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Strong Plots:

The Relationship Between Popular Culture and Management Practice & Theory

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MANAGEMENT PRACTICE & THEORY**

Abstract

In this paper we consider the relationship between popular culture and management practice. Starting with references to previously established connections between high culture and management, we turn to popular culture for the same kind of connection. We suggest that much popular culture is based on established and repeated patterns of emplotment, and we go on to examine how it might teach practices and provide models for how practice is understood. The "strong plots", we claim, provide possible blueprints for the management of meaning in organizations.

We illustrate our ideas with three types of text. The first is an ethnographic study of an organization in decline. Here we show how management practice that attempted to work outside of the heroic emplotment of management action was resisted in the organization. The second example concerns two popular novels about the financial services industry. We point out that these novels perpetuate particular strong plots in relation to gendered practices in financial services. Thirdly, we turn to two examples of the parody of working life in comic strips and animated cartoons. In this case we demonstrate that popular culture can also be a site for the critique of, and resistance to, strong plots. In conclusion we suggest a role for management research consisting in questioning strong plots in both culture and management practice through avant-garde practices of experimentation and creation.

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In times when managers still *had* characters...

"SOCIAL CHARACTER" AND THE HUMANITIES

In 1981, Michael Maccoby, social psychologist, one of Eric Fromm's last collaborators, and the author of the 1976 management bestseller *The Gamesman*, published a new book. Its title was *The Leader*, and it shared its main thesis with its predecessor: successful managers understand, and often embody, the positive element of the contemporary "social character", the attitudes and values dominant during a given era. "The gamesman" was the successful manager of the 1970s,¹ but the 1980s called for a new type, "the leader", as described by Maccoby in a synthetic version of six in-depth interviews² with renowned managers of the era, two of them from outside the USA.

One of the non-US leaders interviewed by Maccoby was Per Gyllenhammar, at that time the CEO of Volvo, one of the largest Swedish corporations.³ He and two US managers expressed the view "that education for leadership should teach the ethical and humanist tradition of religion, philosophy and literature" (Maccoby, 1981:231). Why?

The study of Bible, comparative religion, ethical philosophy and psychology, and great literature leads one to explore the inner life, particularly the struggle to develop the human heart against ignorance, convention, injustice, disappointment, betrayal, and irrational passion. Such education prepares one to grapple with his fear, envy, pride, and self-deception. It raises questions about the nature of human destructiveness and the legitimate use of force. Without it, a would-be leader tends to confuse his or her own character with human nature, guts with courage, worldly success with integrity, the thrill of winning with happiness (p.232).

In other words, "great literature" develops character. Maccoby presaged Richard Sennett's later (1998) preoccupations, and he worried about Sweden:

In Sweden, the failure of education in the humanities ill-equips managers and leaders to understand the malaise of a distorted notion of self-fulfillment. Well-educated in engineering, few of the managers I met at Volvo are familiar with either the Bible or Scandinavian classics such as *Peer Gynt*⁴. The progressive spirit has led Sweden in a direction of material progress and political democracy at the expense of the individual's spiritual, aesthetic, and intellectual development. In the march toward a consumer, both community and the inner life are being lost (p. 233).

There is a certain contradiction, or perhaps just a gap, in Maccoby's reasoning: the successful leader *expresses* or embodies the positive element of social character but, obviously, a leader whose character has been developed in contact with humanities is able to contribute to *shaping* or constructing this social character. Are leaders therefore the products or the producers? Effects or causes? This is a question of much interest to us.

TAKING UP THE MESSAGE

In 1989, *Harvard Business Review* published an article called "Reading fiction to the bottom line". Its author, Benjamin DeMott (a professor of humanities at Baruch College, City University of New York) was invited by the Phillip Morris Foundation to deliver a series of lectures on business culture. Not quoting Maccoby, DeMott did his errand, showing how a story by Lionel Trilling from 1945, and another by Donald Barthelme from 1980, captured "the social character" of their times and. What is more, this presaged metaphors and concepts that emerged in social sciences only much later.⁵ DeMott's conclusion was clear:

What matters is that people who think, regardless of their discipline or occupation, participate in a culture that has powerful, overreaching, all-embracing tides, and that creative thought, particularly as it surfaces in the literary arts, is an exceptionally valuable guide to the direction of those tides. (...) The truth is that all of us belong to the whole of the age we inhabit, not alone to the special sector called work, production, investment; none of us *can* live in a world apart (DeMott, 1989: 134).

It was in this spirit that one of us (BC), together with Pierre Guillet de Monthoux, edited a collection called *Good Novels, Better Management* in 1994. Although the actual title was chosen by the publisher (who hoped, in vain, that the book will become a part of popular culture), it accurately expressed the attitude of the editors and the contributors. The first sentence of the "Introduction" says: "The purpose of this book is to show how good novels can educate better managers" (Guillet de Monthoux and Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994:1). The editors argued their point as follows:

Fiction accomplishes the feat which organization theory often misses: it combines the subjective with the objective, the fate of the individuals with that of institutions, the micro events with the macro systems.

Novels also transmit *tacit knowledge*: they describe knowledge without analysing it, thus tapping on more than an explicit message characteristic for paradigmatic teaching. ... novels are rich in narrative knowledge, as the one that depicts the world in terms of human actions and motives, in contrast to the logico-scientific one, which depicts the world in terms of causal laws and abstract models. (p.9)

The editors continued by saying that novels offer vicarious experience, and a sense of history and tradition in management. Nevertheless, the editors were firm: it was *good* novels that counted. The novels read and interpreted from the managerial perspective by the contributors were classics in their countries: Conrad, Zola, Musil.

"High culture", however, has not been the only form of culture considered by those who have studied work, organizations and management. William H. Whyte dedicated two chapters of *The Organization Man* (1956) to "the organization man in fiction". There he traced representations of his eponymous organization man in fictional stories from the cinema, novels and popular magazines. Whyte believed that popular fiction could be read to gain "an index of changes in popular belief" (p.231). His point resonates with ours.

More recently the topic of the relationship between management and popular culture has been taken up by several authors,⁶ and we take but one example. This is the book edited by John Hassard and Ruth Holliday, called *Organization-Representation* (1998). As the title indicates, it focuses on the matter of representation ("This book

covers a variety of insights into the way in which organization is represented in the popular media", p.1), but with an educational purpose: "a pedagogical desire to use commonplace media representations in the classroom as an aid to teaching and learning how organizations work" (ibid.). The editors argued for their perspective in a way similar to their predecessors:

While the stories of such [TV] dramas may be simple morality tales, the representations of organization within them are frequently different from conventional understanding of the workplace. Such programmes reject the image of the rational, disembodied, unemotional workplace, replacing it with representations of embodied, personal, emotional and frequently petty settings and interactions. (p.7)

We agree with the statement above and we appreciate the importance of the emphasis the editors and the contributors to *Organization-Representation* put on popular culture. In this paper, we would like to complement their insights with some observations of our own. Our interest is in the relationship between popular culture, and management theory and practice in terms of how they each work to emplot working life into particular narratives.

A perspective for the times when managers *are* characters...

There could be no doubt that humanities aid character development, and that "high culture" (great literature, art, philosophy) can express the ideals and describe the practices of its era. In this paper, we complement these claims by additionally three.

The first is that popular culture fulfills the same functions of high culture on a larger scale.⁷ It does so not only in the sense that it reaches "the people", but also in the sense that it can be a vehicle that *popularizes* high culture. One only need think of the almost endless re-use of the plot of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as a model for the love story. In doing so, popular culture might caricature or flatten its "high other"; alternatively it might question its elitism. Nevertheless, elite and popular cultures have more similarities than it seems at a first glance – especially in terms of their forms of emplotment. Much as the authors quoted in our introduction wished differently, culture – high and low – expresses, nay, constitutes the positive *and* the

negative elements of the "social character" of an era. A key difference between two is that popular culture reaches more people, quicker.

Our second claim is that popular culture, apart from portraying its own era, also perpetuates "strong plots", known from mythologies (Greek and Judeo-Christian in case of western management), classic drama and folk tales. Emplotment, as Hayden White (1998) pointed out, is not only a question of the form; indeed, the form carries a content, or medium is the message. The re-use of strong plots might be a matter of convention, of lack of imagination, of literary conservatism, and so forth, but it still offers a blueprint for the management of meaning, so central to managerial practice. "Simple morality tales", to quote Hassard and Holliday again, may be not so simple in this sense.

This leads us to our third thesis: that popular culture not only transmits ideals and furnishes descriptions, but also *teaches practices* and provides a means through which *practices might be understood*. Swedish journalists recently made a documentary about young mafia criminals,⁸ revealing for example that one of the young gangsters knew by heart all of Al Pacino's lines from DePalma's *Scarface*. Abstract models do not teach you what to say or how to act during your first management meeting, a movie might. In short, the mirroring *and* the projection, the expression *and* the construction, the imitation *and* the creation are never separated. This stance locates us close to the so-called circuit model (Johnson, 1986-87; Denning, 1990; Traube, 1992), postulation that production, circulation and consumption of cultural products constitute a loop, not a line. Expression becomes control, as popular culture selects and reinforces certain wishes and anxieties of its audience (Traube, 1992:99); control provokes further expression, both of submission and of resistance. Maccoby supposedly *described* the successful leaders of the 1980s but, by doing so, he also helped to *make* them successful. A manager might read a detective story or watch a western movie for amusement, might learn from them actual – or invented – practices, and might imitate those, not necessarily via explicit reflection. One can only speculate on the influence of John Wayne on a generation of baby-boom male managers.

Mixing up Maccoby, detective stories and westerns begs a question of what do we mean by "popular culture" in this text. As an attempt at a delineation (not definition), we might say that we include popular literature (novels that stand on the shelf called "Fiction", and not "Literature" in English bookstores), films, TV-series, cartoons, journalists' tales, but also management bestsellers, magazines, videos etc.⁹ Lines between "high" and "low" culture are judgmental, political and arbitrary (Street, 1997). As a result they can also be destabilized – both Maccoby and DeMott, but especially James G. March's latest video on Don Quixote and leadership (2003), amply demonstrate this in the case of management. Additionally, contemporary mass culture has a tendency to appropriate "high" cultural forms (Traube, 1992: 76); again, following the example where high culture appropriated many older folk culture forms (of which opera and folk tales are the best examples).

In what follows we illustrate our points with three examples. The first is an ethnographic account of the decline of a particular organization as it was re-told in interviews between one of us (BC) and Bruno – a manager in the organization. Here we explore how organizational practices actually follow strong plots and how detouring from expected forms of emplotted behavior can be rendered unacceptable. Secondly, we turn our attention to two novels – a detective story and a spy story – to see how popular literature mediates between classics and mundane practices. We examine how these novels perpetuate certain strong plots in relation to gendered practice of the financial service industry. Thirdly, we turn to examples of popular culture that appear to be more critical and subversive of strong plots. In reviewing the comic strip *Dilbert* and the television cartoon *The Simpsons* we suggest that popular culture not only reinforces strong plots but can also carry a sophisticated critique. We end the paper with the reflection on the possible role of research vis-à-vis popular culture.

A drama called decline, or the emplotment of managerial practice

BRUNO'S STORY

Our first example draws on the observations of "Bruno", a first-level manager at "Analog Pomerania", a division of a multinational electronic company during 14 months in the late 1980s (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1989)¹⁰. At the time, the electronic equipment market was falling for a number of reasons, and although Analog's profits were still satisfactory, the growth slowed down. The first diagnosis was as follows:

... it has been decided that too much fat has accumulated and it must be cut back. That must be the famous middle-management syndrome. The fat accumulates around the organizational waist and therefore it makes it difficult to bend.

This is not unique to Analog. It is normal that middle-aged, prosperous organizations accumulate too much fat. But when you cannot reach your feet anymore, something must be done about it (Bruno 2, in Czarniawska-Joerges, 1989: 93).

"Keeping fit" is a strong plot of itself, and has its own (re)solutions. A ban on coffee and cakes at meetings was called for, then another ban on assignments abroad and travel in general. This was followed by a ban on promotion raises, which was topped by a ban on investments and on external recruitment.

It did not help; the plot wouldn't hold. It was pointed out that what used to be Analog's niche in the market had ceased to grow, whereas the growth areas were never addressed by Analog. "Recession" became an official label. The ensuing decision was to change market orientation, and to strengthen the marketing function for that purpose. As external recruitment had been banned, an internal campaign started, resulting in 300-500 applications (those responsible for the campaign was too perplexed to count properly) for 50-60 marketing jobs. Chaos resulted – not only from the application process, but also from the realization that so many people (Analog Pomerania employed 4, 500) were displeased with their jobs. As the mobilization of marketing competencies depleted other departments of skills, rumors of a reorganization started.

The rumors proved to be right. A decision at the top was reached to restructure the whole of Analog – "from functions to processes". Decline, or recession, as it was euphemistically called, might have been behind the decision, but its contents were, said people at the Analog Pomerania, "an idea whose time has come" (and with hindsight, we know they were right). Many other traditional measures were also taken: letters to employees asking them to economize; an analysis of internal communication flows; voluntary early retirement, etc. The message from the headquarters to the regional offices was: we count on your initiative, and we are going to take away the middle control level to give you more leeway. A journalist had some doubts:

Q: [The reorganization study] recommended increased delegation, but in tough times the tendency is to increase control. Can this be avoided (...)?

A: Although there is inevitably a tendency to look more closely at operations, this does not necessarily mean setting up a costly control system. More delegation, less headquarters' control and greater local self-sufficiency are the basis of our plans (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1989:104-5).

The appeals for the help and cooperation of first-level managers continued. The headquarters sent a videotape featuring the CEO of Analog:

It was not so silly as one could expect. He is in his office, with his family pictures around and the whole thing, and he sits for a while, then he stands up, talks to somebody who remains out of view, then he talks some more. And what he says is, that a general approach for the constructive people – [the Americans] like very much to call themselves constructive – is to use this situation to turn it into something positive of course, and we cannot go on doing what we were doing before. We now have to stop and look critically at everything we have been doing before, maybe we were doing wrong things and maybe we were not doing things we should be doing, and this is positive, because it means, hopefully, changes for the better. That was the flair of it (Bruno 5, p.106).

While the video was a success, a film shown at a managers' meeting was a flop:

... showing the mountain climbers on a particular steep piece of a high mountain [Bruno laughs into the phone]. You can imagine the rest.

BC: No, you tell me.

Bruno: I do not remember the details. I looked at the view – it was a beautiful film, really. And there was this large, safe male voice in the background, saying: "Are you taking these challenges? Start another project today!" Then you will have to imagine how difficult it will be on the way to somewhere, and you will have to work very hard... And there are three people standing on the top of this mountain in the sunshine: success! That was the film.

BC: But what was the point?

Bruno: I do not really know. The idea is that it is very difficult to get there, and it is up to you to try (Bruno 8, pp. 106-107).

But the most shocking and most ambiguous occurrence happened later at the same meeting. The Head of Operations in Pomerania addressed the group:

He talked a lot, but it became very clear that what he actually said was; "We [top management] see all these problems, and we can see a lot of details of the problems, but we have no solutions at all. And would you be kind enough to help us?" He was sort of standing there, poor chap, saying: "Have you got any bright ideas?" Silence. Of course there was silence. They are not used to it.

There were some whispers around; my boss for example, he said: "He [Head of Operations] is the one who is supposed to tell us! If you are supposed to change your behavior, you have to know which way! And to what effect! If we do not know how to change it, how can we do it?" (Bruno 8, pp. 107, 110.).

Bruno took the appeal seriously. At the first opportunity, he reconsidered the role of his group in the organization and came up with a concrete, if revolutionary, suggestion as to how this should be changed to the benefit of the company and the individuals involved.

So when I got back to the office, just before five, I went to talk to my boss who still happened to be there, in order to speak about something else, and then presented this idea. And he was utterly defensive. One has to bear in mind that he is the architect of what we have today in this (...) section, he made it from scratch – and that obviously is a problem when it comes to change. He is otherwise an open-minded person and very nice. So I argued and he argued back: to ignore all that, not to put on such a big hat, it does not work anyway, you won't get the resources, you know, the old stuff: "You can't change things!" (Bruno 9, p.107).

In time, Bruno accepted that "the hat was too big" (in terms of emplotment, he was proposing things out of character) and that his idea was actually being realized by people introducing "business processes". Indeed, more and more changes were initiated from the top.

Because nothing happened. People were paralyzed by that [an open appeal for help]. Actually, I met another manager and we had lunch together and began to talk. As it happens, we had both exactly the same observation at the meeting. This guy has recorded exactly the same perplexity at what happened at the meeting. So at least it has been verified that it was not something I made up. (Bruno 10, p.108).

After some more months Bruno came to a following conclusion:

So, using the contributions from the bottom – not so much bottom, as this appeal was addressed to managers, the lowest level but still managers – this appeal, which was originally formulated by HO was never followed up, neither by him, nor by anybody else. Maybe that was just a slip of the system, which now will be forgotten and repaired by coming to the normal procedure, which is to make decisions at the top and then inform people about them (Bruno 14, p.108).

A month or two later, a big event took place, including all the employees of Operations. And, much to Bruno's surprise, Head of Operations repeated his message:

And this time it was for all the people, for the grass roots, not only for managers. And it was basically very similar. It was not "Help! we do not know what to do," but more like "This is all up to you." (...) And people were utterly confused again. (Bruno 18, p.108).

Later, Bruno joined the general opinion that the whole thing was due to peculiarities of Head of Operations:

He belongs to the management group, so he is on that high level, but he does quite frequently dive deep into details that are irrelevant. He says things that are completely out of the blue. And because of his position, people listen to him and try to do something. Although what he sometimes says is utterly ridiculous. I think he is simply confused (Bruno 21, p.117)

BC attempted to point out that, in the beginning, Bruno seemed to be positive about a possibility of a grass roots initiative, and this was what Head of Operations asked for, so why was he "crazy", as Bruno's co-workers and he himself put it?

I am uneasy about him, because I don't understand him. I don't understand how can he be where he is. So far, he has not shown any of the signs, or traditional aspects of what one would expect of a person who is a part of a team running a fairly large company. (Bruno 24, p.118).

What is expected of such person? Bruno's description of the General Manager of Analog Pomerania might offer some clues:

He is a remarkable man. He has enormous knowledge of what is happening now. (...) He talked two hours, solid, asking questions and answering questions, but all that was job-related or short-term-goal related, problem-related. There was nothing about a vision. So that is a worry. (...) Because leaders must have this sort of constructions, these visions, if they are leaders. (Bruno 23. p. 118).

Maccoby would have agreed. At the time, BC decided to interpret the events at Analog¹¹ and other organizations in decline using a dramaturgical metaphor. Decline and reactions to it – those of leaders, followers, and audiences – were seen as a kind of dramatic performance, where a given stage setting determines the genre, and then some variation of a well-known play belonging to the genre is performed by involved actors and critically observed by the audience outside.

ARRIVING AT A PLOT

Successful performance combines the live theater tradition – that of audience participation and actors improvising the play as it unfolds – with a ritual where all know the rules. The stage setting is done jointly, and as the play goes on, the leading actors perform their roles, and the rest of the cast take their cues accordingly. The play in this case runs as follows: the stage setting – a decline – demands a performance in which actors called "the leaders" tighten control, and the actors called "the followers" oppose it for a while and then join in and follow, and if all is played well the play soon ends on a more positive note, especially if an applause from the audience is forthcoming. This particular plot, as Wildavsky (1984) pointed out,

follows the Moses' story (up to the point that the leader often does not reach The Promised Land).

In problematic performances, the stage setting can provide immediate complications. A difference of opinion – among actors, or between actors and audience – as to what stage setting is appropriate, may ruin the performance from the start. Sometimes, however, an apodictic sponsor, director, or a leading star can prevail and force others to accept one given plot and genre rather than another. Usually, however, like in Analog's case, the choice of the setting, and of the plot, is a continuous process, where there are several plots in the offing, and one wins as a result of negotiations, the reactions from the audience, persuasion to abandon deviant plots, etc.

Why this plot? Why at this time? The "social character of the era" (of which the Head of Operations was clearly ignorant) is one answer. Another answer might be formulated in Jungian terms, postulating that the attitude toward leadership is an enactment of archetypes, articulated in myths, our collective consciousness (Cohen, 1969; Hogenson, 1987).¹² Yet another interpretation, the one we favor, is that some plots are strong – or stronger than other – because they have been institutionalized, repeated through centuries, well rehearsed. The orthodoxy of the representation is controls the possible meanings (Rhodes 2001a). One should therefore speak of *conventional* rather than traditional plots, and of *dominant* rather than strong plots: they are "strong" in a given time and place. There are many mythologies and each of them contains many myths, many Greek dramas – some of which are more remembered in certain times than others, and a great many folk tales. Traditional plots are used because they belong to a common collective memory, from which they can be retrieved in order to be shared (we are evoking here Avishai Margalit's (2003) distinction between common and shared memory). What is more, they are chosen from among many on the grounds of present concerns. Greek mythology had had the periods of neglect and periods of concentrated attention, not least in Greece. The myths of Sisyphus and Oedipus, Yiannis Gabriel (2004) reminds us, were retrieved and made famous by Camus and Freud not so long ago.

Another question that comes to mind is whether the plot was put into this story by its actors or by the researcher? Although the possible answer to this innocent question marks the abysmal divide between structuralists and poststructuralists, we shall avoid

drastic choices by pointing out a third possibility. The plot – a meaningful structure – was put there by the actors in their attempt to manage meaning, but it could be recognized (perhaps wrongly) by the researcher who had the access to the same common repertoire of plots. This means that one of the important aspects of organizing is emplotment;¹³ a researcher recognizes, shapes and attaches labels to plots.

This also means that the dramaturgical metaphor could be seen as an analogy. Paul Ricoeur pointed out the analogy between action and text (Ricoeur 1981; Czarniawska 2004): to emplot is to organize, to organize is to emplot – among other things. Stories are not just chronicles; they provide a logic to a narrative so that a multitude of events can be structured, and made sense of. A plot is active in its construction of meaning; it is not just a passive rendering of "what happened". This leads us to the question: how are plots retrieved from a common repertoire? Some managers might read the Bible (or Wildavsky on Moses), some might even watch Greek tragedies, or Shakespeare and Ibsen on the stage, but hardly all. Our answer is that it is popular culture that retrieves them, makes them simple, accessible and relevant, and in this way perpetuates them.

Euripides in the City

THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE DAMNED

We now turn to another study (Czarniawska, 2003), which provides a close-reading of a detective story by the Swedish journalist David Lagercrantz, *Star Fall* (2001). This story revolves around the stock market crash and two murders that followed (or preceded) it. The second victim is a "General Bank's" IT analyst, Elin Friman. Elin is not only a victim, but also a perpetrator, a tool in the hands of the Russian mafia, and related to it by her relationship with her former chess teacher. The mystery is resolved by Daniel Mill, an amateur detective whose moral sensibility made him end his analyst's career, and turned him into an astute critic of the world of finances (apart from making him rich and therefore independent).

Elin is perceived by her male colleagues primarily as a sex object: "her smile, at the same time uncertain and cool, which sometimes seems to be an erotic promise", and so on, through various parts of her body. She listens to men and appears to admire them:

She made him talk, made him elaborate long theories on economy, the company, love, human longing. Her presence intoxicated him (...) When he noticed that she looked in the same way at all the male bosses, he began to dislike her willingness to serve, her incessant cleverness (p.11, translations BC).

As an employee of the General Bank, she tends to exaggerate all the desirable traits:

He encouraged ambition and responsiveness to General Bank's corporate culture, but Elin went too far. The bank absorbed her totally, so that sometimes she seemed to lack a core. She could be anything: a mountain climber, a poet, an evening press reporter, a university lecturer but also a hippie (p.11).

Lacking a stable identity of her own, she assumed that of the man she was (most) enchanted with at any particular moment. In love with sensitive leftist Daniel, she took a position against the world's injustice. When Daniel quit his analyst job, she fixed her adoring gaze on the bank's Managing Director and became a careerist. As it turns out, she was persistently faithful to one man and one ideology. A modern Delilah, she was out for Samsons' secrets in the service of Philistines.

Such lack of an enduring individual identity, mutes the – neglected by Elin – Financial Deputy, could have been produced by a collision between her natural talents and her poor background, a contrast between nature and nurture, as it were:

What he sees as a weak self can have resulted from her youth and uncertainty. She is 27, her father is an unemployed bus driver who drinks ... so she probably wanted to escape from it all, find another world, whatever the cost. She has an analytical talent. She immediately grasps the most complex situations and she remembers numbers – especially quotations – in a way that almost frightens him (p. 12).

The readers of Olivier Sachs will of course recognize the extraordinary capacity of the mechanical memory, usually accompanied by a complete inability to function in social life: Elin was not "normal".

She lied, she used "feminine cunning" and blackmail. But she was not evil herself. If anything, she "loved too much", as Robin Norwood's bestseller from 1989 put it. She had masochistic tendencies, begged to be mistreated, and yet abhorred the sexual exploitation of other women. She loved men but also loved ideologies: she cheated and exploited, but for a higher cause. A veiled Marxist, she condemned capitalism in general and her bank in particular, but saw no problem in manipulating the shareholders. As her US super-boss said:

She was complex. She wanted to serve and to be appreciated – no doubt. But she was also vengeful and angry. ... She was like a lion's paw: soft and pretty, but inside there was a claw that wanted to tear all of us to pieces (p.225).

"The construction of Elin" can be seen as highly significant, as it reflects both the received image of today's finance world (inside and outside financial circles) and of people in financial services. In this image, extremely high intelligence (rather than formal education) is both assumed and claimed by traders and analysts. Elin is even more intelligent than most, thus reinforcing the conviction that, for the same job, women need to be twice as good as men. Her sexual intrigues also correspond to the image of a "work hard, play hard", no-family oriented world; but while men are presented as ensnared in her sexual intrigues, Elin initiates them. Last but not least, lack of moral guidance is a trait supposedly prominent in financial dealings, but while young men seem to be *amoral*, Elin is *immoral*, but she performs all her evil deeds instructed by a man, the true master-mind behind the plot. Feminine after all: a will-less tool in the hands of a purposeful man.

While there is no doubt about the fictitiousness of Elin's character, the message (perhaps unintended) is clear: the world of finance is no place for women. Those who make it there are "unnatural" – twice everything the men are, especially the vice, and not even aware of it. While the novel contains many thoughtful men, acutely aware of traps and dangers connected to this world, women, it seems, can only be the victims and the perpetrators in it.

THE REPRIEVED

Linda McDowell (1998) has brought to our attention a British variation on the same theme. It is the spy story *Nest of Vipers* by Linda Davies (1994). The female

protagonist, Sarah Jensen, is a successful FX trader who is placed undercover in a merchant bank to investigate corruption. Sarah is a strong version of Elin; the blurb on the cover summarizes it well:

One of the top foreign exchange traders in the City, she's addicted to risk as a way of blotting out the pain of childhood tragedy, while her glamour provides the perfect camouflage in the ruthless financial jungle (Davies, 1994)

Her morals are not those commonly accepted in society, but "the childhood tragedy" is her excuse. More intelligent than both Governor of the Bank of England and the Director of Counter-Narcotics Crime at MI6, she avoids direct evil deeds by unloading them on her *alter ego*, another brilliant professional woman, a hit killer. These deviant women are spared the fatal fate favored by Euripides,¹⁴ and David Lagercrantz. , The hitwoman escapes to Brasil, and Sarah to Katmandu, in a re-run of the 1960s hippy dream. McDowell comments that an escape to a rural idyll was a consistent theme in the interviews she conducted with women in the City, and Linda Davies herself actually left a City career for "the sylvan surroundings of a London suburb" (McDowell, 1998: 175). Similarly, Lagercrantz allowed the detective Daniel Mill to escape; differently, he left Elin no such option.

Why should highly stylized stories of exceptional women, presented in popular culture, be of interest for students of, for example, management of finance? Let us reiterate the reasons we suggested earlier, in this particular context. One reason is that popular culture – novels, films, mass media, and even how-to, and consultancy books – captures the dominant view of the financial sector at any given time. The other reason is to be found in the old dictum "art imitates life and life imitates art". While we believe, in a Tardean spirit, that people learn their jobs primarily by contact-imitation (Taussig, 1993), the popular culture furbishes them with models and ideals. While the observation of everyday routines teaches everyday routines, popular culture, with its larger-than-life heroes, can provide material for dreams and rule-breaking behavior. As Linda McDowell put it, "[r]epresentations of fictional bankers influence the behaviour and attitudes of "real" bankers, and vice versa" (1997: 39-40). Other professions are similar – as the female police detective in Martin Amis' (1997) *Night Train* suggests: "TV, etcetera, has had a terrible effect on perpetrators. It has given them style. And TV has ruined American juries forever. And American

lawyers. But TV has also fucked up us police. No profession has been so massively fictionalized. I had a great bunch of lines ready" (p. 18).

Why can't young people learn their jobs through reading work ethnographies? Because contemporary ethnographies are modernist, as Manganaro (1990) rightly observed: complex plots, experimental structures, paradoxical resolutions. Popular culture, on the other hand, more frequently relies on strong narratives and traditional plots (even when the aim is to subvert those plots).

Subverting strong plots

In the previous sections we attempted to show how popular culture is related to organizational discourse and action through the mutual reproduction of strong plots. We need to add, however, that this is not endemic to all popular culture; it can also offer alternative and critical readings that bring strong plots into question. This is particularly evident in the genres of popular comedy that parody organizations and managers. This mass culture tradition dates back at least as far as Charlie Chaplin's cog in the machine (literally) worker in *Modern Times*. In folk culture, this dates back even further to practices of the carnival and to the literature of Rabelais (Bakhtin, 1984a, b; Rhodes, 2001b). More recently, popular comedy has also been a site for the critique of dominant approaches to managing and organizing. To illustrate this we turn to two examples of US mass culture that have become global. The first is the comic strip character *Dilbert*. The second is the animated television cartoon *The Simpsons*.¹⁵

Both *Dilbert* and *The Simpsons* have organized work as a major theme. Work is the sole setting for *Dilbert*. The comic reports the absurd yet everyday working life of its white-collar protagonist in the unnamed organization where he is employed. A key institution that features in *The Simpsons* is the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant (SNPP). It is the major industry and employer in the town of Springfield where the show is set, owned and managed by C. Montgomery Burns. This is an organization characterized by an appalling environmental record, dramatically unsafe working conditions, an alienated workforce and a despotic boss.

In portraying workplaces and workplace relations both *Dilbert* and *The Simpsons* draw their comedy from a parody of working life, especially of managerial behavior. In *The Simpsons*, this relates to Burns, the arch-capitalist. In *Dilbert* it relates to The Boss (who has no name) and his unthinking adoption of management fads and fashions.

THE DILBERT SYNDROME

A consistent motif in *Dilbert* is the parody of leadership in business. This is the case both in the comic strips and in the prose that accompanies them in the *Dilbert* books. It is summed up by what *Dilbert*'s creator, Scott Adams, calls the "Dilbert Principle". This states that "the most ineffective workers are systematically moved to the place where they can do least damage: Management" (Borowski, 1998: 1625). This builds on Adams' initial premise that "people are idiots", a drastic reformulation of the more orthodox *Peter Principle* (Peter and Hull, 1969). Whereas once managers rose to their level of incompetence, in *Dilbert* the managers are incompetent to begin with. This theme is played out repeatedly in how the hapless worker *Dilbert* has to interact with his un-named boss and his tendencies to sadism, stupidity, and the thoughtless employment of management buzzwords.

Dilbert: What did you mean when you said all employees are empowered? Does that mean I can control my own budget, make decisions without twelve levels of approval. And take calculated risks on my own?

The Boss: No. It's just a way to blame employees for not doing the things we tell them not to do.

Dilbert: No wonder you needed a new word. (Adams, 1996b: 4.4)

Adams has used his comic strip to poke fun at a range of fashionable management practices. Filipczak suggests that "Adams exposes many 'cutting edge' workplace issues to the severe light of day, inviting us to laugh at re-engineering, cross-functional teams, business meetings, corporate buzzwords, management fads (...) The gap between executive rhetoric and employee reality is a favorite target of Adams' biting humor" (1994: 29). The following is good example:

The Boss: Great news! I've reengineered your job to make you more fulfilled! You'll no longer be limited to one little part of the value chain. You'll be involved in all stages of production!

Dilbert: Oh Lord, you fired all the secretaries!!

The Boss: Dust my credenza. (Adams, 1996b: 6.1)

For Adams, leadership is not depicted through the epic narratives that have been used to re-define contemporary bureaucrats and administrators as heroic leaders and entrepreneurs as, for example, defined by Maccoby. For him leadership seems to be a façade of platitudes that thinly masks a dangerous combination of power and idiocy. Take the following discussion of leadership from *Dogbert's Top Secret Management Handbook*:

Don't get me wrong. Leadership isn't only about selfish actions. It's also about empty, meaningless expressions. Here's a few you should memorize:

Work smarter, not harder

It's a new paradigm

It's an opportunity not a problem (Adams, 1996b: 1.14).

For Adams, visionary leadership is a rhetorical scam. His leaders create mission statements such as: "We will produce the highest quality products, using empowered team dynamics in a new Total Quality paradigm until we become the industry leader" (Adams, 1996a). Overall, Adams is more than ready to play with the heroically emplotted narratives in which leaders are so often cast. For example, where management guru Stephen Covey (1990) has "the 7 Habits of Highly Effective People", Adams has "the 7 Habits of Highly Defective People" (Adams, 1996b: 2.19).

One reading of Dilbert is that it is a sign of a growing cynicism and increasing disengagement of workers from their employers; particularly in response to ongoing downsizing of corporations in the 1990s.¹⁶ *Time* magazine even referred to Adams as the "Bard of downsizing" (Van Biema, 1996: 82). Dilbert has also been said to represent a business phenomenon where "many employees are highly cynical about the effectiveness of management and view large, bureaucratic organizations with disdain and contempt ... [where] ... cynicism is increasing as a new paradigm of

employer-employee relations" (Feldman, 2000: 1286). The implication is that Adams' workplace satire reflects an attitude amongst workers that managers are inept and have little connection with workers (Borowski, 1998). Dilbert's world is said to be one of "vapid corporate-speak with no guts and no emotionally honest message (Johnson and Indvik, 1999: 84). For some this is a sign that "corporate transformation" is only possible when management focuses on re-engaging employees (Miles, 2001). Others see Adams' vision of an inevitably inept management as defeatist and in opposition to the possibility of moral progress in organizations (Borowski, 1998). It has even been argued that Dilbert cartoons are a cause rather than an effect of cynicism (Hutchins, 1999).

To our reading, however, such propositions miss one important implication of Dilbert. This implication is that Dilbert both identifies and critiques dominant stories and their heroic emplotment of leadership – such as the one we saw enacted in Analog. Dilbert problematizes these forms of emplotment by suggesting that they create role models which managers cannot live up to; again, the Analog story amply corroborates it. Such plots can alienate people as they try to come to terms with the messy realities of their work. Adams' plots reflect the "'silent rage' of employees in the workplace ... [where] managers pretend to know all of the answers" (Brown, 1996: 51). The issue is not that many people are disenchanted with jobs they perceive as futile, it is that the strong plots of management heroism fail to emplot the actual experience of people working in corporate organizations. It also suggests that when managers try to align their working lives in accordance with such emplotted narratives, the result is a paradoxical discord. Adams might be regarded as an "anti-management guru" (*The Economist*, 1997: 64), but what he seems to be against is not business per se. He appears to be against particular emplotments of management and leadership narratives and how those narratives are abused in practice.

Adams seems to be following a democratic project. It has been suggested that "whereas most business writers write for the one in ten people who are interested in management theory, he writes for the nine who hate it" (*The Economist*, 1997: 64). Adams says himself: "... all I really do is take what the employees are already thinking and just express it" (quoted in Filipczak, 1994: 33). And further: "... no matter how absurd I try to make my comic strip, I can't stay ahead of what people are experiencing in their own workplace" (quoted in *Fortune*, 1996: 99). His is said to be

a "protest voice ... leading a revolt against traditional management" (Brown, 1996: 49). "Because he has such an intense respect for the people on the shop floor or in the cubicle, he finds it galling to have to heed the words of bosses who refer to human beings as 'resources'" (ibid: 51). When asked in interview whether he thought he had become the "voice of the American employee", Adams responded "Yes, very much so" (Filipczak, 1994: 33).

What we see in Dilbert is the possibility for humor to be used as a way of bringing attention to the way that management work is idealistically emplotted in management narratives. This suggests that lived experience is not necessarily subordinated to strong plots. Adams offers a different and critical emplotment of more experiential veracity. He does so by claiming to give voice to the professional workers who are silenced by the loud din of management-speak. Adams' commentary is a rarely articulated practitioner-driven perspective that draws attention to the "idols" of management theory (Kessler, 2001: 285). Adams is an iconoclast of the strong plots of mainstream management theory and the icon he targets is the heroism that they imbue in managers.

SAMSON/SIMPSON

The Simpsons, is another telling example of the parody and overturning of strong plots in popular comedy (see Rhodes, 2001b). It provides an important reflection on contemporary society (Kafner, 1997). This reflection emerges through the breaking of rules and experimentation with subjects traditionally seen as taboo for animation (Cohen, 1998). As Korte (1997) has suggested:

The Simpsons works to encourage critiques, demanding that viewers be active in their consumption. Without hesitation or apology, it ridicules the advertisements, slated news stories, and inane talk shows that appear on their beloved TV set ... very little is sacred on *The Simpsons*.

It has been said that *The Simpsons* is the most "morally exacting critique of American society that has yet appeared on television" (Marc, 1998: 193). In enacting this critique, *The Simpsons* starts by recreating a "realistic" setting of American suburban life as its context. This, however, is a realism that is not intended to reproduce

"reality". Instead, it reproduces dominant and identifiable social views of reality so that it can question those social views (Hodge, 1996). In our terms, *The Simpsons* sets up strong plots so that it can question them, play with them, or even knock them down. This is particularly the case in the relationship between two of the main characters – Homer Simpson and Montgomery C. Burns. Homer is most often portrayed as a somewhat simple, bumbling, doughnut eating, beer drinking buffoon. Burns, on the other hand, is an old-style industrialist and a Yale graduate. He is also the sole owner of the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant where Homer works. At thirty-six, Homer holds the dubious honor of being the record holder for "the most years worked at an entry-level position".

There are many episodes of *Simpsons* which demonstrate the overturning and parody of "normal" working life (see Rhodes, 2001b). Here we review one such episode – "Simpson and Delilah".¹⁷ This episode takes the subject of corporate meritocracy and equality in career opportunities and turns it on its head with help of another "strong plot" – the story of Samson and Delilah. In original, Delilah takes away Samson's power by female cunning – by cutting off his hair, in which his strength lied after a night of love-making. Also in original, meritocracy is a sanctioned plot of organizational promotion and recruitment stories. It relates to bureaucracy as the dominant mode of modern organizing, where the ability to hold a position is based on credentials (merits) rather than class (Clegg, 1990). This also infers a modernity narrative that sees the bureaucratic organizations as having progressed from the class based systems of the past. The desired bureaucratic plot is where the ability to "succeed" in working life is related to abilities and achievements rather than familial and class position.

"Simpson and Delilah" subverts both those strong plots. The normally bald Homer discovers a miracle hair growth formula. To his chagrin, he is unable to afford it at \$1000. However, he defrauds the nuclear power plant's health insurance scheme and is able to get the formula. Overnight, Homer grows a full head of hair.

Meanwhile Burns is faced with the dilemma of having to promote one of his workers as a result of a clause in his contract with the union (the notion of meritocracy is thus re-cast in terms of adversarial employer-worker relations.) Burns is of the opinion that "none of these cretins deserves a promotion!" When he sees the newly hirsute

Homer through his security monitor, however, he asks his assistant Smithers, "Wait, who's that young go-getter?" Smithers replies: "Well, it sort of looks like Homer Simpson ... only more dynamic and resourceful". Burns immediately decides to promote Homer. An announcement comes over the plant's PA system:

Attention Homer Simpson. You have been promoted. You are now an executive.
Take three minutes to say good-bye to your former friends and report to room 503
for reassignment to a better life.

Homer hires an assistant, Karl, who further helps him refine his image (for example by getting him to stop wearing green polyester suits). Homer's first opportunity to impress Mr. Burns with his initiative comes when Burns announces the need to reduce industrial accidents. Homer's unqualified proposal is that accidents can be reduced by adding tartar sauce to the fish sticks served in the cafeteria. Meanwhile Burns' hired consultants suggest "a round of layoffs might wake up the idiots" and "we could put caffeine in the water cooler". Burns decides to "let the fools have their tartar sauce!" When accidents do fall, Burns is so impressed that he even gives Homer the keys to the executive washroom. (This is a further symbolic parody of managerial hierarchy where even the most mundane bodily functions can take on a privileged form for those in power.) Of course the real reason that accidents have fallen is because Homer, now no longer on the shop floor, is not causing them. As Burns assistant Smithers states:

Accidents decreased by exactly the number that Simpson himself is known or suspected to have caused last month. And our output level is just as high as during Simpson's last vacation.

Eventually, Homer's 10 year old son Bart accidentally breaks the bottle of hair potion while fantasizing about growing a beard. No diabolic women, no cunning, no sex tricks – just a domestic accident. Bart is not even a philistine. Homer returns to being bald. Without hair, no one takes him seriously any more. Burns demotes him back to his former position.

This episode makes one reflect over the old and new plots. What kind of strength did Samson possess that it could be taken away by simply cutting of his hair? Does male power always reside in superficial bodily ornaments? What counts as "merit" and for

whom? For Simpson, as it was for Samson, success is revealed as a matter of "looks". In direct opposition to a meritocratic discourse, the spectators discover that one's ability to "progress" in this organization is about being the right "personality". The older spectators might even remember that they knew it, but simply forgot (just like they probably knew the Samson and Delilah story but did not see it as relevant). As Elisabeth G. Traube (1992: 73) pointed out, the success manuals and middle-class magazines in US noticed already at the turn of the previous century that "[i]n bureaucratic organizations such as large corporations, work is a necessary but not sufficient condition for promotion up the managerial hierarchy (...) Image or appearance became a central concern of the new success literature (...)" It was then she says, that the new middle classes became obsessed with "personality" as a replacement for "character".

When Homer's baldness returned, the normal hierarchical relations were restored. An interesting observation here is that Burns is also bald, but he retains his position of power in the power plant. The inference here is perhaps that "true" power, that which is beyond appearance, is that of capital and tradition, whereas managerial power is fleeting. After all, Burns is more of a robber baron than a professional manager. This is again a direct opposition to the ethos of meritocracy.

The iconoclasm of *The Simpsons* consists in a refusal to take the commonplace emplotted order work seriously. Its humor lies in a powerful counter-narrative that brings strong plots under critical scrutiny.

Our reading of *The Simpsons* and *Dilbert* is that each derives its comic appeal from the overturning and transgression of particular strong plots. Both offer a carnival parody of organizing enacted by playing with the rules of what is expected in more conventional or official representations of organizations (Rhodes, 2001b, 2002). The use of such humor is important because in breaking the conventions of what is expected (i.e. strong plots), comedy can indeed draw attention to such conventions:

Carnival, in order to be enjoyed, requires that rules and rituals be parodies, and that these rules and rituals already be recognized and respected. One must know to what degree certain behaviors are forbidden, and must feel the majesty of the forbidding norm, to appreciate their transgression (Eco, 1984: 6).

Humor, however, is only one way that strong plots might be surfaced and questioned. More conventional intellectual and academic methods have also been used to achieve similar ends (albeit with significantly smaller audiences). It is to this point that we turn in the next and final section of our paper.

Research as Avant-Garde Literature

We live in times when managers no longer seem to have character (Sennett's book is not about managers, but then he wrote it before Enron), but are Characters (McIntyre, 1981). In this setting, popular culture seems to be an all-purpose handmaiden. It perpetuates strong plots and it subverts them. It helps to build the dramatic tension and it works as a safety valve. It stages drama and carnival. It provides exemplars for both conformity and resistance. On the one hand, popular culture appears to be an undervalued and underutilized resource for the study of management. On the other hand, popular culture seems to outperform management researchers in the roles that many aspire to – as analysts, teachers and the providers of exemplars. What, if anything, is left for research literature?

One possibility is that which we are exploiting right now, in this text. management studies can, and perhaps ought to, pay more attention to the two-directional relationship between popular culture and the practice of management. Another, and the one that has been exploited for some time, is that management research might function like the avant-garde art and literature in relation to popular culture. Research writing can be experimental and subversive, it might go beyond the received strong plots. Ours is not, however, an image of the research avant-garde as an elitist judge of culture that consigns the popular to "the rubbish bin of aesthetic history in one easy totalizing and psychologizing gesture" (Docker, 1994: 111). Instead it might be an avant-garde that trades on, hybridizes and mixes the high and the low; the practice and the theory; the elite and the mass without necessarily belonging to any of them. Such an avant-garde experiments rather than repeats; it disrespects the canon rather than either follows or opposes it; much of it vanishes but that which stays can revolutionize the institutional patterns.

Thus, in lieu of a conclusion, we will briefly consider three examples of management research literature to illustrate our suggestion. The first one is the almost forgotten book by Dwight Waldo, *The Novelist on Organization and Administration* (1968). This book is highly interesting for at least two reasons. One, it should be properly called "a retro-garde" as Waldo was intensely opposing the emergence of "organization theory", begotten in the late 1950s by the fascination with cybernetics (Waldo, 1961). Waldo was firmly in favor of "administration theory" ("administration", dictionary-wise, is a synonym of "management") well developed since Plato, and in need of a constant contact with humanities. Secondly, his book might not have sold well but, as this paper illustrates, the idea survived and became developed later on.¹⁸ Young authors use Waldo's insights without quoting him, but not all avant-garde artists become gurus.

The second example is Karl E. Weick's *Social Psychology of Organizing*. Originally published in 1969, but best known in its revised edition from 1979, it took up the concept of open systems, which by then had become the mainstay of organizational analysis, but developed and transcended it.¹⁹ Weick adopted, for purposes of organizational analysis, concepts related to autopoietic (i.e. self-regulating and self-reproducing) systems even earlier than Niklas Luhmann and other social scientists. This innovation permitted him to extend biological metaphors to those coming from literature, poetry and the arts. Further, Weick's understanding of how metaphors work made him use biological concepts in organization theory in a unique way. Organizing, in his rendition, is an ongoing encounter with ambiguity, ambivalence and equivocality, being part of a larger attempt to make sense of life and the world. While organizing is an effort to deal with ambiguity, it never completely succeeds. Thus, the ordering it involves does not consist of imposing the rules of rationality on a disorderly world, but is a far more complex and inherently ambiguous process of sense making.

Social Psychology of Organizing is exceptionally rich in metaphors, anecdotes, and pictures from high and popular culture, jazz, business, politics and sports. The anecdote that is best remembered concerns three baseball umpires who represent the three most common variations of the theory of knowledge. Asked how they call balls and strikes, the objectivist says 'I calls them as they is'; the subjectivist says 'I calls them as I sees them', while the constructivist says 'They ain't nothin' till I calls them'.

This last stance, together with the set of concepts introduced in this early work, was to characterize Weick's work in the years to come, and earned him a wealth of followers.

The third example is Gibson Burrell's (1996) *Pandemonium*. In writing this book, Burrell deliberately rejected the received wisdom and strong plots of how organizations might be written about. He wanted the book to "look and feel different from normal books – particularly that kind of stultifying text which is labeled the 'set book' for an academic course" (p.1). Burrell wrote an organization study of the peasantry that is somehow disorganized, non-linear, unembellished, and which resurrects a non-scientific and carnal knowledge. Burrell's flouting of convention is evident in the aesthetics of the book, even before one reads a word. The bulk of the text is presented as a dual carriageway, where one reads the top half of the pages from left to right. Upon reaching the back cover, the idea is to read the bottom half of the pages from right to left. This ploy is made in a metaphorical attempt to disrupt (at least a little) the conventions of linearity and order ("linearity kills" is the motto). Burrell suggests that organization theory is limited "in the genre available to it and that the book attempts to utilize a variety of literary styles and fashions in order to demonstrate yet again that constraints are always acting upon us, particularly in the range of expressive modes that we may 'legitimately' draw on" (p. 6). Burrell's plan was to avoid the strictures of genre by simulating an "inter-textual collage" (p. 8) of different generic expressions. His text both draws on and represents theory, fiction, culture and autobiography. The result is a text that is not just playful in a frivolous sense, but which joins form and content into a text whose materiality, textuality and sub-arguments are entangled into a messy whole. He associates linear argument with Western rationality and bureaucracy, therefore in his desire to toy with the accepted ideas of organization, he also toys with the form in which they are written. It is thus that his retro-organizational theory is pieced together and encased between the covers of a book. Less than offering an alternative employment, however, it provides an impressionistic mish-mash of stories, ideas, theories, perceptions and minor-diatribes to which any generalization could only ever be violent. There is a self-aware avoidance of any central argument or overarching thesis yet a sweaty awareness of the labor of the text.

Each of these three books are remarkable in that they do not console themselves with the reproduction of strong plots in the sense that we have been discussing them. They are marked by an iconoclastic desire to avoid such forms of emplotment and even to put forth what can be found in the spaces that lie outside of such plots – at least in regards to the emplotment of organization. In this sense, they might be considered forms of a form of avant-garde that trade in the cultural and the theoretical without being ensnared by either of them. These books neither emulate nor reproduce the hackneyed distinctions between popular culture and high culture – instead their exemplarity and originality emerges from their refusal to follow the plots that are handed down to them from either. To copy them would be futile, but it is fully possible to be inspired by them – as indeed the years that passed have amply demonstrated.

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¹ It might be useful to go back to Maccoby's book with the 1990s in mind.

² An in-depth interview is a special kind of psychological interview intended to cover all the important events in life of a person. It usually begins with evoking the first memory.

³ He stepped down after the failure of Volvo's merger with Renault, and was replaced in the role of "carrier of social character" by Percy Barnevik, the CEO of ABB. As Barnevik stepped down after a pension insurance scandal, Gyllenhammar has been reinstated in the gallery of national heroes.

⁴ One explanation might be that Ibsen was Norwegian.

⁵ The idea that literature precedes social sciences has been explored at length by Milan Kundera (1988), but DeMott is more relevant for our purposes as we assume, perhaps wrongly, that more managers read HBR than Kundera.

⁶ The journal *Organization* has been especially open to this kind of endeavors, see e.g. the Thematic Issue on Organization as Science Fiction (vol. 6 no.4, 1999). See also Bloomfield (2003) and Metz (2003) on the relationship between science-fiction and management, and Rombach and Solli's (2003) search for leadership lessons in 10 well-known movies.

⁷ In saying so, we defy many cultural theorists from both the left and the right. The Frankfurt School, and the Althusserian-Lacanian school takes mass culture to be an instrument for ideological manipulation. An opposing perspective (which used to speak of "popular culture") sees it as a new mythology, a shared belief system whose expressions might be produced by media elite but which belongs to the people (see Traube, 1992, for discussion of both). Beginning with Barthes, 1957 and Hoggart, 1957, a new approach claiming that mass culture is both the manipulative commercial product and authentic

cultural creation found a powerful formulation in Hall, 1979, and Jameson, 1979 for commentary, Docker, 1994).

⁸ Noomi Liljefors and Mats Sundgren, "Bröder i brott" (GP 03-01-23).

⁹ It is worth pointing out that both John Cleese and Lars von Trier have their own management consulting companies (Video Arts, Zentropa).

¹⁰ This material was generated using the method of "observant participation". It involved an observation conducted by a practitioner under the guidance, and with feed-back from a researcher.

¹¹ As it turned out, this was just the beginning of the long and dramatic process of Analog's decline and fall.

¹² Although this kind of analysis has been primarily developed in social anthropology and in political sciences, similar attempts were made in organization theory (Gustafsson, 1984; Gherardi, 1995).

¹³ For a more detailed description of the process see Czarniawska (2004).

¹⁴ Mendelsohn, 2003.

¹⁵ Each of these examples are massive in popularity. *The Simpsons* is America's longest running and most successful prime time television show. It airs in more than 60 countries and in 1999 *Time* magazine proclaimed it as the best television show of the 20th century. The Dilbert newspaper comic strip and books are equally successful. The comic strip, first seen in 1989, appears in 2,000 newspaper in 65 countries. There are a total of 22 Dilbert books with more than 10 million copies in print (Adams, 2003). The 1996 book *The Dilbert Principle* was number one on both *The New York Times*' and *Business Week*'s business bestsellers list.

¹⁶ For an insightful analysis of cynical knowledge in organizations, notably in the Catholic Church, see Goldner et al., 1977.

¹⁷ Production code 7F02, original airdate 18 October 1990.

¹⁸ Dwight Waldo was kind enough to write a Preface to *Good Novels, Better Management*.

¹⁹ The title refers to *Social Psychology of Organizations*, a successful textbook by Katz and Kahn, from 1966.