



Paid in Full? Writing Beyond the Pale*

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Two major management journals have published special issues on language and discourse this year.¹ Much of what is contained in these volumes reproduces the debates and concerns outlined in the 2000 special issue of *Organization*.² That is, the work remains part of “different epistemological and ontological positions” that do not concern themselves with “what kind of discourse [do] we want to create and how free we are to constitute new discourses” (Boje, Oswick and Ford, 2004: 573). This issue of *ephemera* is also concerned with texts, discourse and organization; how discourse organizes and the organization of discourse. Without wanting to speak for the various contributors, what we, as the editors of *ephemera* 4(4), want to do is focus on the quotation above in relation to new forms of writing.

In short, the papers presented in this issue either discuss or are themselves new forms of writing. For us, new writing should not conform to established systems and canons and must therefore be free from them. Our intention is to open up a space for new writing that is arguably outside of the established academic domain. In so doing, and against Boje *et al.* (2004), we believe that new writing is neither recognised nor encouraged by academia. Thus, it is not an issue of how free we are to develop new writing *in* the academy but more that to have new writing we must be free *of* the academy.

It is now well established that there are many forms of writing ranging from those that may be termed, paraphrasing Blanchot (1949), ‘technical writing’, to those more concerned with aesthetic style. Arguably much of what passes for writing in management and organization studies concerns itself with the former as it aims to convince the reader of an argument; the causal relations between events are explained explicitly, rather than being implicit in the form of the narrative itself. In other words, the explanatory form is made autonomous. Yet the double slope of writing requires that

* Eric B and Rakim *Paid in full* ©Fourth and Broadway, 1996. Some years ago whilst Tony was a PhD student his then supervisor was cited in a major management journal as one of several important but marginalized academics writing on organization to which organization studies owed a major – and as yet unpaid – debt. (We’re not providing the reference so as not to unduly embarrass Tony’s supervisor). Perhaps cynically the article was published in a journal that arguably continues to ignore and marginalize new forms of writing.

1 *The Academy of Management Review* 29(4); *Organization Studies* 25(1).

2 *Organization*, vol. 7.

even such 'technical writing' must have aesthetic style: one cannot have content without form, or style without substance. Nonetheless style here is secondary, ostensibly concerned only with issues of clarity and impartiality, the issue is to convince rather than affect readers.

A poet's work seeks to move us, to convince not by recourse to reason but by affect. Javier Cercas quotes the Spanish Falangist José Antonio Primo de Rivera – a man often surrounded by poets – as saying "people have never been moved except by poets" before Cercas goes on to argue that "young men go off to the front and kill and are killed for words...and that's why poets are always the ones who win wars" (2001/2004: 39).

Poetry, passion, polemic, rhetoric, uncertainty, a certain lack of clarity – all have little place in Plato's world; all are marginalized or perhaps regarded as beyond the pale as accepted canonical form. Perhaps poets are what Boje, Oswick and Ford still seek in 2004? Nonetheless, as writers we need to recognize that all writing has both a technical and an aesthetic slope. Organization studies needs to address both without preferencing one at the expense of the other. Is it time now for new writing to come in from the cold and for the academy to welcome back its prodigal writers?

Scrambled Eggs

To be forced to admire what one instinctively hates,
And to hate all which one would naturally love is the
Condition of our lives in these bad years, and so is the cause
Beneath other causes for our sickness and our death.
(Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself*)

(Tony, at home in his studio)

I hate reading management texts. Why? Because I find most of them to be arid and dry. They do little for me beyond instilling a sense of boredom. I'd much rather read a novel, watch a film or listen to music. At least these tend to reach out and touch me in a way that management texts so rarely – if ever – do.

I have to pay the bills though, and so I research and (occasionally) publish on organization theory. Now, I've lost count of the journal reviewers who tell me I need to reference the management canon more. For Christ sake aren't there enough of us doing that already! I'd much rather reference works – any work whether it's a novel, poetry, music, art, whatever – that mean something to me; do something for me. But I have to pay the bills and so I need to 'keep my views undercover'.³ Oops!...I did it again.⁴

Ho hum, guess I'll have to make the claim that my work is grounded in 'the new/literary journalism' and like Capote, Mailer and Wolfe I'm just being frank, human, informal and, err, ironic. Convinced?

3 Black Radical Mark II *Monsoon* ©To the Bone Records, 1989.

4 Britney Spears *Oops!...I did it again*, ©Jive Records, 2000.

In his article Alexander Styhre follows the canonical management writing style to discuss the writing of Thomas Pynchon. Styhre sets out to convince readers that Pynchon's 'scrambling of literary codes' offers a new means from which we may write on, and so understand, organizations more clearly. For Styhre, Pynchon offers a means by which we may break from 'received modes of representations' and 'reinforce the prerogative of 'freedom of speech'. He follows Pynchon to question the orthodox belief in scientific progress and its operation as a root paradigm in organization studies before utilising the work of Best and Kellner (2001) to argue a need for 'aesthetic maps' in addition to the 'theoretical maps' more traditional to the management and organizational studies literature.

There is a tremendous sense of fun, play and irony in Styhre's piece for he follows a 'theoretical map' in order to *question* and unground the self-same unquestioned use of them. Thus, whilst Styhre does not follow Pynchon's style of 'scrambling literary codes' he manages to offer an alternative to the canon in the form of a reflexive irony at play (notably one of Styhre's early references in the article is to Richard Rorty) that gently mocks whilst appearing to conform.

Adam Hansen's paper is concerned with understanding 'deviant mobility of 'rogues' in organizations'. In a beautifully written article he draws out the way that rogues have been understood historically to call for a reappraisal of roguish behaviour in our current 'bad' years. It would seem that we have as much need now for rogues as we do for new forms of writing. Rogues and new forms of writing must of necessity remain beyond the pale so as to maintain a dialogism with, and be transgressive of, the mainstream. What we need, perhaps, is not another hero, not another major addition to the accepted and normalizing canon, but someone who will piss in its gene pool.

Thomas Basbøll may well be pissing in the gene pool in his article. Rather than presenting a 'theoretical map', he instead offers a piece of writing that is an aesthetic one. This is a 'scrambling of codes' in action, canonical texts are brought forth in order to be questioned and dismissed. The very use of quotation marks around the names of established theorists in management and organization studies underscores the shallow and ephemeral nature of a canon. There is no attempt to convince and explain but instead this is writing as aesthetic pleasure: you are either touched by it or not. This piece has all the wolfish and roguish charm of transgression – there is no attempt to play by the rules – and in so doing it calls rules into question and demonstrates that canonical rules are there to be broken. All of a sudden the canon appears to be built on very shaky foundations. But Basbøll does not set out to replace one set of old rules with new ones: this isn't a case of 'meet the new boss, same as the old boss'.⁵ As a transgressive act, and as Styhre points out in discussing the destructive nature of Pynchon's work, the concern is to transgress not to form new rules for others to abide by. Basbøll leaves it up to you to choose what you do next in an uncertain world. It is – literally – time to make up your mind.

Jamie King, we would venture, has made up his mind. His note, taken from his forthcoming novel, paints a grim picture of life in a call centre. In the last twenty years

5 The Who, *Won't get fooled again*, © Decca, 1971.

many academics have offered theoretical analyses of call centre management, some of which are empirically grounded in thick descriptions. King's note sidesteps the theory and instead fictionalises an account, and in so doing tells it 'like it is': all the beauty, all the pain, the glory, the passion, the little details that make up the real. Reminiscent of James Kelman's writing, *this* is a thick description that isn't afraid to include the boredom, vacuity and meaninglessness of modern life. If anything it is the repetition of this vacuity in a modern Kafkaesque organizational setting that provides the narrative drive. Few, if any of us, would be able to claim that we've never experienced something similar.

Is this however new writing? King's piece reminds us of Kafka, Joyce and, as we've already suggested, James Kelman. Perhaps we need to relax the stranglehold around management writing and draw a deep breath; realise what we in the academy have missed for so many years and just how far writing has developed beyond our circumscribed view of what writing 'should be'.

Hakala reviews two texts concerned with knowledge production. In general terms, the debate centers on the Mode 1-Mode 2 distinction which supposedly captures the difference between inquiry governed by strictly academic interests and inquiry guided by more socially relevant interests. In practice, however, 'Mode 2' is much more diffuse than 'relevance' normally connotes – closer to a 'market attractor', reducing the university from an institution with the aim of unifying knowledge to a convenient physical space that enables the 'communication' of various knowledge interests. In reading the piece we were struck by the potential for Mode 2 production to succumb to Bourdieu's critiques that Hakala does well to draw out. In relation to writing we are again left with Boje *et al.*'s (2004) question regarding a space for new writing: is there any room for this in an academy obsessed with developing and maintaining a canon? It seems, following Hakala's use of economic nomenclature, that there probably is not.

In Toyoki's review of Hernes, Toyoki discusses Lefebvre's concept of space and spatial production. Rather akin to Bergson's philosophy of time (1911), here is a resounding critique of the prevailing view that we only inhabit space, suggesting rather that we also live through it. For Toyoki, space, like time, has both properties. This introduces the potential that the space of writing is both form and content, technical and aesthetic, ontological and epistemological. Thus it is not just the text produced that is important but what/that the writer comes to be (through) writing. Interestingly Toyoki acknowledges this in the afterword. This opens up a space for discussion and debate and introduces concerns about the production and utilisation of Lefebvre. Hernes, perhaps, has found a place whilst Toyoki is more open and still willing to continue to search for a space to be.

And the News Is

(Tony, sitting in his office at work but wishing he had stayed at home in his studio)

I'm surrounded by second level undergraduate essays that I've just finished marking. The assignment curiously enough required them to reflect on the adequacy of their own writing and consider how they might develop their academic skills here further.

Some seem to have more to say, and can do so more thoughtfully, than I can. I'm struggling with this, I don't know what to write about writing and my interest, to be honest, is slipping. What I'd rather be doing is playing with some music software – Ableton Live V4 – that I've just acquired for my recording studio. The only thing that's stopping me is that I really should stop messing with it and instead sit down and read the manual (note to self – RTFM).

And that's a problem. It's soooo dull, if it wasn't I wouldn't be writing this now. Yet another technical manual – and as a geek I've got loads but have read very few of them – that is so very boringly written and presented. Sure there are some pretty screen shots, sure there are lots of examples, but the writing style... I think I'm going to cop out and buy the training video instead. Or then again, maybe I'll just carry on playing with it – it doesn't really matter that I won't ever get to know all the ins and outs of the software, I can get by with 'good enough'.

Sad to say the Ableton manual isn't the worst, not by a long mile. You should try the Steinberg Cubase SX manual. Better still with this one you have to pay extra to get a printed copy and I haven't got £550 for the software and then an extra £20 for the printed manual... no thanks. So I have to read that PDF file, continually tabbing between the software sequencer screen and the PDF. Yet again it's written in such a boring style that I lose interest far too quickly.

I've just bought an IRiver hard disc MP3 player. I've read the manual seven times and still can't understand it. Maybe I'm just stupid, but it simply doesn't make sense to me. Fortunately I've worked out what to do. Great player, shame about the manual.

Why can't someone write a technical manual that's funny? Is it really the case that we can only convey a technical issue in a dull, dry and linear way? The medium of PDFs and electronic hypertext manuals is non-sequential and can embed other media such as video clips. This is supposed to be 'new media' so why is it all so boring?

My daughter is now learning to read and write at school. She combines pictures, collages and photos in her writing. Her latest is a sign for her bedroom. 'No boys allowed, only girls in this bedroom' says the speech bubble coming out of the mouth of a girl pointing at a much smaller boy. She says that the picture makes the sign much nicer to look at.

And she is right.

So why does a four-year old understand the intertwining of the aesthetic and the theoretical maps so well? It isn't *just* the intertwining of other aesthetic forms; it's also the wit, humour and intertextuality. If a four-year old can do this, why can't we? Is it because we have been constrained for too long and now have too much invested, too much to lose? At what stage will we educate this out of her in order that she concentrate on dull, lifeless but academically correct prose? When will she be restrained to writing through a glass darkly?

A few years ago we attended a conference themed around new approaches to presenting and understanding organizations. Tony presented his paper having previously recorded it against a music backdrop onto his laptop. It didn't take long before some of the audience left muttering about how Tony showed no respect for an academic audience

and that his taste in music sucked. Apparently as academics we can talk about alternatives and difference just so long as we aren't (too) alternative.

So in response to Boje *et al.*'s questions about what kinds of new discourse we are allowed in management and organization texts, the answer seems to be: apparently nothing. It seems that the canon is happy to have a rhetoric around heteroglossia but prefers that 'the new boss is the same as the old boss'. Has management and organizational studies opened their doors to welcome new ways of writing since it lauded those at the margins? No, not really. If they have, then of the thousands of articles published annually, *why* are there so very few that either *are* new writing or discuss it?

We're still on the fringe, forced to take risks and sneered at if we fail: rogues and vagabonds, perhaps admired from afar for what we are but not acceptable, at least NIMBY (a UK acronym for 'not in my back yard'). The politics of writing in management academia is about repetition, not difference. The canon knows and is confident of and in itself by being able to separate out and repudiate 'the other'. That's not a game we wish to be part of.

Paid in full? Like hell.

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