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The Invisibility of the Organization

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abstract

The system theoretical thesis that organizations are social systems, consisting of communication, has as a consequence that organizations are invisible for both internal and external observers. The communication of the organization is invisible, not just because of its ephemeral nature or its overwhelming quantity, but because communication itself is invisible. Nevertheless it seems possible to observe and describe organizations. This paper shows how organizations make themselves accessible in spite of their invisibility. Based on the analysis of Marcel Proust in *Remembrance of Things Past,* the name is presented as a simplified token of unity, followed by the text, the story, management and rhetoric as means of representations of unity. As management is a symbol for the organization as a whole, its function is to coordinate the 'directing distinctions', which are used to observe and evaluate an organization. Therefore, management is a political function and must make use of rhetorical devices.

It is a central tenet in the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann that a social system is operating in the medium of communication. Focusing on one of the three types of social systems, which Luhmann deals with, the organization, this means that communication is not something that an organization engages in once in a while, in between other important tasks. Communication is the very stuff that an organization is made of, which leads to a range of related theses: that it does not consist of things or people and that it is invisible – to itself as well as to its surroundings.

Communication

In order for communication to take place, a sender must encode a form – *information* – into a sensory medium and a recipient must decode the encoded information. Using Gregory Bateson's tricky definition of information as "a difference, which makes a difference" (Bateson, 1973: 428), Luhmann defines communication as a unity of three differences, information, utterance and understanding (Luhmann, 1984: 212). I am going to pay special attention to the following two details: first, that *information* is not something *out there*, as a physical thing, and second, that communication equals neither the sender's *utterance* nor the recipient's *understanding*. Therefore, it happens neither in the sender nor in the recipient but between them – in a vacuum in which there is only light and air. "Communication cannot be observed directly and hence one has to infer its existence" (Luhmann, 1984: 226).

Communication does not consist of sound waves in the air, images on a screen or words on paper. Nothing material constitutes communication in itself. Communication requires signs, which are two-sided forms[1] in which one side is accessible to the senses of both sender and recipient whereas the other side unfolds an invisible world of meaning (Luhmann, 1999: 23). Manipulating visible structures of signs, invisible structures of meaning are manipulated, hopefully in a way which coordinates states of the sender with states of the receiver. Whether coordination takes place as understanding or misunderstanding is often hard to tell (Luhmann, 1984: 196). Through signs, the world is redoubled and obtains a double perspective.

At a closer look, communication is a precarious affair. Sender and recipient cannot see it or hear it but have to test from the outside whether they are using signs with reasonably similar meanings. They have to organize communication backwards, using later events to test earlier events. But since signs do not only have standard meanings but also private and sub-cultural meanings, communication cannot be reliant on understanding in the radical interpretation of the word where encoding and decoding are identical.

One can refer to increasing levels of complexity in which the simplest form of communication merely sends the message that 'I am here'. The sender utters a sound while the recipient decodes the sound as a message, which states nothing outside itself: that a message is being sent. The effort of understanding is minimal but does, however, carry a *communio ergo sum*. More complex, although still manageable, is the communication in which the sender's message, 'pass me the salt', is immediately tested against the behavior of the recipient. Outright disturbing is communication of complicated mental constructions where the understanding cannot be directly tested against behavior whether it is music, abstract painting or theoretical claims such as for example: 'organizations are invisible'.

As consciousness is invisible and cannot be 'expressed' directly, consciousness and communication are totally apart. They do not overlap, not even a tiny bit. Communication arises as an *emergent* phenomenon in its own right and with its own principles from a double expectation in which sender and recipient *internally* handles the difference between information and message and between 'you' and 'me' (Luhmann, 1984: 196). It has no centre because none of the parties possesses or controls it. It can therefore be said, somewhat pointedly, that it is not persons but communication *itself* that communicates. But of course, this is an exaggeration as a sender and a recipient are necessary for communication to take place

Normal language users are daily confirmed in their conviction that communication is possible as they speak and send e-mails to each other. Communication releases the small child from his inner dejectedness when he is able to define himself as 'me' in opposition to 'you' and to 'it', proudly conquering his identity as a pronoun, 'I', in the triangle of communication between I and You and It. Despite disappointments, we resign ourselves to the soothing illusion that as long as we operate on the inner side of

1 The concept of form, as used here, is introduced by Spencer-Brown (1994:1), who identifies form and distinction.

the signs, using sounds, letters and images, the space of meaning will ultimately articulate itself in harmonic rhythms to sender and recipient respectively (Luhmann, 1999: 24).

In the communicative conundrum of everyday life, the tragic dimension of communication is made invisible: that it is not only presence but above all absence, that there is a discrepancy between the amount of words and the amount of memory – to remember is primarily a question of forgetting – and that the nature of communication holds an inherent paradox: The same is different to sender and recipient so that the sweets of understanding are reflected in the irritation of misunderstanding.[2] Often, sender and recipient can only be comforted by agreement to the extent that they abstain from testing the reality of this agreement. Habermas speaks of the way in which all understanding is enveloped in "shadows of difference" (Habermas, 1988: 56), and von Humboldt states that "all understanding is always also a non-understanding, all agreement in thought and emotion also a deviation from each other" (von Humboldt quoted in Habermas, 1988: 56).

The Invisible Organization

According to the systems theory of Luhmann, an organization is, as a social system, made of communications, not of artifacts or people. Taking the perspective of an ant and enumerating everything that meets the senses when moving around through its offices and corridors, one will never meet 'the organization'. It is not an element, parallel with other elements. It is a unity, and it is a category-mistake to confuse a unity with its elements (Ryle, 1963: 17f). And its elements are not artifacts or people since no amount of things stacked on top of each other or people standing shoulder by shoulder will constitute an organization just like that.

The artifacts and employees of an organization are not joined through physical ties, and despite the linguistic coincidence, an organization is no organism. Observing the organization as an autopoietic system, Luhmann argues that it, as a unity, precedes its elements because it itself creates its elements in its network of elements (Luhmann, 2000: 45f). The organization defines its own connectedness, it is not random and detached bits of communication that amass from below and finally give birth to an organization.

Like consciousness, communication might be directed at things but is not as a result transformed into a thing. It is not identical with what it is about, and there is, as Luhmann keeps saying, no point-to-point relation between language and world (Luhmann, 1999: 24). Artifacts – and people – belong to the environment of the organization, and what happens to them does not in the same way happen to the organization. A warehouse can burn to the ground, and a person can drink coffee or be

2 Cf. Luhmann (1984: 194): "The identity of a bit of information must, by the way, be thought of in a way that is compatible with the fact that it means something very different for the sender and the recipient". Later, it is stated that understanding includes misunderstanding as something normal (Luhmann, 1984: 196).

divorced, which an organization cannot. The stuff an organization is made of is different from material objects and it cannot, therefore, connect to objects. All material possessions of an organization can be replaced in the same way that a person can have his organs or cells replaced without turning into a different person. Material objects are externally related to the organization.[3]

On the other hand, an organization can transform artifacts and people into signs, giving them meaning which communicates about the organization. It can redouble artifacts and people so that they become both more than and less than themselves because the unveiling of meaning obscures the observation of the physical, biological or mental entity. One sees the sign and not the thing, the uniform and the role and not the man. Even the products of the organization have no social existence outside the communication, which happens around them. It is easy to be seduced into thinking that one sees the organization when looking at its symbols attached to products, buildings and cars. And when seeing its manager, or headquarters, one is tempted to believe that what one sees is the organization incarnated, whether in flesh and blood or in stone and glass.

Thus modern towns are filled with easily recognizable signs, with logos and names that are massively repeated and related to particular organizations. However, even when a sign relates to an organization, one should not confuse the sign with the signified. One sees the signifier, not the signified, even if they are spontaneously connected like words and their meanings. As Saussure told us, the relation between the two sides of the sign is purely conventional (1916: 26).

The fact that an organization is invisible does not merely result from the fact that only a negligible part of its communication is available, whether one is located inside or outside it, and regardless of the strength of one's sensory organs and brain. In the present, too many things are taking place simultaneously to allow observation or control, and the past and the future are for obvious reasons not accessible. Neither does it result from the fact that communication is a transient occurrence, which incessantly flows back in time so that communication always happens in the present. It is not a thing among other things and is not lying about on the street waiting to be picked up (Luhmann, 1984: 77f).

To assume that organizations consist of invisible communications leaves an unusual question unanswered: How to observe organizations? How to ensure durability and even constancy when communication is transient whereas organizations have a long life? How does the organizational system, which ties together invisible communication, obtain sufficient identity so that we can speak of it? The fact that an organization is invisible does not define it as absence or nothing, and its invisibility is different from the invisibility of X-rays and black holes. Impractical questions of this kind constitute the contribution of organization philosophy to organization theory.

3 This opens for the complicated problems of interpenetration or "structural coupling", which will not be treated here, cf. (Luhmann, 1984: 286ff)

To claim that an organization is invisible is admittedly to push the issue to its extreme. No random extreme, however. If, for a short while, we give up the linguistic routines, which, according to Nietzsche, create the illusion that the world is simpler than it is[4], and if we ask what it means to observe an organization, it regularly leads to a kind of embarrassment. One senses something tricky about organizations although they are spoken of as if they were small round things.[5] However, the aim here is not empty provocation but an attempt to push the issue to its extreme in order to enjoy the trip back: What makes us *capable*, as internal and external observers, of talking about of organizations regardless of which 'guiding distinction'[6] we are using? How is unity created from incalculable and invisible communication?

The Unfolding of a Name

Let's begin with the beginning. When an organization is born, it must, like other children, be given a *name*. A modern organization also needs to obtain a birth certificate, a *text*, which states its identity and purpose in legal terms. However, that does not suffice. Like a person, an organization must present an overall *description* of itself, which, adding time and decisions, turns into a *story*. If we focus on organizations, this leads us to the *management* that is responsible for the organization's public texts and stories, faced with many other texts and stories, told by the employees, the customers or the mass media. In order for a manager to adopt his own text and his own story and carry it through vis-à-vis other texts and stories, he must use *rhetorical* devices.

I will follow a central path that can be articulated by a number of discursive *tricks* that will enable us to observe the invisible organization. The path goes from the organization's name, via its texts and stories, to its management and rhetoric.

Identifying an organization requires a semiotic operation since it is not a physical but a social system that operates with meaning (Luhmann, 1990: 27) – and the only way to observe meaning is by using those small relays which are called signs and which give unity to the invisible and foothold in the stream of communication.

A name does not need to mean anything – it could be a date – but it does assert an address. As time passes it might establish a content of its own and become almost natural, in the same way that a child's name is at first random and strange until it gradually fuses with the child and becomes enriched by the emotions one has for the

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4 "With words we are constantly and all the time seduced into believing that objects are simpler than they are, separated from each other, indivisible, each existing for itself" (Nietzsche, 1997: 878-879).

5 "What is a thing or object [*Sache*]? A round and whole thing is asked for" (Hegel, 1976: 105).

6 The phrase 'guiding distinction' is a technical term used in the system theory of Niklas Luhmann. According to him, modern societies are differentiated in functional subsystems such as science, politics and science, each of which simplifies observation by using a simple binary code, a 'directing distinction' such as the code of money, of power or of truth. On the basis of this simplification, semantic and social systems of great complexity can evolve. Further details can be found in Luhmann (1987).

child. Like the pronoun ‘I’, which puzzled David Hume (1965: 252), a name is not en entity nor a center, but a frame, which can be filled with an immense amount of observations, descriptions, explanations and consequences from many points of view. Still, these different observations presuppose that there is an organization to observe.

A name of an organization creates unity in a chaotic diversity of communication, which can be connected, in the present, with the open horizons of the past and the future. For this to happen, it must be possible for an observer to identify the organization *in other ways*, that is, to distinguish between the organization and its environment. In the case of human beings, the body is used as a reference point. In the case of organizations, this device will not do.

According to Luhmann, the *decision* is the vital knot of an organization, and as decisions presuppose earlier decisions, an organization is a network of (communication of) decisions (Luhmann, 1992: 208; 2000: 123). Only persons who are officially appointed can make binding decisions, and even their decisions are often made void. Everything in an organization is decided, not only members and artifacts, but also their decisions-making procedures and competences. Moreover, even if an organization has no sense organs, it must be able to irritate itself with information about its own state and the state of the world. It must have channels of communication so that one can contact the organization through a *front stage*, a door or a phone line, and for example listen to a person’s voice, maybe recorded, which lets you know that you are talking with the organization. By a hermeneutic effort the observer places himself in an organizational system, guided by his cognitive routines and the available signs in physical space. The whole structure of experience is covered by the name, even if the person using the name may be utterly ignorant of what happens ‘inside’ the organization. The name holds a creative mystery because it seems to provide access to a unity that is otherwise evasive and difficult to grasp. It is the same mysterious qualities that are found in personal pronouns such as ‘I’ and ‘you’.

A name is shorthand and can be saturated with meaning, circulate quickly and eventually become a symbol, a self-referring signifier that melts together with the signified (Luhmann, 1999: 32f). That requires a double operation so that one first learns the meaning of the name and then forgets the learning process, letting the name emerge as a spontaneous sign.

A name refers but has no standard meaning. When one probe into the meaning of a proper name, however, no solidity is found, only what Luhmann calls distinctions and Derrida calls traces (Derrida and Bennington, 1993: 105). Luhmann talks about “transport of differences without beginning or end” (1992: 217) and as a consequence he claims that ontology is a by-product of communication (1984: 205). Both Luhmann (1984: 115) and Derrida (1978: 70) observe the violence done by proper names.[7] Even if a name means different things to different persons, they can assume that what is different is still the same, so that difference presupposes sameness.

7 Between Luhmann’s theory of distinctions and Derrida’s theory of writing, as presented in the first part of (Derrida, 1978) there is a profound kinship, which goes as far as to similarities in the combination of singular words.

Even if a name is purely arbitrary, it is not a performative in the sense of Austin (1963). In using a name one is not doing anything (1963: 132). Even if a name might be used wrongly, it is not the performance, but the name, which is wrong. While *naming* might be a performative act, the name is not.

A name is like a keyhole through which the organization opens up, both to the meaning which is installed in the name, and to the reality to which the name refers, depending on one's previous experience with the organization. In the further analysis of the name I will follow Marcel Proust who also reflects on what proper names are and do. He does not, however, have in mind the names of organizations, but instead something as old fashioned as names of cities.

According to Proust, a name absorbs and transforms the image of a city so that it replaces the city and obtains an opaqueness of its own. It reveals and obscures by putting focus on the city while also hiding it behind a shield of meaning. Proust mentions 'Florence' and 'Venice':

> But if these names thus permanently absorbed the image I had formed of these towns, it was only by transforming that image, by subordinating its reappearance in me to their own special laws; and in consequence of this they made it more beautiful, but at the same time more different from anything that the towns of Normandy or Tuscany could in reality be, and, by increasing the arbitrary delights of my imagination, aggravated the disenchantment that was in store for me when I set out upon my travels. They magnified the idea that I had formed of certain places on the surface of the globe, making them more special and in consequence more real. (Proust, 1989: 420)

The name employs a double mechanism that could be called an *explosive condensation*. Once it has concentrated meaning like in a spicy sauce, compressed the springs of meaning so to speak, it can explode and eject meaning so that the invisible becomes accessible as an imperative emotion. Proust says: "How much more individual still was the character they assumed from being designated by names, names that were for them alone, proper names such as people have! Words present to us a little picture of things, clear and familiar, like the pictures hung upon the walls of schoolrooms to give the children an illustration of what is meant by a carpenter's bench, a bird, an anthill" (Proust, 1989: 420f). Whether words can be said to be pictures is an open question. But the fact that names hold strong powers is beyond dispute, which is why the meaning of names is always a matter of conflict and struggle.

A name gives everything in a city the same uniform quality so that the meaning of the name becomes transferred to the city, detached not only from context but also from insight. One can love the meaning of the name 'Florence' without knowing anything about the real city in Tuscany, Italy. The name separates the signifier from the signified and creates distance between them at the same time as the name itself becomes charged with a meaning that replaces knowledge with an emotion, bewitching or repulsive or both.

Thus the name becomes a 'safe custody', which Proust sees as misleading because it is 'much simplified' (Proust, 1989: 422). However, it can be argued that precisely this combination of *displacement, simplification* and *emotion* makes up the contribution of the name. It relieves memory so that it does not merely refer to for example an organization, known from personal experience, but takes over the creation of meaning so that it is no longer the products of the organization, which cast a spell on its name, but the name that casts a spell on the products. Rather than an invisible reality we encounter an emotional concentrate, which might find expression in a *logo* and eventually through repetition descend to the invisible, but current-carrying layers of the soul.

The names "magnetized my desires", writes Proust who senses that "perhaps, indeed, the enforced simplicity of these images was one of the reasons for the hold that they had over me" (Proust, 1989: 423). A name is more than a sign; it is also an aesthetic device. But when Proust arrived to the physical city, Florence or Venice, the names lost their beautiful and pure ambience, and he became consumed with the task "to include in each of them two or three of the principal 'curiosities' of the town" (Proust, 1989: 422). Who has not experienced the discrepancy between what is said about an organization and the way it appears from personal experience, that is, who has not found himself in a messy office and in vain tried to relate the visible reality to the invisible image of the organization?

Proust follows the transformation through which a name turns into an "inaccessible ideal" and goes on: "Doubtless, if, at that time, I had paid more attention to what was in my mind when I pronounced the words 'going to Florence, to Parma, to Pisa, to Venice', I should have realised that what I saw was in no sense a town, but something as different from anything that I knew" (Proust, 1989: 423) – that is, a name, which both replaces and incarnates the invisible so that it might subsequently be *manipulated directly by symbolic means, beyond contact with reality*.

Proust says that he was not "paying any heed to the contradiction that there was in my wishing to look at and to touch with the organs of my senses what had been elaborated by the spell of my dreams and not perceived by my senses at all" (Proust, 1989: 424). However, the link between the invisible and the visible is readily at hand: *The name* joins them. And as man is a communicating animal, being brought up in language, it is an automatic achievement for the observer to install a distinction between visible and invisible, so that sensory experiences are traced to something different from themselves. The imaginary qualities of the name endow it with an alluring obscurity. The name attains its own magic and hence its own value.

Names provide that which in rhetorical terms is called *pathos*. Proust speaks of "the atmosphere of dreams, which my imagination had secreted in the name of Venice" (Proust, 1989: 427). However, organizations do not leave their names to the randomness of tradition but hire experts to saturate them with meaning so that dreams are not only fictive in the sense of being "unreal" but also in the sense of "having been". Dreams work in reality, which makes them real – that is, *facts* – so that fiction and fact do not only meet by means of a shared linguistic root but also in reality. Ideological constructions are collective fictions, but may have very real consequences for the persons involved. And Proust takes the point farther: Only the reality which finds a duplicate reality, a simulacrum, in the imagination is truly real, creating a desire to re-experience the imagination in reality (Proust, 1989: 427).

When a name becomes rooted in the desire of an observer a hyper-sensibility arises, which reflects back upon the name or the organization that holds the name. Proust speaks of "the supplementary sense with which love had temporarily endowed me" (Proust, 1989: 450) and which gives access to invisible qualities and also activates emotions.

Finally, Proust explores what happens when a name looses its magic, and since he is neither an apologist nor a consultant, he is able to follow through on his theme. As an older person, he returned to the places of his youth, where he once, as a believer, experienced the spell of a yearning which was not brought on by anything exterior. Once the spell was broken, he no longer had "a belief to infuse into them [the 'new components of the spectacle'] to give them consistency, unity and life" (Proust, 1989: 460). They assume no solid form and have no meaning. Without belief one is left with "a fetishistic attachment to old things" so that reality becomes inhumanly empty (Proust, 2002: 460, 462). Names, and hence the unities created by names, are powerful but also transient like time.

From Name to Text

For Proust, a name represents not only a linguistic point but also a text, a complex of meaning. A text, according to Paul Ricæeur, is "any discourse fixed in writing" – where "writing" is not just "fixed speech", but just as by Derrida precedes the normal distinction between writing and talking (Ricæeur, 2001: 339). Whereas a name spreads itself invisibly in the waters of the soul, a text presents explicitly some chosen characteristics of an organization. Instead of the vague associations connected with a name you have the explicit statement of a text. Of course, such associations might be intended by an organization as a means of making an *image*, but still the organization is unable to control the patterns of meaning.[8] Following the name, the text is *the second way* in which an organization becomes visible. When it cannot be pointed to, one has to describe it in order to find out what it is. An organization attains access to itself through a self-description, which cannot include itself, so that the self-description is and is not a part of the whole – the self – to which it refers. However, it also finds access to itself through outside descriptions, so that an entire choir of texts created from different perspectives and using different guiding distinctions competes for the organizational soul. And outside these texts there exist no tangible organization, only more texts because, as Humberto Maturana states, everything said is always said by an observer (Maturana, 1980: 6). As a consequence Maturana speaks of "multi-verses" instead of a universe.

Despite the evanescence of communication, an organization has to construct a self that has some permanence in order for it to be observed and described. Besides names, this requires texts that provide simplification and stability. Even though a text does not change it can only contribute to communication through an interpretation that activates

8 The concept of meaning is here used in accordance with the definition of Luhmann: meaning is "a surplus of references to other possibilities of experience and action" (1984: 93).

it in the present and opens to conflicts. A text is constructed on the basis of experience, but the same reality allows for different texts, depending on guiding distinctions, perspective, knowledge and feelings. In Proust's words a text throws a shadow of the past in front of it, into the present and the future (Proust, 1989: 873). Thus, an organization's own text, its self-description, can be seen as its memoirs (Luhmann, 2000: 465) – what was considered important at a specific point in time. However, it can also be considered to be a tool, which it employs in order to present itself through factual, normative and aesthetic effects, that is, to create presence for itself and giving itself some solidity. In the circular relation between texts and reality, reality creates texts and texts create reality, so that fact and fictions are both *done* and fictive texts might have very real consequences. Even if some facts might be hard to deny, a text that combines facts and places them in a context changes their meaning, and in the overwhelmingly complex network of causes and effects, which combines the part with the future through the loophole of the present, an observer can make his own selection and create his own text.

We might make a distinction between basic texts and descriptions. An organization has a *basic text*, which describes its *purpose* in order for it to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant and between success and failure.[9] The basic text also has to include a *program* that establishes how to make decisions so that the organization can prescribe its own 'enforced decision making' and distinguish between valid and invalid decisions.

A basic text is a legal text and the courts thrive on disagreement over its meaning. However, despite its status, it is a meager text, maybe even the dead hand of the past, which says very little about what keeps the organization alive in the present. It has slipped out of focus, out in the peripheral blind spot of observation, where it unfolds itself as a mere routine so that the interest can be focused on the living texts, which we can term *descriptions,* whether they are self-descriptions or external descriptions.

A description can be made from many perspectives, from within or without, from the past or from the future, and in terms of economy or science or politics. An observed may construct different motives and choose between different causes, so that the observer, as Luhmann (2000: 455) argues, becomes 'the cause of causation' because causality depends on a decision. If the organization's identity is established in a text, it has to deal with the disturbing problem that there are many texts, which are only partially compatible with each other. Although many facts, as already noted, cannot easily be disputed, a text is inevitably selective and arranges the facts it prefers in an idiosyncratic pattern. In the same way that Proust describes beauty, we may claim that organizations are "a sequence of hypotheses" (1989: 766).

Attempts have been made to distinguish between true and distorted texts. For example, in his influential writings on organizational culture Edgar Schein (1985) distinguishes between basic assumptions, which are unconscious, and values, which are only manifestations. On the first level we meet the organization as it is, that is, its assumed *identity*; on the second level we meet it as it appears, that is, its *image*.

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9 According to James March, decisions are 'framed' by assumptions which define the problem to be solved, the information to be collected and the dimensions to be considered (1994: 14).

This distinction might be useful because an organization normally hides behind an idealized text about itself in order to reap the benefits described by Proust. An official description of an organization is idealistic because its purpose is not to present facts. It is also a tool to commit and motivate, that is, create facts by contribute to a minimization of the difference between ideal and *status quo*. An organizational text must make a delicate balance between ‘too much’ and ‘to little’ truth, even if the audience may not be in a position to distinguish between what is true and false. It must blend the past ‘was’ of the organization with a current ‘is’ and adds to that a moral ‘should’ and maybe a futuristic ‘would like to be’. It must present a picture of the future, which might come true, so that the very presentation of the text motivates employees, the public, shareholders and customers to support it. This double purpose means that organizational texts normally are observed with some tolerance. When one listens to after dinner speeches or reads brochures, one need not overburden oneself with demands of exact and verifiable empirical truth.

A self-description is a contract in which an organization commits itself to a select audience. The orientation towards the future legitimizes a range of deviations from the truth and much discrete suppression of what is known to de true. Even if the text is not lying, it does not present the whole truth. With the excuse is that *no* text can present the whole truth, the organization allows itself to cloud what it knows is highly relevant information.

An official text is a beautiful lie that is a little more than *just* a lie and therefore is not simply rejected as a lie (Thyssen, 2003b: 173). The official self-description of an organization, as presented in management speeches and brochures, belongs to a specific genre and its aim it not just to describe, but also to motivate. But it is surrounded by other texts, which create a mirror-room of texts that not only describe the organization from different perspectives but also describe and criticize each other. There are not only texts about battles but also battles between texts.

The difference between identity and image has no theoretical basis. When a text describes something invisible, that which it is about is *itself* a text. ‘Identity’ and ‘image’ flow into each other in endless loops, so that the difference between them is a *difference used for unveiling* or a means of distributing trust. To claim that something is *merely a question of image* means that one subscribes to and hence trusts some other text. When it is argued that an image is an organization’s “fabricated and projected picture of itself” (Alvesson, 2004: 164), it must be added that so is identity.

Generally, only few texts become successful as ‘normal’. They condense as structured centers of meaning, allowing for normal presuppositions or what Heinz von Foerster (1981: 274) calls *Eigenvalues.* Even when they conjure up illusions, they are, for better or worse, effective, either within the organization or in the public or in a loop between them (Morsing, 1999: 30). But which description prevails and obtains model power? Before addressing that question, let us widen our perspective from text to story.

From Text to Story

A text is a static construction even though it can be interpreted dynamically. One can choose to freeze it in a seemingly timeless crystal that describes a *state*, or one can unfold it in time as a *story,* which is, next to the name and the text, *the third way* in which an organization becomes visible.

A story has a content, which is a temporary, often sequential arrangement of events, caused or experienced by one or more persons (Bal, 1994: 8). More detailed, it can be described as the symbolic presentation of a series of events, connected by a theme and related in time (Scholes, 1981: 205). In the case of organizational stories, the principal character is always the organization itself. Just as, according to Ricæeur (1981: 167), a story is made of events in the same degree as it makes the events to a story, an organization is made of events and makes events to an organization, so that the organization becomes the plot, defined by Ricæeur as the comprehensible whole which organizes a series of events (1981: 167).

There are intimate ties between organization and story. Indeed, stories have been appointed the natural form of organizational communication (Fisher, 1987). When one decision is based on former decisions and leads to further decisions, and when texts meet other texts, dramatic developments occur which everyone affects and no one controls. As there are no logical or causal chains between decisions, the story is introduced as another ways of connecting events (Brooks, 1984: 9). The plot described by Peter Brooks is not a mechanical connection, but 'causes causation' and is, therefore, an effect of its own effects. Brooks talks about the 'double logic' of stories, according to which elements of a story on critical points are produced by the necessities of the story itself. In the same manner, an organization tells about itself according to what is considered important, so that one may talk about 'auto-narratives', which structures processes while they take place.

If a decision were made on the basis of complete knowledge, rational means and compelling goals there would be no need for a decision maker, only a computer. But, in the words of Aristotle, a decision is only rarely "determined by necessity" (1984b: 1357a, 2157). When the decision has to balance many considerations, each with its own rationale, it is unfortunately unable to lean against a super reason. When it cannot relate to all knowledge, non-knowledge becomes an important but unfortunately principally non-objective resource (Luhmann, 1992: 184).

For that reason, a chain of decisions has no logical force like a syllogism, but contains information like a narrative sequence. It is contingent in the sense that each decision is a selection between alternatives (Luhmann, 1984: 47). Just as the organizational flow of decisions allows for winners and losers to mirror each other, a story follows a flow of events that could have been a different flow.

An organization is not a theoretical structure but a historical sequence, a "way it happened". If the end of a story is the pole which attracts the whole development (Ricæeur, 1981: 170), so for the organization the future is the attractive pole, as an organization normally has no wish to foresee its own end. When "all things are not determined by law" (Aristotle, 1984a: 1118a, 1796), theory and story do not compete but become supplementary ways of description. Stories are not simply entertainment, as opposed to more serious ways of describing. They transfer their own pattern, and hence their totality, to the organization in a congenial way.

A story unfolds what could be termed *the logic of the specific* in which events are brought into a manageable and comprehensive format in time and space, making the invisible observable. A story is a machine for remembering, a time-syllogism as Peter Brooks calls it (Brooks, 1984: 21). Whereas a theory is based on principles and deduces from principles to individual incidents, a story moves in the opposite direction. It focuses on *the singular example*, which – according to Aristotle (1984b:1356b, 2156) – is not related to any science but does allow for learning processes.

The sophistication of the story is that by confining itself to a specific sequence of experiences and actions it can handle information that is inaccessible to theory. Whereas a theory must specify its presuppositions, data and method, a story can just start. The trick is to engage the audience. A story obtains an "advantage of speed" (Luhmann, 1984: 169) because it does not have to include its preconditions or make itself generally applicable, but can plunge directly into a sequence of events, catch the attention of the audience with a dramatic suspense and leave it to the pleasant considerations of the audience to create a comprehensive picture, fill the gaps and draw in hidden preconditions. A story even curbs the desire for reflection by postponing the redeeming moment as new dangers appear and demand a response. And contrary to the stories of art, organizations have no ambitions of putting a final end to their stories or to itself as a grand story.

Organizational stories can be divided into internal stories and external stories. An organization tells stories about its past, present and future, that its heroic past can be woven into its desperate present and its expectant future. Therefore, the organization's internal stories are not pieces of art that begin when everything is over but have the same structure as the stories of Jesus in which it is said that 'thus he spoke so that what is written shall become reality…'

The official organizational stories have a purpose. Therefore they tend to be positive or even devotional in a manner which literary criticism often abhor. An organization knows that both optimism and criticism are contagious and will more readily be lavish in doling out the positive than the negative. It seeks to motivate through optimism and tries to avoid de-motivation by suppressing criticism. The function of the organizational story might be to disturb but not to discourage employees, customers or the public.

Whereas fictive stories are better the more open they are and the more they require interpretation, organizational stories are about living people and influence their fate – and 'organizations' here include political parties and ideological movements. The choice between an open story, which appeals to freedom, and a closed story, which restricts freedom, is not a choice between bad or good but between different effects that can be employed depending on the requirements of the situation.

Organizational stories are always in the plural since the same sequence of events can be narrated in different ways depending on the choice of perspective and guiding distinction, the ascription of motives, the focus on certain causes, the themes selected as central and who determines who are the bad guys and the good guys. Thus there are not only stories *about* success and failure but also stories *with* success or failure. This raises once again the same question: Which story prevails? Unfortunately, the answer cannot be given in the form of a user's manual that can describe four easy steps and a guarantied success for the way that stories obtain an impact. We can only point to the connection between management, politics and rhetoric.

Management, Politics and Rhetoric

The responsibility for an organization's texts and stories is left to the *management*, which describes and decides on behalf of the organization. Representation implies symbolism and visibility since 'to re-present' means 'to be present on behalf' of something or somebody. After the name, the text and the story, management constitutes *the fourth way* in which an organization becomes visible, and with the additional twist that management is not a tool like the previous three but has to employ all of them, *including it.* That generates a diabolical and never ending game in which battles over names, texts and stories give rise to new texts and new stories about these battles – and maybe even new names, in the event that the old names become tainted and filled with distaste, such as Arthur Andersen or Enron.

In the person of the manager, the organization performs the *trick* of pretending that it is able to act and reflect as a whole. Therefore, the manager is shrouded in a certain mystery – he or she[10] is present as a person among others and at the same time is a symbol of the absent unity so that a strong manager almost invisibly wears 'his' organization as an aura. No matter whether he controls the organization or the organization controls him, he is responsible for an organization self-description and for the implementation of an organizational auto-story, and he is judged on his ability to live up to that responsibility.

Whereas a specialist is responsible for his profession and its texts, a manager is responsible for the whole organization. Conflicting texts with conflicting demands – or values – meet the desk of the manager, not as theoretically interesting suggestions but with demands for clarification and intervention. No manager can disregard the circulating stories and the way his organization is described. His job is to strengthen or weaken texts. That requires sensitivity towards other texts as well as a brutality in putting his own text on the agenda and ensuring its impact by motivating others to accept it, with force, persuasion or seduction. If he fails, criticism will be prompt. If a manager's description is irrelevant, he has made himself irrelevant as a manager.[11]

10 In the following, I will for the sake of brevity present the manager as a male.

11 Even if it is possible to describe a manager as a parasite of the organization, defined by the responses of other stakeholders and with no real access to the power formally built into his role, the description

The clash between texts does not happen in a fictive space but on a political arena – since a problem becomes political when incompatible texts clash in public and compete to triumph. Disagreement between specialists becomes political in a strange way (Mintzberg, 1983: xxiii) so that management is a political function.

The *rhetorical tradition* since antiquity has studied ways in which a text can be made more attractive than others in situations where texts compete. Rhetoric is based on the insight that there are always two or more descriptions of the same event. We use rhetoric, says Aristotle, when we do not have a scientific answer and therefore are forced to consider how we can observe "in any given case the available means of persuasion" (Aristotle, 1984b: 1355b, 2155). If management is politics, we are forced to take the issue one step further: Politics is rhetoric, which allows us to conclude that management is rhetoric because a manager has to display rhetorical skills when trying to influence different types of audiences to support and accept his text and his story. This does not require theory but practical skills which Aristotle called a faculty, a *dynamis* (Aristotle, 1984: 1355b, 2155). Rhetoric constitutes *the fifth and last* way in which an organization becomes visible.

When a manager has been appointed and given authority to describe and decide on behalf of the organization, his text becomes official whereas other texts are degraded to private texts with little impact, *folgenlose Privatmeinungen* (Luhmann, 1996: 31), for example gossip that circulates with no ambitions of creating an open political conflict. However, no manager can isolate his own text and ignore other texts. If he tries to enforce his text on the organization or to suppress other texts, it will probably be counterproductive and instill fascinating and explosive stories of coercion and suppression in the organization. Thus he has to mobilize his Aristotelian *dynamis* and build alliances so that his power of description is not only formal but also a reality.

According to Aristotle, a text can be supported by rational arguments, *logos*, but also with personal reputation, *ethos,* and by appeal to emotions, *pathos* (Aristotle, 1984b: 1356a, 2155f). Organizations have a product to sell, which requires solid reasoning and empirical insight into the potential of the market. A manager can also use his personal example, or *ethos*, to support his text, since the credibility of a manager is dependent on whether he acts in accordance with his words. Often, says Aristotle, "his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses" (Aristotle, 1984b: 1356a, 2155). Finally, one may influence the feelings of the audience, *pathos,* whether it is the public who needs to be convinced by a message that everything is working out well or the employees who are to be alarmed by a message that everything is working out bad.

In order to make the organization visible, a manager has to work frivolously with fictions and well prepared illusions, with metaphors and purified simplifications so that his description of the organization becomes both comprehensive and appealing (Luhmann, 2000: 191). Rhetoric is not only a matter of *tricks* – although it is also tricks

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of the manager as just another rat in the maze is a theoretical exaggeration. Such a claim can be found in (Luhmann, 2000: 324, cf. also Luhmann, 1992: 218) and is criticized in (Thyssen, 2003a: 231ff.)

– but it also delivers inescapable tools for the identification, and thus the protection, of the organization.

On way to protect the organization is to nurture what we might call *necessary illusions*. Often, an organization has to feign an impenetrable unity to the public and save criticism for internal discussion, corresponding to the indignant *pillow talk* of the smiling married couple. A manager has to glorify his organization publicly. And if it is impossible to dismiss criticism because an infected issue bursts open, the miserable conditions will have to be presented almost as a parenthesis of the past. Hence, management preaches, in spite of knowledge to the contrary, that the organization is strong and unified, that it is socially responsible, that its employees are competent, its prices fair and its decisions well-founded.

This can be formulated in another way: a manager has to be a hypocrite as a consequence of the role he is performing (Brunsson, 2002: 27). According to Machiavelli, a prince must be a master of illusions and be able to "pretend and dissemble" (Machiavelli, 1947: 51). When conflicting demands are directed towards an organization, a manager must be able to differentiate "the available means of persuasion" according to different stakeholders, so that legitimacy can be upheld and open contradiction avoided. Even without lying directly, he must say different thing and appeal to different values depending on whether he is addressing the public, the employees, environmental groups, the board, etc. This means that what is said, what is decided and what is done fall apart (Brunsson, 2002: 172), so that a public statement might be made *instead of* making a decision, that a decision might be made *instead of* doing something, or that something might be done without telling anybody. It goes without saying that this calls for extraordinary rhetorical skills.

Conclusion

We started by asserting that an organization consists of communication and thus is invisible. The aim was to cause doubts about the form of existence of something we are all deeply familiar with in order to pave the way for an exposure of the mechanisms, or discursive tricks, that allow us to observe an organization despite its invisibility – regardless of the distance between, on one side, the robust names, the suggestive descriptions, the heroic stories and the optimistic managers, which we are introduced to at a distance, and, on the other side the messy, the often ungraceful and always incomprehensible reality which meets our eyes and ears as we live day to day deep down in the gut of one of those many-headed monsters which we call organizations.

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