

Monks, Rats & Explosions

Dedicated to Temi Darief (rip)

“Von der Abgeschlossenheit des Klosters bis zu den drei Schichten in der Fabrik versetzt die menschliche Ratte ihren Käfig in Drehung und glaubt, sie käme voran, während sie sich in Wirklichkeit nur in ihrer Tretmühle im Kreise bewegt.” (Michel Serres)

This quote by Michel Serres informs us on two things. First that there is a logical connection between the monastery and the factory. The second thing is that although human beings might think they are moving forward, or even that there might be some sort of evolution, this is not the case. The only movement is some sort of pointless turning in circles or an endless movement on a roundabout without the option of leaving. Serres refers to the human rat in its treadmill just moving in circles, endlessly. It thus opposes all thoughts on progress or evolution. Thoughts that are deeply embedded in ideas on organization studies. Apparently things are not as straightforward as often presented. It implies that organization is under the influence of paradoxes.

But what is organization and how can we get to know it, and especially why should I personally be interested in it? Let's start from the beginning. From way back when I've been encountering organizations and even indulging in the obscure tendency of organization. In all kinds of different shapes it has crossed my path and maybe even laid it out for me. It probably started with my first job, working at a conveyor belt at a local plastic factory, which name remains undisclosed. There I was assigned as manager of cardboard boxes. Besides the cardboard boxes the work involved assembling all kind of nice and shiny plastic products. Thinking back I still vividly remember the nauseating smell of plastic, the horrendous noise and the deeply bored colleagues. The senses were put to the test.

The reason for working there was pretty straightforward, namely: money. Next to that I had always been told that having a job is the most important thing in life. That always struck me as mighty strange, as my main interest was making music and wanting to become a musician. There was no natural attraction to the idea of a job, which some even considered a dirty word. Still I ended up at this factory. The main reason probably was that my musical career didn't hit it off immediately so I needed to find some other way to make money. This money was mainly intended for buying musical instruments, records and beer.

Meanwhile I was banging on my drums, trying to sound like Cozy Powell, Tommy Aldridge or Randy Castillo, while playing in a hard rocking band with some guys I met along the way, desperately

trying to get something going. The success was only very limited despite the large amount of explosives we used at our shows. In hindsight the stage antics might have been pretty irresponsible, especially when we thought it would be a good idea if the singer would chop up a speaker cabinet with an axe, while simultaneously the explosives would go off. As this happened next to my drums it might not have been such a swell idea after all. Still I left the scene uninjured. You never know what a musician is capable of.

Next to music I was also enthralled by reading literature. One of these books, *Post Office* by Charles Bukowski helped me to find another job, namely postman. Delivering mail to the citizens of this small city I lived in, during the coldest winter of the century, 1996-1997, was pretty rough. It also made me a witness of the 'postman rituals' and the bizarre group dynamics involved. Out of sheer routine and boredom it is apparently great to start annoying and bullying each other. Besides that it was physically hard labor while enduring freezing cold, pouring rain, batshit crazy traffic, vicious dogs, scarcely clad housewives and so on. I also quickly noticed that I had to eat double the amount I used to while trying to avoid becoming a skeleton. The body suffered endlessly for the sake of money.

A phone call from a temping agency changed all this and moved me into this huge office tower where I became a manager, again, changing from cardboard boxes to people. French filmmaker Jacques Tati questions the difference between these two in his 1967 film *Playtime*, but I noticed that there is a difference, although the fine line is fluid and punctured. It also made me realize how an increasing trust in numbers evoked. The number became the most important thing and the employees, like cardboard boxes, only played their part in order to secure these numbers. Something which never happened by the way. Nevertheless it fascinated me.

What I also noticed was the 'bigness' of the office tower and how it became a world in itself. Standing outside, looking up, watching it scrape the sky and opening up its giant mouth on ground level to the willing cardboard employees waiting to be digested. All these people slowly moving into these buildings intended for organization. Maybe it could be considered some kind of evolution, despite Serres' thoughts. Moving out of the cave, like Plato proposed and into the office tower, which can be considered another beautiful cave ruled by numbers.

I also noticed that fascination or passion is not a big thing in organization. It made me realize that the difference between the conveyor belt and the office is pretty small. What also became obvious is the difference between managing staff or managing a wild bunch of musicians. Where the former lacked passion and fantasy the latter almost drowned in it. It made the movements from the one world into the other and vice versa even more intriguing. It was like the difference between the worlds of Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, Miles Davis, John Coltrane or Frank Zappa and the worlds of Peters & Waterman, Senge, Porter or Mintzberg. Moving in and out of these worlds, just like moving in and out of caves.

*'We cannot do that,
that fucks up our plan'*

(Walter Sobchack in *The Big Lebowski*)

Meanwhile my fascination for organization and subsequent hunger for knowledge moved me towards Nijmegen where I studied management and organization in order to become a master. It was during that period that I became interested in philosophy, especially caused by a guest lecture by someone called René ten Bos, who introduced me to Deleuze. What became clear to me was that being a master did not really do the trick, meaning that the gap between my life in organization and the organizations in textbooks, master-style, became even wider. I also sensed that the only way to explore that gap was through the world of philosophy.

So I started to get acquainted with philosophers like Deleuze, Foucault, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Baudrillard, Kierkegaard or Sloterdijk, to name just a few. It also introduced me to critical management studies and thinkers like Steve Linstead, Pierre Guillet de Monthoux, Martin Parker, Antonio Strati, Gibson Burrell, the before mentioned René ten Bos and many more. This laid the basis for my PhD where I investigated organization and the way these are caught in clichés, and the way in which philosophy and film can break through these clichés. It involved studying the works of directors like Tarkovsky, Antonioni, Takeshi Kitano, David Cronenberg, Guy Maddin, Ulrich Seidl or Takashi Miike. It informed me about the relevance of film for organization studies. Something which later materialized in the *CORPORATE BODIES Film Fest* which explores new perspectives for film as a research and educational tool for organization. I also noticed that the more I started researching film the more fascinating it became. Diving in deep and getting carried away as a zesty enterprise.

The PhD was published as the book *Cliché & Organization, Thinking with Deleuze & Film*. An important part in this was also played by architecture and the way architecture moves us and makes us move. This involved studying the works of Frank Lloyd Wright, Peter Zumthor, Louis Kahn, Rem Koolhaas, or John Lautner, to name just a few. It was also the reason for living in a monastery on two occasions. Once at the monastery of St Benedictusberg in Mamelis (NL). The famous monastery built by Dom van der Laan and based on the liturgy. This involved joining the monks in their rituals driven by the Benedictine horology. The second encounter was at the monastery of La Tourette built by Iannis Xenakis and Le Corbusier, and based on the Xenakis composition *Metastaseis*, which deals with the concept of mass noise. Something which will be explained in the book *Silence & Geiselnahme* (together with Dr Claudia Schnugg). For some reason living in the shielded off heterotopic world of a monastery is not very different from working in an office or even attending a conference.

By the way, the before mentioned Frank Lloyd Wright takes a special position. It was his work, and especially a black and white image of the great workroom of the Johnson Wax Administration Building in Racine Wisconsin, that intrigued while simultaneously puzzling me. Looking at this photograph I knew that I was left with only one option and that was to get on the first available plane to New York and from there rent a car and drive up all the way to this enchanting structure. For some reason I had the idea that the trip itself and experiencing this amazing piece of architecture would direct me in

my quest in understanding organization. I also felt that there is only one way and that is to be inside these buildings, and try to experience them, in a corporeal way. The body and the thrill of its senses are essential in understanding architecture.

What also happened was that I got totally carried away by traveling and by the works and life of Frank Lloyd Wright. I started to study it extensively by moving to his buildings and investigating them. Learning about his life as a nomad, his obsession with destroying boxes and the constant experimentation of fusing nature and architecture. This destroying of boxes, just like the chopping up of speaker cabinets with an axe made me realize how organization studies itself can become a box of which we then have to break out again. The Einstürzende Neubauten informed me that these boxes constantly need to be torn apart, as their band name suggests: collapsing new buildings. Buildings which are not solid but in a state of perpetual destruction. Nature is never solid and stable so why should organization be that way. It is all about disruption and disturbances.

*'In order to learn discipline,
You must learn to misbehave'
(George Liquor in Ren & Stimpy)*

In order to constantly disrupt or disturb the moulded thoughts about the world, philosophy and art is needed. It is needed in order to translate the world, in this case organization into new languages. Now it seems quite clear that language always has its restrictions, but simultaneously its possibilities. This depends on the kind of language that is used. Obviously art can have many languages like film, architecture, photography, literature, music and many more. When considering organization the expression mostly used is the written word, just like I am doing now. In organization these written words are basically limited to clichés, those expressions that have rendered thinking obsolete. Now there might be those who consider thinking in organization an overvalued luxury. I however take a different position and claim that organization needs thinking and therefore disruption and thus art.

But then on the other hand, and yes we need paradoxes, there is the character of Seymour Moskowitz in one of my favorite movies: *Minnie & Moskowitz* (Cassavetes, 1971). Seymour despises thinking. He wants to run, he wants to scream, he goes berserk. When the most cherished thing in his life, his love for Minnie, threatens to go sour on him, he starts punching walls, screaming and in a final attempt to win the love of his life, he cuts off his mustache. This works and shows that thinking is not the only option, although mustaches aren't very fashionable these days. Now fashion or style is another dirty word, just like job. Nevertheless the potency of cutting off a mustache should not be taken lightly as Seymour Moskowitz has successfully demonstrated. And although the last part of his name contains Witz, German for joke, it was not a laughing matter for him.

Besides all that something else happened, namely during my PhD research I also started to attend conferences. One of the first I went to was the SCOS conference in Nijmegen in 2006. Stepping into this radical world of those involved in thinking about organization heavily affected me. Besides intriguing and inspiring presentations, it was probably the whole social climate that appealed to me, meeting all those who were into philosophy, art, and organization, just like me. This first time also proved to be addictive and made me move all over the world visiting all these beautiful places where SCOS, or ACSCOS or affiliated conferences would take me. Places like Sydney, Barcelona, Manchester, Montreal, Copenhagen, Istanbul, Melbourne, Rome or recently exploring the subtle and intense world of Tokyo and Japan. Becoming this nomad, always on the move towards exciting new adventures and knowledge. Meeting all these wonderful people, some of which became close friends like the Yue gang from Halifax, Anthony (with whom I wrote the book *On Mirrors, Philosophy, Art, Organization*), Trish and Sienna. Anke Strauß, with whom I embarked on a train journey from Gothenburg, via Berlin to Istanbul, while discussing the relevance of traveling in relation to thinking. Or Temi Darief (rip) who I met in Melbourne and Sydney, and who, together with Anke, attended my PhD defense, but who died much too young and who is dearly missed. My supervisor the mighty René ten Bos with whom I went on many heavy drinking sessions and devastating concerts like the Swans, the Meridian Brothers, the Einstürzende Neubauten or Rangda. My second supervisor Ruud Kaulingfreks, Sverre, Carl and Alisson, Ed and Vicky, Chris and Gretchen, Albert and Jean, and many more beautiful people in beautiful places. Moments to cherish and never to forget. It therefore seems clear that SCOS definitely shaped my thinking about organization and living and probably will keep on doing so. Oh and before I forget: the Dude abides.

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Luc Peters is a philosopher, writer and musician. His books include *Cliché & Organization, thinking with Deleuze & Film*, *On Mirrors, Philosophy, Art, Organization* (together with Dr Anthony R Yue), *Silence & Geiselnahme*, *On Noise!* (with Dr Claudia Schnugg), *Frank Lloyd Wright: NOMAD* (with Huubke Rademakers), and *Notes from the Inside* (forthcoming). Besides that he is a hardrock drummer and battle-axe shredder. He is also the co-organizer of the *CORPORATE BODIES Film Fest*. Between his travels and adventures he lives and works in the Netherlands.