



Mystification and Secrecy in Contemporary Corporate Life: A Reflection on Lars von Trier's *The Boss of It All* *

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Here comes a movie, and if it already looks a bit weird – then hang in there, because anyone can see it. Although you see my reflection, trust me – this film won't be worth a moment's reflection. It's a comedy and harmless as such. No preaching or swaying of opinion. Just a cozy time. So why not poke fun at artsy-fartsy culture?

These are the opening words with which Lars von Trier announces his movie *The Boss of It All* (2006). What can we expect from a film introduced with such modesty and diffidence? The story that soon after von Trier's blasé introductory voice-over unfolds appears to be a light-hearted comedy on corporate life. It's a fish-out-of-water plot about a boss who has invented a fictitious owner, the 'boss of it all', to hide behind when unpopular decisions need to be taken and paves the way for subtle humour, jokes and wittiness. In contrast to von Trier's previous melodramatic epics such as *Breaking the Waves*, *Dancer in the Dark* or *Dogville*, *The Boss of It All* seems to invite the spectator to just 'sit back, relax and enjoy the flight' through the absurdities of corporate reality. Such an injunction provokes the reverse though, as no one is more inclined to be engrossed with what is happening. The announcement that as a comedy *The Boss of It All* is 'harmless as such' also appears to only scratch the surface. Indeed, with the 'carnavalesque practice of inversion and overturning' of power relations and social conventions comedies are not 'innocent' at all (Rhodes, 2001; Czarniawska and Rhodes, 2006).

It is von Trier's interaction with the viewer, as well as his comic and even burlesque representation of contemporary corporate life, that makes *The Boss of It All* more than 'worth a moment's reflection'. In fact, in its attempt to appear trivial or 'harmless' the film accomplishes the opposite; namely of constituting a site for gaining critical insights and understanding of organizational dynamics. Given its playful and humorous representation of work, it "seems to offer a picture of working life, while simultaneously providing a creative response to it or informing its conduct" (Rhodes

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and Parker, 2008: 632). That is, through its use of humour and irony the film seems to succeed in shedding light on some unexplored paradoxes, contradictions and complexities within corporate life (also see Hassard and Holliday, 1998). In particular, this essay suggests that it might provide insights into organizational dynamics relating to mystifications of power relations and ‘public secrecy’, a kind of unnamed though known secrecy (Taussig, 1999) – arguably the main themes of the movie.

The aim of the essay is to draw on *The Boss of It All* to discuss how the workings of mystifications and secrecy might be part and parcel of organizational discourses and practices informed by the ‘new spirit of capitalism’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). More specifically, through the lens of von Trier’s film, the essay explores how such organizational discourses and practices might play into the manager’s narcissistic identification and ‘desire to be loved’ (Roberts, 2005), as well as potentially being subverted through employees ‘believing too much’ (Fleming and Spicer, 2003). These points will be unpacked in more detail following a brief overview of the film’s plot.

The Boss of It All: Introducing the Plot

In an attempt to escape his responsibility for the negative aspects of corporate life, Ravn, the owner of a Danish software company, has shifted the responsibility to an imaginary boss, referred to as ‘the boss of it all’. Over the years he has been telling his employees that this boss is running the company via e-mail from the United States. The plot thickens when Ravn decides to sell the company to a hard-nosed Icelandic business man called Finnur who insists on negotiating the deal face-to-face with the owner. With his back up against the wall, Ravn hires the unemployed and failed actor Kristoffer to impersonate the owner in the sales meeting. However, Kristoffer, who is obsessed with a fictional Italian play-writer Gambini, takes his role much too seriously, leading to Finnur getting suspicious and refusing to sign the contract. As Finnur storms out of the office, the clumsy and inept Kristoffer makes the mistake of being seen by the employees. He ends up having to attend a meeting with the company’s so-called ‘seniors’, which results in a farce; not only is Kristoffer unaware of Ravn’s pack of lies and therefore has to constantly improvise, but these seniors also turn out to be eccentric: one (Nalle) starts crying during the meeting and the choleric Gorm loses his temper and punches Kristoffer. Despite this, Ravn convinces Kristoffer to keep on playing the boss until the company is sold.

What ensues then is a whole set of comic situations between Kristoffer and the senior staff arising from various misunderstandings and embarrassments. From the e-mails, signed with the ‘boss of it all’ that Ravn had been sending to the senior members, they all have a different idea about the ‘owner’s’ persona. The secretary, for example, has been waiting for the absent owner to marry her, a proposal he apparently made through e-mails at a time when she was thinking about leaving the firm. The HR manager Lise, moreover, does not believe that the boss is homosexual (again something Ravn wrote in an e-mail) and pressures Kristoffer into having sex with her. Slowly Kristoffer becomes increasingly aware that the senior members seem to love, trust and highly appreciate Ravn, whilst he has in fact been manipulating them through his intricate web of lies.

Kristoffer learns that Ravn has borrowed money from the senior members, made them unknowingly sign away their patent rights of the software they designed and that, once the business is sold, all of them will be fired and will not be given their fair profit share. In the knowledge of this, Kristoffer's attitude changes and he tries to convince Ravn to tell everyone the truth. From then on the roles between Kristoffer and Ravn are reversed. Kristoffer is now the one who puts Ravn into difficult situations by dropping hints about his lies in front of everyone. Whilst the unhappy Ravn is left more and more unnoticed by his staff, Kristoffer begins to assume Ravn's previous role of making everyone laugh, forming the team's ludicrous holding-hands circle and so forth.

The decisive moment in the film is the final sales meeting with Finnur, who Ravn once again persuades to buy the company. Kristoffer invites all the senior employees to join this meeting and sit in the back of the room. As the meeting proceeds, Kristoffer encourages Ravn to reveal the truth and the miserable Ravn finally confesses to the employees that he has been 'the boss of it all' and hence lied to them before. Interestingly, the employees somehow express then that they had known all along and instead of being overly angry, they quickly forgive Ravn. The movie does not end here though. It turns out that Finnur is also a fan of Kristoffer's all-time hero, the play-writer Gambini, whose plays Kristoffer frantically wishes to perform. The two of them agree to a pact that if Kristoffer can perform Gambini to Finnur, then he will sign the 'evil' sales contract. The movie ends with Kristoffer performing Gambini and hence the company being sold.

Mystification and Secrecy in Contemporary Organizations?

The Boss of It All illustrates well the ways relations of power might be obscured in contemporary organizations. With a boss who, as an absent-present figure, pulls the strings behind everyone's backs, the film shows how workplaces can represent peculiar spaces of non-transparency and secrecy. Tellingly, in one of the first dialogues between Ravn and Kristoffer, Ravn says to him: "The main thing is that you keep this [Kristoffer pretending to be 'the boss of it all'] a secret". Whilst some kind of mystification might perhaps have always been part of capitalist processes (Marx, 1867/1978), mystifications coupled with forms of secrecy might be particularly prevalent in contemporary organizations that increasingly seek to downplay traditional formalized structures (i.e., hierarchy, de-personalization, etc.). Indicative of the 'new spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) corporate authority figures are now seen to "disguise themselves as benevolent doubles of their subordinates" (Salecl, 1998: 172) in an effort to resemble more egalitarian and less hierarchical places.

Drawing on *The Boss of It All*, it might be suggested that in such settings, not only the mystification of power relations is intensified, but that it is also accompanied by secrecy, as employees are required to know about it but act as if they do not. This – what I suggest to be illustrative of 'public secrecy' (Taussig, 1999) – is highlighted in the movie, in that the boss Ravn conceals certain knowledge from his employees (in relation to the 'boss of it all'), but somehow still expects them to know that he is the actual boss. The kind of secrecy I am referring to here is therefore not one that entails

employees remaining silent about their concerns (Milliken and Morrison, 2003) or unethical behaviour (Keane, 2008). It is secrecy with a strange relation of ‘knowing and not knowing’ (Simmel, 1906/1950), since employees are expected to “know what *not* to know” (Taussig, 1999: 2; emphasis added). How such secrecy affects employee-manager dynamics and the ways it could be undermined in organizations will be discussed in the next sections through the example of the boss Ravn and his employees.

From Outsourcing Responsibility to Longing to Be Loved

At first sight Ravn seems to represent the typical nasty and instrumental capitalist who tries to exploit his employees as much as he can. This aspect of his character manifests itself in the fact that he wants to sell the firm without giving anyone their fair share and in that he has made the seniors sign their patent rights over to him. Ravn’s creation of a phantom boss can then be interpreted as a rational act of outsourcing responsibility. In this way, Ravn does not have to deal with the tensions and contradictions inherent in power relations. The mystification of power allows the organization to be run more smoothly. That is, he can easily push through unpopular decisions such as cost cutting measures or firing staff without having to deal with any resistance from the employees.

On closer examination, however, there is another perhaps more subtle, yet intriguing side to Ravn’s character, which relates to his co-dependent behaviour, i.e., longing to be loved by his employees. It is the Ravn who, before Kristoffer takes over, initiates the team’s hugging circles, calms down Nalle when he cries again in a meeting and lends a sympathetic ear to everyone’s concerns. From this perspective, Ravn creates a phantom boss so that he can interact with his employees on a par (though, of course, he still wants to lead them informally) and be accepted and adored by them as their ‘cuddly teddy bear’. That is, aware that being loved is incompatible with running a business under the forces of the market, Ravn conceals his position.

This interpretation reminds one of Bertold Brecht’s parable *Der Gute Mensch von Sezuan*, in which Shen Te, the ‘good soul’, the helpful and beloved person, takes on the identity of her cousin, the nasty businessman Sui Ta, in order to make money and exploit those around her. In a similar vein, Ravn has a split character so that, with any unpopular decision to be made, his image does not need to suffer and he does not fear being blamed and rejected by the others – a common concern of managers (Jackall, 1988). On the contrary, Ravn is seen to be equally under the commands of a merciless boss and pitied by everyone for the decisions he has to carry out on his behalf. More importantly, this allows him to be in the position of saying ‘yes’ to what the employees might want (something he advises Kristoffer to do as well) and therefore be loved by them. In this respect a conversation between Kristoffer and his ex-wife (who is coincidentally Finnur’s lawyer) is revealing. He explains to her that “Ravn loves his staff but lacks the strengths to be their boss”, to which she answers that “by blaming all this shit on this boss, you can appear likeable and noble”. When his ex-wife asks Kristoffer “what Ravn’s greatest fear is”, he replies: “Not being loved. That’s what it’s all about. He wants to be the big, and cuddly teddy, otherwise he loses it”.

Interestingly, the importance the movie places on discourses and practices of love might be closer to corporate reality than it perhaps seems. Bojesen and Muhr (2008: 80)

recently argued that “contemporary workplace politics and practice is fuelled by a rhetoric of love”. Whilst these authors go on to show how this affects the employee self, the film demonstrates how love, which, following Lacan, primarily denotes the ‘desire to be loved’, might be an important factor in a managerial narcissistic identification with their ‘imaginary’ (Roberts, 2005). That Ravn displays facets of what Freud refers to as primary narcissism manifests itself in Ravn lacking feelings of duty and responsibility and mainly desiring to “become once more the centre of an admiring and loving world” (Gabriel, 1999: 187). The reason why Ravn becomes so unhappy towards the end of the film is because he feels replaced by Kristoffer who starts to receive all the employees’ attention and love (e.g. instead of referring to Ravn the employee Lise now refers to Kristoffer when saying ‘you can’t help loving him’ – to which Ravn makes a pouty face). Ravn’s revelation of his ‘true’ nature in the last scene can be seen to embody an attempt to regain the love of his employees. Following this, Ravn engages in mystifying his actual position, arguably in order to be able to adhere to or narcissistically identify with his ego-ideal or ‘imaginary’ (Lacan, 1977), which represents a wishful fantasy of being a benevolent friend to the other employees within a happy organization.

In this sense, it might be inferred from *The Boss of It All* that it is not only employees who are constantly in search for and lured to the confirming ‘gaze of the other’ (Roberts, 2005), but also managers. Following Lacan’s (1977) ‘mirror stage’ essay, Roberts shows that employees are vulnerable to managerial forms of control, as these confirm their ‘imaginary’, which constitutes an illusory fantasy of a coherent and autonomous self. That is to say that the employees try to “secure the self by seeking (...) to complete oneself in the gaze of the other” (Roberts, 2005: 633), ‘the other’ being the manager. Indeed, they engage in a “narcissistic identification with the gaze of the other” (2005: 633) and that entails “the demand for proof of (their) love-ability” (2005: 631). Building on some of the film’s insights, we might argue that managers too are trapped in the ‘desire to be loved’, as Roberts (2005: 631) calls it. Perhaps it could even be said that contemporary managerial efforts to cultivate a seemingly supportive, friendly and non-hierarchical organizational culture on the basis of the workings of mystifications might express an attempt to secure such love. Clearly, employees might be more willing to give love and affection to the seemingly caring team member who appears to be everyone’s friend than the boss who forces through ruthless decisions. Then it might be even argued that the ‘The Boss of It All’ draws attention to the fact that managers also desire some kind of love from their employees and that this provides the latter with more power in channelling managerial decisions than it might seem. Could it not be said that the employees’ withdrawal of their love at the end of the movie made Ravn change his mind, not even wanting to sell the company anymore (as I will point out below, the employees are more cunning than they appear)?

However, it should be noted that managerial efforts to secure love by forming more egalitarian and less hierarchical cultures does not imply that managers actually want to be treated like everyone’s friend or an equal group member. On the contrary, as the case of Ravn shows, he wants to have his cake and eat it too; not having to deal with the downsides of being a manager, but instead receiving employees’ love *and* simultaneously leading them (on an informal basis). This is pertinent in the film in that Ravn does get annoyed with Kristoffer, when he starts to make decisions and over-rules

Ravn, for example, by announcing the previously cancelled 'fun day'. There is even the sense that Ravn in fact wants his employees to know that he is their boss. Indicative of this is the fact that Kristoffer is thrown into the deep end by Ravn, as the latter does not explain to him what the business is about so that Kristoffer can only fail in representing a credible boss. Another detail of the film hints at this. In team meetings the employees use a teddy bear to represent the 'boss of it all' whilst simultaneously they refer to Ravn as 'our cuddly teddy bear'. On the basis of this, it might be maintained that the organizational dynamics were marked by the workings of 'public secrecy' (Taussig, 1999), as it was generally known but not openly spoken about that it was Ravn who was in fact the boss. The next section discusses the ensuing dynamics between the employees, Ravn and Kristoffer in this organizational setting marked by public secrecy in more detail and looks at the ways the employees might have undermined it.

Secrecy and the Employee-Manager Dynamic

In contrast to Ravn, the senior employees of the organization appear like a peculiar bunch of people throughout the movie. Their characters all express some kind of 'quirky' side, which ranges from being over-sexed (Lise), paranoid (Mette), choleric (Gorm), hysteric (Nalle) and desperate to get married (the secretary Heidi). They seem to play the role of the naive believers, as they fail to unknot the obvious web of lies Ravn has woven around them. Their ignorance and foolishness provide the ground for many of the film's comic situations. For the employees the absence of the boss seems to be partially compensated through the creation of individual fantasies relating to the boss' persona, to which, of course, Ravn's e-mails signed with 'the boss of it all' give rise. Moreover, Ravn appears to step in as an 'ersatz authority' (Salecl, 1998) for the absent boss, of course, until Kristoffer arrives on the scene and the relations between Ravn and the employees change in important ways. But are these employees really the ones who are simply fooled and naive, as one initially thinks?

Again von Trier's story is more complicated than it likes to appear. As it turns out towards the end of the movie, it seems that the employees were aware all along about the non-existing 'boss of it all' and therefore Ravn's and Kristoffer's lies.¹ From this angle, the plot of the movie requires a different interpretation than one might have thought. In looking at the ways the dynamic between the employees, Ravn and Kristoffer unfolds throughout the film one can detect that whilst at the beginning this dynamic was marked by the workings of 'public secrecy' (Taussig, 1999), towards the end this secrecy was undermined by the employees' unquestioned belief in Kristoffer as 'the boss of it all'. When Kristoffer joins the team, the employees first seem sceptical and even suspicious of Kristoffer as their boss. This is particularly expressed by their questioning of his business knowledge. With the employees knowing that 'the boss of it all' is a phantom figure, it could be suggested that at this stage they play along with the 'public secret' (Taussig, 1999), which Ravn constructs in order to be loved and informally lead them. They also look up to Ravn as their authority figure or leader and

1 It remains ambiguous at the end of the movie if all the employees actually knew or not. Even if that is not the case, it still can be argued that in their unquestioned belief in Ravn they in fact somehow subverted the workings of secrecy, the point I am trying to develop in this section.

seem unsure about Kristoffer's role – something that Ravn appears to enjoy (e.g. he smiles and laughs about Kristoffer's inability to represent a credible boss).

The turn of the screw in the movie comes when the employees increasingly take 'the boss of it all' at face value and accept Kristoffer as their leader. The dynamic between the organizational members changes, as the employees start playing their part of acting as if a 'boss of it all' really exists too well. Through their seemingly unquestioned belief in Kristoffer as the boss they seem to counter-intuitively subvert the functioning of 'public secrecy'. For the 'public secret' to work it requires people not to openly name things but to still act upon them (Taussig, 1999); it is therefore always accompanied by a particular tension regarding "knowledge and acknowledgement, personal awareness and public discourse" (Zerubavel, 2006: 3). To exemplify this, take a typical 'new spirit of capitalism' type corporate culture that plays upon the equality of everyone in the team and hence non-existence of hierarchies. Such a culture of friendship, we might call it, requires employees, on the one hand, to pretend that everyone is equal, whilst, on the other hand, to carefully acknowledge the, of course, still existing hierarchy. In the film the workings of 'public secrecy' and the associated obscuring of power relations does not work out in the end, as the employees engage in what Fleming and Spicer (2003) term 'believing too much'. They "take [the existence of the 'boss of it all'] far too seriously" (2003: 172). As Fleming and Spicer (2003) explain, in 'believing too much' or 'over-identifying' with managerial discourse employees are able to bring to the surface its inherent contradictions and thereby create a "subversive effect of throwing the reproduction of cultural power into complete disarray" (2003: 172). Building on this, it might be argued that at the point the employees take Ravn's and Kristoffer's lies at face value, they start to undermine the dance around the 'public secret' of 'knowing and not knowing' (Simmel, 1906/1950), that is of knowing the unknown and unspoken. By recognizing Kristoffer as the 'boss of it all' they act as if they *really* do not know that Ravn is the actual boss. Not only is Ravn no longer running the show now – something he finds difficult to deal with, as mentioned previously – but they also bring the very contradictions and tensions underlying the organizational dynamics to the surface.

Moreover, the power of 'public secrecy' is said to be amplified when people try to unmask it (Taussig, 1999). In the film, however, the employees do the reverse; they do not openly confront Ravn to reveal the secret and through questioning give the secret more power. Thereby, they refuse to elevate Ravn to the position of being the mysterious boss pulling the strings behind their backs – again something that he would desire given his seemingly narcissistic character. More importantly, they increase the pressure on Ravn to reveal the truth the more they play the innocent fools who would not believe that Ravn could harm them. It is in these ways that I would like to propose that the employees managed to somehow change the rules of the game. Of course, whilst they might have resisted Ravn's mystifications of power, their resistance still turns out to be ineffective in the end, as it is Kristoffer who in the name of art betrays them.

Conclusion

The essay argues that von Trier's *The Boss of It All* provides an interesting site for exploring mystification and secrecy at work. The film suggests in a caricatured way that the mystifications taking place in contemporary organizations (exemplified by 'new spirit of capitalism' cultures that emphasize informality) might be based on 'public secrecy' (Taussig, 1999), which can powerfully influence employee-manager dynamics (also see Weber, 1922/1978). Whilst it requires a certain reflexivity on behalf of the employees of 'knowing what not to know' (Taussig, 1999), it somehow creates a particular aura around the manager, who now can lead employees and enjoy the 'desire to be loved' (Roberts, 2005). Thereby, as Taussig (1999) maintains, "it is precisely the role of secrecy, specifically public secrecy, to control and hence to harness the great powers of contradiction so that ideology can function" (1999: 268). In this sense, secrecy and power are indeed inextricably linked (Canetti, 1960/1984). The film also demonstrates how this interrelationship can potentially be subverted and undermined, i.e., in 'believing too much' (Fleming and Spicer, 2003), employees fail to play along with the rules of 'the public secret'. By doing so, they might achieve to bring to the forefront all the inconsistencies and contradictions within their organization that the mystifications try to overcome in the first place.

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