

Book Review

Aesthetic Leadership: Managing Fields of Flow in Art and Business by Pierre Guillet de Monthoux, Claes Gustafsson and Sven-Erik Sjöstrand (Eds.). London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. 287 pages, hard cover.

Reviewed by

[Ralph Bathurst](#)

Massey University, Auckland, NZ

Organizational Aesthetics

In the search for alternative ways to examine organizations, prognosticators argue that we are facing an “aesthetics boom” (Welsch, 1997, p. 1), where sensate responses are valued and indeed encouraged (Strati, 1999). It is argued that while aesthetic insights may be universally experienced (van Damme, 2006), subliminal reactions are, by their nature, difficult to frame into language, making them “prearticulate” (Postrel, 2003, p. 6). How, then, can the ephemeral and even the ineffable nature of aesthetic engagement be analysed and discussed?

Organizational researchers have begun to overcome this difficulty by exploring artifacts as evidence of aesthetic experience. For instance Gagliardi (1996) argues that “corporate artifacts can function as *clues* to ways of seeing and *feeling* very distant from the rationalizations offered by the actors” (p. 568, emphasis in the original). Out of this genesis organizational aestheticians are moving beyond this symbolic focus and making advances in theory development, thereby offering a way forward beyond muteness (Taylor, 2002).

Such advances are offered in the recently published collection focusing on leadership: *Aesthetic leadership: Managing fields of flow in art and business* (Guillet de Monthoux, Gustafsson, & Sjöstrand, 2007). At its core, the book’s claim is that aesthetic leadership is a quest for beauty; the transformation of the sometimes dehumanizing work sites of “factories, market place and offices” as well as traditional arts-based institutions of “theatres, museums and concert halls” (p. 6). Beauty in its orientation towards harmony and the sublime has, the editors contend, been “dismissed as *irrational* and *taboo*” by the business world’s orientation towards “scientific control over social life” (p. 6). The intention of this book is to reclaim beauty as the essence of organizational life.

As the subtitle suggests, the unifying idea that underpins beauty is the concept of *flow*, a phenomenon that presents aesthetics as a third ideal to the more common notions of leadership and administration. However, this notion extends beyond an *individual* “feeling [of] things going well as an almost automatic, effortless, yet highly focused state of consciousness” (Csikszentmihályi, 1997, p. 110), to encompass *collective* flow; or as the book’s subtitle suggests, “*fields of flow.*” And this is where aesthetic leadership is expressed in its ability to work simultaneously and spontaneously at a number of different levels.

Fields of Flow

This concept of fields of flow springs from the Romantic tradition that sees knowledge acquisition as being in a continuous state of fluctuation. Friedrich Schiller in his letters on aesthetics explores the idea of the “play impulse” (Schiller, 1795/1965, p. 74), a state that oscillates around the paradoxical ideas of *being* and *becoming*. More recently Guillet de Monthoux explores this idea, using play’s German derivative *schwung* (Guillet de Monthoux, 2004). Now in this volume of *Aesthetic leadership*, flow takes centre stage, disrupting Cartesian dualism by encouraging “business to discover its inherent aesthetics, to recognize that aesthetics is *everywhere*” (p. 252, emphasis added). This ubiquity enables aesthetically-aware leaders to avoid the trap of bipolar thinking, thereby reinvigorating organizational life. According to the editors, triadic perspectives shift thinking beyond the dilemmas *either/or* polarities impose on business.

Therefore the focus of this book is to demonstrate how flow unlocks the stalemate caused by dichotomies. To do so, 13 mostly Scandinavian contributors offer case studies of organizational problems, recasting them within an aesthetic frame. Through these theoretical positions, resources are offered to practitioners and scholars alike, enabling them to probe beyond familiar and taken-for-granted solutions.

Aesthetic leadership undertakes this task by dividing the cases into three domains: art companies, business enterprises, and organizations that embody both artistic and business ideals. This division assists in fulfilling the book’s goal to be a vehicle through which arts and business leaders can attend to each other, thereby enriching leadership study and practice.

Art Companies

But how would this interaction between rational business ideals and ephemeral aesthetic responses flow? Jeanette Wetterström (2007), in her analysis of the history of the Royal Swedish Opera, demonstrates how the normalizing qualities of management practice ensures the longevity of the enterprise while at the same time idiosyncratic aesthetic engagement provides for creativity to bloom. This opera company’s beginnings in the mid-eighteenth century as a form sponsored and maintained by aristocrats, to today’s publicly owned and funded enterprise, have seen a consequent change in managerial functions. Originally managers operated in the background under the direction of royal power and enthusiasm. However, in the contemporary context of restricted financial support, managers are required to set limits to artistic freedom. A successfully managed opera company, then, is in a state of flow where there is reciprocity between constraint and autonomy. Wetterström astutely argues that “we must abandon the idea of artistic creation is freedom from binding rules” (p. 47). Rather, by embracing fields of flow, the paradoxical elements of *control* and *letting go*; where the *regression* imposed by managers and *progression* inspired by artistic creators work together.

Business Enterprises

Organizations outside the arts sector also benefit from taking this aesthetic approach. For instance, take a company like Weight Watchers. On the surface, it appears to be

focused on assisting participants manage personal health and lifestyle. However, its success as a multinational firm brings wider implications. Beyond body sculpturing, Stenström (2007) argues that the aesthetics of Weight Watchers situates the body as central to organizational life. Hence “the feeling of *being* a body” (p. 89 emphasis in the original) highlights the centrality of the whole person as a worker who is both emotionally alert as well as physically present. By following this trajectory, Stenström argues that the personal transformation that participants in weight reduction programs experience is an analogue for the kind of structural sculpturing that companies can experience as they make an aesthetic turn.

To further examine this flow between functionality and aesthetics, other cases are offered. These include virtual knowledge-based activities such as writing computer software and financial trading, to large engineering projects like designing roller coasters and constructing power plants. In each case aesthetic judgement is positioned alongside traditional forms of “logico-deductive analysis” (Guve, 2007, p. 132) that have been staple to organizational analysis.

For instance, Piñeiro (2007), in his exploration of computer software writing, claims that a lack of attention to beauty by software engineers causes programs to go to market underprepared. He argues that where commercial and time constraints override aesthetic concerns, managers actively hinder quality programs from being created. Hence consumers inevitably become the victims of “bad” software that does not work efficiently or effectively. On the other hand where engineers are given licence to develop “clean” or “elegant” software (p. 109), the probability is raised that programs will work better from the outset. Furthermore, according to Piñeiro, it is this need for writing beautiful code that is driving Open Source systems that, like Linux, successfully compete with off-the-shelf software.

Origins of Aesthetics

Finally, no volume of this nature would be complete without an examination of aesthetics’ origins in antiquity. To do so Katja Lindqvist (2007) uses a dance metaphor to explore the idea of flow. She examines the art gallery curator’s role, which is unique in its position at the arts-business nexus, needing to satisfy both the requirements for sound business practice and passion for the art form. Lindqvist conceives of this problem as a *pas-de-deux* between the ancient Greek gods of Apollo and Eros. For her, Apollo represents a moderating influence that provides clarity to creative impulses, while ardour and freedom are found in the figure of Eros. As elegant as the dance itself, Lindqvist describes the relationship between the two as neither being too restrictive to stifle the generative urge, nor too loose so that creativity flounders. The mythological dance of these ‘ideal types of drives or logics’ (p. 207) offers exemplars for leaders desiring to achieve flow.

Therefore, this book works at a number of levels. Firstly, in themselves the variety of case studies are pertinent to students of organizational process and behaviour. Secondly, explorations of a variety of artistic endeavours provide a lens for business leaders to examine the *art* of leadership. Finally, the wide range of philosophical investigations offers an excellent introduction to a field of study that is gradually gaining in importance to those interested in understanding how aesthetics may be applied to organizational research.

Aesthetic Leadership Rich in Insights

Guillet de Monthoux, Gustafsson, and Sjöstrand present a book that is rich in insights. For scholars and leaders alike it suggests ways in which the project of organizational revitalization can be advanced. By introducing aesthetics as a core epistemology, the quest for new methodological insights can be illuminated. While the book does not confront the problem of defining aesthetics in generic terms, its focus on fields of flow as a way of disrupting traditional paradigms provides a pathway for scholars interested in taking organizational aesthetics further.

If we take seriously the rise of aesthetics as an important component of organizational life, then future leaders will need to explore beyond functionality and attend to the beauty of their enterprises. *Aesthetic leadership* offers a resource for this to occur. Its emphasis on *managing fields of flow* provides for a variety of approaches, each with its own distinct exploration of how leaders may become aesthetically aware. These fresh insights present excellent resources for reflection and as practical guides to reenergise organizational life.

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Ralph Bathurst began his working life as a musician and music educator. Currently he lectures in management and leadership at New Zealand's Massey University. His Ph.D. was in organizational aesthetics, where he studied a symphony orchestra undergoing governance examination and change. His current research extends notions of the aesthetics of organizing by studying the ways in which the artistic process is translated into leadership practice, making sense of the paradoxes and contradictions inherent within these domains. Reach him at R.Bathurst@massey.ac.nz.