

Our Father, Twenty Years On

Review of: *Organizational Theory and Aesthetic Philosophies* by Antonio Strati. Routledge 2019.

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I think of Antonio Strati as the father of Organizational Aesthetics. Although I am sure, he would say that he was just one of many who created the field in the 1990s, I look to his 1999 book *Organization and Aesthetics* as the foundational work. Or if I am to take a particularly American focus, I might point to his 1992 article in the *Academy of Management Review* as the foundational work. This feeling shows up in my insistence that every cover image of this journal includes a chair – an homage to the riddle that Antonio starts *Organization and Aesthetics* with. *Organizational Theory and Aesthetic Philosophies* revisits the ground that was broken by *Organization and Aesthetics* twenty years earlier. But now that the ground is broken, he can dig into the fertile bits that pique his interest and play in the dirt a bit.

It would be typical to start a review by summarizing the content of the book, but for me the content is almost secondary. What is primary is the way in which Antonio does what he is talking about. I do not see the book as being primarily an argument for the importance and usefulness of aesthetic philosophy for organizational theory – although it certainly makes that argument in a convincing and compelling way. I see the book as an example of how aesthetic philosophy can be used in an artful way to give us insight into organizations and organizational theory. Much in the way that art can give us a profound glimpse into the essence of a particular fragment of life, Antonio plays with a variety of ideas to give us profound glimpses into organizations and organizational theorizing. There is no claim for a broad, universal theory, instead his approach is more heuristic and the book shows us his project rather than telling us. That is to say, the secret here is that *Organizational Theory and Aesthetic Philosophy* might look like it is a discursive form in the grand tradition of academic writing, but it is not. It is a presentational form in the grand tradition of making art.

At the heart of Antonio's book are six interludes that come between the chapters of prose. Each interlude is an image, a photopoem that Antonio has created. The first is *Poetry as Manifesto, N 2* which is based on his photopoem *Poetry as Manifesto N 0* (shown below and discussed in the book). The images serve as both an interlude in which the reader is encouraged to step away from reading and spend time looking and also as illustrations in the text that follows. Antonio is a respected art photographer and this allows him to offer first person narratives about the making of the photopoems. For me, it is in these first person reflections that the book is most artful.



Figure 1: *Poetry as Manifesto, N 0, 2015*

Throughout the book, Antonio plays. He plays with organizational theory, with aesthetic philosophy, and with his own art and experience. This makes the book fun to read in a way that most academic works are not. Rather than analytically pounding away at the argument, the work dances around and shows us things. It is a work driven by curiosity and seems to open up possibilities rather than arrive at a conclusion. I cannot help but think of Daved Barry and Stephan Meisiek's articulation of the difference between craft and art "that craft is largely about exemplary arrivals ... 'art proper' seems largely focused on extraordinary departures" (2010 p. 335). *Organizational Theory and Aesthetic Philosophy* is an extraordinary departure.

To close, I want to share a memory that came to mind when reading the book. It was 2006 at the Art of Management and Organization (AMO) conference in Krakow. Antonio was a key note speaker and he spoke a bit about how his colleagues had been surprised when he told them about the conference. He told us how "amo" meant "I love you" in Italian and his colleagues thought he was going to the "I love you" conference. A woman in the audience stood up and shouted, "Amo Antonio!". Since that moment I have regretted that I did not immediately stand up and shout, "Amo Antonio!". I imagine that would have led to one person after another rising up and shouting, "Amo Antonio!" in a "I am Spartacus" moment. I didn't say it then, but I am saying it now and I encourage each and everyone of you to say it with me, "Amo Antonio!"

References

Barry, D., & Meisiek, S. 2010. The art of leadership and its fine art shadow. *Leadership*, 6(3): 331-349.

About the Author

Steve Taylor is a professor of leadership and creativity and the interim dean at the WPI Foisie Business School. His research is focused in two areas: organizational aesthetics and reflective practice. The former applies art-based scholarship and practice to management and organizations. The latter focuses on the ability to analyze our own actions and learn how to be more effective, ethical, and artful as managers and leaders. His research has been published in academic journals including *Organization Studies*, *Leadership Quarterly*, *Leadership*, *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, and *Journal of Management Studies*. Taylor is the author of the books: *Leadership Craft*, *Leadership Art*; *You're a Genius: Using Reflective Practice to Master the Craft of Leadership*; and *Staging organization: plays as critical commentaries on workplace life*. He is also the founding editor of the journal *Organizational Aesthetics*. Steve is a playwright, whose plays have been performed in England, France, Poland, Canada, Denmark, New Zealand, Italy, Australia, and the United States. He received a PhD in management from Boston College; an MA in performing arts from Emerson College; and a BS in humanities from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.