



## Seeing organization 'slant'

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### review of

Pitsis, A. (2014) *The poetic organization*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. (HB, pp.197, £67, ISBN 978-1-137-39871-0)

The power of poetry and of poetic writing is that it plays with language in ways that subvert meaning, convey affect, enable embodiment and passion, and jolt and discomfort our perceptions of the world. To paraphrase the words of Emily Dickinson, through poetry we can see all the world but see it slant as it shifts our perspectives and we consider new understandings. There is something about the poetic that captures, or at least gets close to capturing, the unsayable and the inexpressible. *The poetic organization* could therefore be a timely contribution to a growing debate within some areas of organization studies that focuses on how scholars can both 'read' and 'write' organization in ways that escape the straightjacket of social science norms. The book claims that it sets out a different way, using *facto-analysis*, of traversing organizational practices through what it terms poetic explorations, particularly referring to organizational coaching. It also aims to promote the active poeticization of organization. The cover 'blurb' promises the reader a poetic journey in which organizational members and practices can be seen in a new light.

The book opens with an attempt to define what is meant by 'poetic'; a task that it finds something of a struggle before settling on 'an approximate term referring to aspects involved in creating and processing semblances and thematics within organizations' (11). Pitsis freights poetics with a large number of claims; that poetic processes can be discerned in organizational existence, that poetic

practices sustain organizational viability and that aspects of poetics establish and maintain professional identities. She also argues that there is something about a method grounded in poetics, and, relatedly, understanding organizations as texts to be unravelled by literary and fictive techniques, that brings into view those aspects of organization that are fleeting, difficult to access or to describe. This can assist the researcher coming to a reflexive understanding of the ways that knowledge is produced in organizations and organizational research.

Having established the centrality of poetics to organization and organizational research, Pitsis turns to review existing scholarship addressing the poetic in organization (Chapter 2) and that exploring the philosophical and methodological implications of reading organizations as fictive texts (Chapter 3). These chapters provide a thorough and useful overview of the context in which the book is situated. Indeed, for me, these reviews were the strongest sections of the book. In Chapter 2, 'A trajectory of poetics in organization', Pitsis notes that early work was very much focused on metaphor and storytelling. Some of this foregrounded poetics as a route to new and exciting ways of conducting and reporting research but Pitsis recognizes that more often, metaphor (in particular) was applied to organization as a type of productive tool that could be used to examine and analyse organization in a functional and utilitarian sense. This is a timely reminder of the stultifying tendencies of much social science research and especially within organization studies which arguably perceives itself as having a continuing problem with legitimation. The review goes on to discuss more recent work, such as that of Westwood (1999) or Linstead and Westwood (2001), which has highlighted the textual nature of organization and the ways in which language underpins organization. At the same time, this work pointed to the slipperiness of language such that it cannot be said to pin down meaning. This led to a turn to a 'fictive' account of organizations that regards them as collective inventions with no existence outside memories and imaginations (Case, 2003). The ways in which research is reported and represented has also come to be regarded as a literary and creative process (e.g. Rhodes and Brown, 2005). This is made explicit by some scholars who incorporate poetry into their accounts (e.g. Rippin, 2006) or who write 'differently' (e.g. Westwood, 1999), but the review makes clear that even objectivist research is a form of fiction even though it asserts the revelation of 'facts' that transcend the performance of language.

'Examining the fictive as a methodological stance' (Chapter 3) continues this exploration of scholarly antecedents. In this section, Pitsis draws on literary and philosophical expositions of the fictive in a discussion that ranges through, for example, Aristotle, Iser and Blanchot as well as current approaches within organization studies. For Pitsis, using the notion of the fictional is 'not about evading the truth of the research, but embracing it playfully' (43) and this notion

of 'truth', and, in particular, that emerging from the poetic space between 'fact' and 'fiction', forms the heart of her discussion. She outlines how a range of philosophical approaches to the fictive could inform organizational research. This includes Aristotle's notion of poetics as creating potential future realities which can clearly be applied to the stories that organizations and organizational members construct about themselves. Other philosophers, such as Walton (1990) or Thomasson (1990), pose questions around the differences between what belongs in the realm of make-believe and what is part of materiality reality. They come to the conclusion that the same processes of cultural creation bring both into being such that they occupy the same realm. The characters, situations and so forth created through the literary process have no objective reality outside the text, but they have a reality that is both interiorized to the text and auto-references the material world in order to construct plausible narratives. This also is pertinent to studies of organization where the research process creates characters and situations through very similar fictive mechanisms and works in the same way to engage author, reader and participants in the co-construction of an agreed version of reality. Iser (1993) addresses the complexity of the relationship between literature and the ways in which humans can become present to themselves, while Blanchot's non-writing, the impossibility of capturing 'what is' through language, is related to research processes and data (1969/1993). Here, Pitsis, drawing on Blanchot's notion of question as 'speech as detour', offers an invaluable insight into the absurdity of the questioning at the heart of most research:

...each question poses the question 'not posed'. ... As a researcher I too was rendered paralysed by the absurdity of questioning as if it were to bring forth, or uncover, some realization and acute awareness on how these coaches engaged poetically. What I was left with was the feeling of standing in a profound space that could not be explained, a non-arrival at the research question/doctrine. (56, emphasis in original)

She thus weaves together resources from social sciences, philosophy and literary studies to formulate an interesting and provocative argument for seeing the fictive as a productive means to explore the immateriality of organization and to generate understandings of organizations and those who work within them. However, Pitsis does not claim that the use of fictive methods offers an 'authentic' or one-best-way way to research organizations and she takes care to emphasise that fictive approaches view a coherent and seamless representation of the world as just that; an illusory representation.

From this discussion, Pitsis develops the ficto-analytic framework that is positioned as one of the book's main contributions, but it is precisely here that the work begins to disappoint. She presents this framework as a 'general term to

position the approach taken that relies on a poetic mode' (66-67) and, quite correctly, points to the subjectivity that is an inherent part of the research process but which, through the use of the framework, is allowed a space for reflection and play. This is followed by an outline of the main tools used in the research. However, I could not discern whether these tools comprised the framework or were an outcome of it. Moreover, such tools would not be out of place in an NVivo coding of interview data. To be fair, Pitsis does state that the research process involved the usual ways of obtaining data that would be deemed relevant and functional in 'classic' research, but she also claims that what emerged from her own 'reveries and intuitive explorations' as well as 'personal impressions and understandings' was a new poetic text.

Thus, Pitsis promises that her method of ficto-analysis provides a creative, experimental and vibrant way of viewing organizational spaces. However, *The poetic organization* ultimately fails to deliver on its promise of a poetic journey; indeed reading the book, at least for this reader, was at times a less than pleasing aesthetic encounter. Much of the writing is tortuous and in places repetitive. The methods used, which are not in themselves innovative (interviews, free writing, using an object to provoke discussion), have produced data that appears little different from other qualitative research projects. The coding framework is hardly less mechanistic than other coding frameworks and the idea that a researcher creatively applies their own interpretation to a text is not ground-breaking. But it is in the reporting of the research findings that Pitsis has really missed an opportunity to show how her method can add something creative, experimental and vibrant to organization studies. She could have been considerably braver in her representation of the poetic in her participants' responses – weaving them together in the form of a novel or a play, or taking inspiration from writers such as Annette Kuhn (cultural theory – e.g. 2002) or Kathleen Stewart (anthropology – e.g. 2007) who have challenged the boundaries between social sciences research and art. This would perhaps have enabled Pitsis to play more creatively with her insight that humans draw on 'poetic' language and weave elements of story, myth and music into the means by which they represent their lives – including their organizational and professional lives – such that organization is 'a perpetually *unfinished project* with inherent fictional processes contained within it' (173, emphasis in original).

In the final chapter (Conclusions and future issues), the book turns to discuss its potential value to the 'poeticized organization'. Pitsis claims the ideas in the book can be used by organizational members to 'foster the creative aspects of the organization', 'find ways to dissolve and re-emerge as a newly invented organization' and finally 'embrace the fluid and agile ways of being that can sustain a flexible organization in the changing global environment' (181). It is a

great pity that ultimately, the book veers dangerously close to falling into the same instrumentalism as the earlier literature on metaphor and which Pitsis critiques.

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