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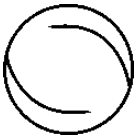

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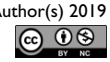
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Novel Thought: Towards a Literary Study of Organization

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Abstract

Novels espouse an epistemological freedom that is beyond even experimental forms of scholarly research and writing. Precisely this freedom makes novels so conducive to thought. Their enduring presence in organization studies demonstrates literary fiction's power of conveying how things are, might be, or can be thought of; of inventing new ways of seeing; of enabling different vocabularies as well as staging and transmitting specific affects. In this paper, we trace the mutual 'contamination' between the novel and organization studies as well as discuss different modes of engaging prose fiction, drawing on Rancière's ethical, representative and aesthetic regimes of art. With a special nod to Kafka's novels and stories and also McCarthy's *Satin Island*, we outline the contours of a literary study of organization and introduce the special themed section on 'The Novel and Organization Studies'.

Keywords

fiction, Kafka, literature, McCarthy, organization theory, organization, Rancière, the novel

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> For six days, [Lévi-Strauss] wrote from morning till night on the back of sheets of paper containing his research notes. The drama's plot involved a Roman emperor and his assassin, and a grand exploration of the themes of glory, power, nature and annihilation. I picture him writing it, cold and rheumatic on interminable afternoons. No, scratch that: what I actually picture is the paper that he writes it on (. . .). On one side, scientific, evidence-based research; on the other, epic art. If my Report had come to be completed, which side of the paper would it have been written on? (. . .) Perhaps to neither side, but to the middle: the damp, pulpy mass that forms the opaque body at whose outer limits, like two mirages, the others hover.
>
> (McCarthy, 2015, p. 115)

Introduction

The study of organization is contaminated by novels. Literary scenes, sites, characters, objects, plots and writing styles have found and keep finding their way into research papers, monographs and teaching materials. Countless snippets of, references to or discussions of prose fiction populate organization studies. Often, this happens in passing and without further reflection: a literary epigraph to set a research paper's tone, see above; a reference to Kafka, Austen, Musil or Pynchon, say; a famous literary metaphor; an illustrative scene taken from a novel; an interior monologue of the kind that is by default unavailable in empirical fieldwork; a convincing, enchanting or shocking thick description of organized life; or even a piece of analysis or theoretical reflection gleaned from a novel. Infrequently, special issues or edited volumes explicitly thematize the relation of novelistic writing to organization studies, usually in the form of exemplary readings of specific novels in the context of organization-theoretical concerns.

At the very least, the sheer presence of literary writing demonstrates that novels 'cannot be automatically precluded from taking part in practices of knowing' (Felski, 2008, p. 103). Rather, novels seem to be always-already at work in how organizations are made sense of, and in the ways in which the fruits of this sensemaking are presented. More provocatively put, literary works influence the imagination of organizational scholars. A reconstruction of organization studies' history of thought as well as an understanding of its presence would require attending to its uses of literature.

This is quite remarkable. After all, novels – and no matter whether of the realist or the (post)modernist kind – espouse an epistemological freedom that is beyond even experimental forms of scholarly research and writing. Novel-writing can simply 'ignore empirical criteria and constraints of evidentiary argument' (Felski, 2008, p. 90) as well as theoretical, methodological and stylistic prescriptions. Yet it is this quality that makes them so conducive to thought. Novels can make us not only see new and different things but also see things differently. They have the power to affect the way we sense and, in this way, alter the very ways in which we perceive, study and write organization.

In this paper, which also frames the special themed section on 'The Novel and Organization Studies', we seek to discuss the modes of engagement between prose fiction and organization studies. Our aim is to outline the contours of a literary study of organization. This undertaking's central premise is that literature and organization studies are interdependent rather than exclusive forms of discourse. De Cock and Land (2006) have spelled out an intriguing treatment of this relation in the pages of this journal. They employ the notion of the 'seam' to think of literary writing, literary criticism and organizational thought. Both narrowing and pushing further De Cock and Land's thesis, our paper and the special themed section specifically focus on novels as the main modern form of literature. The notion of literature comprises 'three thousand years of poetry, fiction and theater' as well as the literary essay (Marx, 2018, p. 1); the modern novel emerges in the 18th and 19th centuries as part of a new regime of literary expression or 'aesthetic revolution' that puts paid to formal or social confines of what may be represented in literary writing (Rancière, 2011). Moreover, we borrow Gasché's (1999) notion of mutual contamination to capture the specific reciprocal relation

between the novel and organization studies. This notion allows us to draw attention to the fluid exchanges between the two as well as the irritations to which their encounters give rise.

In order to more closely attend to the mutual contamination of novels and organization studies, we seek to radicalize a thesis already brought forward by De Cock and Land (2006): that novels can contain, invent and perform organizational thought. Implicit in this thesis are three premises that direct our investigation. First, the trajectory of organizational thought, and of social theory in general terms, is haunted and influenced by novelistic writing. Second, prose fiction is a prime 'site' of irritating and unlearning accustomed insights and assumptions of what organization is and how it does and does not work. Third, novels themselves engage with and enact social and organizational thought. We believe, however, that these premises do not equal 'a desire to subordinate the literary to the organizational' (De Cock & Land, 2006, p. 523). They simply assume finding the organizational at work in prose fiction. To translate recent rapprochements of sociology and literary studies to the encounter of prose fiction and organization studies, even to the forms of organizing narrated in prose fiction (Levine, 2017), novels do not merely represent an *object* of organizational analysis. They may also form a *medium* of organizational thought in their own right, and organization studies might depend in significant ways on this kind of organizational imagination (Harrington, 2002, p. 60). Engaging with novels therefore calls for a radically literary study of organization (Alworth, 2016, p. 4).

Focusing on novels as media of organizational thought implies that we will not specifically dwell on literary *theory* and its relation to organization studies. Scholarly readings of novels are in some way or other informed by literary criticism, of course. Texts are apprehended through previous interpretations, through sedimented categories and reading habits (Jameson, 1983), and we specifically draw upon literary theorists that reconsider the relation of prose fiction and social thought. Yet we believe that focusing on a 'perverse exchange of fluids' (De Cock & Land, 2006, p. 518) between the heterogeneous fields of literary theory and organization studies would merit further and separate investigations. It risks distracting from this special themed section's more modest inquiry into the specific relation of novels and organizational thought. This also means that we touch upon yet refrain from discussing in any detail the 'literary turn' in organization studies (Glaubitz, 2016) in relation to the fictitiousness of organization (Savage, Cornelissen, & Franck, 2018) and related issues of representation, narrativity, storytelling and different styles of writing (Czarniawska, 1999; Rhodes & Brown, 2005; Steyaert, 2015).[1]

Moreover, our approach is ill equipped to investigate the literary field as an organizational complex in its own right. As amply demonstrated in the sociology of literature (Bourdieu, 1993; English, 2010), the literary field is of course part of the organized world, its hierarchies and power relations, interests and inequalities, and as such its organizations and organizational processes can be analysed and critiqued (Land & Śliwa, 2009). Novels are embedded in their specific social, historical and cultural context, yet this does not mean that they need to be read as a direct effect or a mere symptom of these conditions.[2] Rather, our interest is in novels as primary material of, and for, the study of organization(s).

Finally, our focus on 'novel thought' implies engaging with what De Cock and Land (2006) call 'great literature'. We do this unapologetically. The novel is a fundamentally open, mongrel form, and its greatness comes in many guises, as already this special themed section shows. While we believe that scholarly and lay reading share the 'emphatic experience' of reading novels – attuned to the 'differential force and intensity of aesthetic encounters' (Felski, 2008, p. 20) – any scholarly mode of reading is marked by its quest to glean insights from novels. The emphatic experience of encountering novels is in this sense coupled to the desire for some kind of in-depth inquiry (Guillory, 2000). What makes novels great, then, might be precisely their ability to contaminate our thoughts and affect our senses, to resonate with and provoke sustained reflection, to evoke moments of irritation and surprise and, in this way, to foster communal debate.

In moving towards a literary study of organization, we proceed in five steps. The first *historical* section contextualizes and 'grounds' the proposition of mutual contamination. The second *systematic* section maps the different modes of contamination at work between prose fiction and organization studies. Following Rancière (2004), we distinguish between ethical, representative and aesthetic encounters. The next sections entail brief *exemplary* discussions: the third is dedicated to Kafka's writings, arguably the pivotal site of mutual contamination; the fourth discusses Tom McCarthy's novel *Satin Island* as a contemporary example. In the conclusion, we sum up our main points and briefly introduce the special themed section's three investigations of specific novels and/as organizational thought.

The Novel and Social Thought: A History of Mutual Contamination

To claim that literature and organization studies are interdependent and not mutually exclusive forms of discourse is far from a new gesture. Its historical baggage does not make it less provocative and contested, however. 'Literature is a source of scandal', thus begins William Marx's recent study on *The Hatred of Literature* and its historically persistent motives (2018, p. 1). For Marx, our presupposition of interdependence – mutual contamination – describes literature's general condition. It simply cannot be thought without its opposing forces, what Marx calls 'anti-literature'. Marx's 'gallery of grotesques' (2018, p. 5) is structured into four basic, and endlessly repeated, arguments or 'primal scenes' (p. 4) that mark this opposition. Literature is contested in the name of authority (as unauthorized speech that does not stick to its proper place), in the name of truth (as false or misleading make-believe), in the name of morality (as immoral, harmful, monstrous or debased) and in the name of society (as not adequately reflecting society, as elitist or as an instrument of power).

While in this section we will make a broad-brush historical case for a self-evident relation between prose fiction and social and organizational thought, it is worth noting that acknowledging this kind of relation is far from evident. We suspect that Marx's four opposing forces in some way or other still influence the perception of novelistic writing in today's scholarship of (not only) organization. To set the scene, consider Habermas' injunction against what he perceived to be the liquidation and levelling of fundamentally different genres. In his influential critique of Derrida in *Nachmetaphysisches Denken* (Postmetaphysical Thinking), Habermas warned that 'the limits between literal and metaphorical meaning, logic and rhetoric, serious and fictive discourse becomes blurred in the stream of a general happening of the text' (Habermas, 1992, p. 242; translation taken from Gasché, 1999, p. 286). In other words, fictive (unauthorized) speech needs to be kept away from serious scholarship. Yet this kind of injunction of purity fails to realize that

> the distinction between the philosophical and the literary remains intact even though, or precisely because, each one a priori shelters the possibility of the other. Indeed, this unbreached and unconditional difference not only is required for the 'logic' of contamination of one by the other to make sense, but it is precisely what such contamination 'engenders'. (Gasché, 1999, p. 298)

The term *contamination* captures well the sense of a threat of pollution that novels bring to the putatively clean and orderly world of scholarship. Moreover, it is a compelling notion precisely because it does not level any distinction between, in our case, prose fiction and organization studies. Yet this difference 'is not an established, positive given':

> What makes philosophy philosophy and literature literature takes place in a constituting 'process' in which philosophy calls upon literature as *an* (rather than *its*) other so as to be able to demarcate itself and be what it is in difference from something like literature. (Gasché, 1999, p. 288)

Such is the continuous performance of theory in relation to the novel: a constitutive process through which literature is posited as an other so as to throw into relief what theory is or can become.

What theory is or can become is then to some degree predicated on literature and, in particular, novels. In this sense, Rancière (2011, 2017) has shown how the rise of the 'realist' novel in 19th-century Europe as well as the later 'modernist' writings ushered in specific sensoria or ways of seeing and experiencing that enabled social thought. Historically, the importance of the social body that came to fascinate social thinkers seems to have been pioneered by literary undertakings before becoming part and parcel of the social sciences. '[Modern] [l]iterature itself was constituted as a kind of symptomatology of society' (Rancière, 2004, p. 33), producing a mode of visibility that helped displace the ordinary world of organized life from its trivial obviousness. Modern novels (think of the writings of Balzac, Hugo or Flaubert) pioneered models of relating the presentations of facts with ways of rendering them intelligible. Leaving behind formal codifications and rules of what, and how, people and things are to be represented, the novel became a fundamentally open or indifferent form and home for experiments with changing what is visible and sayable, what can be felt, perceived and expressed. For instance, 'Marx's commodity stems from the Balzacian shop' (Rancière, 2010, p. 164): 'The Marxist theory of fetishism is the most striking testimony to this fact: commodities must be torn out of their trivial appearances, made into phantasmagoric objects in order to be interpreted as the expression of society's contradictions' (Rancière, 2004, p. 34).

This kind of philosophical reasoning resonates with Lepenies' historical account of the mutually contaminating relation between literature and sociology. Focusing on the rise of sociology in France, England and Germany, Lepenies (1988) showed how social theory – what in the book's original title is called 'the third culture' (*Die dritte Kultur*) – developed through a kind of oscillation between attempts to become more scientific and an inseparable tie to the modern novel, which in the 19th century pioneered a *science sociale* of depicting and even analysing the transformation of social relations. In this sense, the strategy of imitating the natural sciences is also predicated on early sociology's proximity to, and competition with, a literary prose of social conditions. Lepenies assembles a variety of 'case studies' from within the respective national contexts, which demonstrate the contaminated grounds between literature and social thought. In early 20th-century British sociology, for instance, significant parts of modern literature were discussed as descriptive sociology (Lepenies, 1988, pp. 146–154). In France, Tarde's sociology of imitation was marked by a poetic sensibility, his method deemed more literary than scientific and its author dismissed by Durkheim 'as a mere man of letters' (Lepenies, 1988, p. 59). Or consider how Thomas Mann claimed ownership for the relation between Protestantism and the capitalist work ethic famously theorized by Max Weber (quoted after Lepenies, p. 298):

> I set some store on confirming that I acquired the idea that the modern capitalist businessman, the bourgeois with his aesthetic concept of professional duty, is a creation of the Protestant ethic, of puritanism and Calvinism, entirely on my own account (. . .) and that it was only afterwards (. . .) that I noticed that learned thinkers had also been thinking and saying it.

More recently, Luc Boltanski (2014) has explored how the themes of mystery and conspiracy underpin the rise of crime fiction and the spy novel as well as the ascent of the social sciences in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Different forms of (novelistic, journalistic, police and scholarly) inquiry are thus based on a shared sensorium of apprehending and problematizing reality and its uncertainties.

Arguably, such early contaminations of founding axioms of social organization by the literary imagination haunt the ways in which matters of sociality and also organization are reflected today. While it can be argued that the subsequent professionalization and specialization of the social 'sciences' has led to a disentanglement of social thought from prose fiction (which

presupposes, as we have seen, to posit the fictive as the other to the truth claims of social theory), the former's contamination by the latter has never subsided. For instance, in 1959 C. Wright Mills famously made the case for the relevance of literary work for the sociological imagination (Mills, 1959). In a more recent expansion of his argument, Avery Gordon (1997, p. 25) has argued that it is precisely because prose fiction 'has not been restrained by the norms of a professionalized social science' that it 'often teaches us (. . .) what we need to know but cannot quite get access to with our given rules of method and modes of apprehension'. It is in this spirit that for instance Bruno Latour, pointing to the novels of Richard Powers among others, endorses 'the resource of fiction', its counterfactual histories and thought experiments (Latour, 2005, p. 82). There is 'a lot to learn' (p. 82),

> because the diversity of the worlds of fiction invented on paper allows enquirers to gain as much pliability and range as those they have to study in the real world. It is only through some continuous familiarity with literature that ANT sociologists might become less wooden, less rigid, less stiff in their definition of what kind of agencies populate the world. (Latour, 2005, pp. 54–55)

All this points to the ways in which the epistemic freedom of novels makes them so generative for organizational enquiries. As contaminating force, the novel may not simply act as a source for validating what we already know but also upset and reconfigure what we know or make us discover new realities. Epistemologically, novels thus demonstrate the indeterminacy of organization theory's matters of concern understood as epistemic things: 'open-ended projections to something that does not yet exist, or what we do not yet know for sure' (Miettinen & Virkkunen, 2005, p. 478; for the notion of epistemic things in the natural sciences see Rheinberger, 1997). This indeterminacy implies that imagination is invariably at work in scholarly sense-making, too. Here we may also think of the encounter with the novel as one of abduction in the sense of Charles Peirce (Van Maanen, Sørensen, & Mitchell, 2007). Prose fiction can provide organizational scholars with inspiration and imagination precisely as it produces mysteries (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007), generates doubt (Locke, Golden-Biddle, & Feldman, 2008), and thus irritates, negates, supplements and stimulates our thinking.

Importantly, however, we do not regard the contamination to be merely a one-way street (in the way that, for instance, Oswick, Fleming and Hanlon (2011) depict the relation between social and organizational theory). If we follow Gasché's theorem of mutual contamination, then social and organization thought affords its fictionalization through novels. To reference a prominent example to which we return below, Taylor's 'scientific management' found its way into Kafka's stories and novels (Wagner, 2009). To be sure, this particular contamination took place via distortion, displacement, unexpected references, allusions, irony and other ways of poetic imagination – the stuff that orthodox forms of theorizing avoid like the plague. For related manoeuvres on the cusp of organizational theory and literary imagination, one can point to contemporary works such as David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King* (Michaelson, 2015a), Richard Power's organizational novel *Gain* (Latour, 2005), Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Against the Day* (Beyes, 2009), Austrian writer Kathrin Röggla's fictionalization of 'the capitalist uncanny' (Clarke, 2011) or Tom McCarthy's take on corporate anthropology, *Satin Island* (Beyes, 2017), to reference but a few.

In surveying the historical conjunction of literary fiction and social and organizational thought through the lens of their mutual contamination, we are led to 'understand the novel not in its quality as a work of fictional representation but as a mode of thought' (Bewes, 2014, p. 194) and thus an ally in the endeavour to come to terms with organization (Alworth, 2014). To further discuss the potential of such a literary study of organization, we now turn to organization studies' modes of engagement with the novel.

Modes of Engaging the Novel: Ethical, Representative and Aesthetic Encounters

Notwithstanding claims to the contrary (e.g. Thexton, Prasad, & Mills, 2019), we believe that there is a quite rich and productive engagement with prose fiction in organization studies. As demonstrated by special issues (Land & Śliwa, 2009; Cnossen, Dekker, & Taskin, 2017; Thexton et al., 2019), books (Czarniawska-Joerges & Guillet de Monthoux, 1994; Knights & Willmott, 1999; Ortmann & Schuller 2019) and a host of articles in the field's relevant journals, it is an engagement that goes beyond 'merely' embellishing research accounts with literary quotes or metaphors. Rather than performing an exhaustive review, it behoves us to systematically discuss how organizational concerns are seen to be at work in prose fiction, and whether and how novels are mobilized as 'allies' in the furthering of organizational thought. To do so, we draw upon De Cock and Land's notion of 'modes of engagement' (2006, p. 518); yet we more specifically focus on the relation of novels and organizational thought.

In terms of the relation of prose fiction and organization studies, useful classifications comprise the distinction between fiction as pedagogy, as ambience (or textual atmosphere), as empirical data and as method (Phillips, 1995); as illustration, source and analysis (Kuzmics & Mozetič, 2003); and as surrogate cases, stories of organizing and vehicles for organizational analysis (Śliwa & Cairns, 2007). Given the historical and actual relevance of prose fiction as not only contaminating the study of organizations but as also pioneering organizational thought – and given our quest to outline the contours of a literary study of organization – we seek to keep our categories more open for the unsettling and inventive capacities of novels. We therefore base our discussion on Rancière's three – *ethical, representative* and *aesthetic* – regimes of art, which are themselves prominently modelled on the rise of modern literature and its capacity to reorder what can be sensed and what makes sense (Rancière, 2004, 2011).[3] The regimes or, in this paper's terms, modes of engagement are discursive orderings of the relationship between prose fiction and organizational thought, i.e. orderings of how (in our case) the novel is perceived in terms of what it can do to the study of organization. Note that we employ these modes as heuristic devices. They may well overlap in the way novels are read and written about in organization-theoretical terms.

First, the *ethical* mode of engagement summons novels to foster and improve practical and critical sensibilities. Following Rancière, we call it 'ethical' since, strictly speaking, the novels under discussion are not granted the capacity for autonomous, 'non-scholarly' organizational thought. Rather, in line with a longstanding tradition of seeing (some) prose fiction as beneficial for the development of moral imagination, sympathy and emotional intelligence, they are considered vehicles to help their readers develop or foster values and sentiments that are deemed useful or necessary. Educational aims and purposes loom large here, and much has been made of the novel's potential to teach specific capacities, even skills, to students of organization and management. Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthoux's *Good Novels, Better Management* (1994) and Knights and Willmott's *Management Lives* (1999) are examples here, as are reflections on teaching with novels to foster a 'care of the self' (Śliwa, Sørensen, & Cairns, 2015) and to learn empathy (Thexton et al., 2019). Beyond the realm of education, novels are presented as helpful tools to cultivate 'ambiculturalism' and bridge cultural divides (Michaelson, 2015b) or to live consciously (Michaelson, 2016).

Second, the *representative* mode of engagement identifies and positions novels, or excerpts from novels, in relation to an existing classification of organization-theoretical and practical concerns. Novels can be seen to properly contribute to more or less longstanding research issues, providing 'sustained and penetrating commentary on many of the prevailing phenomena and theories in the field' (Holt & Zundel, 2014, p. 576). In a kind of illustrative hermeneutics, prose fiction

is then employed as an illustration or a case to exemplify, shed light on and thus represent specific organization-theoretical matters. That (some) novelists are able to offer better and thicker descriptions of organizational life-worlds is a recurring refrain. The focus here is thus on a novel's use for describing, analysing and sometimes complexifying and problematizing appropriate aspects of organizational life such as workplace envy (Patient, Lawrence, & Maitlis, 2003), commitment (Śliwa & Cairns, 2007), leadership (Śliwa, Spoelstra, Sørensen, & Land, 2013), accounting (Maltby, 1997), organizational modularity (Aroles, Clegg, & Granter, 2019), organizational secrecy (Costas & Grey, 2016), resistance (Rhodes, 2009) and subjectification (Huber, this issue).

Third, the *aesthetic* mode of engagement echoes the novel's potential to intervene into given codifications of what 'organization' entails and how it is made visible. It enacts what Rancière (2004) calls a 'redistribution of the sensible' by provoking a different way of seeing and thinking organized life. The rise of the novel encapsulates the 'aesthetic regime of art' – also called a 'regime of expressivity' with regard to the novel (Rancière, 2011, p. 60) – and its unmooring of the written word from representative rules and regulations. Precisely because the novel can be understood as a 'genreless genre that freely circulates through diverse publics rather than being restricted to specific domains or privileged locations' (Rockhill, 2011, p. 14), it is apprehended as potentially inventing alternative sensoria for questions of social organization, experimenting with its own organizational thought (which can, as discussed above, itself be informed by social and organizational theory). Such literary writing points to 'the limits of sensemaking' (Munro & Huber, 2012) because the fruits of its reading cannot be contained by – and thus come to represent – the accustomed conceptual grid of organization theory. Such aesthetic encounters thus have the potential to expand the imaginary of organization studies. They can bring to light the 'organizational gothic' (Parker, 2005), the affective intensities and entanglements in uncertain work lives (Otto & Strauss, this issue) as well as the miracles of organization as imagined by Kafka (Caygill, this issue). Indeed, thinking with the stories and novels of Kafka encapsulates the aesthetic mode of encounter (Ortmann & Schuller, 2019), to which we return shortly.

In tracing different ways of how novels can infect and contaminate organizational thought, the modes help us outline the contours of a literary study of organization. For one, the heterogenous set of contaminations of organizational theory through prose fiction emphasizes the novel's epistemological indeterminacy mentioned above. A literary study of organization welcomes this heterogeneity and calls for more experimentation and diversity with 'novel thought'. Even if accustomed concepts are irritated or made strange through prose fiction, however, the ethical and representative modes tend to subordinate novels to pre-established theoretical frameworks. This is not a generalized claim about literature's fundamental difference to our ways of sense-making – on the contrary, we believe that these ways of sensemaking are often contaminated by the literary imagination. Novels often stage familiar, common, even predictable scenes, settings and encounters. Yet precisely because novels can conjure ways of seeing and redistribute what is visible and sayable, and at the risk of overgeneralizing, we believe that emphasizing a novel's otherness to customary modes of thought – while probably *de rigeur* in literary studies (Felski, 2008) – is subdued in organization studies' engagement with prose fiction. A more radically literary study of organizations would more widely and more daringly embrace an aesthetic mode of encounter and move from a poetics of representation towards a poetics of expressivity. It would localize organizational thought

> not in terms of what [the novel] represents but what it operates: the situations that it constructs, the populations that it convokes, the relations of inclusion or exclusion that it institutes, the borders that it traces or effaces between perception and action, between the states of things and the movement of thought (. . .). (Rancière, 2017, p. xxxiii)

It would thus approach novels as potential media of organizational thought in their own right, and it would try to think organization with and through these writings. This entails the necessity of closely engaging with novels and to embark on immanent readings, so as to keep in check the habitual projection of organization theory's extant categories and concepts.

Before turning to Kafka and McCarthy as exemplary writers for a literary study of organization, a further point needs to be made. There is a tendency of relating an engagement with the 'realist' novel to a hermeneutics of illustration, and of granting the experimental, modernist novel the potential to mess with and provoke new organizational thought. Yet for Rancière, it was already the invention of the so-called realist novel that tore asunder codified rules and procedures of writing and discussing literature (and, among other things, ushered in an attunement to social relations that came to inform social theory). Rancière therefore insists that the realist novel and its 'excess of words' cannot be reduced to a representative logic. In this sense, a modernist giant like Kafka and the writers of realist fiction are approached on an equal plane: both are part of the novel's aesthetic revolution, liberating literary expressivity from the representative regime.

For the purpose of a literary study of organization, Campe (2004, 2005) offers a perhaps more useful distinction between the biographical or family novel, the German *Bildungsroman* (*Bildung* understood as developmental foundation; a special case being the educational novel), and 'the novel of institutions' *(Institutionenroman)*. In the latter case, the emphasis falls not on the individual, its life, personality and development, but on the question of organization and how individuals are subjected to forms and processes of organizing (Ortmann, 2019). Here organizational spaces define life and subject positions: schools, hospitals, bureaucracies, courts or corporations. While Kafka's novels, such as *The Castle* and *The Trial*, are paradigmatic for the novel of institutions, contemporary variants include, for instance, David Fosters Wallace's *The Pale King*, Rachel Kushner's *Mars Room*, Joshua Cohen's *Book of Numbers* and Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island*.

From Representative to Aesthetic Encounters: Kafka

Kafka's work and organizational practice and thought are mutually contaminated. As Benjamin wrote, Kafka 'could have defined organization as destiny' or fate (20007, p. 123), because '[i]n every case it is a question of how life and work are organized in human society' (p. 122). It is well known that Kafka suffered from his office life at the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia in Prague, and especially from the difficulty of reconciling work life and writing life. While scholars tend to interpret his writings as a critique of bureaucracy, such readings underestimate Kafka's appreciation of rules, standards and procedures, given his constant encounters with faults, failures and dereliction. He was in fact 'a brilliant innovator of social and legal reform' (Corngold, 2010, p. 27), particularly in the area of industrial safety and accident prevention (Caygill, 2017). A more enticing way to read Kafka's novels is therefore through the analogies between his 'hotly intensive imaginative writing and the life-blood of the office' (Corngold, 2010, p. 29).

Apart from his organizational experience, theoretical and philosophical knowledge – theories of law, Nietzsche's philosophy of life and Taylor's scientific management – contaminated Kafka's writings. Consider Taylor's influence. In 1916 a colleague and close collaborator of Kafka, Alois Gütling, welcomed the 1913 German translation of Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management* so as to combine 'Taylorism, accident statistics, and accident prevention in a new regime of industrial control' (Wagner, 2009, pp. 40–41). Kafka directly refers to Taylor and Gütling in his office writings as well as literary work, for instance in 'a precise diagram' of a specific 'bureaucratic constellation' in *The Castle* (Wagner 2009, p. 27), and a sarcastic portrait of a lower-ranking leader resembling Taylor (or Kafka himself in his role at the Institute) in *Building the Great Wall of China* (Kafka, 2007).

Kafka's literary work dwells on the ambiguities, cracks, fissures and abysses of social and in particular organizational order, thereby inverting the 'clean' imaginations, representations and theorizations of organization. Yet Kafka does not just describe odd and scary ways in which, for example, rules and procedures work yet escape one's grasp. Also, and more importantly, he expresses this withdrawal in and through his procedures of writing – 'not in terms of what [the novel] represents but what it operates', to requote Rancière (2017, p. xxxiii). His novels and stories mainly consist of interrupted and incomplete texts, marked by retractions, gaps and an enervating logic of suspension, of a 'not yet/no longer' (for instance in the validity of rules in *The Trial*).

These brief remarks help explain the lasting inspiration scholars across disciplines find in Kafka's work. While a discussion of the 'Kafka industry' is beyond the scope of our undertaking, it is worth the attempt to outline how Kafka has entered organizational thought. One common – representative – mode of engagement has been to juxtapose Kafka and Weber in order to deepen our understanding of the concept of bureaucracy (Hodson, Martin, Lopez, & Roscigno, 2012; Jørgensen, 2012; Warner, 2007). In an aesthetic, more radically literary register, Kafka's depiction of bureaucracy's meaninglessness, incomprehensibility and self-referentiality has provoked explorations of organizational confusion, disorientation and perversity (Ossewaarde, 2019), of the uncanniness of organizational space (Beyes, 2019) and of the experience of organization in the digital age (Czarniawska, 2019; Keenoy & Seijo, 2010), and it has led to 'Kafkaesque' empirical inquiries into administrative life (McCabe 2015; Clegg, Pina e Cunha, Munro, Rego, & Oom de Sousa, 2016). The way Kafka's thinking and writing circles around the groundless grounds of organization has been presented as reflections of organizational bootstrapping *avant la lettre* (Ortmann, 2019). Thinking with Kafka has opened the study of organization to its mythologies and potential counter-mythologies (Munro & Huber, 2012) as well as to a conceptual discussion of violence and power in organizations (Costas, 2019). Kafka's stories have enabled the theorizing of organization in terms of the animal and animal ethics (Sayers, 2016), and his strange beasts have been translated into a bestiary of organizing (Beyes & Holt, 2019).

Already with regard to a literary organization studies, then, the variety of Kafka readings is astonishing, as is the inspiration his organizational thought can provide for counterintuitive and inventive investigations of organized life. A hundred years after their fabrication, these texts continue to challenge, irritate, capture the imagination and take on unanticipated resonances.

Some Auto-alphaing and Auto-omegating Script: *Satin Island*

The scholarly infatuation with Kafka's writings (and with Kafka the writer) perhaps conveniently distracts from a wider loss of relevance that has befallen the formless form of the novel. Arguably, prose fiction has lost its cultural centrality; it is no longer the preeminent medium of aesthetic expression and reception (Shields, 2010). However, becoming more marginal does not equal a loss of inventiveness and daring. Consider how Tom McCarthy's recent novel of institutions *Satin Island* ponders, among other things, the status of fiction in contemporary organizing. Masquerading as a piece of corporate anthropology, the novel follows its protagonist (and contemporary revenant of Kafka's 'K'), 'U', through contemporary organized life. U is working for a global consultancy company called 'The Company', whose head describes its main operation thus:

> If I had, he'd say, to sum up, in a word, what we (the Company, that is) essentially do, I'd choose not consultancy or design or urban planning, but fiction. (. . .) The city and the state are fictional conditions; a business is a fictional entity. Even if it's real, it's still a construct. Lots of the Company's projects have been fictions that became real. (. . .) Fiction was what engendered them and held them in formation. (McCarthy, 2015, pp. 44–45)

In one of the reflexive loops of the novel, organizational actors self-reflexively engage with, and sell, fictions, while its (fictive) salaried anthropologist is tasked with writing what the head of the Company calls the (empirical) 'Great Report' on contemporary society. Fiction in the guise of organizational anthropology deals with fiction in the guise of corporate operations, which are themselves constantly engaged in the 'as if' of organizational hypocrisy.[4]

But in *Satin Island* more is at stake, which moves our reading more firmly from a representative to an aesthetic register. There is yet another layer of reflexivity, one that is more disturbing, and perhaps more provocative, to organizational thought than the fictive staging of an anthropologist's quest to understand the fictions of organizing (Beyes, 2017). To pick up a term that McCarthy (2017, pp. 153–156) himself uses in an essay on Kafka, *Satin Island* presents us with a 'cybernetic aesthetic' of contemporary organization as 'a giant information-relay device' and its 'fuckuptive logic' 'of being held within a great organization'. This is not a formal organization as we know it (or as we perhaps might glean from Kafka – although already with Kafka, the 'fuckuptive' organizational and infrastructural logics surpass the contained notion of specific organizations). Rather, it is the ubiquity of digital computing and the 'datafication' of everyday work life that reconfigures organizational processes. McCarthy's rendering of the Company barely registers conventional organizational traits such as formal hierarchies, functional departments or units, or pre-established structures of decision-making. Instead, the book foregrounds a fuzzy, shifting and often incomprehensible array of organizational scripts and practices, tied to material objects, networked infrastructures and media devices as well as data and communication flows. For instance, U participates in a massive project that is 'supra-governmental, supra-national, supra-everything' (McCarthy, 2015, p. 110). Yet the narrator does not have much of a clue. The project is a 'black box' (p. 60), amorphous, shape-shifting and opaque; 'it has to be conceived of as in a perpetual state of passage, not arrival – not *at*, but *in between*' (p. 4; italics in the original). Its processuality and inscrutability is tied to network architecture and the amassing, extraction and employment of data. The novel stages organization as caught up in a cybernetic arcane that, while connected to the infrastructures of server farms, satellite dishes and computer hardware, comes across as intransparent and unknowable (Beyes & Pias, 2019).

In this sense, *Satin Island* can be read as a radically literary organizational ethnography that reflects its own impossibility:

> Write Everything Down, said Malinowski. But the thing is, now, it *is* all written down. There's hardly an instant of our lives that isn't documented. (. . .) Each website that you visit, every click-through, every keystroke is archived (. . .). And as for the structures of kinship, the networks of exchange within whose web we're held, cradled, created – networks whose mapping is the task, the very *raison d'être*, of someone like me: well, those networks are being mapped, that task performed, by the software that tabulates and cross-indexes what we buy with who we know, and what they buy, or like, and with the other objects that are bought or liked by others who we don't know but with whom we cohabit a shared buying- or liking-pattern. (. . .) the truly terrifying thought wasn't that the Great Report might be unwritable, but – quite the opposite – that it had *already been written*. Not by a person, nor even by some nefarious cabal, but simply by a neutral and indifferent binary system that had given rise to itself, moved by itself and would perpetuate itself: some auto-alphaing and auto-omegating script (. . .). And that we, far from being its authors, or its operators, or even its slaves (for slaves are agents who can harbour hopes, however faint, that one day a Moses or a Spartacus will set them free), were no more than actions and commands within its key-chains. (McCarthy, 2015, p. 123; italics in the original)

'U' reads as 'you', of course: the corporate anthropologist is a contemporary 'organization (wo)man'. The Great Report, maybe needless to say, never materializes. Or perhaps it does, in the form of the book called *Satin Island*. Or perhaps *Satin Island* is less a great report than a glitch or a bug in the

inscrutable world of contemporary cybernetic organizing – akin to a moment of buffering perhaps, to pick up a recurring motive in the novel, that allows for an aesthetic encounter, for the novel's expressiveness to reroute and make us appreciate and ponder anew how organization takes place.

Conclusion

Through conjoining historical, systematic and exemplary discussions of the relation between prose fiction and organization studies, we have traced a rich and heterogeneous story of mutual contamination. The way organization is apprehended and theorized is indebted to the literary imagination and its ways of perceiving and expressing organizational life. Novels enact and experiment with organizational thought, and research accounts and concepts of organization feed back into literary writing. Rather than fending off such contamination as unwanted or unwelcome pollution of a pristine body of scholarly thought, the study of organization should acknowledge its indebtedness to the past and present of literary writing, and to affirmatively engage with its unique power of considering, complexifying and illuminating how organization takes place. In this spirit, we have suggested distinguishing between ethical, representative and aesthetic modes of engaging prose fiction. While novels can certainly be employed for educational ends and for richly exemplifying and representing given organizational theories, a radically literary study of organization would approach the novel less as an object of analysis than a generative mode of thought: an aesthetic force of inventing alternative sensoria for organizational life and of reconfiguring what is visible and sayable about it. The ways that Kafka's writings experimented with organizational thought and have been subsequently picked up also in organization studies is exemplary here. Yet contemporary novels, too, harbour trenchant observations and reflections that can not only enrich but further organizational theorizing. In our eyes, McCarthy's *Satin Island* is a case in point.

The three papers included in this special themed section respond to the call to think with novels and take further steps towards a literary study of organization in different ways. As Birke Otto and Anke Strauss show in their contribution, a realist novel such as Fante's *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, set during the Great Depression at the end of the 1920s, can harbour an organizational thought that is of utmost relevance to the present. Otto and Strauss approach Fante's novel as a 'sensuous site' that enacts an 'affective assemblage of novel+reader+writer+text+', which invites a feeling and thinking of a different kind organizational affectivity. Interweaving their reading, or rather their being-affected, with cultural theorist Lauren Berlant's notion of the impasse allows the authors to explore and theorize a cruel predicament of work-life, namely the ordinary crisis of feeling stuck that is perversely fuelled by attachments to collective fantasies of the good life. The 'affective landscapes' of *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* and its 'sentimental plots' thus enable the study of organizational affect, and the study of uncertain work environments in more general terms, to critically apprehend and ponder 'sticky' affective registers that shape uncertain work environments (and that cannot be explained or wished away by emphasizing the fluid and transformative potential of affective forces, or by conventionally critical accounts of emotional labour).

It should not come as a surprise that the other two contributions take their cue from Kafka. Christian Huber dissects the famous parable 'Before the Law' in *The Trial* (Kafka, 1998a) in order to rethink the processes of subjectification in organizations. In a comparably representative mode of engagement, Huber takes from Kafka how individual actors can engage in their own subjectification – thus self-subjectification, to which organizational theories of power have so far paid scant attention. In developing different readings of Kafka's parable, Huber points to how an indeterminacy and ambiguity of power can not only bring about reflexive entanglements with power and practices of self-slander, and also how the humour and desire found in the folly and absurdities of organization can open up spaces of freedom.

Finally, the philosopher Howard Caygill, who has among other things written on Kafka as a theorist and practitioner of organizational accidents (Caygill, 2017), returns to *The Castle* (Kafka, 1998b) with a surprising twist. He presents a close reading of the novel as fundamentally about the miracle of organization, understood as the interruption and temporary suspension of the laws and routines that order and govern the organized world. Yet there is neither higher power nor mundane organizational power that might save or make use of the miracle (and resolve K's predicament). In Kafka's organization, even the miraculous is a matter of mere chance and organizational chaos – a sardonic rebuke to the age-old imaginaries and theologies of rational and hierarchical political organization. It takes an aesthetic encounter with a novel such as *The Castle* to radicalize an understanding of the contingency of organizational operations into matters and situations of miraculous chance which, unrecognized by K, leave without a trace.

We end on a few caveats and further openings. It perhaps goes without saying that we do not claim that prose fiction holds an epistemological privilege over the common, orthodox ways of knowing and studying organization. Yet we hope to have shown that novels can carry organizational thought and have a power on their own to make us see and explore organization differently. Nor can we speak about 'the novel', let alone literature, as such. The formless form of the novel makes a mockery of such generalizations. Who knows what the novel can do? Our approach is embedded in the history of 'Western' modern, and predominantly male, literature, since our argument hinges on a European history of social and organizational thought, where the modern novel – and concomitantly, its mostly male authors – loom large. But there are ample reasons to look beyond these confines. After all, in postcolonial thought (Lane, 2006) as well as gender and queer studies (Sedgwick, 1997) engagements with literary writing and reading are prominent; here, too, novels enable or provoke a different sensibility and new ways of seeing. Moreover, these and other movements of thought share close ties with literary studies and literary criticism. While we have signposted recent rapprochements between social and literary theory as well as important receptions of concepts and concerns of literary criticism in organization studies, we have narrowed our view to novelistic writings. Future engagements with 'the literary' might again broaden and diversify this kind of approach. Finally, while focusing on novels we have said very little about the practice of *writing* organization. Yet if the main concern of a literary study of organization is what and how a novel operates rather than represents, then questions of style, of different forms of writing, of convoking relations of organizing and evoking organizational situations, plots and scripts, must take centre stage. Who knows what a literary study of organization can do?

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Notes

1. Novels and scholarly texts can be regarded as (different kinds of) literature, and both make use of myths and fictions. Theories often build on what Iris Därmann (2013) calls 'scenic fictions of theories' (*Theorieszenen*). The study of organization also works with such mythical, suggestive fictions; see only Taylor's famous parable of the pig-iron handler Schmidt. Moreover, theories of organization are marked by 'fictions of purity' that are designed to reduce complexity for theoretical ends (e.g. the fictive ideal type of *Homo oeconomicus*). And of course, in organizational life fictions greatly matter, see e.g. Chester Barnard's discussion of 'the fiction of superior authority' (1938, p. 170).
2. The risk of subordinating literary fiction to social-theoretical concerns holds even if one can show that a work itself entails the instruments required for its own sociological analysis (Bourdieu, 1993), since this kind of analysis still seems to presuppose a command over the 'right' sociological categories.

3. Rancière (2004) intervenes in the orthodox art-theoretical juxtaposition of classicism and modernism by constructing competing and contradictory relations between three artistic regimes, or discursive modes of visibility. Alluding to Plato's critique of writing, the 'ethical regime of images' does not refer to an autonomous art, since images are either genuine and truthful in order to educate the populace, or they are treacherous and misleading simulacra. The 'representative or poetic regime of the arts . . . identifies the arts (. . .) within a classification of ways of doing and making' (p. 22); it constitutes a set of norms, an ordering of the relations between the visible and the sayable. The representative regime is ruined by the aesthetic regime of art, which recognizes the autonomy of art while abolishing the rules and regulations that allowed clear distinction between art and non-art.
4. U is making good use of his education in radical theory, 'feeding vanguard theory (. . .) back into the corporate machine' (McCarthy, 2015, p. 31). Advising the client Levi Strauss [sic], U channels Deleuze and Badiou for the selling of jeans:

   > for [Deleuze], *le pli* or fold, describes the way we swallow the exterior world, invert it and then flip it back outwards again, and, in so doing, form our own identity. I took out all the revolutionary shit (Deleuze was a leftie); and I didn't credit Deleuze, either. (. . .) I did the same thing with another French philosopher, Badiou: I recycled his notion of a *rip*, a sudden temporal rupture, and applied it, naturally, to tears worn in jeans, which I presented as the birth-scars of their wearer's singularity, testaments to the individual's break with general history, to the successful institution of a personal time. (pp. 30–31; italics in the original)

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