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Learning and change in organisations: cases and perspectives from aesthetic approaches


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This book is an edited anthology that has the purpose of disseminating new aesthetic perspectives in the field of organisational studies. The two editors introduce the background of this initiative, which lays in the establishment of the Aesthesis Project in 2007. More than a working or editorial project, Aesthesis had been a community building initiative, collecting researchers and artists from different scientific or artistic traditions. The consequent publishing of the journal Aesthesis and the launch of the Art of Management and Organisation conferences contributed in holding this community curious and industrious.

The present anthology collects some of the contributions emerged in this period, with the purpose of renewing or reformulating the research questions that have guided this community so far. The two editors clearly state their intention: "Throughout the book we ask and seek to answer one essential question: 'Is there not an alternative? Is this the only route to knowledge of/with/for organisations and organising?'" (p. 20). For "this" the editors intend the traditional scientific method. Far from advocating for the rejection of the scientific method the editors and the authors call for a more diverse, multiple and creative scientific methodology, that is able to include holistic models, heuristics, and aesthetics. For its innovative approach this book is more than a dissemination of content: it is a statement. Its contributing authors are invited to think differently and propose viewpoints from which the field of organisations and organising is looked upon in new creative ways.

For instance, included are experiences, intuitions, aesthetics, symbols or cultural artefacts.

The editors provide a quick overview of the bibliographic references that are central to the understanding of this field of research and a good state-of-the-art reference list. This is invaluable for the reader in need of an introductory approach to the field of organisational aesthetics. The "newcomer" will also find precious introductory definitions and examples of their applications to multiple contexts.

The collected contributions are themselves examples of methods for studying, looking, analysing or communicating organisational research in alternatives ways. For instance the opening article, authored by Wendelin M. Küpers, triggers a literary rhetoric of Sternian memory: the elaborated title that almost is a short essay in itself (The Sense-Making of the Senses – Perspectives on Embodied Aisthesis & Aesthetics in Organising & Organ-
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- or why sensing (and sense-making) makes sense and no senses lead to nonsense), the provocative authorial statement of the essay being written by "Wendelin M. Küpers, and the Senses" (p. 35), the playful shift of typography, the play words and puns are, among the others, tools of aesthetic de-familiarisation, which the first chapter presents in Ian King's De-familiarising Organisations. The author brings us through a journey through the senses, as Pierre Guillet de Monthoux brings us through a real journey through European cases of organisational aesthetics (Masters of Business Art: Visiting Art and Business in Europe 2000-2005).

The senses are the main characters in the book's narrative: peripheral awareness (Robert Chia and Robin Holt, Peripheral Awareness and the Business of Strategy), design thinking (Bob Robertson, Thinking Through Design – Processes and Tools for Knowledge Sharing in Organisations; Robert Bauer and Ward Eagen, Design Thinking as Multi-epistemic Intelligence in Organisations), topophilia and aesthetic pleasure (Samantha Warren, Organisational Topophilia: the Countryside and Aesthetic Pleasure at Work; Jonathan Vickery, Aesthetics and the Spaces of Organisational Life) or more broadly as background of emotions as engagement (Nuno Guimarães-Costa and Miguel Pina e Cunha, POEM'E': Effectively Managing 'Engagement').

Other contributions relate to the topic of organisational aesthetics in more general ways (Alberto Zanutto and Enrico Maria Piras, Researching the Aesthetics of Organisation; Antonio Strati, Becoming or Process: What Future for Aesthetic Discourse in Organisations?; Ian King and Jonathan Vickery, The New Landscape of Organisational Life), either by introducing the research in the field or the relational elements in the art of leadership (Steven Taylor and Barbara Karanian, The Relational Art of Leadership).

This book addresses practices, theories and dilemmas from the field of organisational aesthetics. As a researcher and a practitioner in this field, I find it rich in information, inspiration, but also with regard to diverse perspectives that provide a broad and critical view on this field. Especially as an arts-based consultant in organisations one can be predisposed to embracing truths or half-truths in a too uncritical manner, in order to advocate for the very existence of aesthetics in organisational contexts. The shortest way is to promote the "Halleluiah-approach", where the arts are uncritically claimed to be the ultimate cure for all organisational ailments. The longest way, which this book, for me, seems to encompass, is instead made of small but meaningful empirical bricks, of large and solid load-bearing conceptualisations, of diverse furniture and designs, of flexible spaces and mind-sets. These all contribute to building a creative environment for learning and change for the future of organisations.

One last remark about the book goes to the aesthetic experience that this volume enhances: its format, layout and visual commentary enact what the content of the book addresses. The experience of the senses is pleasurable in spite of the excessive weight, due to the chosen paper quality, and in spite of the bookbinding that fails to keep the 280 thick pages together.

About the Author

Tatiana Chemi is an Associate Professor of Educational and Organizational Innovation at Aalborg University, where she is leader and co-founder of the researchers group ARiEL (Arts in Education and Learning). She is also a member of the research centre recreate and the research groups Higher Education Research Group (on university pedagogy) and FIU (on research in educational cultures). Her major interests are the artistic and creative learning processes, pedagogical innovation, and arts-integration.