



Of Language, Limits, and Secrets

Christian De Cock and Christina Volkmann

review of:

Samuel Weber (2001) *Institution and Interpretation*, expanded edition. Stanford: Stanford University Press (pp. 275; PB, £13.95, ISBN 0-8047-3119-5; HB, £45, ISBN 0-8047-3118-7)

Michael Taussig (1999) *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*. Stanford: Stanford University Press (pp. 311; PB, £14.95, ISBN 0-8047-3200-0; HB, £40, ISBN 0-8047-3199-3)

To set us on our way, an epigraph:

The limit is not outside language, it is the outside *of* language. It is made up of visions and auditions that are not of language, but which language alone makes possible. There is also a painting and a music characteristic of writing, like the effects of colors and sonorities that rise up above words. It is through words, between words, that one sees and hears. Beckett spoke of 'drilling holes' in language in order to see or hear 'what was lurking behind.' One must say of every writer: he is a seer, a hearer, 'ill seen ill said,' she is a colorist, a musician. (Deleuze, 1993/1997, Preface of *Essays Critical and Clinical*)

Institution and Interpretation

Samuel Weber's *Institution and Interpretation* was first published in 1989 to considerable critical acclaim. Twelve years later six chapters have been added to the original nine. The book comprises a range of essays published between 1980 and 1996, thus giving the reader glimpses both of Weber's intellectual range and of some of the developments/turmoils in the discipline of literary theory. Inevitably, a certain amount of repetition creeps in (e.g. in the use of identical quotes in different essays, in the recurrence of the same key ideas), but at no time did we experience this as inappropriate. Given that this book is a 'slow' book (i.e. one that needs to be read at a leisurely pace in order to follow the various arguments), the repetitions serve as useful anchoring points for the reader. Furthermore, the notion of repetition becomes itself a key reflection point for Weber in the later chapters:

For if there can be a distinctive sense to the human, something that is by no means certain or assured, then it cannot lie in the direction of unity, totality, and autonomy. It must consist, rather, in the opening *of* and *toward heterogeneity*. Nothing else was and is at stake in the rethinking of repetition that runs from Kierkegaard to Deleuze and Derrida. (p.252, emphasis in original)¹

Weber works from a handful of key authors and texts that underpin virtually all of the essays published in this collection. These are Nietzsche (especially *The Genealogy of Morals*), Derrida, Kant (especially *The Critique of Judgement*), and Freud. In the earlier essays Saussure and Peirce feature prominently, in the later ones Weber explores the works of Heidegger and Kierkegaard in ever greater detail. The critical engagement with these thinkers' ideas and concepts is refreshing in an age where theoretical concepts and frameworks quickly become *substitutes* for real thinking.² An example of Weber's careful treatment is his discussion of "Peirce's '*pragmaticism*' – so named to distinguish it from the theories of William James [*pragmatism*], considered by Peirce as psychologistic" (p.13). For an audience more familiar with writings in organization studies, where one is quick to pillage words and phrases from key thinkers as theoretical back-up or intellectual veneer, Weber's painstaking way of proceeding may at first seem somewhat irritating ('let's get to the key point here!') but ultimately stands out as an example of how to improve the intellectual practices of the field. As Weber puts it: "The less one worries about one's use of language, the more one is subjected to its effects" (p.221). Weber's technique, if one can call it that, is exemplified in his close reading of key texts in their original language (be they French, German, or Danish) and then pointing out subtleties in the original texts that got lost in the 'official translations'.³ Two examples:

The translation of *Selbstüberwindung* as 'self discipline' involves a shift in emphasis that is symptomatic of the redefinition of interpretation at work in this text. 'Self-discipline' suggests a voluntary, deliberate activity of the conscious self, establishing a measure of control over its

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- 1 One author Weber does not consider but who immediately comes to mind in this context is Jorge Luis Borges. In a recently published collection of his essays (Borges, 2000), one can find the same phrases, paragraphs and even whole pages recurring (to the point it almost becomes a game to spot identical paragraphs and pages – we counted well over a dozen). These repetitions are part of Borges' lifelong fascination with the way old elements can be reassembled, by chance or design, to create new variations, or something that appears exactly the same but now acquires a different interpretation, thus continuously breaking open any totality (viz. Borges' famous story of Pierre Menard, see e.g. De Cock (2000: 597-599). An outstanding example can be found in one of his longest and most famous essays, 'A New Refutation of Time,' (originally published in 1947) which not only cites the same paragraphs from Bishop Berkeley twice, but also reproduces a whole section from an essay published in 1936 – 'A History of Eternity.' Interestingly the two essays were translated by two different translators, which leads to the rather quixotic (dare we say Borgesian) result that the fragments of texts which are identical in the Spanish original are subtly different again in the English collection. Žižek, whose work we will use to structure our discussion (Žižek as a spectral presence as it were), also unashamedly reassembles sentences and paragraphs used across a range of recent books (2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2001d).
 - 2 Žižek, for example, offers a withering critique of how the notion of totalitarianism, far from being an effective theoretical concept, has become a kind of stopgap: "instead of enabling us to think, forcing us to acquire a new insight into the historical reality it describes, it relieves us of the duty to think, or even actively *prevents* us from thinking" (2001a: 3).
 - 3 Iser's (2000) reminder of what interpretation has always been – an act of translation – is pertinent here.

unruly impulses. While this is by no means entirely foreign to the *Selbstüberwindung*, it is also far from exhausting the word's connotations. (on Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, p.79-80)

Much of what goes on in this seminal text is, I believe, largely incomprehensible if one does not refer back to the meaning of the Danish word that is used: *Gjentagelse* [translated as repetition]... the failure of his efforts to determine whether or not repetition 'is possible', remains unintelligible if one relies only on translations... To 'repeat,' therefore, as in *Gjentagelse*, is 'to take again'. The promise of repetition is that through it, the subject will be able to 'take again,' to recover, to reappropriate what is lost through the passage of time, and, ultimately, through finitude. (on Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling/ Repetition*, p.246-247)

Needless to say that the reviewers feel somewhat humbled. We are only modestly read in what Weber considers seminal texts (thus making it exceedingly difficult to follow his arguments on several occasions), and even if we had read all these classics we would have missed out on significant subtleties because we would not have read them in the language they were first published in. This realisation will inevitably colour our review of this challenging book.⁴ Furthermore, we quickly realised it would be rather futile to apply a checklist approach, ticking off the key arguments/ideas of each chapter as we rapidly progress through the book's pages and then to try and provide some overarching conclusion. Such a superficial analysis would be futile precisely because the particular, the unexpected, and the unpredictable form such a key part of Weber's project (and of the Humanities itself he argues). On the final page of the book he suggests:

A task for the humanities would be to rethink not just the human but everything connected with it *not*, as hitherto, strictly from the perspective of the universal, the concept, but from that of the exception; which is to say, from the perspective of what refuses to fit in, what resists assimilation, but what, in so doing, reveals the enabling limits of all system, synthesis, and self-containment. (p.252)

We have chosen to structure our review around a discussion of some anxieties that permeate the field of literary studies, and we will explore how Weber's reflections on these can enrich current debates in the field of organization studies. At the very least it should be of some comfort to organizational scholars that they share similar anxieties with literary theorists/critics. The lack of objectivity (Weber considers it to be *constitutive*) in the study of literature confronts the field with the problem of its legitimation, and hence, with its status as, and in regard to, institution(s). As long as founding conventions concerning the nature of its object – 'literature' – were generally accepted as unproblematic, the thorny problem of the field's relation to that particular object could be safely ignored. However, in recent decades interpretations of literary texts could no longer be necessarily "certified as inhabiting the discipline of literary studies or even the institution of academic America." No longer were the debates and resulting polemics necessarily

comprehensible in terms of any *given* institution or set of interpretive assumptions. Indeed, the results may not be *comprehensible* at all, which is not to say that they are necessarily worthless or gibberish, but rather that they may call for a new practice of interpretation, in which

4 A quote from a young Borges reading James Joyce comes to mind here: "Be what it may, I will always esteem and adore the divine genius of this Gentleman, taking from him what I understand with humility and admiring with veneration what I am unable to understand" (Borges, 2000: 15).

‘understanding’ or ‘comprehension’ are no longer supreme categories or absolute values. (p.38, emphasis in original)

By the 1990s the “community of interpretation” to which theorists like Fish and Eco so strongly appeal was no longer simply a unified, undivided community, ‘within’ which the diversity of individual interpretations took (their) place. The “sets of institutional assumptions” had themselves become “the objects of dispute” (p.35-36).

For Weber a return to a definable, delimitable set of commonly held assumptions, although superficially attractive, is no longer a viable option. His perspective is most clearly articulated in his critique of what he calls “the professionalist paradigm of knowledge”, a notion closely associated with a “productivist model of research and development”:

The regulative idea of this paradigm is that of the absolute autonomy of the individual discipline, construed as a self-contained body of investigative procedures and of knowledge held to be universally valid within the confines of an unproblematized field. (p.147)

Whilst this critique finds its origin in Weber’s home discipline of literary theory, it unfolds into a questioning of the very notion of the University:

The university, itself divided into more or less isolated, self-contained departments, was the embodiment of that kind of limited universality that characterized the cognitive model of professionalism... Indeed, the very notion of academic ‘seriousness’ came increasingly to exclude reflection upon the relation of one ‘field’ to another, and concomitantly, reflection upon the historical process by which individual disciplines established their boundaries. (p.32)

Weber’s critique is particularly pertinent to the discipline of organization studies⁵ which, in reaction to a modest opening up to a body of writing rooted in the distinctive pre-occupations of Continental European philosophy in the late 1980s, witnessed a concerted effort (e.g. Pfeffer, 1993, Tranfield and Starkey, 1998) to re-establish “the need for consensus and credibility with external stakeholders and also as defence against other disciplines” (Hardy, 2002: 16).⁶ Frost, in an amusing aphorism worth quoting at some length, aptly captures the desire among organizational scientists for a kind of magical return to a state of ‘innocence’:

As organizational scientists, we invest large amounts of intellectual and emotional capital to learn and eventually master the models and practices that form our craft. The wells of knowledge we come to call our own are often comfortable and comforting and it is not surprising that when, unexpectedly, we are brought face to face with different and perhaps more expansive ‘oceans’ of knowledge we experience disorientation and get a headache. Seeing the other scholar’s ocean can threaten our sense of confidence in what we think we know. We may become afraid. We can no longer be so precise or so certain about the world we describe and try to explain... [but then] We

5 Or OMT, Organization and Management Theory, in its North American version.

6 Hardy, in a refreshingly short piece, denounces “the obsession with consensus and convergence that characterizes much of the work carried out by the Academy of Management” (2002: 17). de Rond, too, offers an alternative, but unfortunately as yet marginal, vision where organizational scholars “actively look, possibly outside of the discipline, for theories of heterogeneity - theories that accept variety and, by implication, complexity as ontological... that are tolerant to variety in methodology and that are not constrained by prediction or necessarily have to be fully fledged... Perhaps it is only thus that we may help humanize one of the most important spheres of life” (2002: 43).

slip the experience into our unconsciousness. And when we awake we are back in our own comfortable well. We have not changed our perspective or allowed ourselves to open to other models and practices. (2002: 21)

A large part of *Institution and Interpretation* is taken up by Weber's attempts to make sense of⁷ and move beyond this desire to establish "impenetrable frontiers and unshakeable foundations",⁸ supplanting it "by a more practical, strategic approach involving an effort to extend or otherwise put into play what could be described as enabling limits" (p.x). Weber's preferred way of exploring these limits is by revealing the strategic nature of apparently objective, denotative language of academic discourse; and demonstrating how this discourse entails, necessarily but implicitly, a precise series of prescriptive 'speech acts', involving injunctions and commands.⁹ The traditional production and transmission of knowledge has always involved the effort to overcome uncertainty and to provide security, and the way of achieving these objectives was by "providing a *model of unification* legitimating the *political containment* of conflictual diversity, whether that of social relations or that involved in historical transformations" (p.238). The re-definition of controversial issues in less explosive, less conflict-laden ways has precisely been part of the constitutive project of professionalism, Weber argues. This has meant the effort to transfer and relocate conflictual issues in space whose borders seem naturally given ('you are an interpretivist, I am a functionalist, let's do some paradigm bridging!'). For Weber, the polemical character of scientific inquiry is not merely a result of the struggle to supplant previous theories (something which he considers an important enough aspect) but also fundamental to the process of *experimentation* (engaging with the subject matter) itself. This experimentation is characterised by uncertainty, uncertainty being symptomatic of something very essential in the way language works:

Words are determined only by their being referred to other words, which in turn must be referred to yet other marks, usages, contexts, and the like. This process is intrinsically endless, and yet in order for it to function at all we must *arrest* it. The fact that we do this (most of the time without a second thought) and that our lives are generally organized precisely in order to defend against such arresting second thoughts does not change the basic operation: namely, that even in the most prosaic use of language, we must in a certain sense *split our minds* in order to *think* at all, in order

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- 7 Thus accounting for "the fact that the desire for identity, unity, and totality should have proven so much more resilient than either Foucault or Barthes expected..." (p.xvi).
- 8 Zald's perspective, incidentally in a paper *arguing for an opening of organization and management theory towards the humanities*, is typical in this respect: "Organizational studies could be a powerful applied discipline *if the scientific base of the field was strong*. Since it is not, organizational studies follows the ratings, responding not only to academic fads, but to the whims and foibles of academic hucksters and the problem definitions of corporate executives" (1993: 514). In considering one of the youngest academic disciplines, film studies, one can see how the very fact of being/becoming a university discipline, and the concern with frontiers and foundations this involves, leads to sterility: "I was thus able to ask him to address directly the problems of the narrowness and sterility of the university discipline that had promised so much a generation before...If the creation of a separate discipline of film studies has enabled the carrying out of vital and important historical work, film theory itself has become less interesting within its new university home" (Colin McCabe, Head of Research at the British Film Institute 1989-98, in the preface to Žižek, 2001c).
- 9 Žižek, in typically flamboyant style, takes issue with the "taming of free radicals": "No less than social life itself, today's 'radical' academia is permeated by unwritten rules and prohibitions although such rules are never explicitly stated, disobedience can have dire consequences" (2001a: 1).

to articulate. We must both refer the defining terms to other marks that can never be fully defined for us and at the same time – but this precisely fractures the Sameness of that Time – we must ‘forget’ this irreducibly undefinable vestige, this set of exclusions that is neither entirely indeterminate nor fully determinable. (p.145, emphasis in original)

It is precisely because scientific activity inevitably entails the effort to determine the indeterminable, it will, by necessity, be an ambivalent and conflictual process. Furthermore, one of the effects of *splitting our minds*, to use Weber’s terminology, is that the objectivised language of experts and scientists can no longer be retranslated into the common language accessible to everyone, into our experience of representable reality. This ‘break-down’ in translation already emerges with Galileo and is brought to the extreme in quantum physics (e.g. Superstrings, Quantum Oscillation, cf. Žižek, 2001c).¹⁰

At this point it is useful to comment on Weber’s ontological position – something that he only indirectly alludes to. For example, he explores how Charles Sanders Peirce developed notions of the ‘real’, the ‘actual’ or ‘experience’ not as a given state of affairs, but as a violent shock, involving conflict, struggle, and resistance:

[T]he real is that which insists upon forcing its way to recognition as something *other* than the mind’s creation” [1.325]. The real is that which insists and resists, which disrupts and unsettles [1.321]... (Peirce as quoted by Weber, p.16)

This ontological position has strong affinities with a Lacanian view, which in recent years has been popularised by Slavoj Žižek:

His lesson is that the experience of an insurmountable obstacle is the positive condition for us, as humans, to perceive something as reality. Reality is ultimately that which resists. (Žižek, 2001a: 226)

The Real (with capital R) resists simple integration into our common reality (symbolisation, integration into our universe). What we usually experience as reality is not the ‘thing itself’, it is always-already symbolised, constituted, structured by symbolic mechanisms.¹¹ Yet, symbolisation ultimately always fails, it never succeeds in

10 This puts an interesting spin on the recurrent lament in the field of organization studies about the ‘translation’ of organizational research into the common language of organizational actors. Recent studies by Boland *et al.* (2001) and Mohrman *et al.* (2001) suggest that the typical way of presenting academic information (through objective, declarative knowledge) is a relatively ineffective way of getting knowledge to ‘take’ in practitioner settings. There have been various presidential addresses at the Academy of Management over the past decade addressing the translation of academic knowledge into practical action (e.g. Hambrick, 1994; Huff, 2000; Mowday, 1997). The message seems to be that organizational researchers must bridge the many disciplinary and ideological islands in the academic community in order to ‘see the whole system’ that they are studying and so better inform organizational action and organizational design decisions.

11 This modality is that of reality as (symbolic) fiction, “reality as really made up” as Taussig has it in *Defacement* (e.g. p.259); a reality that necessarily has to pose as natural so we can ‘get along’ with our everyday lives. The well-known sense of unreality we experience in the presence of certain phenomena can be located at this level; it indicates that the object has lost its place in the symbolic universe (Žižek, 1991). This “sense of unreality” is to be distinguished from a symbolic reality “deprived of the hard kernel of the Real”, which becomes “a malleable, indefinitely plastic texture

fully covering the Real. What this means is that we cannot ever comprehend the ‘whole’ of reality that we encounter: if we are to be able to endure our encounter with reality some part of it has to be ‘derealised’, experienced as a spectral apparition. There are thus three modalities of the real: we have the “real Real”, the “symbolic real” and the “imaginary real”, the latter being a spectral dimension which shines through our common reality (“the mysterious *je ne sais quoi*, the unfathomable ‘something’ that introduces a self-division into an ordinary object, so that the sublime dimension shines through it”, Žižek, 2001d: 82). This is why distortion and dissimulation, such key themes in Taussig’s book, are in themselves revealing: “what emerges via distortions of the accurate representation of reality is the Real – that is, the trauma around which social reality is structured” (Žižek, 1999: 79).

The crucial point for Weber, as he puts it in a delicate Derridean¹² stance, is that

in this spectral world, choices must still be made and identities established, no matter how provisional, probabilistic, and aleatory these may be. It is the inevitability of such decision making, in a situation marked by irreducible ambiguity, that gives rise to a thinking nourished not only by ambivalence, but also by anxiety. (p.xii)

Even in a non-deterministic epistemology ambiguity will still have to be limited, ‘excluded’, if objects are to be determined – that is, cognized – in any way whatsoever. This leads Weber to introduce the concept of *ambivalent demarcation*. Any selection or delimitation made will necessarily be partial. The partiality, which founds the possibility of cognition and insight, does so only insofar as it ignores/represses its own particularity:

[S]uch cognitive repression does not entail the pure and simple effacement of what is thereby excluded from one’s field of vision or of consciousness: rather, the exclusions persist qua exclusions, and they must be so maintained if they are to delimit what falls within the scope of our determinations. The result, then, is what I have called ambivalent demarcation. The demarcation is ambivalent because it does not merely demarcate one thing by setting it off from another; it also de-marks, that is, defaces the mark it simultaneously inscribes, by placing it in relation to an indeterminable series of other marks, of which we can never be fully conscious or cognizant. (p.145)

Rather than offer a conclusion at this point, we will move on to Taussig’s book in which the above reflections and operations are explored in quite some detail and with admirable skill, thus providing further texture to our own narrative.

which, precisely, loses the character of ‘reality’, and turns into a fantasmatic effect of discursive practices” (Žižek, 2001a: 166).

12 Derridean in that he avoids the twin pitfalls of naïve realism and direct philosophical foundationalism. Human beings strive compulsively towards a global notion of truth, of a universal and necessary cognition, yet this cognition is simultaneously forever inaccessible to them: “a ‘philosophical foundation’ for our experience is *impossible*, but *necessary* – although all we perceive, understand, articulate, is of course overdetermined by a horizon of pre-understanding, this horizon itself remains ultimately impenetrable” (Žižek, 2001a: 203-204).

Defacement

Taussig's book takes up many of the themes of Weber's *Institution and Interpretation*, such as the opening toward heterogeneity, the notion of repetition, the full acceptance of ambivalence, and goes on to explore them in complementary ways. *Defacement* is a strangely beautiful book, full of sumptuous yet utterly appropriate language use. Taussig displays here a fine awareness of the possibilities of language, with its referential meaning often clearly subordinated to its performative dimension. In what follows we will introduce an inordinate amount of quotes to convey an impression of this sumptuous writing which forms such an integral part of the author's project. Taussig does not so much try to explain or provide foundations for his key concepts as to engage in a mode of 'truth telling' that slowly unfolds the concepts' complex meaning/function.¹³ The writing itself,¹⁴ in its meandering ways, rather than any particular explanation, is the 'message', of this curious book. Taussig clearly intends his position of enunciation to be inscribed in his text, rather than safely exempt from its content: "Rather than pronounce theoretical verdict and encapsulate defacement's mysterious force, I see my task first and foremost to be not its explanation but its *characterization*" (p.1). In this task he is guided by a single sentence from Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*: "Truth is not a matter of exposure which destroys the secret, but a revelation which does justice to it".¹⁵ Thus he regards "the public secret as fated to maintain the verge where the secret is not destroyed through exposure, but subject to a revelation that does justice to it" (p.8). The public secret, defined as a "reconfiguration of repression in which depth becomes surface so as to remain depth" (p.5), and in another version "that which is generally known but cannot be articulated" (p.5), is a notion that has obsessed Taussig for many years. For example, in an earlier book, *Mimesis and Alterity*, he already suggested:

We act and have to act as if mischief were not afoot in the kingdom of the real and that all around the ground lay firm. That is what the public secret, the facticity of the social fact, being a social being is all about. (Taussig, 1993: xvii)

Everything that *Defacement* has to offer in terms of concepts and argument is contained in the eight pages of the prologue, and it is worth quoting Taussig at some length here to give the reader an introduction to the key concepts of the book: *defacement*, *the public secret*, and what Taussig calls after Hegel *the labour of the negative*:

Yet what if the truth is not so much a secret as a *public secret*, as is the case with most important social knowledge, *knowing what not to know*? Then what happens to the inspired act of

13 Thus Taussig offers yet another example of the well-known phenomenon of traditional forms pushing against their own boundaries "by way of mobilising procedures which, at least from our retrospective view, seem to point towards a new technology that will be able to serve as a more 'natural' and appropriate 'objective correlative' to the life-experience the old forms endeavoured to render with their excessive experimentations" (Žižek, 2001c: 78).

14 In this we also have to include Taussig's judicious use of images, such as Selk'nam drawings in the frontispiece and throughout the book, and photos of the Subcomandante (Sup) Marcos masked and unmasked.

15 The phrase features in the frontispiece and is repeated throughout the book, gathering meaning and significance as the narrative unfolds.

defacement? Does it destroy the secret, or further empower it? For are not shared secrets the basis of our social institutions, the workplace, the market, the family, and the state? Is not such public secrecy the most interesting, the most powerful, the most mischievous and ubiquitous form of socially active knowledge there is... Defacement is like Enlightenment. It brings insides outside, unearthing knowledge, and revealing mystery. As it does this, however, as it spoliates and tears at tegument, it may also animate the thing defaced and the mystery revealed may become more mysterious, indicating the curious magic upon which Enlightenment, in its elimination of magic depends... Defacement works on objects the way jokes work on language, bringing out their inherent magic nowhere more so than when those objects have become routinized and social... (p.2-5, emphasis in original)

Everything is contained in embryonic form in the prologue, but only acquires meaning/texture through an unfolding, by “tracing the edge sideways like a crab scuttling” (p.2), over the remaining 250 or so pages. It is only in witnessing this unfolding that one can start to appreciate Taussig’s tour-de-force. For Taussig, the negativity in the act of defacement is far from negative in its effects, for it lures absence, that of which we would otherwise not know anything, into presence.¹⁶ Taussig’s accounts of defacement do not impute to it the status of an origin, and thus refuse the consolidation of defacement into something that simply can be appropriated: “characterization of defacement can never confront its object head-on, if only because defacement catches us unawares and can only be known unexpectedly, complicit with the violence of daily life” (p.2). Here we can see parallels with Lacan’s *act*, the rupture in the symbolic narrative continuum, the “possibility of new possibilities” (Žižek, 2001d: 101). Just like Freud’s ‘death drive’ or Lacan’s ‘meaning of the phallus’¹⁷, defacement is not a positive concept with a specific content, but a mere promise of some unspecified knowledge, the designation of a seductive mystery. And yet, this strange notion is crucial in Taussig’s project of re-enchantment:

What begins as poetry becomes dulled through usage and we no longer see that the very facts of our existence are not facts but artifacts. *And it is precisely here* in the very nerve center of this active forgetting that, with its burnings, its savage markings, its cruel and often clever cuttings . . . defacement exerts its curious property of magnifying, not destroying, value, drawing out the sacred from the habitual-mundane, illuminating what Nietzsche saw as metaphoric basis of all existence but effaced by usage, passing into practical illusions of factual truth. *Defacement* puts this habitual operation of *effacement* into reverse... (p.54, emphasis in original)

Taussig’s writing, especially in the first chapter, can be best described as ‘fragmentary’. We are offered little ‘vignette’ reflections and stories, often little more than newspaper cuttings, covering multiple facets of defacement. These include such various topics as Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, corpses, sniffer dogs, the American flag, Tim

16 Budick and Iser posit in a literary context: “In its undetermined proliferation, negativity speaks for something that is arguably as real as anything else we know, even if it can be located only by carving out a void within what is being said” (1989: xi). Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* where truth-effects are produced through failure, is also of some relevance here. To put it succinctly: one tries to grasp/conceive the object of thought; one fails, missing it, and through these very failures the place of the targeted object is encircled, its contours become discernible.

17 “The impossible fullness at the level of meaning (of the signified) is sustained by the void (the castrating dimension) at the level of the signifier – we encounter the ‘meaning of phallus’ when, apropos of some notion, we enthusiastically feel that ‘this is *it*, the true thing, the true meaning’, although we are never able to explicate *what*, precisely, this meaning *is*” (Žižek, 2001c: 60).

McVeigh (the Oklahoma bomber), and a theoretical reflection on monuments. Enough to leave one's head spinning after a mere twenty pages. But as Horkheimer and Adorno posited in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947/1973), such fragmentary writing has a very serious purpose. Fragmentary writing is premised upon the refusal of the operations that establish rational connections between statements in theoretical discourse (inference, entailment, deduction) and their linguistic representatives (therefore, because, etc.). Historical truth is 'shown' in fragmentary writing, which does not then explicitly aim to demonstrate or to explain. Explanation neutralises the phenomena in question; to explain is to explain away. Taussig suggests that traditional tropes have precisely the effect "of closing down analysis in the name of analysis, diverting attention from the power of the contradiction" (p.198). Indeed, the traditional way of proceeding in the social sciences becomes itself a target for Taussig:

But surely there is a secret, even a 'lubricating corruption,' in all of this, right where there shouldn't be, 'methodology' being designed, so to speak, to be the site of luminescent openness and purity thereof [truth]?... And as for the style of detachment, surely the posture of neutrality is just that, a posture recognized as such, a charade acknowledged as a public secret by one and all... From here stretch endless questions and uncertainty. What passion does one have to muster to become passionless and detached, for instance? How does one switch it on and off and off and on again? Surely this whole approach, which to greater or lesser degree involves us all, requires the most meticulous practice of deception and self-deception, secrecy and public secrecy? (p.75-76)

After the pyrotechnics of the first few pages the book settles into a nice rhythm. The remainder of the chapter mainly explores the process of defacement in connection with the sculpture 'Down by the Lake with Phil and Liz' in Canberra in the mid-1990s.¹⁸ From here on the prospecting becomes more and more detailed, the unfolding more and more complex. In the second chapter we are introduced to the elaborate survey of secret societies that forms the core of this book; Taussig the anthropologist takes over. We are treated to a curious exploration of secrecy in an anarchist Andalusian village in Franco's Spain and in Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice*. All the time, Taussig struggles with "an ineffable fusion of surges so conflicting and contradictory that they overburden language..." (p.50).

18 The display in a public space in Canberra of a sculpture of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip as two naked figures is seen by some as unacceptable, a sacrilege. This is the case especially since the figures "are realistic, life-size. Perhaps if they were more abstract it would be more acceptable" (p.11). A member of the police force tries to rescue the situation by covering the figures with an Australian flag, which in turn is seen as a 'desecration' by the organisers. It remains unclear if the attempt of covering the sculpture with an Australian flag takes place before or after it has been partly destroyed in several attacks, or "ceremoniously vandalised" (p.12). It also remains unclear if this vandalism has been carried out solely by another artist, or if others were also involved. The organisers planned to leave the mutilated sculpture in its place "as a symbol of intolerance, irrelevance, disintegration" (p.12). Eventually, however, the two statues are removed (although with them not the whole sculpture). The now vacant space attracts the attention of "crowds gathered around the empty bench on which the statues had been sitting" (p.12). The story of "Down by the Lake with Phil and Liz" is put together by taking miscellaneous quotes of newspaper and television news reports. These bits of news are taken from different contexts, and the reader pieces the story together through the various bits of information given on what it is about and what has happened. Later in the book, Taussig reveals more information about the background of the story (p.23ff).

In the third chapter, *In that other time: Isla Grande*, we find ourselves truly in the realm of anthropology. Taussig explores various works relating to the Selk'nam and the Yamana, living in Tierra del Fuego in the early years of the 20th century. The chapter takes up almost half of the book and allows him to prospect his key concepts – defacement; the public secret; the labour of the negative – in minute detail. At times, Taussig is on the verge of getting carried away by his anthropological enthusiasm (and losing the reader in the detail, in one more elaborate example). The more traditional linear narrative that dominates here is somewhat disappointing, tedious even at times, although Taussig does introduce welcome interruptions. These are some of his 'curious'¹⁹ conclusions:

There may be nothing more dissatisfying than the exposed secret, the triumph of exposure giving way to some vague sense of being cheated. *There was nothing after all*. This I take to be emblematic of Enlightenment, bringing light to dark places, most ethnographies being the verbal form of the museum exhibit, which, no matter how transparent the glass or bright the light, reflects an increasingly opaque display, ever more turned in on itself. (p.157, emphasis in original)

There is a comical aspect lying in wait for those who, at their peril, ignore this mix of impenetrability and everydayness that constitutes the public secret - as when the anthropologist undertakes to reveal the secret of the Big Hut, *yet all along revelation was part of the secret's secret*, part of its secret. (p.162, emphasis in original)

Might it not be, then, that the drama of exposure staged by the missionaries did not destroy the secret, but became instead the raw material for new myths and modernist rituals along the same lines as before? Might not my own writing wriggling itself into being here, be part of just such a ritualization, the ever-repeated final exposure of the secret that in destroying redeems it? (p.216)

Having reproduced some of Taussig's 'curious' conclusions, it is perhaps appropriate to return one more time, however tentatively, to organization theory. This move serves as a vehicle to conduct a cross-reading of *Institution and Interpretation* and *Defacement* as one of the *ephemera* editors suggested.²⁰ What sets both Taussig and Weber apart from most of the work in organization studies is their *position of enunciation*. When the doxa of our field insists on clear theoretical classifications and gradual generalisations based on careful empirical research, one should bear in mind that this apparently modest position involves a much more immoderate position of enunciation of the organization theorist himself/herself as the observer exempted from the object of his/her study²¹. Taussig is perhaps most forthright about his position when he states:

19 We borrow the notion of 'curious conclusions' from Weber: "curious not simply because they [conclusions] are odd and unexpected, but because, in a certain sense, they do not conclude. They should not so much satisfy curiosity as suscite it" (2001: 72).

20 Although he admitted the email containing the suggestion was written while in a slightly inebriated state, the advice was gratefully taken on board.

21 Even academics who would see themselves as part of the 'vanguard', can be accused of a certain arrogance when taking issue with traditional modes of theorising and organising (for an elaboration on this, see De Cock, 2001: 163). As Žižek puts it: "When I say, 'the theory (which I am deploying) is just an impotent mental construct, while real life persists outside,' or engage in similar modes of referring to the wealth of pre-theoretical experience, the apparent modesty of such statements harbours the arrogant position of enunciation of the subject who assumes the capacity to compare a theory with 'real life'" (2001c: 15).

So our writing becomes an exercise in life itself at one with life and within life as lived in social affairs, not transcendent or even a means to such, but contiguous with action and reaction in the great chain of storytelling telling the one always before the last.²² (p.7)

Although Weber is not as explicit, his position of enunciation is also clearly included, inscribed, into the processes he describes. Both authors set themselves further apart from traditional research in organization studies in their *focus on the particular and the exception*. Their way of proceeding can be best described as a direct jump from the singular to the universal, by-passing the mid-level of particularity ('mid-range theories') so dear to organization theorists. The 'enabling limits' that feature so prominently in Weber's project are only revealed "from the perspective of what refuses to fit in, what resists assimilation" (p.252). Understanding and comprehension, while certainly not superfluous, can no longer be considered "supreme categories or absolute values" (p.38). Indeed, both Taussig and Weber encourage us to face up to the irreducible contingency and ambiguity of (social) life:

The challenge, as I see it, is not to indulge an empirically-based skepticism grinding away in its infinitude on yet another disputable or disputing fact, trying to maintain one's balance in so much heady contrariety by clutching at yet another destabilizing observation, but instead to allow oneself to be brought face-to-face and remain within the ambiguity, grasping it hole, so to speak. I am at a loss to put a name to this stance but it must imply location no less than mobility, location within struggle, the struggle with ambiguity itself, which the fact of ambiguity as opposed to the facts that constitute it. (Taussig, 1999: 107)

In taking up this challenge, the very purpose of organization and management theory, that "if we ground our paradigms in organizational reality, OMT will flourish and the management profession will benefit" (Van de Ven, 1999: 123), has to be put into question. Both Weber and Taussig challenge in their own particular way some of the field's most basic assumptions: "building scientific knowledge that better approximates reality", producing "cumulative scientific knowledge", providing "increasingly closer approximations to understanding what Gregory Bateson called 'this buzzing, blooming, confusing world'" (Van de Ven, 1999: 119). When organizational researchers attempt to capture or encapsulate organizational 'reality', they indeed ignore at their peril "this mix of impenetrability and everydayness" (Taussig, 1999: 162), and may find "there was nothing after all" (p.157). The point of 'enabling limits' (Weber, 2001), of 'the labour of the negative' (Taussig, 1999) is to put some NO TRESSPASS signs in the path of

22 Whilst many organization theorists now fully acknowledge how the fullness of life flow escapes forever the network of language categories ("Thus words, especially in the form of conceptualizations, serve to imprison, immobilize, and injure that which they seek to address," Burrell, 1996: 646), most still see the abyss which separates 'things' from 'words' as something one has to overcome. Yet Hegel, who serves as a source of inspiration for Taussig, "is full of wonder... for this tremendous power that tears apart what 'naturally' belongs together and is thus able to subordinate the very reality of the life process to symbolic 'fictions'; this inversion where fiction subjugates reality rather proves *the inherent ontological nullity of what we call 'reality'*... What we forget, when we pursue our daily life, is that our human universe is nothing but an embodiment of the radically inhuman 'abstract negativity,' of the abyss we experience when we face the 'night of the world.' And what is the *act* if not the moment when the subject who is its bearer suspends the network of symbolic fictions which serve as a support to his daily life and confronts again the radical negativity upon which they are founded?" (Žižek, 2001b: 53-54).

overzealous researchers. Žižek's discussion of Polish film director Krzysztof Kieślowski's work is pertinent here:

Kieślowski's first move was to fight false representation (the lack of an adequate image of social reality) in Polish cinema through documentaries; then he noticed that, *when you let go of false representation and directly approach reality, you lose reality itself*, so he abandoned documentaries and moved into fiction. (2001c: 121, emphasis in original)

It is precisely because our social/organizational reality is sustained by symbolic fictions that the ultimate achievement of research is NOT to better represent and then explain reality (the "increasingly closer approximations"), but to make us discern the fictional aspect of this reality itself (by circumscribing, hinting at...).²³ It is only when we perceive this reality in all its fragility (e.g. through the process of defacement) that we have a movement from reality to the Real, to what, in reality itself, is "more than reality" (Žižek, 1991). So much for cross-readings and (over)ambitious visions for organization and management theory. Remains for us to finish our review of *Defacement*.

The penultimate chapter, in a symmetrical move, heralds a return to the more fragmentary approach of the first chapter. Whilst dipping into various stories/issues, the focus here is a revealing(!) discussion of the unmasking of the Zapatista subcomandante Marcos, based on newspaper articles/photographs and communiqués.

Everything seems to hinge not on the mask but on unmasking... When the state did the unmasking, the mask became even more of a mask. It spread through society, it became collective ("We are all Marcos"), and the appearance of depth and mystery it created became even deeper. But when the Zapatistas do it to themselves, tearing off the mask becomes like defacing-sport, exercises in metamorphosis and the generation of mana²⁴. (p.257)

The final chapter offers, of course, no conclusion. Instead we are treated to some curious autobiographical reflections on Santa ("the cheery fat man is thus one of the great signs whereby gift and secrecy allow the adult's imagination of the child's imagination to sustain the theater of the social world as exchange", p.269) and then the book just ends. Taussig, the author, achieves some personal closure through a clever slight of hand, but the reader remains faced with an incompleteness that is now permanent (there is no more writing to follow). Mission accomplished? Taussig concludes thus:

23 It is worth pointing out that Weber's and Taussig's respective books do not support the fashionable position that 'everything is discourse'. The current globalisation of discourse seems to have two meanings: there is no limit as to what one can say, *and* there is nothing *outside* discourse, no objective reality, everything appears as the effect of discursive mechanisms. As Žižek suggests: "These two meanings are interdependent: external and internal limits ultimately *coincide*, i.e. the moment one can 'say everything', the moment there is no inherent prohibition to what we can say, the external limit that rates 'words' from 'things' also falls and everything becomes a discourse-effect" (2001c: 190). What both Taussig and Weber take issue with is that the "NO TRESSPASS" is increasingly undermined in a society where there is pressure to 'tell everything', to 'expose all secrets'.

24 Mana is "a term of Melanesian and Polynesian origin that entered early ethnology to convey, as Marcel Mauss put it in 1902-1903, a sort of magical key to magic in general" (Taussig, 1999: 176).

Thus I bring my book to finish, in arch-defacing mode, allowing (my) art to take its revenge on reality through the medium of an autobiographical detail plundered from the adult's imagination of the child's - a sacrilege, no less, that does not expose the secret so much as do justice to it. I hope. Midday: moment of the shortest shadow.²⁵ (p.271)

And so our review also comes to a close. We are fully aware this is not a conventional review, leaving so very much unsaid and adumbrated, but then *Defacement* and *Institution and Interpretation* are no conventional books. We hope to have revealed some of their content in a way that does justice to them, but no 'pulling it all together' we're afraid. Just a few final borrowed words:

Do you really imagine that all I have to do is to find a formula, a set of words, some phrases strung together – and then you would nod your heads and say: Oh of course, that's it... and everyone would be happy? (Lessing, 1981: 328)

Of course you don't!

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25 The last sentence is a quote from Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*, it pops up at various places in the book and also ends the prologue; this repetition introduces an interesting circularity.

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the authors

Christina is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Exeter. In the course of this year, she got close to a nervous breakdown on numerous occasions. She thought that researching strategic change management in the Berlin State Library would offer her some respite this summer. How wrong she was... Christian acts as her supervisor and has been known to take home Christina's dirty linen when she was without a washing machine. (*Objection: That's not quite true, it was his wife who helped out on this one.*) Further details of his likes, dislikes and obsessions can be found in author's notes from earlier articles he wrote for ephemer.

Address: School of Business and Economics, University of Exeter, Exeter, EX4 4PU, UK.
Email: c.de-cock@exeter.ac.uk, c.r.volkmann@exeter.ac.uk