

**Giovan Francesco Lanzara**

*Shifting Practices. Reflections on Technology, Practice, and Innovation.*  
Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2016, pp. 304

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One of my favourite album of past months is *Rock'n'roll Consciousness* by Thurstone Moore. Singer, guitarist and architect of one of the most important bands on the contemporary alternative musical scene (Sonic Youth), thirty years since the beginning of his career, Moore has made a record that in my opinion strikes a perfect balance between 'old' and 'new', tradition and innovation, past and current. It is an album that ranges among different music genres (from rock, through punk, noise and dark, to free jazz and drone-metal) but which creates an amalgam of sounds that make the final result entirely 'natural'. It is a record whose tracks never last for less than six minutes (and in fact, in a couple of cases, exceed ten minutes), but they do not sound 'long', 'boring' or 'repetitive'. Dissonances and harmonies, suspended moments and sonic irruptions, rhythms that slow down and accelerate, are all played with such mastery that the novice and/or distracted listener may even not realize how much expertise lies beneath them.

But these trajectories, where careful composition and free jamming merge together, never lapse into a self-indulgent display of virtuosity or nonchalance because there is always a dynamism and impetus that do not leave time to get bored. In a sense, it is an album that not only expresses the author's approach and musical aesthetic but also asks the listener to position him/herself. The circularity of the melodies, in fact, transports the listener into the piece, and then asks him/her: do you like this music? Too predictable? Too experimental? Compared to what? What music do you usually listen to? What do you like about it?

But above all, what does this have to do with the book subject to this review?

Perhaps nothing. But because of my passion for music, whenever I have to review a book, I ask myself: and if it was an album? What album would it be? In most cases, I cannot find a sufficiently intuitive match to decide to use it as an outline for the review. But this time the match seems wholly befitting.

Firstly, like Moore's record, Giovan Francesco Lanzara's text 'sounds good' in the sense that the writing is enjoyable, rhythmic, rich with analytical concepts and reflections, as well as metaphors and references to art and literature.

Secondly, it is a book written by someone who, following a multi-year research career, expresses his own ideas without citing those of others. Lanzara, who has always carried out his research at the intersection

among organization studies, information systems and innovation studies, uses his research findings to reflect both on innovation as a bricolage and practice-based phenomenon, and on the methodological and epistemological principles useful for reading innovation in processual terms. In particular, Lanzara revisits two of his research studies: the first (conducted between 1986 and 1989) concerning the introduction of software for the teaching of music in a music school; the second (conducted between 1990 and 1993) concerning the introduction of video recorders in Italian courtrooms. Rather like some of the sounds in Moore's album, despite the amount of time that has elapsed, both cases 'sound' extremely current and exemplify the different phases, ambiguities, decision-making, imperfections, contrasting interpretations, "translations" (to use the ANT term) that characterize any process and innovation design at organizational level. Moreover, both are narrated with an attention to detail that engages the reader in a sort of "participatory analysis" of what is being recounted. The reader is provided with the tools and materials to follow the author in his narrative. At the same time, in this way, the reader has the opportunity to construct his/her personal interpretation of the events narrated, without this necessarily coinciding with the author's point of view. The search for "interpretative reciprocity" is, moreover, an essential move for the purpose of studying (and understanding) innovation as a processual phenomenon. The author focuses in this regard on the centrality of "backtalk", not so much in the Goffmanian sense as in that defined by Donald Schön (1983), as "reflective conversation with the materials of the situation". But unlike Schön (to whose memory the text is dedicated), for Lanzara "the materials of the situation" comprise not only the interaction among the designer/researcher, his or her partners, and the materials, but also "the researcher's conversations with his own research materials; the researcher's conversations with himself and his own theories; the second-order conversations between the researcher's and practitioners' stories and between their current and previous stories" (p. 42). The study of innovation phenomena therefore necessarily requires an approach which if not longitudinal nevertheless extends over time. Reading innovation in processual terms means giving innovation time to unfold in relation to the different "situations of practice" (p. 21) and to the various actors with whom it will come into contact. During this time, the meaning of innovation can change, and so too can the identities and interests of the actors involved. The flow of this time is characterized by the alternation of "transient" knowledge (and constructs): that is, "knowledge that is created in a process of design and innovation: a kind of transformative activity is carried out, and the knowledge is subsequently obliterated, transformed or transcended by the same activity as the process unfolds" (p. 217). Typically, this knowledge is "embodied in (...) artifacts, minimal structures, recombinant routines, ephemeral practices, incomplete representations and shifting stories (...)" (p. 217). These are "transient con-

structs” or “embodied hypothesis”, that is: “hypothetical statement about how an object or tool could look, how it could or should be used, how the situation could be understood, and how the world could be organized” (p. 222).

Transient knowledge and constructs are ephemeral. Consequently, people often lose track and memory of them. But for Lanzara they are the moments on which it is most interesting to dwell in order to understand the trajectory of an innovation. While knowledge and constructs are ephemeral, they are also transient in the sense of “transitional”, thus providing a “provisional ‘anchoring’ to some features of the situation that can be handled” (p. 224). It is therefore in these partial articulations and definitions that innovation takes shape, embodying materials, objects, ideas and interpretations that are sometimes lost, while others persist over time, but which in any case act as “temporary scaffolds for building new forms of knowledge and agency” (p. 246).

More than asserting a series of statements, therefore, Lanzara’s text asks a series of questions: “What happens in an established practice or work setting when a novel artifact or tool for doing work changes the familiar work routines?” (p. 5); “What is revealed of a practice in the switch to a different medium? How are objects, activities, representations, and skills affected by the nature of the medium? How are our perceptions and idea of materiality and reality mediated by the medium? How is knowledge itself medium-dependent? And (...) in what sense is a practice a mediated world?” (p. 203). Moreover, “To what extent can an observer legitimately penetrate into the representations of the actors observed? What kinds of access are technically rigorous, socially feasible, and morally acceptable? To what extent is digging deeply into the actors’ representations also a form of intervention, or perhaps intrusion, into them?” (p. 253); “How can an experiment be designed that would enable both the researcher and the practitioners involved in the project to develop relevant knowledge about the innovation process and reflect on their own theories, strategies and experiences while they are actually engaged in action?” (p. 37); “How does the subtle line between what is remarked and questioned and what instead goes unremarked and unquestioned affect the researcher’s reconstruction of reality?” (p. 46); “When does the researcher notice the tools being worked with and the equipment on which she or he relies for carrying out ordinary research work? When are the things that surround her or him and support routine operations seen?” (p. 47).

As in the case of some of the sounds in Moore’s record, there will certainly be those who say that they have already heard these questions (and, perhaps, have already found the answers). However, for Lanzara questions serve to problematize reality, and if they are well formulated, they lead to further questions, more than to definitive answers. From this point of view, it can indeed be argued (as Lanzara does) that: “what is

fixed as the reality – the accepted facts, the known events, the shared truths – also constitutes the experiential and cognitive limit of the inquirer, marks the boundaries of the hitherto known world, and the nature and quality of social interaction. And what is called reality coincides with the place and time in which the practice of reflexivity gets suspended” (p. 265).

Just as the keyword of Thurston Moore’s album is not so much “Rock’n’roll” as “consciousness”, so the keyword of Giovan Francesco Lanzara’s text is not “practice”, “technology” or “innovation” but rather “reflection”. And reflection (like music) is never-ending.

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### **Bruno Latour**

*Piccola filosofia dell’enunciazione (con una nota di Jacques Fontanille)*  
[*Tiny Philosophy of Enunciation (with a note by Jacques Fontanille)*], Roma, Aracne, 2017, pp. 68

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Providing an autonomous format to Bruno Latour’s 1999 article “Piccola filosofia dell’enunciazione” [Tiny Philosophy of Enunciation] with both the original French version and the already published one in Italian, was the right move. Now that some years have passed since the publication of *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence (AIME)* (Latour 2013), it can result extremely useful to have at hand one of the sources, and one of the steps towards, *AIME*, in order to better understand and appreciate Latour’s trajectory in its entirety.

This new version of Latour’s article is accompanied by a useful afterword – in Italian and in French – by French semiotician Jacques Fontanille – “Dagli atti di enunciazione ai modi di esistenza” [*From acts of enunciation to modes of existence*] (pp. 43-52 and pp. 53-63). In such afterword, Fontanille clarifies the closeness and the distance between Latour’s proposal and the original theory of enunciation, from which Latour draws, in order to track and describe the relations giving way to different modes of existence.

“Piccola filosofia dell’enunciazione” (PFE; Latour 1999) has been initially published in a festschrift dedicated to Paolo Fabbri, semiotician who introduced Latour to semiotics and with whom Latour signed his first science studies article. Fabbri, who is now the director of the Centro Internazionale di Studi Semiotici [International Center for Semiotic Stud-