These statements that the French philosopher Yves Michaud made some years ago are of an ironic nature – it is not exactly so, as Michaud will point out immediately after (2003: 8). However, these considerations evoke important aspects of the beauty of responsible management that are highlighted by the aesthetic study of organizational life. Could, in fact, the responsible management be ugly?

I will discuss the issues highlighted by this question in this chapter. I will expose my considerations in the light of the aesthetic discourse on the organization and, in particular, of my aesthetic approach to the study of organizational life (Strati, 2019).

1.1 Responsibility, Organizational Maquillage and the An-aestheticizing Process

In our contemporary societies, observes Yves Michaud (2003: 7) always with irony, everything must be beautiful: the products we buy, as well as their packaging, the designer clothes we wear, our bodies modeled by body-building and gyms, our cozy workplaces and our well-appointed homes, as well as the ecologically well-protected and well-preserved environment.

For Michaud (2003: 169) this empire of the aesthetics in society also concerns the atmospheres we live, and the experiences we can have at work and in our private life, because in our societies it is the processes, the transactions and the relationships which “make the substance”.

This quest for an experience where one “feels good”, flowing and slipping, brings the experience of art closer to all those where, metaphorically or otherwise, the individual seeks today a world without friction and fasteners, protected and smooth – a world where everything slides without weighing. (Michaud, 2003: 173)

Michaud is a philosopher particularly devoted to the study of the arts and design. He directed the *École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts* in Paris for almost a decade just before publishing this essay in which he discusses the triumph of art and aesthetics in the globalized societies in which we live. Subsequently, Michaud (2013) also showed some interest for the theme of responsible management. But it is his essay on the empire of art and aesthetics in the everyday life of contemporary society that I find provocative to the point of stimulating the considerations that follow on the beauty of responsible management.

What happens then to “responsible management”? Is responsible management to be beautiful? Moreover: Is responsible management beautiful? Because, it is “difficult and even impossible to escape this empire of aesthetics”. Even the moral vision of behaviors seems to be there “to make it beautiful” – observes Yves Michaud (2003: 8–9) – and “morality becomes an aesthetics and a cosmetic of behaviors”.

These interrogatives show how important aesthetic considerations are about the beauty of responsible management, as well as the methodological awareness and theoretical insights that the aesthetic approach can give to understanding the characteristics of responsible management.

The beauty of responsible management could serve as maquillage to embellish responsible management as a whole, as a managerial form, as well as the social practices of responsibly managing and the situated managerial processes.

This embellishment constitutes an aesthetic process that, at the same time that it aestheticizes responsible management, “an-aesthetizes” our critical aesthetic understanding based on our activation of personal faculties to perceive and judge aesthetically. Cosmetics, maquillage, embellishment, and even the beauty “taken for granted”, which comes from the arts, are critically scrutinized by the aesthetic approach because they are forms of “aesthetic anesthetizing” dynamics that characterize the ugly, the grotesque, the kitsch in our societies.

At this point, another question is posed by the aesthetic study of responsible management. Where does the beauty of responsible management come from? What are the origins, the roots and the foundation of this beauty?

1.2 Moral Philosophy and the Beauty of Responsible Management

Looking at responsible management with the lenses of organizational aesthetics, it is important to underline a fundamental theoretical node as regards the beauty of responsible management: it is the moral philosophy that gives the aesthetic quality of beauty to responsible management; it is ethics that excludes ugliness from responsible management.

This is a substantive aesthetic connotation of responsible management, that is, it is something profound and involving emotionally and affectively that characterizes responsible management. But it is not just about the beauty of responsible management.

When I began to study the aesthetic dimension of organizational life, I soon learned that aesthetic appreciation was often deeply connected to moral imagination and the ethical judgement of “good”. In a sense, what was referred to as “beautiful” in organizational life was often also “good”, that is, it had a positive value for the participants in that specific process, it was also moral, it was ethically correct and responsive to organizational ethos. The “beautiful” event, process or product was also, to a certain extent, “good”, “useful”, “positive”, “ethical”.

The connection-in action between beauty and good in organizational life constitutes also a theoretical node that has philosophical foundations when one looks at the intertwinements between the philosophical aesthetics and moral philosophies. In this regard Berys Gaut (2001: 345) observes that “our aesthetic practices are laden with ethical evaluations” and that we often “aesthetically praise works for their ethical characteristics” and for their moral insights and moral sensitivity. These philosophical considerations are rooted in the “long tradition of maintaining that ethical evaluations and aesthetic evaluations are intimately interlinked” (Gaut, 2007: 252). Intimately, as Gaut (2001: 344) illustrates making reference to the arts, that is to the privileged experience of aesthetic beauty:

Consider Picasso’s great anti-war painting *Guernica*. Someone who reacted to it merely as a set of lines and colors in Cubist style would be missing out on a central item of aesthetic interest: namely, how Picasso *uses* Cubist fragmentation to convey something of the horror of war and Fascism. Our aesthetic interest is directed, in part, at the mode of presentation of subject matter; and the way it is presented can and often does manifest ethical attitudes.

This is a fundamental vision given by the aesthetic approach to the understanding of responsible management: its aesthetic quality of beauty is rooted in the “intimate interlink”

between aesthetics and ethics, so that responsible management receives its beauty from moral philosophy.

The following interrogative, on the other hand, reinforces the crucial importance of these aesthetic considerations: Could responsible management be ugly?

Surely, at least in principle, responsible management could be ugly. But, as I emphasized above, it is rather difficult to see the ugliness of responsible management as a whole and in its form of organization as a whole. It is much easier, instead, to have an aesthetic view of ugliness if we refer to specific social practices of responsible management. But these responsible management practices can be ugly, though, because they are not morally responsive as ethically desired in responsible management.

I will further illustrate this organizational vision deriving from my aesthetic approach to the beauty of responsible management by referring to the “Italian industrial design” launched internationally by Olivetti. This company, which produced typing machines and computers, can be considered, write Oliver Laasch and Roger Conaway (2015: 25), as a form of responsible management implemented during the 1930s in Italy:

Adriano Olivetti launched in 1932 the first portable typewriter through his Italy-based company Olivetti. He designed a program of innovative projects to modernize operations at the company. In realizing his plan, he placed a great importance on the company’s relationship with the community, creating projects for the construction of new production facilities, offices, employee housing, canteens, and nurseries, and developing a complex system of social services. The new organization led to a significant improvement in productivity and sales, with operations in all the major international markets and 36,000 employees.

2. ITALIAN DESIGN AND THE BEAUTY OF RESPONSIBLE MANAGEMENT

The “Italian industrial design” created at Olivetti “has even managed to configure the image of the entire Italian design”, comments the Italian historian of design Renato De Fusco (2002: 268). However, the history of the Italian design of the last century shows that the relationships between the arts, organizational aesthetics and industrial projects were very complex and also highly controversial. There has been a continuous stylistic struggle between the Neo-Rationalist camp and the Anti-Rationalist camps “which sought to imbue design with a greater sense of artistry, influenced by tendencies with contemporary fine art”, observe Charlotte and Peter Fiell, and Catharine Rossi (2013: 15).

After the Second World War, several groups of influential designers – from those who referred to the more theoretical and politicized “Radical Design” to those who showed a playful “Anti-Design” and Pop sensibility – continue Fiell et al. (2013: 19) – dominated the aesthetic debates on Italian design, and in 1972 “the avant-garde reputation of Italian design reached its cultural zenith with the staging of a major exhibition at New York’s Museum of Modern Art”.

In the midst of these aesthetic debates, the “Italian industrial design” created and promoted internationally by Olivetti continued to forge the social memory and the social imaginary of Italian design thanks to the connection-in action of the Olivetti’s design with the “aura” of beauty that surrounded the responsible management at Olivetti.

2.1 Design, Responsible Management, and Social and Organizational Memory

The Olivetti, especially in the years of Adriano Olivetti's management – which ran from the mid-1920s to the end of the 1950s – succeeded in developing an entrepreneurial “project” that went beyond the company boundaries.

A project that – observes Giulio Sapelli (2005, reprinted in 2007: 53) – has become a “social memory” that goes beyond the organizational memory of Olivetti and that has been supported “by real sites and physical references of memory”, from the plants of the company headquarters in Ivrea, in Northern Italy, where there is now the Olivetti Historical Archive (Bulegato, 2008), to the Olivetti stores structured by architects, as well as Gae Aulenti in Paris, and decorated with contemporary Italian art works (Zorzi, 2003), or to the logo and the brand of the company and, above all, to the design of the products which contributed decisively to realize these internationally renowned products, up to theatrical dramas (Curino & Vacis, 2010) and the recent television series (Soavi, 2013) that celebrated those years at Olivetti.

What remains today, asks Maria Pia Di Nonno (2014: 50):

of the prestigious, original, eccentric Olivetti shop on New York's Fifth Avenue where it was placed on a column outside, so that all passers-by could stop for a few seconds to write a few words, the famous “Lettera 22”? Only a legend remains, a beautiful fable [which illustrates the beauty of design that is deeply connected to responsible management].

On the one hand, the responsible manager at Olivetti achieves unquestionable successes, at least until the 1980s and, therefore, even after the premature death of Adriano Olivetti in 1960. The company increases its turnover, the number of employees grows, the international activities of Olivetti offices abroad become increasingly important, the numerous awards received for the beauty and capabilities of typewriters and computers.

On the other hand, since the 1930s the employees of Olivetti “have been regarded with strong envy by those of other Italian industrial complexes” – Maria Pia Di Nonno (2014: 50) notes – because “they are entitled to scholarships, medical assistance, company canteen, company kindergarten, they are granted mortgages at lower interest rates than those of the banks, they can read in the company library”.

In a word, employees are considered “persons” in their own right – rather than just individuals – and it is in the concrete, material “person” that the anti-fascist entrepreneur Adriano Olivetti identifies the core of his project of responsible and humanistic management.

This project is characterized by moral integrity, a sense of social justice, the feeling of community and the interweaving of artistic culture and corporate culture. It was a “soft break-in” in the Italian business climate which gave “Italian industry a record of advanced technologies, of formal refinement, of civil coexistence” of which, writes the sociologist Domenico De Masi (2008: 13–14), the launch of the publishing house “Edizioni di Comunità” – as well as the publication of the journal *Comunità* – were “paradigm and mirror”:

The format, the graphics, the content: everything broke with the current culture, opening new roads. Texts such as those of Simone Weil on working life, or Raymond Aron on the relationship between the West and the Soviet Union, or Roethlisberger on group cohesion in factories; classics like Weber and Durkheim, Tönnies and Lynd introduced bright divergent visions in the editorial swamp of a country that Fascism had separated for twenty years from the progress of the spirit.

2.2 “Italian Industrial Design” and Olivetti Organizational Communication

But why did Olivetti become the emblem of the Italian industrial design? “Objects like the Marcello Nizzoli’s typewriters for Olivetti, or Oscar Barnack’s cameras for Leica” – observes Deyan Sudjic (2008: 77) – “were archetypes, driven by aesthetic ambition as well as by engineering pragmatism”. Archetypes which also connect the daily working life “inside” the organizational contexts with the everyday life “outside” the organizational contexts.

The “high-level industrial equipment of Olivetti” as its typewriters and calculators, and as its computers and its alphanumeric video terminals constitute “work equipment”, but also equipment, writes Renato De Fusco (2002: 278):

for home and leisure use; in a word, the widest horizon of mechanical objects with which we are in daily contact. Common to all is the concealment for aesthetic and safety reasons of their mechanical, electrical and electronic core, but this intent, unlike what happened in the past, is carried out today with a growing coherence to the logic of the integrated design. The bodywork is no longer a “beautiful” shape that envelops a mechanism, but a conformation that is increasingly adapted to it, which in the meantime tends to be reduced to the most recent miniaturization processes ... such positive results can be achieved only thanks to considerable experimental tests, to the advanced degree of research – the first large fully transistorized processor is Olivetti’s Elea 9003 of 1958 – to the most sophisticated technologies (many are the patents of this company abroad) and, in general, to a company policy among the most advanced in the world.

“Crucial to its success” – write Charlotte and Peter Fiell, and Catharine Rossi (2013: 74) – “Olivetti understood the importance of implementing a ‘total design’ policy, from the design of its state-of-the-art factory and workers’ housing to its products and publicity materials”.

As the designer Ettore Sottsass “memorably put it”, the office typewriter was transformed in “a red-and-orange lightweight portable” – the Valentine – which “was designed to keep lonely poets company on weekends in the country” (Sudjic, 2008: 49). Sottsass “had realized that technical equipment could be domesticated. A typewriter did not have to be treated as a piece of anonymous machinery, but could be understood as having a character of its own” (Sudjic, 2008: 49).

The crucial point of the connection between “Italian industrial design” and responsible management at Olivetti is the fact that – as I argued elsewhere (Strati, 2013: 42) – “the company communicates a particular style of living the work life in industrial organizations, and specific ways of feeling the relationship between work time and non-work time, between production and social life” which even a typewriter is able to represent “both outside the company, in fairs, on the territory, and within the company, towards those who work there”.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In this chapter on the aesthetic dimension of responsible management I intended to give a methodological and theoretical contribution to the debate on the renewal of the approach to the study of ethics applied to responsible management. I underlined the anesthetizing drift due to the aestheticization of everyday life in contemporary societies; but, above all, I emphasized the intimate link between aesthetics and ethics which characterizes the situated practices of responsible management also referring to the “Italian industrial design” created at the Olivetti company.

In particular, I have emphasized that the term “beautiful” can be used to mean “good” and that the term “beautiful” can include the sense of goodness in itself. In fact, there are no clear boundaries between the “beauty” and the “good”, both in the daily use of these terms in organizational life and in philosophical aesthetics and moral philosophy. The beauty of responsible management is deeply influenced by the aura of goodness that surrounds the image of this management and its situated social practices.

With the recent development of applied ethics, in fact, writes Adriano Fabris (2018: 11), moral philosophy looks at “concrete questions relating to living conditions, the ways of dying, the various ecological emergencies, the changes taking place in economic and social relations, and their consequences” without, however, binding and limiting the so-called “applied ethics” to the level of concrete practice. The experiences that have developed in this direction have shown the limits of a mere reduction of ethical reflections concerning the situated practices in “contingent forms of negotiation” (Fabris, 2018: 15).

On the contrary, the reflection on the moral philosophy “inside” practical problems has the merit of producing “a renewal of the approach to certain concepts or traditional questions of the moral philosophy by obliging them to register them in the contingency of the contemporary world whose activity is largely techno-scientist”, observed years ago Marie-Hélène Parizeau (1996: 539–540).

The considerations above by Adriano Fabris and Marie-Hélène Parizeau are relevant to outline the scenario of future research on responsible management which is conducted through the lens of aesthetics. In this scenario, in fact, I imagine that:

- The aesthetic approach to the study of organizational life can make a fundamental contribution to the understanding of the aesthetic dimension of responsible management. In this chapter I have illustrated and discussed how important the methodological and theoretical bases of aesthetic discourse on organizational life are, since they enable researchers, organizational actors and practitioners to create knowledge involving the corporeality of all human senses, activating sensitive aesthetic judgments and focusing on organizational performance;
- “Playing with” (Strati, 2019: 168–176) philosophical aesthetics and philosophical ethics will constitute a style of research to understand the intimate link between aesthetic and moral philosophies which characterizes the situated embodied practices of responsibly managing. This is a style of aesthetic research that considers the social practice situated and embodied as a unit of analysis and that gives the methodological form of organizational knowing that emerges “from within” of responsibly managing practices to the theorizing of responsible management;
- “Aesthetic reflexive practice” will be fundamental for organizational actors, researchers and practitioners. The reflexive practice is not “some anodyne and cerebral activity” – underline Paul Hibbert and Ann Cunliffe (2015: 184) – but involves an aesthetic and embodied engagement to understand the beauty of responsible management, that is, “a commitment to find new avenues for our desiring-production” – emphasizes Mollie Painter-Morland (2011: 94) – “through very embodied, material experiments and visceral engagements with others and with the animate and inanimate environment”.

In this scenario for the future development of the aesthetic study of responsible management, let us not forget that “good design is also a pleasure in itself” – as Deyan Sudjic (2008: 51)

exhorts – and that, as I have shown in this chapter, the good of responsible management is also its beauty *tout court*.

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