

MEMORY AND ORGANIZATIONAL LIFE

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on The Liverpool Cityscape

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on visual narrative

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on the aesthetics of listening

aesthetics

Volume 2//ONE 2008

Aesthesis:

International Journal of Art and Aesthetics in Management and Organizational Life

is published by

the **Aesthesis** project

The Aesthesis Project was founded in January 2007 and is a research project investigating art and aesthetics in management and organizational contexts. The project has its roots in the first Art of Management and Organization Conference in London in 2002, with successive conferences in Paris and Krakow. From those events emerged an international network of academics, writers, artists, consultants and managers, all involved in exploring and experimenting with art in the context of management and organizational research. The Aesthesis Project will be developing extensive research and artistic projects internationally, with academic research fellows and associate creative practitioners, publications and consultancy.

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PRINTER

Warwick Print, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

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ISSN 1751-9853

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Representing organizational aesthetics: an open issue at every stage of field research

Alberto Zanutto

ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH USUALLY REQUIRES SPENDING LARGE AMOUNTS OF TIME IN ORGANIZATIONS, FOSTERING RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE ORGANIZATIONAL ENVIRONMENT, THE ACTORS INVOLVED, THE ARTIFACTS IN THEM, AND ENCOUNTERING THE REPRESENTATIONS OF THIS SPACE THAT PEOPLE PRODUCE. THIS LATTER ACTIVITY BECOMES EVEN MORE IMPORTANT IF ACCESS TO THE FIELD PROVIDES OPPORTUNITIES TO INTERACT WITH A MULTIPLICITY OF EXPERIENCES THAT ANIMATE AN ORGANIZATION'S INTERIOR AND ARE ORCHESTRATED BY THAT ORGANIZATION ITSELF.

The work of the organizational researcher originates, in fact, in the 'wonder' provoked, at least initially, by the diverse ways in which we can access the field. But perhaps it begins even before this, in the 'prefiguration' of the actual research activity. Those of us involved in organizational research can invoke in our imaginations the uniqueness of the spaces, the people, the objects, and the rhythms of the research phases we had prepared, when entering particular organizations to conduct our research. In these situations we 'tune' our perceptions by connecting the perceived exterior of the organization to our interior stock of both tacit and explicit knowledge. We also easily remember how the process of research develops over time, first evoking representations of the organization, then an actual encounter, modifying such representations, and finally to the writing of reports and accounts -- more or less original and more or less able to express the results of the research as the outcome of this series of representations. Another important dimension of our work is the relationship with colleagues and the persons involved with us in the research, within both the organization and the research unit, and those who have shared access to the field with us and have somehow anticipated its relationship to the broader scientific community. Within this series of relations, representations are negotiated and aligned according to the greater or lesser intensity of connections, sensibilities, and specific views of the various subjects involved.

It is perhaps in this that research work essentially consists: opening passages for an osmosis that establishes a linkage between the reality observed and the reality represented -- both cognitively and empathetically by researchers -- so that these are set on the path that leads them to choose a combination of these representations that they submit to the commissioners, the research team, and the scientific community. They are helped in this process by the scientific articles already available on the topics selected, by discussions within the research group, by analysis of the websites of the organizations studied, and so on. So far, nothing new. However, if the analysis is focused on organizational aesthetics, then the representations generated by the reality observed (through our perceptual engagement with it) may be manifold and sometimes wholly unexpected. If research work involves an extensive sensibility, it can never consist merely in an incremental logical-cognitive and unilinear process. As Strati (1999, 61) writes, 'study

based mainly on ontological considerations is not enough to know correctly what organization means'; it serves, in fact, to reconsider organizational realities from a standpoint that is aesthetic in the broadest sense of the term. It is necessary to traverse the threshold of cognitive ontology, as etymologically the word 'traverse' means 'move across', that is, move beyond, the static condition of simple 'action' within organizations. Aesthetic analysis of organizations can be represented by this idea of co-penetration, whereby the researcher is 'traversing' between two mountains -- the observed and experienced reality, and the reality represented and then distributed within the community of readers and scholars to which the research is addressed.

This article analyses and reflects upon this dynamic. How can researchers in organizational aesthetics be 'traversing' and produce knowledge in organizations by overcoming the rigidities often imposed by the canons of standard methodology? How can a researcher, or research group, build knowledge from the representations of the 'objects' observed through the aesthetic analysis of organizations? Furthermore, how can the study

of organizational aesthetics be possible if we do not change methods and practices? Is it possible to overcome the crystallizations of methods that every scientific statute relies upon for identity reasons?

The answer is apparently simple: it is sufficient to change traditional methodological tools so that research is able to include the 'new concerns' of organizational aesthetics. Here my purpose is more specific: I am going to explore how we represent organizational aesthetics within research processes. This requires an investigation into what sustains the research process as a whole, whilst in this process remaining constantly open to aesthetic sensitization. The latter cannot emerge solely at the end of the research.

The article intends to answer these above questions by summarising a three-year research project conducted by a team at Trento University, and characterized, amongst other things by precisely this form of reflexivity. A description of the methodology used to study certain organizational aesthetics or their specific settings is flanked by comparison of the methodological tools employed and the results obtained. This comparison will be conducted by describing the practices used by the researchers who had direct experience of this kind of reflexive representation and focusing on research methods as open processes.

THE FREEDOM OF RESEARCH AND THE RIGIDITY OF METHOD

In the past two decades, the development of organization studies has been stimulated by contributions from a variety of disciplines. Emblematic in this regard is analysis based on the metaphor of organization-as-theatre (Mangham and Overington, 1987), which has

markedly innovated an approach to organizational research. In general, often outside traditional academic contexts, recent years have seen successful attempts to broaden the perceptual horizon of organizational life and enable researchers to renew their gaze and sensibility towards organizational settings. Interestingly, these advances have been received more favourably by practitioners than by academic scholars, who continue to embrace standard views of organizations (Gagliardi, 1996).

The recent advent of an explicit 'aesthetic' approach to the study of organizational aesthetics (Strati, 1999, Strati and de Monthoux, 2002) has created a context inclusive of all research processes, and extends beyond the standard rationalistic approach to knowledge about organizations. Aesthetic analysis, in fact, gives conceptual unity to a multiplicity of issues and aspects that would otherwise be dispersed among the archipelago of the sensibilities of the various orientations to research. Contrarily, the aim of the Trento research group was to combine these diverse approaches in such a way that they followed specific trajectories in parallel. At the same time, through constant sharing of reflexivity, the group on the one hand was able to valorize organizational aesthetics as an integral and often important part of the situations observed. On the other hand, it paid close attention to method, continually re-orienting its gaze with regard to traditional methodology. For these reasons, the multi-year project progressively centred its interests on the question of method (Strati, 2007). Whilst international experiences in organizational themes highlight the freedom of researchers with regard to their objects of study and how these are studied, innovation in methodology seems more limited and less thematic. This again raises the question of method and whether it is possible to study organizations – and in our case organizational aesthetics – if the method used to gather the information remains anchored in conventional research models and old ways of collecting and processing data.

For these reasons, the research group subjected its work to various constraints, which compelled it to follow unconventional routes and study unusual organizational settings. These constraints were the following:

// access to the organizational field had to allow the construction of a relational network, so that it was possible to be perceived as subjects who could construct a bond involving a degree of empathy in relation to the organizational aesthetics;

// the organizations studied had to be identified and selected on account of their 'post-modern' condition, that is, they were sufficiently 'fluid' to allow organizational aesthetics to manifest themselves; they were 'alive' as organizations and not yet 'crystallized';

// the methodological framework for each point of access to the field was subject to weak constraints, though nevertheless strongly oriented in terms of bringing out innovative ways to access 'information' on organizational aesthetics; this often required recourse to ethnographic tools also;

// all reflection and reflexivity on the research and the processing and analysis of the materials collected had to conform to one single criterion: the researchers should base their inquiries on an evocative and imaginative tension – in a word, a representation – able to free itself from conventional logical-analytical categories (systems, roles, functions, etc.). Because of this constraint, the group was able to draw iteratively on metaphors, evocations, images, visualizations, multimedia ethnographic materials, and so on.

These (apparent) restrictions also gave the group a broad methodological freedom in exploring relations in organizational contexts where artistic materials were produced and managed, while it was also possible to

examine how aesthetic sensibility was individuated and concretized. Moreover, this set-up also created space for the explicit and implicit aesthetic categories present in organizations, and it allowed innovative empirical research, which was free in regard to both the setting and the methods devised to access organizational aesthetics.

Of course, as with all processes described *a posteriori*, none of this was clear at the outset, but an attempt was certainly made to mark out a distance from previous research. Organizational aesthetics constitutes a 'core' of organizational contexts, which require a specific sensibility and an endeavour to replace already-available tools with perceptual categories, emotions, creative rationalizations, and intuition itself. The aim was to consider the processes of representation as embedded both in the fieldwork and in analysis, all the more so if the latter was conducted in open form by a multidisciplinary group like that from Trento.

SEVEN SCENARIOS FOR AESTHETIC ANALYSIS

Our group of researchers came to realize that research conducted on these bases is an increasingly open process. Every choice made impacted on the purpose of the aesthetic analysis of the organizations considered. Each researcher had to rely on the representations available to him/her or which s/he created through manifold ways to collect information both rational and sensory. From the outset, the research group understood that, for example, the selection of organizational settings pertains to the sensitization process of the aesthetic analysis of organizations. Every research 'location', in fact, evinces the sensibility of those who propose it and highlights the theoretical reason for the choice. The group sought to involve unusual work experiences or places where the organizing subject to study was 'done' (or had been done). Selected from this broad array of options were sites which already possessed the requisites of a sensible interest for aesthetic analysis.

In the case of a software company, for instance, they decided to observe how organizational communication took place among computer programmers; in the case of an organizational training scheme, it involved an analysis of an experimental course where the trainees used aesthetic categories to represent their office. Examined in another context was a simulation of military operations by an army assault unit in a war zone; in yet another, a cultural foundation was selected whose distinctive feature was that it was both situated in a city of art and housed in a building already artistically interesting because it combined architectural styles with operational functions. In short, in each of these aesthetic contexts the researchers were able to put both their sensibility and analytical competency to the test. They analysed the aesthetic features of those organizations in order to 'know' them in a way that was new, less rational, but certainly tied to the 'soul' of the organization; and this involved that area of 'sense' that every organized context at once possesses and constrains our relationship with it, although it is often taken-for-granted and neglected by logical-rational approaches (Schutz 1979). These aspects finally made it possible to 'see' organizational activities or specific practices in all their completeness and complexity. The tensions, desires and passions of organizational life do not derive solely from psychological and relational dimensions of activity, but also from organizational and social ones. Our study confirmed that many aesthetic aspects solicit sociality and modify people's attitudes and behaviours because they are aesthetically embedded in a sensible organizational context: they are endowed with dimensions of meaning that extend beyond the simple confines of the standard representations of organization charts and documents.

See Fig. 1 Fields explored and aesthetics sensibilities considered

It will be seen from Figure 1. that there are diverse means of access to a field, and yet they are apparently unable to demonstrate their difference from the materials conventionally collected by sociological research. Repeatedly entering and exiting such organizational contexts made it evident to the group that each activity was always a maze of opportunities, and that the process never became saturated with respect to its potential for evocations, sensitizations and possible representations. The work group that entered these fields in order to sensitize itself to the aesthetics of organizational settings realized that it was necessary to revise its methods so as to extract information otherwise left indistinct or embedded in a context that greatly extenuated or compromised it. Observational activities, with or without participants, using conventional research categories, were indeed experiences of 'immersion', yet without such revision the researchers were unable to entirely incorporate themselves into the aesthetic sensibility of the interlocutors and organizational situations.

See Fig. 2 Aesthetics considered

Likewise, simple ethnographic experience was revised and hybridized with numerous other experiences that were not ethnographic activities in the strict sense, but bore important features of them. Thus evident is the relationship between aesthetizing and 'an-aesthetizing' – as two processes imposed by social science on its researchers, because in the end the written text is the medium by which experiences are confirmed. In the aesthetic analysis of organizations, a relationship should be established between the social-in-aesthetics and the social-in-scientific-representations. For this reason, given the goals pursued by the research group, ethnographies:

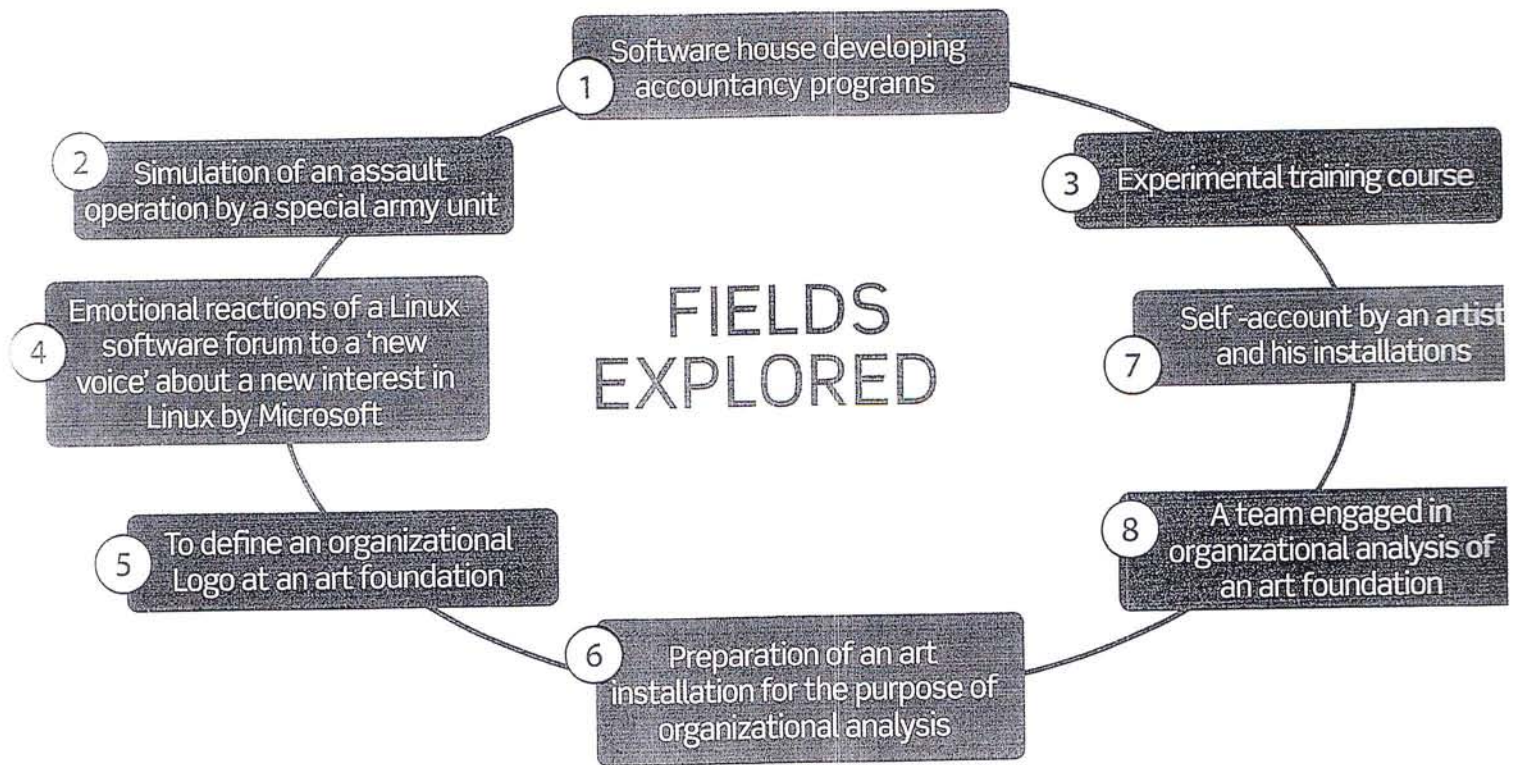


Figure. 1 Fields explored and aesthetics sensibilities considered

- 1 Creativity and emphases in virtual communication among programmers
- 2 Artistic dynamics of the operation simulated
- 3 Colours, odours and shapes in representations of organizational units
- 4 Emphases in an entirely virtual discussion
- 5 Accumulated, and otherwise, aspects of artistic sensitization
- 6 The artist's idea -selection processes
- 7 Comparison among situated aesthetic sensibilities
- 8 The researchers' aligned and unaligned sensibilities

Figure. 2 Aesthetics considered

Fig. 3 Materials produced from the field and analyzed

Materials analyzed

1. Notes on, and transcripts of, interviews on the creativity of the work
2. Account of immersion in the army unit's environment
3. The trainer's freehand drawings and self-analysis
4. The forum's notes and scripts
5. Notes, images and transcripts from immersion in the setting
6. Conversations with the artist, images
7. Audio and video recordings of the performance and self-reflexive notes
8. Notes, discussions, images, re-sounding wall, ethnographic reload, self-reflexivity

(though not only these) had to pass through a social mediation of negotiation with the actors in the field and with the research team. Only with truly open processes like those conducted by the work group is it possible to 'an-aesthetize' the scientific text. Likewise, only in this way can organizational training pass through a transformation from the rational-cognitive to the irrational-sensible, both in the classroom and in the 'trained' activity -- the sensory aspects that characterize membership of the organization. Each of the activities undertaken during the three years of research were therefore made

possible by opening new perceptive channels and a total reflexivity processes of analysis.

Nevertheless, for this to be possible, the aesthetic knowing had to deconstruct and re-arrange the usual tools of organizational analysis: on the one hand, the research had to recognize the role of 'sensorines'; on the other, it had to realize the potential of continuous re-elaboration by the researchers, bringing out the tacit aspects of experience.

Before proposing a systematic review of the tools developed for research, it should be pointed out that long and complex processes like the ones described, and relating to the activity of a group of researchers with diversified competences as with the Trento group, cannot leave the researchers themselves indifferent. It is evident that after systematically introducing the element of the aesthetic into research, this involvement with the organizations studied facilitated a continual change in the perceptions of the researchers. It is here that one grasps the intricate signals that aesthetics impose on organized contexts. Consider the disputes over background music in organized contexts, or the need to comply with a 'dress code' to work in certain organizations, or the aesthetic tricks of restaurants when the food falls from the cook and so on. No organization can ignore the importance of these aspects and the researchers who concentrate on them no longer remain detached. The researcher's practices also move through progressive legitimization among colleagues, with which the opportunity to know and act in the field is shared day by day and with the scientific community. For these reasons, the composition of the researcher's group in the field experience was determined above all by strong perceptual heterogeneity.

A senior coordinator, the main inspirer of the sensibilities deployed in the field, was flanked by an artist, an expert on organizational training, an organizational consultant, a connoisseur of contemporary art, an expert on communication, and an expert on aesthetic analysis. This medley did not always facilitate the smooth running of the research project, but sometimes gave rise to differences of opinion and conflicts due to different ways of representing phenomena. Nevertheless, all the participants involved progressively reshaped their representations of the work as a process driven by reciprocal learning, and by the relations among the identities present in the group.

In order to highlight this dynamic further, an ad hoc activity -- the heterogeneity of the researchers, so that these differences were opportunities to garner knowledge in a particular organizational context. The intention was to verify how different representations and different ways of perceiving organizational aesthetics were manifest in the 'same' object of study. The somewhat surprising result was that incompatible differences of representation constantly imposed on the 'opening' and 'closing' of the knowledge process, compelling the group to support or evade. Thus compared were ways of reading organizational aesthetics, the methods reinterpreted to do so, conflicts among views, then possible integrations. Only after the materials collected had been discussed and collectively re-processed was it decided to account of the analysis of organizational aesthetics, as it was to produce a final report that did not betray the differences among positions due to different representations. How could an account of a process, which by its nature was open and the outcome of contributions and acts of reflexivity?

The researcher tasked with writing the final report decided not to 'collapse' the different perspectives and the different results of the group's research; rather, he decided to give account of them in the form of synoptic tables comparing statements on specific steps defined by group discussion. However, this device still did not provide a complete and exhaustive treatment of the process. Two further tools guided the group's analysis and reflexivity.

The first of these tools was the 're-sounding wall', that is, the role assumed by the senior researcher and coordinator of the project, who acted as an 'echo' external to the fields investigated, and who produced 'redemptive' or 'problematic' images and evocations of the settings described. His intervention furnished a further representation of the organizational phenomena observed. He made it possible to re-view the materials collected and the researchers' various positions as if they were parts of a unicum; they assumed a new form, but this was efficacious in analysing the organizational context studied.

The second tool was the 'ethnographic reload', that is, the need to connect meanings and organizational aesthetics after access to the field, given that this had profoundly different impacts on the researchers. This stratagem consisted of revisiting field notes and diaries, along with the places observed by others, in order to retrace the route described in the texts and experience it at first hand following the researcher's narrative construction in his/her ethnographic report. This activity profoundly affected the writing of the final report, and it required the analysis of organizational aesthetics to be constantly open and dialogic.

FREING UP THE METHODOLOGY AND RECASTING THE TOOLS USED TO STUDY ORGANIZATIONAL AESTHETICS

Recent studies on the methodology of organizational analysis (Bryman, 2008) exhibit a twofold frame. On the one hand they use traditional modes to describe methodological tools; on the other they seek to open more expansive horizons for researchers embarking on organizational research.

One sometimes gains the impression that methodology, too, is undergoing a disciplinary consolidation, which proceeds in small steps and with the slow but constant inclusion of new epistemological devices. Yet one also observes the continuing 'inadequacy' and shortcomings of a methodological approach which, with its latent deterministic fixation, risks constraining observation so that it cannot give account and salience to the significant unpredictabilities imposed by the field.

In fact, methodologies by definition follow a logos of method, a rational discourse which translates the irrational into aspects and questions intelligible according to the method. Studies on organizational aesthetics display this contradiction, and they can be both its metaphor and development. On the basis of the long fieldwork performed by the University of Trento team it is possible to propose the changes set out in figure 4.

See Figure 4: Changes to research methods in order to represent organizational aesthetics

We are aware that no proposal for innovative change to the methods used for the aesthetic analysis of organizations can hope to be adopted, given the scientific community's strong adherence to the unifying rationality expressed by its epistemologies. Nevertheless, the purpose of this proposal is to show all the minor exemptions and concessions that everyday research practices require of researchers. We are convinced that those who set out to examine organizational aesthetics must pay maximum attention to these 'deviations' from the method. Every researcher must let some sort of 'broad band' of field access emerge. Today, data gathering is much more fluid and open than it used to be. Yet publishing restrictions require drastic reduction of the range of sensibilities activated by experience in the field. This entails a search for a middle way between creative spontaneity and the rigidity of the standard representations of research results. If organizational aesthetics are to be considered and represented, this search and this constant 'band broadening' are necessary.

CONCLUSION: ORGANIZATIONAL AESTHETICS AND RESEARCH PROCESSES

This article has argued for the need to reflect on research methods and on how they represent the reality when organizational aesthetics are considered. The work of the University of Trento team has shown that the innovation of methods is highly advisable because these construct and define the language and semantics of the data collected. Letting oneself be involved in such a process requires excellent sense of balance and a good capacity for visualization, or as Morgan puts it, for 'imaginization' (1997). Necessary as a consequence is the willingness of researchers to let themselves be changed by organizational aesthetics, so that the ways

Research team:
Team of persons with aesthetic sensibility



Aesthetic team: a team which creates perceptual asymmetry vis-à-vis the organizational aesthetic (dialectic and shared reflexivity)

Interview:
(semi-structured, in-depth, ethnographic):
Moving beyond cognitive and rational verbalizations so that the aesthetics of accounts can be treated as well (images evoked, specific narratives used)



Aesthetic interview (organizational): interview open-ended but designed to cover aesthetic dimensions (inclusion of aesthetic dimensions that comprise and support the verbalization)

Discussion with the research coordinator:
Coordination relies on a new and independent evocation and visualization (aesthetic mirroring)



Re-sounding wall: a person other than the researchers in the field. S/he examines and reinterprets the echoes reported by the researchers concerning their information-gathering

Participant observation:
Need to become 'one' with the organizational environment (aesthetic and an-aesthetic of the setting considered)



Ethnographic immersion: rational and sensory entry into the organizational context as a field of analysis

Secondary analysis of ethnographic fieldnotes:
understanding data collected by others requires their linkage with the perceptual



Ethnographic reload: re-reading ethnographic notes and reports by revisiting the original organizational context (after a brief elapse of time)

Improvisation/representation in the communication of organizational issues:
The aesthetic is communicated directly by jointly involving actors and recipients



Revealing performances: installations and performances which translate and deconstruct the networks studied

Classroom research:
Supersede the cognitive dimension to sensitize trainees to organizational aesthetics



Classroom aesthetic research: production of artifacts endowed with sensible features representing the organizational aesthetic

Individual analyses of organizational settings:
The aesthetic in organizations is multi-layered because it is communicative when set in relation to accumulated perceptual experiences



Aesthetic analysis group: analysis of organizational contexts with specific orientation to the diversity of the researchers in regard to the organizational aesthetics evoked

Reflexivity:
Importance of the sensible visualizations produced by the researchers for their analyses



Reflexive aesthetics: analogical analysis of aesthetics which may use diverse tools for temporary visualization

Presentation to the scientific community:
Superseding the an-aesthetic so that all supports able to sensitize are included (discarding the digital approach)



Aesthetic presentation: multi-sensorial presentations comprising all and every expressive form

Figure. 4 . Changes to research methods in order to represent organizational aesthetics

in which they recount and represent those aesthetics can change as well. Sensoriness, emotionality and cognitive sensibility constitute a complex and composite mix which must be nurtured, but above all made explicit. Only thus can the gaze be renewed and new research tools be constructed. This is certainly a long process which has only just begun. Nevertheless, the undertaking can finally give 'citizenship' to aspects of organizational aesthetics and the methods with which they can be studied.

This imagining of something new is more important than scientific rigour, for as Einstein said, the imagination can open new horizons and new ways to interpret the world and its phenomena. The imagination 'encircles' the whole world. Science is only a part of it. //

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