Institutional aesthetics: The case of ‘contestation’*

Robert Cooper

Throw away the lights, the definitions,
And say of what you see in the dark
That it is this or that it is that,
But do not use the rotted names.
– Wallace Stevens, ‘The man with the blue guitar’

The imperfect is our paradise,
Note that, in this bitterness, delight,
Since the imperfect is so hot in us,
Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.
– Wallace Stevens, ‘The poems of our climate’

Which is real –
This bottle of indigo glass in the grass,
Or the bench with pot of geraniums, the stained mattress and the washed overalls
drying in the sun?
Which of these truly contains the world?
Neither one, nor the two together.
– Wallace Stevens, ‘The indigo glass in the grass’

* Editor’s note: This paper was originally presented at Utrecht University, January 1991. Some of the sources and page numbers were missing in the original paper. These have been added to this lightly edited version of the paper. Edited by Sverre Spoelstra.
He had to choose. But it was not a choice
Between excluding things. It was not a choice
Between, but of. He chose to include the things
That in each other are included, the whole,
The complicate, the amassing harmony.
– Wallace Stevens, ‘Notes toward a supreme fiction’

In these (somewhat free-wheeling) notes I take the opportunity of exploring
an approach to human institutions that runs through much of recent critical
thought in the humanities and social sciences, especially those writings
motivated by a post-structuralist cast of thought. I identify this approach by
the term Institutional Aesthetics. While the modern interpretation of
aesthetics is confined (by the academic division of labour) to art theory and
philosophy, its original meaning connects it to fundamental aspects of human
action and experience: perception via the senses. In fact, this is also how
modern art practice and art theory understand artistic activity. From Cézanne
to Picasso and Magritte and beyond to contemporary work such as Robert
Rauschenberg’s and Jasper John’s, modern art is preoccupied with the
perceptual and sensory means by which the human agent relates itself to the
external world. In applying aesthetics to institutional behaviour, I am merely
drawing attention to the fairly obvious idea that human institutions (formal
organizations, professions, technologies, etc.) also rely on aesthetic logic –
forms, structures, representations, symmetry/ asymmetry, etc. – though it is
difficult for us to see institutions in this way because we have been
conditioned to view them almost entirely in functional terms (this applies
above all to the field of organizational analysis).

Let me illustrate with an argument from art theory. In his famous conceptual
analysis of the elements of art – point, line and plane – Kandinsky (1926/1979)
argued that there are two ways by which we experience phenomena – the
Outer and the Inner. He applies these two ways of perceiving to the simple
point or dot. When we look at the point externally (via the Outer),

1 Editor’s note: ‘The indigo grass in the glass’ is a full poem, the other quotes are
excerpts. All of these poems can be found in Stevens (1954).
it is merely a sign serving a useful end and carries with it the element of the ‘practical-useful’ ... [it] becomes a thing of habit (...) All appearances that are traditionally familiar because of their singular expression, become mute to us. We no longer react to their appeal and are surrounded by silence; so we succumb to the deadly grip of ‘practical-efficiency’. (Kandinsky, 1979: 25)

Sometimes we are jolted out of our external, practical-useful attitude by sickness, accident or war and are forced to see the Inner aspect of things. Sometimes we can – with effort – develop the capacity to analyse the Inner aspect. This is what Kandinsky does with the point which now becomes more than just a full stop at the end of a sentence. Once we tear the point out of its customary contexts, its Inner features begin to reveal themselves, e.g.:

The point is the result of the initial collision of the tool with the material plane, with the basic plane. Paper, wood, canvas, stucco, metal – may all serve as this basic plane. The tool may be pencil, burin, brush, pen, etching-point, etc. The basic plane is impregnated by this first collision. (ibid.: 28)

The point is temporally the briefest form. (ibid.: 35)

The point is the basic building block of the line, i.e., the line is the point in movement; etc. Kandinsky writes over thirty printed pages on the Inner aspects of the point. Essentially, Kandinsky is showing us how the aesthetic attitude works to reveal a complex world which is hidden from us when we rely – unconsciously and uncritically – on the practical-useful attitude.

There is a striking analogy between Kandinsky’s argument in art theory and the work of the theoretical biologists Maturana and Varela, which has attracted the attention of a number of social scientists, notably the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (and Morgan, 1986). Corresponding to Kandinsky’s Inner aspect is Maturana and Varela’s idea of autopoiesis, while the farmer’s Outer (practical-useful) aspect corresponds to the idea of the computer-gestalt in Maturana and Varela. As Varela (1979: xii) points out, the computer-gestalt (practical-useful) approach to knowledge is all-pervasive: ‘Its popular model is: something in/process/something out’; it defines phenomena externally, in terms of its value to the external definer. Autopoietic phenomena are autonomous processes that are internally regulated, just as Kandinsky’s point receives its significance from its internal structures. They operate independently of human purposes and control. To
understand autopoietic processes requires a special way of thinking – what Kant, in *The critique of judgment*, called aesthetic judgment (a kind of ‘suspended cognition’):

...when we call the sight of the starry sky *sublime*, we must not base our judgment upon any concept of worlds that are inhabited by rational beings and then (conceive of) the bright points, with which we see the space above us filled, as being these worlds’ suns, moved in orbits prescribed for them with great purposiveness; but we must base our judgment regarding it merely on how we see it, as a vast all-embracing vault, and only under this presentation may we posit that sublimity that a pure aesthetic judgment attributes to this object. Similarly, when we judge the sight of the ocean, we must not do so on the basis of how we think it, enriched with all sorts of knowledge (that are not contained in immediate intuition), e.g., as a vast realm of aquatic creatures, or as the great reservoir of those vapours that impregnate the air with clouds for the benefit of the land, or again as an element that, while separating continents from one another, yet makes possible the greatest communication among them; for all such judgments will be teleological. Instead, we must be able to view the ocean as poets do, merely in terms of what the eye reveals – e.g., if it is observed while calm, as a clear mirror of water bounded only by the sky; if it is observe while turbulent, as an abyss threatening to devour everything. (Kant, 1987: 130)

In other words, the elements of the world have to be seen according to a disinterested, aesthetic language which relies on such aesthetic devices as *frames, boundaries, reflections*, etc. – all devices that the modern artist counts as his real subject matter (as Cézanne noted, he did not paint houses or mountains – he painted primarily shapes and colours which were only secondarily houses and mountains): the starry sky is simply a ‘vast vault’ that contains everything – it is an aesthetic figure which also contains the eye that looks on it; in fact, the vault of the sky is physically reflected in the eyeball to create a dynamic interaction between sky and eye in a kind of vertiginous vortex since there is now no simple distinction between sky and eye but a confusion between subject and object, sight and seen.

The aesthetic approach can be seen at its best perhaps in the work of Michel Foucault. Significantly in the present context, much of Foucault’s work is concerned with ‘seeing’ (understanding, knowing) and sight. Specifically, he studies institutions (and organizations) in terms of how they assist ‘man’ to see/understand/know himself, e.g., the rise of the social sciences in the last two hundred years is analysed as a series of strategies to put ‘man’ ‘in the
picture’, i.e., to make himself both understandable and useful to himself. Foucault’s work also shows that these strategies emphasize the practical-useful as opposed to the aesthetic and, in doing this, they deny access to the hidden, inner aspects of their own construction and activities. But more specifically relevant to our argument is Foucault’s use of figural devices like frames, boundaries, etc. No doubt this helps explain Foucault’s interest in the work of artists like Velázquez and Magritte – he saw these people dealing with precisely the same issues he observed in institutional behaviour.\(^2\) I shall leave Foucault for the moment and return to him later in a discussion of one of his figural devices – the Double or Fold – when I come to deal with the idea of ‘contestation’.

At this point, let’s return to the field of organization studies. While the professional study of organizations is heavily biased toward the practical-useful (managerial), it’s possible to detect a tension between the practical-useful and the aesthetic in the work of certain writers in the field.

Gareth Morgan’s *Images of organization* (1986) seems to me to be an example of a writer whose work suffers from this tension. The idea of images or metaphors nods in the direction of the aesthetic but the images are always subservient to the practical-useful (the book was written primarily for MBA students in North America). James March’s work seems to suffer from the same problem, e.g., his work on decision-making in organizations, while primarily concerned to be ‘instructive’ in the practical-useful sense, is shadowed on every side by intimations of the aesthetic (in some of his later essays, March refers to philosophy, poetry and novels as though to say that these sources are more profoundly relevant for understanding behaviour in organizations than the practical useful style of most current writing in the field). But perhaps Karl Weick’s work stands out as the most intriguing example of someone who recognises the importance of the aesthetic approach but who at the same time is confounded by the demands of the practical-useful.

\(^2\) Editor’s note: The first chapter in *The order of things* (Foucault, 1970) is a discussion of the painting *Las meninas* by Diego Velázquez. Foucault wrote a short book on René Magritte’s *Ceci n’est pas une pine* (Foucault, 1983).
The general spirit of Weick’s (1969) work fits in quite well with what we are here calling institutional aesthetics. Weick focuses on the moving form of organization rather than the more static idea of the organization. Like Maturana and Varela’s approach in autopoietics, Weick says he is interested in processes of organizing, and not in the outcomes of these processes. Despite this, Weick often falls back on a practical useful way of talking. Since I want to refer to some of Weick’s ideas later, let’s briefly summarize his position: ‘Organizing consists of the resolving of equivocality in an enacted environment by means of interlocked behaviours embedded in conditionally related processes’ (Weick, 1969: 91). Weick lays emphasis on the continuous re-accomplishment of organizing through the process of enactment. Like Shotter (1993), Weick (1969: 64) says that the human agent ‘creates the environment to which the system then adapts’. He borrows his basic idea for the enacted environment from the phenomenologist Alfred Schutz who argues that the construction of meaning is time-based: it is based on looking back at an action we have accomplished. As Weick describes it, ‘Stated bluntly, we can know what we’ve done only after we’ve done it. Only by doing is it possible for us to discover what we have done’ (ibid.). In other words, enactment is based on the future-historic tense. Weick illustrates its operation in terms of ‘Ed Rose’s function’:

When Ed Rose (a sociologist) visits a strange city and is being driven by his host from the airport to a motel, Rose looks out of the car window and at some random moment says, “My, that’s changed”. In response to this senseless statement, Rose’s host usually makes some sensible reply such as ‘Yes, it burned down’, ‘there is some new urban renewal work going on’, etc. Having heard his host’s answer, Rose is then able to discover the meaning of what he said in the first place. (Weick, 1969: 68)

Enactment is thus the attribution of meaning to a part of the world – or, as Weick more formally defines it, it is the removal of equivocality (i.e., no meaning) to produce bits of enacted information. So far, so good. But Weick then proceeds to talk about information in terms of inputs, so that the bits of enacted information come to be seen as outputs/outcomes. In other words, he adopts what Varela calls the input/output model of the computer-gestalt in which information is viewed as a commodity (at one point, Weick actually

Editor’s note: Weick (1969: 68) credits Harold Garfinkel for ‘Ed Rose’s function’.
refers to information as a commodity) and so loses the aesthetic approach he began with. In the aesthetic approach, information is always internal to the system as we saw in Kant’s case of the interaction or intertwining of sky and eye. While Weick puts the emphasis on the solipsism of the actor, in Kant the actor is part of the informing/enframing system. In other words, while Weick centres the actor in the organizing process, Kant de-centres it. While, for Weick, the actor enacts information, in Kant’s scheme, the actor is enacted by the information, i.e., the actor is in-formed/en-framed. Even Weick’s concept of enactment is placed under suspicion by the aesthetic approach.

The logic of contestation

Where Weick puts the emphasis on enactment as the removal of equivocality, Shotter (1993: 153) underlines the non-removal of equivocality: ‘In everyday life, much of what we talk about has a contested nature, that is, our talk is not about something which already actually exists, but is about what might be, what could be the case, or what something should be like’. Shotter views contestation as part of his social constructionist approach.

In this section I try to discuss the process of contestation within an aesthetic framework mainly as a way of illustrating a bit more fully what I mean by institutional aesthetics. The first point is that we have to get rid of the practical-useful idea that institutions and organizations have purposes and goals. As Mary Douglas (1985) has pointed out, institutions do not have purposes – only individuals have purposes. Institutions are autopoietic processes and refer only to themselves, i.e., they do not necessarily exist for an external reason like progress or efficiency. As we know from Foucault’s (1977) work, especially the essay on ‘Nietzsche, genealogy, history’, human institutions cohere around differences, around divisions and conflicts. Following Nietzsche, Foucault tells us that it is, paradoxically, dissension and disparity which holds things together in the human world. In other words, contestation is the motor that drives human relationships and institutional

---

4 Editor’s note: Cooper used a different edition of this text, which is nowadays hard to find: Shotter, J. (1990) Knowing of the third kind: Selected writings on psychology, rhetoric, and the culture of everyday social life. Utrecht: ISOR.
action. Human actors get their individual identities from contestation. Meaning also comes from contestation (which may now be seen as a better way of understanding Weick’s notion of equivocality). In order to bring out the inner logic of contestation and its aesthetic (autopoietic, self-referring) character, I draw on a little-known essay by Nietzsche called ‘Homer’s contest’ (Nietzsche, 1977). Nietzsche’s intention here is to show how the early Greeks recognized two conceptions of struggle or contest. On the one hand, contest or struggle is viewed as a way of attaining a goal outside the contest itself (e.g. victory over an enemy and appropriation of his land). On the other hand, the struggle, contest or game is seen as an end-in-itself (i.e., it is self-referring). The first idea of contest finds its most extreme expression in the extermination struggle. The second, identified with Greek society at Homer’s time, is best understood in the Greek concept of agôn. The ancient Greeks prized the agonic relationship as the source of the life-force, and, as Nietzsche points out, they valued feelings of envy, jealousy and rancour as positive advantages, gifts of the gods.

Agonistics, according to Nietzsche, always contains an element of domination, a desire to lay hold of the other, to curtail the otherness upon which the agonistics nevertheless depends. Agonistics is necessarily ambivalent, and the only question – the question animating Nietzsche’s text – concerns the manner in which it tries to assume that ambivalence. The answer given in Nietzsche’s text is to show how the Greeks succeeded in recognizing their identity as players as the effect of an irreducible otherness (Weber, 1985: 107, emphasis in original).

Once the contest, the struggle or game, is reduced to the idea of a win-lose ethic, it is already over. At the battle of Marathon, the desire to be unequalled was the cause of the fall of Miltiades, as Nietzsche explains:

After the battle of Marathon the envy of the heavenly powers seized him. And this divine envy is inflamed when it beholds a human being without rival, unopposed, on a solitary peak of fame. Only the gods are beside him now and therefore they are against him. They seduce him to a deed of hybris (excessiveness), and under it he collapses. (Nietzsche, cited in Weber, 1985: 107)
What Weber (1985) calls an *irreducible otherness* is what Weick calls *equivocality*. But in Weick equivocality is seen as something external to the actor which he/she has to reduce and tame. In Weber, contest is the effect of an *irreducible otherness* which in-forms people’s actions, i.e., is internal or intrinsic to them. The idea of contest, struggle or action (note that actor, action, act all derive from the Latin *agere*, to act, which relates to the Greek *agón*, contest) can be pursued further in the concept of the Event, which is another way of talking about *irreducible otherness*.

### The Event

The concept of the Event emphasizes precisely the interactional or interpenetrational structure of Kant’s aesthetic. Where Weick gives emphasis to the meanings extracted from interactions, the Event focuses on the interaction itself.

The notion of the Event is associated mainly with post-structuralist writers such as Deleuze and Lyotard but Floyd Allport (1955) in social psychology can perhaps lay claim to being the first to address fully the implications of the Event for human action. Allport was especially interested in showing that structure is a dynamic process which operates at all levels of human action. For Allport, structure consists of ongoings and events. The ongoings are the continuous motions in and behind actions (at a physiological level, e.g., they are the neural impulses, muscular contractions, etc., which are ongoing through space and time). The events are the ‘junction points’ or ‘encounters’ between ongoings, e.g., the point of contact between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. It’s clear that Allport’s conception of the event is like a process of division or difference (Bateson, Derrida, Lyotard).

In *The logic of sense*, Deleuze (1990) provides an extensive analysis of the Event in terms not unlike those of Allport. For Deleuze, the Event is a process of mixture (incidentally, Allport pays less attention to this feature of the Event than does Deleuze) in which things interpenetrate. It’s the interpenetration or ‘irreducible otherness’ of the things of the world that constitute the special character of the Event. To illustrate the interactional nature of the Event,
Deleuze uses the battle as described by Stephen Crane in *The red badge of courage*.

On the field, a battle consists in innumerable actions and reactions between bodies: sabres cut into the warm flesh, bullets penetrate it, cannonballs dismember it, blood and sweat seep into the earth, trees are blown to smithereens. Nature itself is wounded. But the battle does not exist at all (...) it is everywhere, but nowhere in particular; it clings to every object like a film, yet the actors never perceive it (the hero of *The red badge of courage* takes part in it, at one point tries to escape from it, and yet never perceives it as a single entity, as the battle). There it is, bodiless and impassive, indifferent to the actions and passions that constitute it (...), neutral between the victors and the vanquished, the brave and the cowardly. This is why Crane never gives names to his heroes: they are the variables, the x’s and y’s in a formula, an event, the battle. (Lecercle, 1985: 98-99)

The battle as Event demonstrates Weber’s idea of ‘irreducible otherness’ – what’s important is not the individual elements but their *mixing*:

The knife that cuts and the flesh that is cut become inextricably mixed. But from these very material mixtures there rises an incorporeal vapour: the event, which is produced by these mixtures, but which must not be confused with them. Indeed, the event ‘cutting/being cut’ belongs to a different order of being from the knife, the flesh and their conjunction. It is not a physical property but an attribute of things: it does not exist in things, it insists in them and subsists in language. (Lecercle, 1985: 98, emphasis in original)

As one would expect from Deleuze, there is much more to the Event than these brief examples suggest. What I’m trying to bring out here is that the Event makes us see contestation not in terms of say, *my* interests against *your* interests but that *mine* and *yours* belong to some bigger force (or, as Allport would say, ‘event-structure’), to an ‘irreducible otherness’ that, to continue Nietzsche’s metaphor, belongs to the Gods and not to human beings. In this sense, contestation as Event is (to use Kant’s term) *sublime* – it is ‘sub-liminal’ or always beyond our individual grasp. Lyotard (see Bennington, 1988 for a most useful overview of Lyotard’s writings on the Event) has argued, analysed and illustrated the *sublime* aspects of the Event in a whole series of books and essays, bringing out its importance in political, knowledge and aesthetic fields.
For Lyotard, the Event, ‘irreducible otherness’, is basically unthinkable, ungraspable – this is what he means by the sublime. For convenience, illustrate Lyotard’s analysis of the sublime Event through one of his essays on the American painter Barnett Newman (Lyotard has written several pieces on Newman – see Lyotard, 1989). Lyotard starts with an essay, ‘The Sublime is Now’, written by Newman as a theoretical complement to some of his paintings. The focus of Lyotard’s analysis is the ‘Now’ of Newman’s title, as a way of understanding the sublime. ‘Now’ is not the ‘present instant’, the immediate; instead, the ‘now’ is ‘what dismantles consciousness, what deposes consciousness, it is what consciousness cannot formulate, and even what consciousness forgets in order to constitute itself’ (1989: 197). What we can’t formulate is that something happens, that there is an occurrence, a happening. The ‘it happens’ must ‘precede’ the question about what is happening (ibid.). (Think of the ‘it’ in the sentence, ‘It is raining’, where we do not have any precise idea of the nature of the subject, and one gets some idea of what Lyotard is trying to say).

Institutions, however, make it difficult for us to think of the ‘newness’ or sublimity of the event, since they are continually structuring our thoughts and thinking processes for us. Universities, schools, political programmes, religious credos, academic theories are all ‘infected’ with the practical-useful. Institutionalized thought ‘works over what is received, it seeks to reflect on it and overcome it. It seeks to determine what has already been thought, written painted, or socialized in order to determine what hasn’t been’ (ibid.). All these institutional activities which determine thought for us (see also Robert Pirsig’s 1974 book Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance for a related argument about the role of institutions in society)

... forget the possibility of nothing happening, of words, colours, forms or sounds not coming; of this sentence being the last, of bread not coming daily. This is the misery that the painter faces with a plastic surface, of the musician with the acoustic surface, this misery the thinker faces with a desert of thought, and so on. Not only faced with the empty canvas or the empty page, at the ‘beginning’ of the work, but every time something has to be waited for, and thus forms a question at every point of questioning [the division that characterizes Allport’s definition of the Event], at every ‘and what now?’ (Lyotard, 1989: 198)
The sublime, the beyond, the inexpressible aspect of the Event or the ‘Now’ is not something that resides in the ‘beyond’ as another place or time. Newman’s point is that it is the ‘it happens’ is what is happening here and now – it is the paint, it is the picture itself, not some representation of an external reference. As Lyotard says, Newman’s essay title has to be understood as

*Now the sublime is like this*. Not elsewhere, not up there or over there, not earlier or later, not once upon a time. But as here, now, it happens that, ... and it’s this painting. Here and now there is this painting, rather than nothing, and that’s what is Sublime. (Lyotard, 1989: 199, emphasis in original)

The sublime is ordinarily the sub-liminal – what’s continually staring us in the face but which we never see. This is another way of saying Weick’s ‘equivocality’ but Weick does not ask the more basic question of the sublime. It’s also another version of Crane’s battle.

I don’t know if Lyotard has made direct use in any of his work of Samuel Beckett’s ‘novel’, *The unnamable*, but there are strong affinities with Lyotard’s conception of the Event and Beckett’s concerns. The ‘hero’ of Beckett’s book has no name (like Crane’s hero in *The red badge of courage*), and he/it has no recognizable form; he lacks all features – he has no nose, no sex; he is smooth and hairless; he has no past, only the here and now. He is unknowable and therefore unnamable – just a ‘it happens’. He speaks and writes but as the book progresses even words lose their institutionalized meanings and structures and become, like Newman’s paintings which are simply themselves and have no external referent, mere sounds and marks that ‘just happen’. We are back with Cézanne’s recognition that he did not paint houses or mountains but shapes and colours that ‘happen’.

Lyotard has analysed a variety of happenings as events that are ‘irreducibly other’. One such analysis concerns the death of a worker, Pierre Overney, during a demonstration outside the Billancourt, Paris, factory of the Renault motor company in 1972. Specifically, Lyotard analyses the story or ‘narrative’ constructed to give meaning to this event. There is no ‘real’ referent for the story, for the ‘referent’ is actually made up by the ‘theatrical’ staging of the narrative device:
Robert Cooper

This event does not have to be taken into account by virtue of being ‘real’, attestable outside the theatrical volume engendered by narration. Nor is it worthy of consideration because it is ‘sensational’, likely to engender many a metamorphosis on the ‘social body’ … these effects are clearly not without their importance, but they are legible only on the surface of the ‘social body’ and considering them uncritically will not fail to plunge us back into the (‘sociological’) naivety of belief in this social body, and thus in its pre-existence, and thus in a reference assignable to the death of Pierre Overney. If this death is an event, this is above all a tensor or intense passage, and this tensor requires not the three-dimensional Euclidean space of the theatrical volume and the organized social body, but the n-dimensional, neutral and unpredictable space of the libidinal film engendered by the tensor-event itself in its amnesiac singularity. (Lyotard, cited in Bennington, 1988: 109)

Here, Lyotard is arguing that Overney’s death is an Event not in the media sense, not because of its political-economic meaning, but precisely because it lacks intrinsic or internal meaning – as an Event it exists (like Crane’s battle) ‘before’ meaning and as such is without sense (see Deleuze’s similar argument in The logic of sense). Neither the Renault company’s narrative nor the counter-narrative of the demonstration’s organizers can override the fundamental ‘meaninglessness’, ‘senselessness’, of Overney’s death – it remains an Event ‘insofar as it refuses to be absorbed into the order of a classical narrative, brought to book in a narrative account, its tension exchanged for other tensions’ (Bennington, 1988: 109).

Lyotard is trying always to work before the imposition of order and meaning, of narrative and referentiality – before the instantaneous, almost ‘natural’ cognitive process that sets up a presupposed subject and object. The purpose of the Renault narrative is to promote the idea that there is such a ‘natural’ set-up. Lyotard is at pains to underline the volcanic force in people to see the world as a ‘natural’ set-up – rather like Wallace Stevens’ idea of a ‘rage for order’ – and the difficulties that this force implies for a deconstructive analysis such as his own.

The set-up or representation

In order to give a better idea of Institutional Aesthetics, I’d like at this point to pursue a bit further Lyotard’s idea of the ‘set-up’ – what he calls the mise-en-scene, the construction of a ‘scene’ or representation – by contrasting it
with a (marginally) similar approach in organizational studies: dramaturgy. Mangham and Overington (1983) have argued the case for the theatrical or dramaturgical metaphor in the study of organizational behaviour, drawing on Brecht, Goffman, Harré, and others. Mangham and Overington actually call their ‘theatrical’ methodology ‘a social psychological aesthetic’. Relying heavily on Kenneth Burke’s ideas, they say that the theatrical metaphor enables us to see ourselves as language-users ‘capable of playing a number of characters to varying audiences and yet still retaining a grasp of an acting self’ (ibid.: 221). ‘Theatre’ reminds us that social life is made up of ‘seduction’ and ‘bamboozlement’ in which people act out their roles in a non-critical way, in a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ (ibid.: 223). Brecht’s work in experimental theatre is especially concerned with ‘deconstructing’ the power of theatrical representation to deceive us into acting as social automatons. In short, social institutions seek to ‘mystify’ themselves through theatrical representations:

Churches and universities display myths of Purpose: preparation of the elect in one form or another. Industry occasionally mystifies the Agent: Salvation lies in the hands of the engineers or accountants ... (Mangham and Overington, 1983: 225)

So far, so good. This is quite consistent with Lyotard’s ideas on the ‘set-up’. But Mangham and Overington go on to ‘reduce’ the promise of their introduction to institutional dramaturgy by applying it to a piece of business consultancy in a large manufacturing company. The consultancy analysis was confined to (1) managers and the various ways they interpreted their organizational ‘scripts’, and (2) self-reflection on the consultant’s roles as ‘audience, critic, dramatic coach, dramaturge, and casting director to the enterprise’ (ibid.: 228).

In stark contrast, Lyotard uses the concept of the theatre as a paradigm for analysing the process of representation. In short, he shows how institutions set up the machinery by which their members’ ways of thinking and perceiving are structured. Lyotard looks at ‘theatre’ not in the ‘reduced’ sense of a play with scenes, scripts, roles and actors (which is exactly how Mangham and Overington used the theatre metaphor, i.e., precisely as metaphor) but more like Heidegger’s interpretation of what ‘theory’ and ‘theatre’ meant for the early Greeks:
Thea (cf., Theatre) is the aspect (Aublick), the outlook (Aussehen) in which something shows itself. Plato called this outlook, in which the on-going (Anwesendes) shows what it is, eidos. To have seen this outlook (Aussehen), eidénai, is knowledge (Wissen). The second root in theorein, horao, signifies: to look at something, take it in (the sight of the eye) ..., to regard it. What follows: theorein is théan horan: to look at the aspect wherein the on-coming appears, and through such sight to linger there while seeing. (Heidegger, cited in Weber, 1990: 60)

Clearly, this notion of ‘theatre’ and ‘theory’ is much more like Kant’s purposeless aestheticism and this is how Lyotard uses the idea of theatre in order to understand more clearly the representational logic that is common both to ‘theatre’ (in the usual sense) and ‘theory’ as a form of institutionalized thinking.

As a methodology of representation, a theatre includes three frames or divisions:

1) the outer walls of the building, where the ‘real’ world is outside and the theatre’ inside. When you walk into a theatre you enter a different space, ‘announced’ by the foyer, etc.

2) the second frame is what separates the stage from the audience – this marks off the place observed from the place from which it’s observed. This division is further emphasized by a proscenium arch, footlights, and (maybe) an orchestra pit. The audience has to sit still and quiet in the dark; only the actors move, talk, etc., in bright light.

3) a third frame divides the stage from the wings and backstage – everything which ‘puts on’ the play is here, and this is invisible to the audience.

Lyotard is not interested in the theatre per se nor even as an analogy for ‘setting-up’ or ‘putting-on’ representations. He is more concerned with the general logic of representing and he sees the theatre as exemplifying this logic. The structural logic of the traditional theatre he also observes in the world of painting where the art book or gallery corresponds to the first frame of the theatre, i.e., the walls; here, the spectator is placed as a ‘viewer’ of the art work just as the theatre audience is placed to see the play. The second
frame is the actual picture frame (like the proscenium arch) which says to the viewer, ‘now, you are seeing a real scene, with depth, perspective, etc.’ The canvas and the paint itself provides the third frame which, like the backstage of the theatre, must never be seen, otherwise the represented scene would not be visible. There is of course a whole lot more in Lyotard’s complex portrayal of the representational process in theatre, painting, etc. It’s enough for us to understand that Lyotard is showing us how the aesthetics of institutions develop technologies which organize our perceptions and thoughts about the world we live in. And this is quite a different use of aesthetics from the practical-useful emphasis of Mangham and Overington where increased ‘interpersonal competence’ of managers is the goal of the exercise. For what lies ‘before’ the ‘set-up’, the representation, is precisely the Event – that which just happens, beyond all our attempts to give it practical-useful meaning, just shapes, figures, forms, frames, divisions, etc.

The Fold

An essential feature of the aesthetic is concern with the ‘sensory’ one literally ‘senses’ the world in Kant’s portrayal of the aesthetic. And in this literal ‘sensing’, we have to understand the processes of physical contact between, for example, the body of the human actor and the external elements he/she comes into literal contact with. This is precisely the point of Allport’s notion of ‘event-structure’ and the ‘otherness’ or ‘interpenetrativeness’ of the ongoings in Crane’s battle. It is not the bodies, the sabres, the cannonballs, etc., that constitute the ‘sensory’ experience (i.e., experience is not to be found in the senses) but what lies between the senses and what makes them ‘sense’. It’s this idea that is suggested by the Fold or Double. The Fold is another way of talking about the Event – both are exemplary aesthetic structures.

In this section I want, briefly, to show how Foucault uses the idea and structure of the Fold in his various institutional analyses. But, before we attempt this, it may help to understand the idea of the Fold by reference to Derrida’s idea of ‘invagination’, which is structurally the same. Invagination is the folding ‘in’ of the ‘out’, e.g., the human body is an invaginated structure whose inner spaces – mouth, stomach, etc., – are really pockets of externality
folded in. Invagination is a special property of the Event which, as we have seen is constituted by the interpenetration of two elements, e.g., sabre and flesh, eye and sky, etc. It refers to that paradoxical line of division where things are both separate and joined together. A glove, for Derrida, is an invaginated structure since turning it inside out transforms, say, a right-hand glove into a left-hand glove.

To grasp the wider implications of the Fold for institutional/organizational analysis, we need to remind ourselves that the social sciences are given to what Serres (1982) calls the ‘Euclidean’ mode of thinking in which everything is cast into individual elements or ‘singularities’: motives are ‘inside’ people, intelligence is ‘inside’ the human brain, etc. In organizational studies, an example of the Euclidean style of thought is the tendency to think of ‘organization’ and ‘environment’ as separate, encapsulated domains. The Fold provides an entirely different perspective to the organization-environment relationship. Like Derrida’s glove or Crane’s sabre and flesh or Kant’s eye and sky, organization and environment have to be seen as an interlocking, antopoietic enfolding. I have tried to give some simple examples of how the Fold can be used in the institutional analysis of the organization-environment doublet (Cooper, 1991). One example is the rise of the Portuguese East Indies Company in the 15th century. One of the major problems faced by the Portuguese was the hostile natural environment that lay between Lisbon and India/Goa – threatening winds, boisterous seas, vast distances, etc. A hostile ‘outside’ had to be appropriated and tamed (made ‘certain’, as we might say in organizational studies) by developing a new range of technologies and organizational practices on board the Portuguese vessels, e.g., the Portuguese navigators were able to appropriate the Atlantic winds when they saw their sails as folds in which an inside (the protective sociotechnical system of the vessel) was doubled with an outside (threatening winds) – by redesigning the technology of sail and rigging. Similarly, when Louis Pasteur developed the anthrax vaccine in the 19th century, he was faced with a complex series of folds and not just causal, linear relationships, between his laboratory and the anthrax-infected cattle of France. In effect, Pasteur’s laboratory became a fold of the infected farms, his anthrax vaccine doubled the anthrax bacillus. The laboratory is a fold of the farm, just as the ship is a fold of the sea.
It’s this sense of the Fold that Foucault (1970) pursued in *The order of things*: the Fold of the inside/outside, of the institution/society, organization/environment. ‘The outside is not a fixed limit but a moving matter animated by the peristaltic movements, folds and foldings that together make up an inside; they are not something other than the outside, but precisely the inside of the outside’ (Deleuze, 1988: 96-97). In other words, the Fold is always an interiorization of the outside, a doubling of the outside, the outside reversed, so to speak. Foucault’s concept of power is to be understood as the work of folding. Power, as we now well know, is not a commodity, it is a contestation between an inside and an outside. When one exercises power over others, it is precisely that power that one brings to bear on oneself in a kind of self-mastery, *enkrateia* as the ancient Greeks so insightfully called it. The birth of modern clinical medicine, as Foucault (1975) has shown, is also a product of the contestatory fold where the medical ‘clinic’ and its technology focused on unfolding the folds of the body and its illnesses – to make it transparent, linear, two-dimensional and therefore controllable just like Pasteur’s enfoldment in, and unfolding of, the anthrax problem.

**Some final comments**

In these impressionistic discussion notes, I have tried to do two things: (1) to indicate that John Shotter’s concept of ‘contestation’ is central to institutional and organizational analysis, and (2) to suggest that contestation, in its varied, subtle and complex forms, can be best understood and appreciated by following what I have called an ‘aesthetic’ approach and not a managerial (or even sociological and psychological) approach whose language is inadequate for the task of getting to grips with the complexity of institutional behaviour.

The work of people like Foucault, Deleuze and Lyotard has been used to illustrate the aesthetic approach. It’s an important part of my argument that these writers borrowed their ideas from novelists and painters. They did this because only creative writers and artists – and not professional(ized) social scientists and philosophers – have tackled the problem of developing conceptual methods for thinking about the non-functional, non-technical facets of human behaviour in the increasingly organized world of today. It is
these aesthetic methodologies which are required in order to understand more fully the nature of the technical-functional world and the role of the social sciences in this technical-functional process.

**references**


the author

Robert Cooper (1931-2013) was a prominent theorist of organization, known for introducing postmodernism and post-structuralism to organization studies. He has also been highly influential in process studies of organization. After writing and publishing poetry in his early years, and a PhD at Liverpool University, he held academic positions at various English universities – Aston, Lancaster, Keele – finally ending as an honorary Professor at the University of Leicester.