

Art and Organizing: Lessons for organization theory from the humanities

Jerzy Kociatkiewicz
Essex Business School, University of Essex
kociak@kociak.org

Monika Kostera
University of Warsaw
monika@kostera.pl

The breach between sciences and humanities has been widely recognized for quite a long time, though the position of social sciences was always tentative and vaguely defined in this classification. As the alignment with *Naturwissenschaften* tended to be seen as more prestigious, it was there that many disciplines, including organization studies, strived to look for inspiration. Nowadays, however, the gap can be seen to rapidly diminish and lose in its importance — conference and research projects increasingly attempt to bring together not only researchers from diverse disciplines, but also arts and art critics, hoping they can all benefit from collaboration. Humanities, it is more and more widely recognized, can teach other disciplines many valuable lessons. In this text we would like to outline six of them which have, in our eyes, a special relevance for organization studies:

1. organization theory is about human beings
2. feelings are part of organizing
3. beauty and ugliness are important for human experience
4. organizations tell stories, feature in stories, and so do the scientists
5. write in a way that does not discourage readers
6. make a difference through being critical

Lessone One: Organization theory is about human beings

This is, quite probably, the most important point in this text, and also one of the most frequently overlooked

in the practice of organizational writing. There are a number of important notions deriving from this observation, the most obvious one being that texts which fail to deal with human beings have precious little to say about organizations. As it is inelegant to criticize others for mistakes we have ourselves committed, let us look for an example at a text written by one of us (Kostera, 1998). This little book is particularly interesting in that, as it is intended to be a brief overview of organization theory, it contains a summary of quite a lot of the influential theories in the field. What it does not, however, contain, is a single word devoted to the people involved in organizing; it describes models of human behaviour, but the humans themselves are strangely missing. And thus, as might be expected, the book allows the reader to learn a number of things concerning organization theory, but it does not even touch the subject of organizing and organizations, although the two topics should be synonymical.

Another aspect of human presence is the complexity with which it endows organizations. If anything, the limited success of Artificial Intelligence projects has proven the difficulty of simulating the working of a human mind. Obviously, organizations in which many human (and non-human) beings simultaneously interact are even more complex, and to propose to explain their behaviour and structure by use of simple models and categorizations is a serious sign of dangerous conceit. This is not to dispute the validity of all models, but only to point out how far they are from

representing organizations and relations encountered therein. As Karl Weick (1969/79) pointed out, it is impossible to conceive of a theory at once simple, general, and accurate. At least one of these principles needs to be sacrificed, and a reflexive scientist needs to be aware of the sacrifices made in the process of writing.

The second lesson is also a direct consequence of human presence in organizations, but is important enough to merit its own sub-chapter.

Lesson Two: Feelings are part of organizing

Organizations are feelings. They awake feelings, they originate from feelings, they consist of feelings. Linda Smircich (1983) described the difference between organizations conceived of as "having" a culture and "being" a culture, and we would like to suggest that we engage in a discourse based on an analogous insight. We can either talk of "work related feelings", "the emotional side of the enterprise", we can ponder about the possible ways of "making people feel" this or that way (e.g. loyal, as a team, self-fulfilled), or adopt a root metaphor of organization as *feelings happening* to people, between people, in people, etc. Feelings are not an organizational by-product, not a "tool", nor a "potential". They are part and parcel of organizing, which Weick (1969/1979) has already pointed out already years ago.

The humanities have been so much more active in their development as far as the emotional dimension of (social) life is concerned than the social sciences. Organization theory can look to them as to its natural teachers for learning the lesson of feelings, and also the next one: that of beauty.

Lesson Three: Beauty and ugliness are important for human experience

Organizational aesthetics is a current of thought that constructed a bridge between art and science. It became quite popular by the end of the previous century. It offers the opportunity to explore the more subjective and singular, as opposed to the objective and general which was long considered to be science. Pierre Guillet de Monthoux (1993), one of the precursors of organizational aesthetics, argues that the enterprise

can be described as sublime and it is through their capacity to be experienced as sublime that they can function against all plans and rational forecasts. Such enterprises made the author think of aesthetics rather than economics. He thus defines the enterprise as art and explores the implications of such a definitions. One important question is what we can learn from art and aesthetics. On the art of the enterprise he writes the following:

All human actions have an aesthetic potential. If we succeed to

communicate something with our actions, reach out to our fellow human beings, we can be grateful to art for it. The actions of our enterprises and projects achieve success when they are art. We cannot understand enterprising without understanding art. Neither grasp economic development without an aesthetic dimension (p. 1).

Similarly, Lloyd Sandelands and Georgette Buckner (1989) claim all kinds of work can be compared to art. They investigate a class of work feelings associated with aesthetic experience and they argue that a study of aesthetic experience can importantly contribute to a broader understanding of the psychology of feelings of work. This view can be illuminating, as it "centers on the characteristics of work that can evoke and sustain a play of mind at the fringe of awareness" (p. 122).

Antonio Strati is one of the most renowned scholars who successfully link aesthetics and business administration. He finds the aesthetic approach very useful for the studies of organizations (1992, 1998). The aesthetic understanding of organizational life enables to view organizational complexity and ambiguity in a different light. The author takes a holistic view of organization, arguing that through the aesthetic experience of organization the researcher can gain ample knowledge about organizations. The category of beauty can be useful for interpretation of organizational life "because, thanks to its long history and to its mystery, it can be applied to a wide range of diverse situations" (Strati, 1992: 568). The author considers the implications of this view of organizational product, the work environment, and the organizational culture.

Different kinds of art have been studied, with the intention to understand various experiences related to organizing. Dag Björkegren (1995) studies the largest cultural medium – television in order to grasp the production of culture, and especially popular

culture. He takes a look at the television medium from a managerial point of view. Hugo Letiche (1995) describes the history and functioning of Nederlands Dans Theatre in order to explore the question of perception and the rendering of perception. Monica Lee (1995) explores the lessons from science fiction literature for the understanding of organization and especially organization of gender. Claire Cohen (1995) considers the educational implications of what she calls "sudden poetry" in management textbooks. Antonio Strati (1995) analyzes art photography in Europe as an example of organization without walls. Several authors have explored the use of beauty and ugliness in organizing. For example, Heather Höpfl (1995) considers the relationship between organizational rhetorics and poetics. Rhetorics is used to persuade people into performing the "right" behavior, obscuring the ambiguity, which can be restored through the poetic. The realization of the relationship is important to organizational life, but perhaps most relevant for understanding the situation of women in the ordered world of work. Allowing for poetic organizations would not only actually empower women, but open organizations for innovation and creativity. One of us have been among those interested in the potential that metaphors from art has for the description of organizations. She has aimed to explore the feelings and experiences that organizations evoke in people (Kostera, 1997). She argues that organizing generally implies a thinning out of experience, and organizations are a "way of taming, not framing reality" (p. 176). The article proposes a metaphor of the Kitsch-Organization to enable radical criticism from a constructivist point of view. As opposed to that, leaving an empty space, a deliberate sanctuary for artistic chaos in organizations can make them genuinely creative (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 1998). The mention of ugliness in the above paragraph is very important, as aesthetics does not end with the study of the beautiful; it also reminds us of the need for the awareness and study of ugliness, in our case in organizations. The Modern dream of purging the world of ugliness, Bauman reminds us, brought about arguably the most heinous crimes in the history of mankind — "*Endlösung* was an aesthetic solution" (Ozick, 1984 quoted in Bauman, 2000: 11). A part of the broad scheme of eradicating ugliness was the reduction of contrasts, so that while the beautiful loses some of its lustre, the ugly gets tracelessly eliminated.

Such are the roots of standardization, and its inevitable child — McDonaldization as described by George Ritzer (1995/96), the attempt to replace ugliness and beauty by mediocrity and predictability. It is obvious by now that both beauty and ugliness constitute an important part of human experience, and any attempts at their removal are not only doomed to failure, they also bring about unspeakable atrocities — Gibson Burrell (1997) convincingly demonstrates the direct link between assembly line, abattoirs, and concentration camps. Dreams of perfection quickly turn into nightmares of death (and contemporary agricultural production is just one glaring example of our not having left such practices behind).

The above review of literature on aesthetics and organization is, of course, brief and far from complete. Its intention is to give the reader a tentative grasp of the diversity of topics undertaken by authors interested in organizational aesthetics and the living potential this field offers. Organization and various aspects of organizational life can and are, then, conceived of as art, and this idea offers a fascinating realm for organizational studies.

Lesson Four: organizations tell stories, feature in stories, and so do the scientists

It is obvious that *some* organizations tell stories — Disney, or LucasArts being just two of the most well-known examples. This is hardly news, and our lesson goes far beyond such a statement. Alasdair MacIntyre (1981/1990) claimed enacted narrative to be the most common form of social life; storytelling is also a very common form of communication and of sensemaking — we tell stories not only to entertain and inform, but also to explain and make sense of the world around us. Barbara Czarniawska (2000: 2) insists that a "student of social life, no matter which domain, needs to become interested in narrative as a form of knowledge, a form of social life, and a form of communication." However, before we tackle the activities of scientists, let us first consider some preliminary problems. We are organization theorists. Should we and the likes of us speak of science? For a long time, the learned talk about science has been the domain of epistemology and philosophy rather than organizational science (which is a young discipline, especially as compared

to the former two; its status is furthermore, not as well established and sometimes causes feelings of inferiority). However, science is a form of organized human activity, a special case of organizing, if you like. There is no reason why science should not be studied by organization theorists. Many organization theorists, especially nowadays, engage in discussions and reflections about science and academic writing. In her essay *Narration or science? Collapsing the division in organization studies* Barbara Czarniawska-Joerges (1995) explores the links between science and story telling (narration). Narrative knowledge is quite fitting for social sciences and humanities, and can be used to an advantage in organization studies. There are traditions within organization studies to use narrative, such as case studies, studies of organizational stories and various interpretive approaches. In 2001, the narrative approach within organization studies is almost universally accepted, and thus standards that in the past were typical for the humanities, such as beauty and use, are commonly adopted in organization theory. Organization theorists take upon themselves to represent other people, which they should strive for doing fairly and helpfully. They should also write their texts in a readable way; if possible, they should develop their writing skills and write beautifully (Czarniawska, 1999). In 1995, Czarniawska-Joerges hoped for a conscious and reflective creation of a specific genre, which recognizes tradition without being paralyzed by it, which seeks inspiration in other genres without imitating them, which derives confidence from the importance of its topic and from its own growing skills (p. 28).

Six years later, we are still working on it, even if the inspiration across genres and disciplines now perhaps seems more obvious to most of us who write management.

The boundaries between the so-called humanities and the social sciences are, as we are demonstrating here, being demolished. The recent debate on syntagmatic knowledge (Latour, 1992) and boundaries between "rational" and "irrational", between "mind" and "emotion" (Hassard, 1993), as well as the historical and institutional roots of rationality (Shenhav, 1999) has clearly shown the necessity of non-dualistic thinking. One of the dualisms that long has been taken for granted and hindered a constructive dialogue is the distinction between science and art. But rigid boundaries are a very artificial creation,

impeding thought as well as expression. This does not necessarily mean equating science with literature; as Umberto Eco, a powerful presence in both of these fields, writes in his recent book on semiotics:

theoretical discussions of mine are interwoven with "stories." Perhaps some readers will know that, when I feel the urge to tell stories, I satisfy it elsewhere, and therefore my decision to tell stories here is not dictated by a need to realize a suppressed vocation (a temptation for many contemporary thinkers who substitute philosophy with pages of *belletrisme*) (Eco, 1997/2000: 5).

His reasons for including stories are quite different — to enhance discourse, to illustrate his theses, and to anchor scientific reflections in our experience. The same reasons hold for organization studies, which brings us to the topic of the next lesson: scientific writing.

Lesson Five: Write in a way that does not discourage readers

Writing management is a genre of writing, and as such there is lots to learn from the masters: the novelists, poets and dramatists (Czarniawska, 1999). The style of our writing can improve if we study how to write. Also, we hope that we will be read and that our readers will not only understand what we say but perhaps derive some kind of pleasure from the reading. The common template of scientific texts, in its rigidity, seriously hampers expression and limits the scope of academic discourse (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 1999).

At this point it should be evident that our own choice of structure for this text is a tongue-in-cheek tribute to the management writing template, as well as to the non-academic template of "airport literature" on management. We wish to capitalize on the powerful rhetoric value of such templates, while at the same time to expose their absurdity. Six easy lessons for including humanities in organization research are an obvious farce, and our aim is not to provide solutions but to provoke thought and reflection.

We agree with Richard Rorty (1989) who says that there is no "ultimate truth" beyond language. Both Rorty and ourselves believe in an external reality; however, the link between reality and language is neither obvious nor direct.

To say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most

things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states. To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations (Rorty, 1989: 4-5).

Thus, the problem of language becomes of paramount importance. It is as relevant *how* we write, as it is that we write true/ interesting/ valid things. The language is itself part of the truth, interest and validity. Writing has moved from a peripheral to a central issue in organization studies (and social sciences at large). Not surprisingly, organization theorists look to what used to be called the humanities for inspiration and lesson. Fiction as a way to tell stories about organizing has a great potential. Karin Knorr Cetina (1994) argues to introduce fiction into social sciences. Fiction can explain and illustrate things that we want to put forward as theories. Pierre Guillet de Monthoux and Barbara Czarniawska-Joerges (1994) speak of the value of studying literature for management learning and for the enhancement of our understanding of organizations and organizing. The book edited by them and containing a collection of stories about known literary works and the lessons for management that can be learned from them is not only a great read, but a really useful book in the teaching process. Nelson Philips (1995) goes even further, not just advocating a use of fiction for the study of organizations and/ or teaching, but claiming that fiction and fact literature tend to become one: „the barriers between fiction and fact, and art and science, have become increasingly difficult to defend” (p. 626). In fact, „social scientists often do what writers do: they create rather than discover, they focus on the unique and individual, they use illustration and rhetoric in an effort to make their case” (p. 626). Writers, on the other hand, often do what scientists are supposed to do. The boundaries become indistinct and the demolition of them could, if not „move us closer to the ultimate truth”, create an interesting space for organization studies. Philips then goes on explaining different narrative praxes and categories, and their use (and possible use) in the studies of organization.

Lesson Six: Make a difference through being critical

If we are not only to write more carefully (and hopefully, beautifully), but also to aspire to make a difference in the way people construct their everyday experience of the things we write about, we can learn from semiotics about open texts (Eco, 1973). The poetics of an open text aims

[...] to inspire the interpreter to 'acts of conscious freedom', to make him an active center for an unlimited net of relationships, whom he is to give an own shape, not being limited by a *compulsion* implied by the given rules of organization of a given text (27-28).

The open text helps people to make use of their creative powers, it inspires to be imaginative and inventive. The academic writing of the 60ties and the 70ties strived after a closedness, because it aimed at precision and accuracy. When it became obvious that a true accuracy is not very likely but quite prone to bring about sterility and dualist thinking, new aspirations have been embraced by the social scientists. One way to go is the positivist rendering of truth based on the principle of representation. Another way is founded on the cultural interpretation of perceived reality. This perspective is based on the Kantian tradition¹, shaped by phenomenology and recently beautifully written about by Rorty (1980/1994). Narrative scientific writers follow this tradition, trying to engage the reader in an active process of co-interpretation and co-exploration, refraining from making definitive and final statements about phenomena under consideration.

We are, however, not only objects of criticism, but we ourselves describe and criticize. Another useful lesson that can be learned from the humanities concerns the position of the critic. The critic is one who knows the language, knows the tricks, one who can taste the genre and place it just right. She or he is a person with a deep and intense knowledge, not only intellectual but also emotional, of the subject at hand. However, she or he is one who stands a bit apart, on the outside. In order to be a good critic one has to be different, not too

¹ There are several quite different directions into which the Kantian thought has developed, based on different texts by Immanuel Kant. As it is beyond the scope of this text is to discuss them here, we would just like to make the acknowledgement that interpretive epistemology in social sciences is just one among several inheritants of Immanuel Kant.

perfectly socialized into the studied culture. As David Silverman (1993/1994) reminds us (however with an entirely different intention), anomalies (deviants) are often treated with suspicion by societies. "What do anomalous entities do? They cut across boundaries." (p. 206). Cutting across boundaries is about mixing, or linking objects (categories). A creative combination of things, or more precisely, of symbols, evoking aesthetic reactions, is art. Art is, then, in our point of view a kind of anomaly. People who cross boundaries perform a necessary action to take look at something, for example at a piece of art. According the social constructivist point of view, unsuccessful socialization can be seen as a more or less necessary precondition for creative social change (Berger and Luckmann, 1966/ 1983). Deviant participants of a society, if they are to construct an own definition of their identity, must first form an contra-society of their own, where they also redefine social reality in a way enabling development of an alternative world. An unsuccessful socialization leads to people asking themselves "who they are", a process of questioning that may (but not always has to) lead to a creative activity of seeking alternative ways of enacting reality. It may equally lead to destructive action. Nevertheless, the quest for alternative means of expression may start from being "outside" social order.

Our view, which is rooted in (but not entirely consistent with) the social constructivist perspective, emphasizes the borderlines: the crossing, cutting across boundaries. People construct boundaries to put order into (a chaotic) reality (Bauman, 1994; 1991/1995a). They categorize and organize it, enacting it and re-enacting it daily in their everyday interactions. People who for various reasons find themselves outside this order² often start more or less urgently looking for means of communication and expression others than those encoded in the order. Thus they first acquire a distance essential for redefinition (see e.g. Hennestad, 1992 on the topic of culture seen from the inside versus from the outside; Björn Hennestad reminds of the old proverb saying that the fish is the last to discover water). This is the first instance of creative crossing of boundaries. Next, they produce a personalized statement, using means they have access to ("old") in unorthodox ways ("in new ways"). We believe that the most interesting re-contextualization of this kind

² This is the fate of many immigrants and travelers as well as of ethnographers.

occurs when it provokes a feeling of liberation from the existing order(s), produces a feeling of "empathy", i.e. a feeling of momentary entering into the other's impression and/ or sensitivity ("seeing the world through the eyes of the Other"). It also can inspire to make a new reading of reality: the "fish" discovers the "water".

Bibliography

- Bauman, Zygmunt 1994 *Dwa szkice o moralności ponowoczesnej*. Warszawa: Instytut Kultury.
- Bauman, Zygmunt 1991/ 1995 *Wieloznaczność nowoczesna - Nowoczesność wieloznaczna. (Modernity and ambivalence.)* Warszawa: PWN.
- Bauman, Zygmunt 2000 *Ponowoczesność jako źródło cierpień*. Warszawa: Sic!
- Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckmann 1966/1983 *Społeczne tworzenie rzeczywistości. (The social construction of reality)* Warszawa: PIW.
- Björkegren, Dag 1995 "The not so sublime: The organisation of the esthetic in the field of television." paper presented at conference, Bolton: *The Aesthetics of Organization*.
- Burrell, Gibson 1997 *Pandemonium: Towards a retro-organization theory*. London: SAGE.
- Cohen, Claire 1995 "The educational implications of 'poetry' i management textbooks." paper presented at conference, Bolton: *The Aesthetics of Organization*.
- Czarniawska-Joerges, Barbara 1995 "Narration or science? Collapsing the division in organization studies." *Organization* 2/1, p.11-33.
- Czarniawska, Barbara 1999 *Writing management*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Czarniawska, Barbara 2000 "The Uses of Narrative in Organization Research." Working paper. Gothenburg: Gothenburg Research Institute
- Czarniawska-Joerges, Barbara and Pierre Guillet de Monthoux (eds) 1994 *Good novels, better management: Reading organizational realities*. Harwood Academic Publishers.

- Eco, Umberto 1973 *Dzieło otwarte: Forma i nieokreśloność w poetykach współczesnych. (Opera aperta: Forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee)* Warszawa: Czytelnik.
- Eco, Umberto 1997/2000 *Kant and the platypus: Essays on language and cognition*. London: Vintage.
- Guillet de Monthoux, Pierre 1993 *Det sublimas konstnärliga ledning*. Stockholm: Nerenius & Santérus.
- Guillet de Monthoux, Pierre and Barbara Czarniawska-Joerges 1994 „Introduction: Management beyond case and cliché.” in: Czarniawska-Joerges, Barbara and Pierre Guillet de Monthoux (ed) *Good novels, better management: Reading organizational realities*. Harwood Academic Publishers, 1-16.
- Hassard, John 1993 "Postmodernism and organizational analysis: An overview." in: John Hassard and Martin Parker (eds) *Postmodernism and organizations*. London-Newbury PArk-New Delhi: SAGE
- Hennestad, Björn 1992 *Organizational change as reframing*. doctoral dissertation, Sandvika: Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration
- Höpfl, Heather 1995 "Organizational rhetoric and the threat of ambivalence." *Studies in Cultures, Organizations and Societies*, 1/2, 175-187.
- Knorr Cetina, Karin 1994 "Primitive classification and postmodernity: Towards a sociological notion of fiction." *Theory, culture and society*. London-Thousand Oaks-New Delhi: Sage Vol. 11, p. 1-22.
- Kociatkiewicz, Jerzy and Monika Kostera 1998 „Creativity out of chaos: Anarchy and organizing.” *Human Resource Development International* 1/4, p. 383-398.
- Kostera, Monika 1997 „The Kitsch-Organization.” *Studies in Cultures, Organizations and Societies* 3, p. 163-177.
- Kostera, Monika 1998 *Podstawy Organizacji i Zarządzania*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo WSPiZ.
- Latour, Bruno 1992 „Technology is society made durable.” in: John Law (ed.) *A sociology of monsters: Essays on power, technology and domination*. London: Routledge, 103-131.
- Lee, Monica 1995 "Gender and future realities." paper presented at conference, Bolton: *The Aesthetics of Organization*.
- Letiche, Hugo 1995 "Observer versus audience." paper presented at conference, Bolton, *The Aesthetics of Organization*.
- Philips, Norman 1995 „Telling organizational tales: On the role of narrative fiction in the study of organizations.” *Organization Studies* 16/4: 625-649.
- Rorty, Richard 1989 *Contingency, irony and solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge U.P.
- Rorty, Richard 1980/1994 *Filozofia a zwierciadło natury (Philosophy and the mirror of nature)*. Warszawa: SPACJA.
- Sandelands, Lloyd E., and Georgette C. Buckner 1989 "Of art and work: Aesthetic experience and the psychology of work feelings." *Research in Organizational Behavior* 11: 105-131.
- Shenhav, Yehouda 1999 *Manufacturing rationality: The engineering foundations of the managerial revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Silverman, David 1993/1994 *Interpreting qualitative data: Methods for analysing talk, text and interaction*. London-Thousand Oaks-New Delhi: SAGE.
- Smircich, Linda 1983 "Concepts of culture and organizational analysis". *Administrative Science Quarterly* 28/3, s. 339-358.
- Strati, Antonio 1992 "Aesthetic understanding of organizational life." *Academy of Management Review* 17: 568-581.
- Strati, Antonio 1995 "Aesthetics and organizations without walls:." *Studies in Cultures, Organisations and Societies* 1/1: 83-105.
- Strati, Antonio 1998 *Organization and aesthetics*. London-Thousand Oaks-New Delhi: SAGE.

8 Jerzy Kociatkiewicz and Monika Kostera

Weick, Karl 1969/1979 *Social psychology of organizing*. Reading: Addison-Wesley.

This copy does not follow journal layout or page numbers. Originally published in *Master of Business Administration*