Fantasy to (evade) order: Vicarious schadenfreude

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abstract

This note reflects on emerging theorization of vicarious schadenfreude as a way of enabling and evading order. Drawing on my reading of the first volume of Dante's Divine Comedy, *The Inferno*, I recount how my own disordered emotion, fury, is both enabled and transformed through the experience of another disordered yet ordering emotion, vicarious schadenfreude. I channel the fury by fantasizing about misfortunes befalling those who perpetrate injustice in their organizational practice, and this helps to maintain my ability to order my criticality.

Introduction and scene setting

> ...fantasy and dreaming can supplement fictions of self created by management and control...We may not dismantle organizational controls, but we certainly learn how to evade them. (Gabriel, 1995: 498)

In this note I begin to develop an argument for critical organization scholars that suggests how connecting dark, arguably disordered, emotions with fantasy enables both order and the evasion of order of self. Following Gabriel's quote above, such a connection with fantasy is not dismantling order, but is enabling a productive evasion. Specifically, through this note I offer some thoughts about transforming one disordered emotion, fury, into a more ordered yet still disordered emotion that I term vicarious schadenfreude,

through the fantasy poetry of Dante's *Inferno*. Fictional writing may 'tell stories of success and glory...whisper despair and helplessness...articulate the tacit and the secret' (De Monthoux and Czarniawska-Joerges, 2005: 10). Dante's writing in the *Inferno* has stories of success or glory, but more frequently the writing screams despair and helplessness that follows the apparent success or glory in life and foregrounds the tacit and the secret hidden into a fantasy. The implications of this for critical organization studies are related to two of the epistemic functions of emotions as argued in the extant literature, including: as forces to impel knowledge (Brun and Kuenzle, 2008); and as forces influencing evaluation (Candiotto, 2019). Specifically, in order to maximize the productivity of emotions as these forces, there is an extent to which both order and disorder are necessary – disorder can create the urgency that pushes knowledge, but it must be contextualized (containment as a form of ordering) to ensure that my evaluation remains grounded and robust. I appreciate the space offered by this note section of *ephemera* to allow me to explore these ideas further with you. Its purpose is to respond to the invitation of the Editors of this special issue (Plotnikof et al., 2019) to consider relations of disorder/order, disorganization/organization, by understanding them as mutually dependent and interwoven.

Researching critical organization studies, specifically those streams of studies related to ethics, responsibility, and social justice, frequently includes observing extreme unethical and unjust management, leadership, and organizational practices across a range of settings. These practices are often observed to be knowingly undertaken by organizational actors in extremely powerful roles. These actors create moral disorders, playing with and manipulating notions of moral order, with practices including blatant lies, physical and emotional violence and/or violations, exploitation, flattery, and abuse of position, all of which result in myriad harms. My own research includes reading the stories of those whose experiences have been minimized and/or silenced through organizational tools (non-disclosure agreements) and behaviours (treating speakers as non-credible). In these stories, I frequently see the interests of powerful organizational actors privileged over others, often to the direct detriment of others. Despite processes to apparently order organizational practices, such as the rule of law being

followed, accountability is lacking, as is recourse or justice, legal or moral, for those harmed by the practices. Apparent systems of order in the form of legal processes and legislative protections frequently seem disordered; see media coverage for some high-profile examples including Philip Green (Syal, 2019) and Harvey Weinstein (Townsend, 2018). The harms are direct and the practices continue. I have an emotional response to these texts (Ahmed, 2014) and 'emotions *do things*' (Ahmed, 2004: 26). I feel unable to act directly to curtail the behaviours and experience the 'vengefulness of the impotent' (Nietzsche quoted in Leach and Spears, 2008: 1384). This I describe as a feeling of fury. I am furious the vast majority of the time whilst I am undertaking my research.

The emotion of fury is powerful and one element of Ahmed's work closely analyses how different emotions are transformed into effects, so potentially enabling the power to be productive. For example, 'disgust works to produce "the disgusting", as the bodies that must be ejected from the community' (Ahmed, 2014: 15). My fury in seeing certain organizational actions fixes the actor as an other to whom I attribute causality of injustice, 'the unjust'. This fury can be debilitating because it is arresting and consuming. Nevertheless, because 'texts...perform different emotions' (Ahmed, 2014: 13), I am able to transform this disordered emotion by reading a different form of text – the fantasy text of Dante's *Inferno* read through an organizational lens – into a reordered yet still disordered emotion that enables a form of productivity that evades control (I can still feel the emotions). Taking this fury and directing it through fantasy translates it into a form of the moral emotion schadenfreude (Lindebaum et al., 2017), which I term 'vicarious'.

Schadenfreude is politely defined as the experience of joy in the misfortune of others (Dasborough and Harvey, 2017; Watt Smith, 2018). In this definition, though, much is hidden by the interpretation of 'misfortune' – the potential of this to range from forms of embarrassment through to physical damage, harm and/or injury. My experience of the emotion is vicarious because it is experienced through my fantasy and imagination as a result of reading fictional accounts of the misfortune of others.

Schadenfreude has been argued to be in close relation to other emotions. Portmann (2002), for example, argues that malice is a source of

schadenfreude, whilst Leach et al. (2014: 214) argue rather that schadenfreude is the gateway drug, that 'the passive, indirect, and opportunistic pleasure of schadenfreude may be an initial step down the slippery slope to more active, direct, and purposeful acts of malice when circumstances allow'. Schadenfreude could be construed in relation to gloating, but 'whereas gloating is an experience and expression of superiority over others, the muted pleasure of schadenfreude is based in passivity and concerns about inferiority and powerlessness' (Leach et al., 2015: 2). Also, this enjoyment does not represent sadism, as I am not inflicting the pain on the other for my own pleasure and pain is not the end in itself (Dasborough and Harvey, 2017; Svendsen, 2010). Neither does it represent vengeance, as I am not responsible for the harm (Seip et al., 2014). Despite its relation to these emotions, it is distinct and taking pleasure in imagined or material misfortune may still be judged an especially disordered emotion because of its tangled relationship with morality. Schadenfreude was judged 'vicious' by Plato, 'the worst trait in human nature' by Schopenhauer, and 'inhuman' by Kant (Svendsen, 2010: 103). Leach and colleagues' (2014; 2015) research nods towards schadenfreude having the potential to be a first step to greater darkness, deeper shadows. It is argued in the literature that 'schadenfreude occurs when the perceiver, motivated by a number of situational and dispositional variables, dehumanizes the victim, whereby the dehumanization disturbs the perceiver's mind perception, objectifying the victim and turning the misfortune into a social reward' (Wang et al., 2019: 6). Indeed, Greenier (2018) found that schadenfreude has been positively correlated with the Dark Triad of personality – narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism – and negatively correlated with traits including empathy.

In the literature on schadenfreude, one of the main underpinning concepts identified as drivers of this particular outlaw emotion (Jaggar, 1989) is the deservingness of the sufferer of misfortune linked to notions of justice, and this is the most relevant for the thoughts expressed in this note. The notion of justice schadenfreude (Wang et al., 2019) proposes that a driver of the feeling of pleasure is that the misfortune is perceived to be deserved (Li et al., 2019). Vicarious schadenfreude, as I introduce it here, differs from 'pure' schadenfreude because it is imagined misfortune. 'Pure' is where there is actual, material misfortune that is being observed in the lived experience. The

fantasy provoking vicarious schadenfreude is not just about overcoming the bad feeling (fury) associated with the injustice of the organizational acts I am reading about; it is also about 'moving and being moved as a form of labour or work' (Ahmed, 2014: 201) in relation to that which we critique. These transformations of emotion offer the opportunity for order and disorder to exist simultaneously, allowing for control and evasion to be played with in my labours of critique (*ibid.*). By this, I mean the disordered emotion enables the evasion of control in one form – I can be disordered but: (1) look like I am under control; and (2) use this safe experience of disorder to genuinely reorder my self in a way that is socially acceptable – not dismantling but evading. 'Disorder' retains the relationship with disassembly, clutter, muddle, albeit that the other connotations of something being wrong, incorrect, in need of remedy in the form of ordering are not far from the discussion. For my reflexivity and critical epistemology of organization, this means that I can transform the disorder of fury, which feels negative and static, into a reordered disorder of vicarious schadenfreude, which feels positive and dynamic in my critical practice, moving me in my work towards addressing injustice. This imagined misfortune incapacitates the powerful and fortifies against feelings of impotence.

Fantasy and dark emotions – an illustration

Fantasy may be inspired through reading fictional and imaginative writing in the form of novels and poetry, which have contributed towards the critical study of organizations (Darmer and Grisoni, 2011; De Monthoux and Czarniawska-Joerges, 2005). These include: the poetic works of managers themselves (Windle, 2006); the value of poetic language in communicative practices (Berman Brown, 2006); the possibility of gaining evoked knowledge from poetry (Fraiberg, 2010); and the relationship between poetry and identity construction (Darmer and Grisoni, 2011). Grisoni and Kirk (2006: 520) also explain that 'the power of the poem lies in its ability to focus in, not only on factual details, but also on behavioural and affective elements embedded in the episode', drawing attention to the performative and emotional impacts of engagement with poetry.

Inferno is the first book of Dante's fantastical poem *The Divine Comedy*. Dante is the protagonist of the story, finding himself lost in a dark wood on Good Friday he is guided through the Inferno by Virgil, the epic poet of Latin literature. The Inferno, hell, is organized, ordered, hierarchical in layers of souls tortured for sins judged least worst to most worst, as defined at the time of Dante's writing and heavily influenced by Roman Catholic teachings and traditions (Sørensen et al., 2012). The following offers a summary of the entire structure of the Inferno.

A summary of the Inferno	
Circle 1	Limbo, in which Virgil is held. This contains those who 'were neither for God nor against him. Having shown neither the courage nor the energy to act decisively, they are now not good enough for heaven, and not evil enough for hell' (Nichols' notes in Alighieri, 2005: 25).
Circle 2	The Lustful
Circle 3	The Gluttonous
Circle 4	Misers and Spendthrifts
Circle 5	The Wrathful, The Proud, and The Sullen
The Walls of the City of Dis lie between Circle 5 and Circle 6	
Circle 6	Heretics
The River Phlegethon lies between Circle 6 and Circle 7, which is split into three Rings, each containing The Violent.	
Circle 7 Ring 1	Violent against Neighbours (Murderers and Plunderers)
Circle 7 Ring 2	Violent against Themselves (Suicides and Squanderers)
Circle 7 Ring 3	Violent against God, Nature, and Art (Blasphemers, Sodomites, Usurers)
A sheer cliff and waterfall introduce Circle 8, split into ten Ditches, each containing The Betrayers of Those who have No Reason to Trust.	
Circle 8 Ditch 1	Panderers and Seducers
Circle 8 Ditch 2	Flatterers
Circle 8 Ditch 3	Simoniacs
Circle 8 Ditch 4	Magicians and Fortune-Tellers
Circle 8 Ditch 5	Barrators
Circle 8 Ditch 6	Hypocrites
Circle 8 Ditch 7	Thieves
Circle 8 Ditch 8	Counsellors of Fraud
Circle 8 Ditch 9	Sowers of Discord
Circle 8 Ditch 10	Falsifiers
Circle 9 contains the Betrayers of Those Who Trust and is introduced by the Well of the Giants, followed by four frozen zones.	
Circle 9 Zone 1	Caina: Betrayers of Relatives
Circle 9 Zone 2	Antenora: Betrayers of Their Country
Circle 9 Zone 3	Tolomea: Betrayers of Guests
Circle 9 Zone 4	Judecca: Betrayers of Benefactors
Lucifer resides at the base of the Inferno.	

Table 1: Adapted from Aligheri, 2005 translation.

Different types of sinful behaviours are described through each layer, some of which are related to embodiment (for example, lust, gluttony), some of which are also related to distinct organizational practices (for example, usury, simony), and some of which may be committed personally and/or organizationally (for example, fraudulence, hypocrisy, lying). Dante's vision of hell describes particularly violent and visceral forms of justice (punishment) for a range of actions and it is through the depictions of fantasy violence that I find my own pleasure, vicarious schadenfreude, being piqued, given the visceral corporeality of the images in Dante's work.

Throughout his work, Dante names particular people, specific people that the readers of the time would have known well, some of whom are also known from history and legend. This provides a crossover between the present and the future, the material and the fantasy, and my own protagonists can be imagined in place of the names from history. Whilst I am furious during my research, I re-read Dante's circles of Inferno through an organizational lens. What I see are circles of Inferno that are populated by unjust organizational actors, the organizational equivalents of Dante's sinners. Through this reading I fantasize about certain organizational actors being tortured in the Inferno for their unjust acts. As I read, I feel the fury transform into vicarious schadenfreude as those being punished in the Inferno after their deaths are enduring '"deserved misfortunes" ...associated with attributions of control and unethical behaviour, not misfortunes caused by happenstance or bad luck' (Dasborough and Harvey, 2017: 704). The vision that Dante presents is of an afterlife that offers a form of fantasy or hope (depending on whether one believes that the afterlife exists or not) which, either way, enables the reader to revel in the justice being served by someone/something.

In the ninth ditch of the eighth circle of the Inferno reside those who provoke upheaval, the 'sowers of discord'. This includes those who have acted in organizational positions to disrupt for their own gain, based on false and/or misleading information, abusing their positions. The prevalence of the use of mis-truth and epistemic injustice to further individual agendas is well-documented (e.g. Bouilloud et al., 2019; Hopkin and Rosamond, 2018; Knight and Tsoukas, 2019). My research into the use of non-disclosure agreements brings this into sharp relief, where legal tools are used to silence knowledge of unjust, exploitative behaviours in order to protect the powerful (Nichol,

2019). An example from a story in a submission to the Women and Equalities Committee's (2019) inquiry into the use of non-disclosure agreements is as follows.

> *Around a decade ago, whilst working for a large financial services company in London, I accused a senior manager of perpetrating a drug-facilitated sexual assault against me during an afterwork gathering of colleagues. I reported the assault the following morning to the Metropolitan Police, and a few days later to my line manager and the company's HR. The senior manager was initially suspended from the firm. The company did not carry out its own internal investigation into the incident, citing an unwillingness to interfere in an ongoing police enquiry. However, they lifted the senior manager's suspension a few weeks later, and within two months of the incident taking place I had been managed out of the business and required to sign a Non-Disclosure Agreement. The senior manager remained in his position for a further eight years.*

I feel fury in reading this experience, but then read what Dante describes when he sees the punishment of these sinners as follows.

> *I never saw a barrel gape apart,*
>
> > *Through loss of hoop or stave, as I saw one*
> >
> > *Ripped from his chin right down to where we fart;*
>
> *His guts between his legs, his inside out,*
>
> > *Intestines on display, with that foul pouch*
> >
> > *That changes what we swallow into shit.*
>
> *While I was all intent upon this sight,*
>
> > *He looked, tore his breast open with his hands,*
> >
> > *And said: 'See how I pull myself apart! …*
>
> *A hidden fiend back there renews our trouble*
>
> > *Continually, by putting to the sword*
> >
> > *All of the shades included in this rabble,*
>
> *Each time we travel round this road of pain,*

Because each time we come to face that devil

Our open wounds have all healed up again'.

(Inferno XXVIII 22-30: 289, 37-42: 291)

The images represent being held to account in the most violent and visceral way. The bodies in the Inferno are in a constant state of being ripped open and apart, healed, and ripped open and apart again. The fantasy is provocative; there is a material creativeness through the destructive, disruptive vision. As I read, I imagine the perpetrators of the organizational injustices in my research in this perpetual state of disembowelment, their bodies being ripped apart, reinstated, and ripped apart again. My heart beats quicker with excitement, 'the exciting delirium we feel witnessing destruction' (Watt Smith, 2018: 27). My fury transforms to vicarious schadenfreude, the violent misfortune is mediated through my imagination, piqued by reading the bombastic, fantastical, descriptive writing of another. I fantasize about their painful punishment. Whilst I as schadenfroh am not directly active in generating the misfortune, I am *active in generating the imagination of the misfortune*, of deliberately creating a mental picture of a material situation of misfortune from the fictional one being read. That is, the pleasurable emotion is also sought out. This is yet another form of order, in terms of controlling the fantasy of the nature of the misfortune. I smile to myself.

Ben Ze'ev (2014) argues that the degree of acceptability, or social ordering, of the moral emotion of schadenfreude can be justified according to whether: (1) the person is perceived to deserve the misfortune; (2) the misfortune is minor; and/or (3) the schadenfroh is passive in generating the misfortune. With all forms, perceptions of deservingness can vary, resulting in righteous (if perceived as deserved) or ambivalent (if perceived as undeserved) schadenfreude (Li et al., 2019). This is in the eye of the beholder, although there may be some commonality in judging particular instances of deservingness. Regardless of the extent to which it can be justified against the social order, schadenfreude is undoubtedly one of the shadows, intricate and paradoxical. It is not an emotion frequently discussed, as it is perhaps considered distasteful and impolite, but it is argued in the literature that this

could add to its pleasurability; that it is clandestine, surreptitious, and unspoken (Leach et al., 2015; Leach et al., 2014).

Dante's illustration helps me imagine and take pleasure in fantasy justice in the form of violent, eternal misfortune. I desire their eternal torture in return for their deficit of compassion in life (Lindebaum et al., 2017). My fury towards these particular purveyors of the wicked in the present is translated into pleasure by the possibility of torture in the imaginary depiction of the afterlife. It is safe to enjoy their illusory pain. I feel liberated by the experience of pleasure in this imaginary vision, liberated from the crushing sense of injustice in the present. Portmann (2002: 43) writes: 'the conceptualization of hell as the paradigm and culmination of suffering almost seems to beg comparisons of temporal suffering with eternal suffering and, consequently, thoughts about day to day justice'. In other words, where vicarious schadenfreude is conceptualized as driven by notions of justice, Dante's poetry allows me to imagine eternal misfortune as justice for extremely unjust day-to-day actions. Whilst the perpetrator may experience episodic misfortunes in life, visions of hell and eternal damnation may offer a deeper sense of justice, albeit illusory (Ben Ze'ev, 2014).

Concluding thoughts: Disorder, reorder, evaded order

This note is a presentation of ideas that reveal 'that part of ourselves [myself] full of uncomfortable desires, motivations and memories that is suppressed or hidden' (Linstead et al., 2014: 170). It explores socially uncomfortable yet personally rewarding criticality, inspired and revealed by the morally charged writing of others. It is a provocation, personally risky, and makes conscious the shadow of my unconscious self (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2010) with the potential for theoretical insights into epistemology and emotion. Mediating certain emotions, such as fury, using fantasy means that I both evade control and revel in their different forms of disorder – *I can feel the fury [negative disorder], I can feel the pleasure in fantasy misfortune [positive disorder]* – but these are also reordered in such a way that maintains social norms and conventions – *I do not express these emotions, they are contained and this energizes my labour* (see also Ahmed, 2014).

In reading the misfortunes of fictional others, speculation is possible, the unthinkable is thinkable by imagining material others, who share similar roles and characteristics of those in the fiction, experiencing the same misfortunes in their place. Portmann (2002: 6) argues that schadenfreude is 'one form of solace in a pain-filled existence' and I find it so (see also Fischer, 2014; Watt Smith, 2018). I can seek out opportunities to deliberately fantasize about my own protagonists experiencing the misfortune, which is a form of ordering (*my own ordering evading the ordering of others*) of what others might perceive as disordered emotions. Through vicarious schadenfreude I can revel in my nastiness, evading the order of social acceptability using my imagination, such that I will then order my self for my epistemological position, my apprehending the world in my research and practice (Ahmed, 2014).

Having seen an earlier presentation of this note, a colleague commented that there is something refreshingly evil in making negative emotions explicit. Contradicting this, another comment from a colleague suggested that revelling in the shadows, which this note was perceived to be encouraging, contradicts an ethic of care, promoting more nastiness in an already nasty world. My aim is to demonstrate that it is both/and, not either/or. The disorder of the shadows can be embraced through fantasy, to enable the presentation of self in an ordered, caring, manner. Fantasy enables schadenfreude to be experienced vicariously. This does not dilute the power of the emotion, and its potential to be judged negatively, but mediates its experience through the imagination. It simultaneously evades order and is ordered.

I have developed these ideas in relation to the example in practice when I am working with my research material related to the use of non-disclosure agreements in organizations, working to understand the implications of the silencing that occurs. The fury builds as I read the accounts of those whose experiences are made insignificant by this binding tool. I channel this by fantasizing about misfortunes befalling those who seek to silence, and this helps to maintain my ability to order my criticality. Fantasy can evade order, because it allows for the imagination of extreme events, behaviours, and consequences in response to our emotions that do not have the order imposed by lived experiences. However, in doing so, the evasion through fantasy also helps to order the expression of our darkest emotions in a contained form such that the lived experiences of our work maintain the socially expected order.

That is, I do not vocalize and/or embody my fury. By not vocalizing or embodying my fury, an emotion that is arguably disordered, a form of outward organizational order is maintained. However, I have to take it somewhere and in so doing through fantasy, a form of order is evaded. Whilst I am yet to see actual misfortune befall them, fantasy helps me to imagine the perpetrators of unjust acts being subject to the fictional accounts I read, and I take pleasure in this imaginary torture and suffering. There is an illusory justice experienced vicariously. Reading Dante's poetry mediates me from the misfortune through its fiction; I can completely immerse myself vicariously in the extreme nature of the fantasy, imaginary misfortune – pleasure that may usually be hidden or minimized may be openly indulged in. The activities of the punishers can be enjoyed vicariously, at a distance, and I am 'most satisfied by endings in which the perpetrator suffered, knew that the suffering was repayment for the transgression, suffered in a way that matched the initial transgression' (Haidt, 2003: 857).

This evasion of order through fantasy and simultaneous maintenance of outward order creates both the impulsion and energy towards the often challenging epistemic practices of my work, allowing for greater balance in my evaluative judgements (Brun and Kuenzle, 2008; Candiotto, 2019). Fury translates into pleasure, which creates a sense of justice that impels me to be more ordered in my work (Brun and Kuenzle, 2008; Candiotto, 2019). I can feel a sense of justice, albeit illusory because it comes from the fantasy text (Ben Ze'ev, 2014). In this respect, there remains the evasion of order in this 'kind of symbolic and sometimes even illusory gain, as it actually does not change the agent's situation' (Ben Ze'ev, 2014: 80). With this comes the risk of making the status quo seem more bearable, more ordered, and thus diluting the emotional impact of the disorder in the injustice originally seen in my research. The wrongs themselves are not righted and, as such, the sense of emotional reordering does not hide the disorder, rather the reordered disorder – to the positive from the negative – results in renewed energy towards maintaining critique and seeking justice for unjust organizational actions (Ahmed, 2014). Thus, fantasy offers the evasion of order by allowing the darkest, most negative disordered emotions (in this case, fury) to be felt and expressed; transformed into a more positive form of disordered emotion (in this case, vicarious schadenfreude); which in turn offers a form of order

through which to labour towards addressing injustice in my critical organization studies.

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acknowledgements

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