



In Need of Medication?

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review of:

Emma Bell (2008) *Reading Management and Organization in Film*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. (PB: pp. 240, £23.99, ISBN: 9780230520929)

As I am reading through *Reading Management and Organization in Film* by Emma Bell, my thoughts constantly waver off in all kinds of directions. But rarely do they linger over any of the films discussed in Bell's little book, or, for that matter, over the ideas that she tries to illustrate through the many film interpretations she engages in. And I can't help wondering what it is that makes my mind flicker and the reading so tedious – and whether or not I am in bad need of that ADHD medicine recently promoted in *Wired* so as to amp up my brainpower.

Medicine aside, I do believe I've figured out why.

What Bell sets out to do in this book, is to explore how different aspects of organization and management are represented in popular film. And she takes what she terms a thematic approach to the endeavor "whereby themes related to management and organization that occur frequently in film are analyzed in depth" (p. 8). In fact, more than a hundred films are referenced, analyzed and discussed over the two hundred plus pages of the book, and related to seven different themes comprising 1) the organization of the film industry, 2) the negative portrayal of organizations, 3) the presentation of 'organization man', 4) the shift from modern to postmodern worker, 5) women as the excluded Other of organizational life, 6) a preoccupation with the meaning of work, and 7) spectres of organization. In a somewhat roundabout fashion, this approach is said to rest (partially at least) on a recent development within organization studies by which narrative approaches have been gaining ground. Drawing, for instance, on the work of Barbara Czarniawska and Pierre Guillet de Monthoux (1994), Bell argues that interpreting and evaluating any kind of narrative exercises the reader's skills of criticism and aids the understanding of the complexity of organizational life. And drawing on the work of Nelson Phillips (1995), she argues that a narrative account, if successful, to some extent contributes to validate theory, or theoretical facets, residing in the narrative.

Writing for advanced students of business and management, at an undergraduate or postgraduate level, popular film should thus make up a plentiful source for this audience to further the understanding of organization and management in different times and contexts, and with regards to practical aspects as well as theoretical ones. And working with the assumption that film plays a decisive role “in producing systems of discourse which help to shape our collective perceptions of management that continue to inform our experience of organized work” (p. 202), it could also serve as a means for reflecting upon the impressions and opinions one holds in relation to these matters. All that needs be done to reach this ‘deeper’ understanding, is to take a deconstructive approach to the operation, Bell seems to argue (one influenced also by intertextual and semiotic readings of the material in question).

And this is what Bell claims to do in the book. She has asked around among students, colleagues and friends what films have told them anything about the subject at hand, and she has watched these films closely. She has taken notes, identified themes and worked with these themes “in a way which enabled them to be related to theory” (p. 8). And she has extended the research material and claims to have found related films by consulting services like Amazon’s ‘Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought’, in what appears to be an effort to reach a fair representation of films dealing with organization and management. Throughout the book, she then elaborates on the different themes, introducing the reader to how they have been discussed within the field, and bringing up numerous examples of how these themes are manifested in film – in the body text as well as in film focus boxes containing more detailed accounts of scenes from particular films (and the approximate running times for these scenes, should we want to check them out ourselves). Aspects of organization and management which usually are repressed in narratives on organization and management are also, in good deconstructive order, explored and exemplified in the last two thematic chapters. And by the very end, Bell concludes by reminding her readers that the specific themes she has been discussing (mentioned only briefly in the above) keep recurring in very similar form in film after film, year after year, and in varying contexts. Somehow they appear to have a universal dimension which stands the test of time and withstands significant external variations in the socio-economic constitution of society. And supposedly, it is their recurring representation which makes them “more acceptable within the social context in which they are located” (p. 202).

Not without its merits, I believe, however, that the approach taken by Bell – and the insights she delivers from the endeavor – are somewhat problematic. And I am quite convinced that this contributes to the reading experience.

To begin with, I’m not entirely certain of whether Bell sees this book as an introduction to (critical) management studies through film, or as a thought provoking piece of research in itself. That is, I am not sure of whether the book strives to introduce and present themes and topics frequently discussed in the organization and management field in an elucidating manner, and point to some of the merits with the kind of reading undertaken. Or, whether it strives to bring about new understandings of the topics addressed, cast new light on the phenomena encountered in the film material – understandings and shifts of perspective that make a strong contribution to the way we think about organization and management practices by challenging prevalent

movements within the field.¹ Or rather, if she sees her work as a little bit of both, whereby the novelty and contribution of the book first and foremost lies in directing the attention towards a somewhat unconventional source of empirical material. But, where the ‘theoretical’ themes are not in themselves explored or challenged much further, but merely collected from a kind of mainstream critical management discourse – with the author’s identification of them only serving to validate their existence and their relevance also in the realm of popular film. For much of new understanding of these themes and how they have been represented through the film medium over time – of their inner workings, of their interplay with the film medium as such, and of slight but important changes in their representations, for instance – is indeed hard to see here. And to claim, as the author does, that the book deals with in-depth analyses of the many films encountered, really is a bold statement in this regard.

Rather, it appears as if Bell, by this only halfhearted attempt to explore the power of theoretical notions and make use of any specific conceptual apparatus, contributes to a slight confusion. This is a confusion one often seems to come across in interdisciplinary fields where philosophical/theoretical perspectives are used somewhat haphazardly and coupled in peculiar and even careless ways (with such variegated weaves of concepts and conceptualizations sometimes even being posited as theoretical bases for a certain field), and it concerns how differing theoretical positions actually relate to one another. In short, a confusion concerning the way in which one treats theoretical notions and concepts.² On the very first page of the book, Bell presents the reader with a quote taken from Slavoj Žižek’s *Interrogating the Real* (2005). Žižek writes:

Why do I resort so often to examples from popular culture? The simple answer is in order to avoid a kind of jargon, and to achieve the greatest possible clarity, not only for my readers but also for myself. (Žižek, 2005: 56)

One can only assume that clarity, rather than confusion, is what Bell also appears to be striving for in her book. But is it not near necessary, for the sake of clarity, to spell out what theoretical position one at least tentatively subscribes to in taking on an endeavor such as Bell’s? Especially, if the analysis circles around ambiguous notions such as reality and ideology, and one sets out by quoting Slavoj Žižek’s work which is infamous for addressing such notions in a somewhat unconventional manner? I find little of this sort, however. And it most probably contributes to making me a rather disinterested reader.

It might seem somewhat superfluous to add, but I am far from convinced that such a move would be opposed to any of the two distinct approaches suggested above – that is, neither to the teacher’s nor the researcher’s approach to analyzing organization and management issues in film. I am not even convinced that they at all need to be

1 Certainly, Bell explicitly states that this is introductory reading for students. But doesn’t she at the same time posit the work as a scientific and explorative endeavor, in her emphasizing that the analysis rests on an allegedly scientific methodological approach, whereby she has been striving for an exhaustive screening of the themes related to organization and management figuring in popular film, and whereby she has been aiming to gather a fair representation of films by means of certain sampling techniques?

2 Not to mention confusion concerning what these theoretical takes actually give to the analysis.

understood as distinct approaches. But for the sake of clarity to any one reader, I suspect that a more fruitful way to carry out an organization and management reading of film, would have been to attempt a symptomatic reading of some of the films treated in the book. That is, to attempt to use philosophy or a theoretical apparatus in order to bring a *new* understanding to how we, through these popular films, relate to management and organization (and not only to validate what we thought we ‘knew’ already); to intervene in the field by *re-interpreting* how popular film might act on our conceptions of organization and management (cf. Kristensen, Pedersen and Spoelstra, 2008). In other words, attempt to use philosophy in order to look for *other* mechanisms at work in ‘film texts’ than merely themes that we are already used to hearing and talking about within the field, and to explore how these mechanisms might work in detail.

That is to say, instead of yet another attempt at deconstructing management discourse and laying bare supposedly stable symptoms, themes, truths (?) of the representation of organization and management, would it not have been a more fruitful project to perform, for instance, an ideology critique of some of the films in question in a Žižeko-Lacanian vein; exploring different ideologies at work in these films, and how these ideologies might structure various kinds of enjoyment regarding organizational and management practice? And, not to forget, exploring how these ideologies might have changed ever so slightly throughout the time-period explored and discussed (i.e., mainly the twentieth century)? Seriously subscribing to a Žižek-inspired theoretical framework – which the author shows some aspiration towards doing, judging again by the opening quote – implies that such an analysis would be able to capture beliefs at work in this particular realm, and in society more broadly, by treating popular film as a materialized unconscious. And, hence, not as something separate from our immediate perceptions of organization and management but as a part of the apparatus which creates the fundamental screen through which we view and perceive in the first place (i.e., ideological fantasy) (cf. e.g. Žižek, 2007: 52).

Such an endeavor would, to my mind, be truly interesting – as material for teaching advanced students of business and administration, and for researchers alike. It would, however, most certainly require a dramatic narrowing down of the film material addressed. And thus not offer as many analyses of particular film scenes, and as many films to point a larger group of students to for further exploration, as the book now does. But I believe that the benefits certainly would overshadow such drawbacks. For potentially, at least, it would give to the text and the analysis that which it most acutely is lacking in its current state. Namely a strong guiding idea of what is to be demonstrated throughout the book; a strong idea guiding the exploration and analysis undertaken – and not least guiding the reader.

Moreover, such an approach might well have done away with some of the anxiety which marks the text, now manifesting itself in the author attempting to legitimate and explain her endeavour far more than I believe is necessary, or even sound. And, instead let her concentrate on getting the analysis to speak for itself, and demonstrate that the project is one worthwhile.

Such an approach might also hold in itself a potential for explaining one of the major mysteries surfacing in this work, and which has been hinted at in the above. Namely, that although film is proposed to contribute to producing and re-producing systems of discourse which shape collective perceptions of management, and thereby the themes discussed throughout the book, these same themes – according to Bell – appear to demonstrate a “historical endurance despite significant socio-economic changes in the period since film making began” (p. 202). And, in case they should disappear for a bit, Bell concludes that they merely “recede until societal conditions change in a way that permits their revival in a revised form” (*ibid.*). But – forcing the argument just a bit – if film discourse plays such an important role in shaping society, and society’s view of organization and management, how come discourse can remain (thematically) stable while society is changing significantly? – And in case it is not that stable, but dependant on ‘societal conditions’? What explanatory power lies in such a conclusion? Could this insight not, rather, suggest that our collective perceptions of management aren’t indeed, to any greater extent, shaped by these seemingly stable discourses or themes, but that you always will be able to find examples of such themes if you are looking for it? Or, on the contrary and more plausibly: that there actually have been important changes in these discourses which we haven’t yet paid enough attention to, and properly understood?

Is it not also in order to better understand the somewhat paradoxical conclusion of Bell, that we must proceed to a Žižeko-Lacanian framework for carrying out symptomatic readings of cultural texts such as film? I am convinced it would make medication a less tempting option.

references

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