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Grand plots of management bestsellers: Learning from narrative and thematic coherence

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Abstract

Barbara Czarniawska and Carl Rhodes have argued that managers and entrepreneurs often learn from popular culture. The dominant plots offer the accepted interpretations and guide for actions, whereas alternative plots, available but not most prominent, provide schemes for possible departures from the common wisdom. In this article, we propose that not only works of fiction serve this purpose; powerful ideas derive also from popular management books, not only in terms of explicit content but also as what we term, in homage to Lyotard, the grand plots: structures of meaning not usually seen as the overt message of this article. We present the results of our classificatory reading of popular management books, interpreting them in terms of the tacit notions of narrative development and cohesion, emplotted in the background. The contribution of this article is to show the ways in which the grand plots of popular management books are used to achieve coherence in presenting the books' total solutions for a variety of organizational problems and contexts. What their readers learn is not so much (or not just) how to manage but how to make narrative sense of management regarded as part of wider cultural context.

Keywords

grand plots, management discourse, narrativity, popular management textbooks, sensemaking

Introduction

Barbara Czarniawska and Carl Rhodes (2006) argue that managers and entrepreneurs often use popular culture to guide their practice: the plots and images offered by films, books and media stories provide them with inspiration and sometimes with direct ideas that they use for everyday practice. The dominant plots, those which appear most often or in the most prestigious sources offer the accepted interpretations and guide for actions, while alternative plots, available but not overwhelmingly popular, provide blueprints for possible departures from the common wisdom (Czarniawska, 2012). In other words, popular culture can be regarded as a significant and not always consciously realized source for learning, including learning new and inspiring ideas about managing (e.g. Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2012; Panayiotou, 2014).

In this text, we propose that not only works of fiction serve this purpose; popular management books also contain powerful ideas, expressed not only through explicit content, but also in the broader forms of expression: what we term, in homage to Lyotard (1979), the grand plots: structures of meaning not

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usually seen as the main message of the text. They are not intentionally hidden from the eyes of the reader, but serve as a background to the explicit argument and provide coherence and tone to the entire composition. Answering the call of Ann Cunliffe and Eugene Sadler-Smith (2014), we approach a strain of popular culture, relevant to management learning, in a critical and reflexive manner. Critical, because we analyse and question what is often taken for granted, in this case, that managers only learn from explicit plots and models. Reflexive, because while doing so, we question our own approach to popular management literature as a fashion phenomenon, quite distinct from enlightened learning from research articles and books. This text proposes to use popular culture more consciously as a source for inspirational learning.

Managers read popular books and they take in not only the models and knowledge they explicitly offer (House, 2009), but also the plots and images that exist in the background. Standard management textbooks used in mainstream university level teaching often provide only limited representations of managerial work, necessary to pass exams but failing to offer any guidance as to the context and generally present management in a disembodied way (Knights and Willmott, 1999). Popular books, often bolstered by the authority of established management gurus (Huczynski, 1996), generously fill in this gap and may be a rich source of knowledge possible to be personalized and made experiential (e.g. Furusten, 1999; Collins, 2007).

Further on, we present the results of our classificatory reading of thirty-one hugely popular management books, driven by the attempt to identify not only the explicit knowledge (such as ideas about management, change, or power) presented in such texts, but also the tacit notions of narrative development and cohesion, important for the reader, and thus influential in management practice, yet emplotted in the background and thus hidden from most common forms of management discourse analysis (e.g. Alvesson and Karreman, 2000; Fairclough, 2005).

It is our contention that the grand plots present in management literature serve as an important source of inspirational learning, based on imagination, which makes it possible to make sense of and act in complex, shifting environments (Morgan, 1993). Morgan proposes to use such methods as mind games or brainstorms to develop this kind of learning; our suggestion is to read management books, but look beyond their superficial narrative line, and towards the grand plots. Not tied to any specific theme or idea, grand plots establish rules for the construction of appropriate, or admirable, plotlines. This text aims to analyse the ways in which the grand plots of popular management books are used to achieve coherence in presenting the books' invariably total solutions for organizational problems as adaptable to different environments, contexts, and varied organizational dilemmas. Besides mapping the ways of establishing coherence, we also compare them to the textual strategies of more literary-oriented genres, and postulate the desirability of more conscious use of literary schemata which, even when not consciously invited, find their way into management books.

Thus, this text's contribution is to introduce the idea of grand plots, and to analyse the forms they take in some of the most popular and influential management books. This concept may enable critical management researchers to explore potential sources of sensemaking processes that enable learning from management fashions presented in popular books. Furthermore, it may help reflective authors, including academics who wish to reach practitioner audiences, to address their audiences in ways that inspire learning that leads to change in attitude and/or practice.

Organizations and sensemaking

Following Karl Weick, we think of organizations as persistent processes, bringing together "ongoing interdependent actions into sensible sequences i.e. generate sensible outcomes" (Weick 1979: 3). The results of organizing are cycles linked together as loops rather than chains of causes and effects. Organizing, and particularly managing involves active and continuous sensemaking: devising workable interpretations of ongoing activity and enacting them as real (Weick, 1995). Organizing is complex and non-linear, it embraces people and artifacts (Law, 1994). John Law describes it as a mode of ordering: an emergent strategy in which no single actor determines the outcome. Organizations are a way of life, a mindset, or

> nets of collective action, undertaken in an effort to shape the world and human lives. The contents of the action are meanings and things (artifacts). One net of collective action is distinguishable from another by the kind of meanings and products socially attributed to an organization (Czarniawska, 1992, p. 32).

Sensemaking processes, managing included, depend on mobilizing available resources (Callon, 1991), be they physical, economic, or textual. It is in providing

such resources that we see the strongest significance of management bestsellers: they can serve as both a source of readily available interpretations for understanding organizational realities and as rhetorical tools for changing them (inasmuch as these processes can be separated). The narrative form of these books thus impacts not only their rhetorical effect on the reader, but also their applicability for constructing and changing concrete organizational settings, and for being adapted to reflect the experiences of other actors as well as the reader.

In his book dedicated to the narrative features of organizations, Kaj Sköldberg (1990) reflects upon various organizational forms in terms of their poetic logic. Bureaucracy, human network, system and culture are presented as manifestations of poetic logic based on the enactment of respectively, tragedy, romance, comedy and satire. These dramas are each directed by a leading trope: metonymy, metaphor, synecdoche and irony. The book provides a rhetorical analysis of business administration ideas and the main styles of organizing. The aims, and in particular the effectiveness seen as the ultimate goal of organizing are also depicted as features of the narrative genre. Each style of organizing has its own dominating ideal of effectiveness: effectiveness of input, personality, the system and the mission.

Managers' day-to-day practices involve using extant sensemaking narratives (largely following the fundamental types delineated above), and rely on readily available accounts of ideal managerial activity, lending themselves to conceptual conservatism and the tyranny of the one best way. And yet, as Stewart Clegg et al. (2006) show, management has a potential to learn to develop away from tyranny and towards polyphony, via active translation from one or several sources. We propose that popular management books have the potential of serving as sources of managerial polyphony, but in order to examine that potential, we need to first consider the very idea of a (popular) management, or organizational narrative.

Narratives in organization studies

Narratives have gained much interest as method and substance of research in social sciences (Czarniawska, 2004), and in our own field of organization studies (Boje, 2001), studied as a way of experiencing social reality as well as of communicating, teaching, and learning these experiences. Kenneth Gergen (1997), using a very broad definition of the narrative as any temporal embedding, argues that experience invariably takes narrative form. Every event is conceptualized in some relation to the past and the future, and thus narrativized. This describes not only everyday perception but also the more "advanced" perception of scientific research (Bruner, 1991). Other researchers, like Yiannis Gabriel (2000), prefer to use the term narrative much more narrowly, as needing a clearly delineated plot. Seen this way, narrativity becomes only one of the possible forms of expressing experience; painting, music, and even some forms of writing, such as straight description, or a chronicle (White, 1980), are seen as non-narrative. In a similar vein, David Boje (2001) sees narratives as a form of processed, accommodated experience, while discerning some similar structures in what he terms the antenarratives—fragmentary and disjointed accounts of the lived experience which, although they lack formal structure and fail to cohere into continuous stories nevertheless contain an expressive mixture of events, reactions, and feelings that clings close to the perceived, and felt, social reality.

The definitional confusion is heightened by the debate on the narrative's ontological anchoring, much as in the case of the discussion on the existence of outside reality. Some scholars, like David Carr (1991) see in it the deep structure of the only reality humans have access to, others, like Hayden White (1973), view it as an arbitrary (but ingrained in our culture) way of making comprehensible the chaotic jumble of events. Our aim, however, is not to try and resolve this dilemma, but rather to examine some of the variety in narrative forms used to communicate management ideas.

Studies in literary theory and linguistics have proposed large number of classificatory schemes for analysing narratives, be they Vladimir Propp's (1968) formalist dissection of folk tales, Greimas'(1983) attempts at identifying basic components of any discourse and Kenneth Burke's (1945) dramatistic pentad. While originally intended for the study of literature and paraliterature, all of these schemes have found use in examining other forms of discourse, including that of social science and management, from discussing language used in organizations (Rhodes, 2001; Tietze et al., 2003) to classifying academic texts (Monin and Monin, 2003; Styhre, 2005).

In regards to the latter issue, Barbara Czarniawska (1999) proposed examining different kinds of academic writing as genres, and raised the possibility of fruitful

comparisons between academic and literary genres. Using a definition of genre as "a system of action which has become institutionalized and is recognizable by repetition" (p. 15), she specifically points out parallels between organization theory and detective fiction, including realist style, focus on problem-solving, and concern with social context. She also retroactively labelled Burrell and Morgan's (1979) model of sociological paradigms in organization theory as an exercise in genre analysis, which seems to take an overly broad understanding of the notion of genre: Burrell and Morgan's study deals mostly with authorial stances rather than with writings themselves. We understand genres as types of utterances, or texts, and thus, in as much as our own analysis concerns genres, we subscribe to Tzvetan Todorov's description of a genre as "a codification of discursive properties" (1990, p. 18).

At the same time, we are not interested in genres as deployed in the original context of their definition. Jerzy Kociatkiewicz and Monika Kostera (1999) looked at the possibility of translation between fiction writing and academic texts, pointing out the leeway present even in the relatively strongly codified form of a journal article, and arguing that the long history of experimentation and innovation in storytelling can be mobilized to enrich the often incredibly boring academic writing. This article also concerns generic translation, but directed at different texts.

Management bestsellers, produced at the edge of the academia are often written by academics but addressed primarily to non-academic readers: managers or would-be managers. In attempting to draw and hold the readers' attention, these texts employ a wide variety of textual strategies, and our aim is to establish generic characteristics of a range of these books, show the correspondences between the narratives presented therein and established genres of fiction-writing and, in particular, to investigate the variant ways in which these texts maintain coherence despite covering a varied range of topics.

Learning new ideas

The discussion of whether management ideas are being propagated by diffusion or translation is vibrant and ongoing (see e.g. van Veen et al., 2011; Örtenblad et al., 2011; Clegg et al, 2006). In this text, we follow the tradition of Bruno Latour (1986), according to which cultural notions travel and gain acceptance by means of translation, that is through recontextualization requiring active engagement of the social actors involved. The process of translation is complex, and the outcome (that is, the translated ideas and their reach) is never fully predictable (Latour, 1993), but rather a "result of a blend of intentions, random events and institutional norms, all processed in a collective apparatus of sense-making" (Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996, p. 11). It involves deterritorializing an idea, or removing it from its network of contexts (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986), transporting or transposing it and, finally, reterritorializing it in a different setting. The idea is not material, even though at any given time it is expressed through concrete, almost physical attributes, by the use of verbal, visual, or material symbols. These symbols make it ready to be put into action through the reterritorializationin relation to a new web of meanings, and the whole process involves intense and continuous sensemaking.

As we have argued above, an important channel of propagation of management ideas involves popular management literature, and we would like now to turn to the authors who have studied the processes involved. Staffan Furusten (1999) shows how management fashions, presented in the most popular of management bestsellers are translated from scholarly studies to management practice. He finds that the authors of popular books propose models only partially based on contributions from scholarly studies, models which at the same time form rather crude simplifications of real conditions and problems. While not providing ready-made solutions to practical problems, these ideas are attractive to practitioners because they serve the role of fashion icons, linked with virtues, ideologies, notions and standards. Furusten describes these ideas as providing sets of managerial lifestyles, complete and ready for use.

Andrzej Huczynski (1996) likewise envisions management learning as a propagation of fashions and styles, rather than just knowledge, through the pronouncements made by management gurus, such as the famous consultants respected by business practitioners. These statements are accepted as an attractive source of learning because they offer a sense of personal and professional worth at the same time as they provide the readers with ready looking "recipes" for success. In a chaotic world, they offer a sense of control and predictability or, in the terms we have used in this text, tools for managerial sensemaking. Finally, the

gurus are skilled in using such cultural expressions that resonate well with the values and expectations of their audiences.

Furusten (1995) offers an explanation to one of the sources of this resonance. Popular management books are often based on the narrative structure of the heroic myth, thus connecting their teachings with a profound symbolism which may be very attractive to readers aiming at tasks which have to do with control of uncertainty and making sense in an increasingly complex world, and such is the current context in which managers operate. This is why archetypical images are so intensely appealing nowadays, even though the humanities have been all but erased from modern management curricula (Kostera, 2012).

David Collins (2007) provides an in-depth analysis of the writings and public speeches of Tom Peters, whom he considers to be one of the most prominent management gurus of all times. The enormous popularity of his ideas is due to his talent as storyteller. Indeed, Tom Peters has changed the vocabulary of management, providing practitioners with symbols and expressions that not only offer them a fashionable language, but inspire them to trying out new endeavours through an ability to provoke new thoughts. Peters has influenced the way we think and talk about work, as well as how we manage others and ourselves; indeed, we now have "a new way of speaking about management which insists that managing is, not so much a job as, an heroic way of life" (Collins, 2007, p. 8).

The problem of how the ideas are deterritorialiazed and reterritorialized has been much discussed in social science and management literature. The narrative has been pointed to as a particularly powerful sensemaking device used in organizations (Weick, 1995). Specifically in our area of interest, Isabelle Corbett-Etchevers and Eléonore Mounoud (2011) presented a narrative framework for conceptualizing how management ideas are reterritorialized. Plots are adopted and used for their distribution, from abstract concepts to individual and organizational experience. Effective emplotments are interactive, they occur at many levels simultaneously, continuous and manifold. This texts aims to show some of the possible ideas used in emplotment processes of the kind depicted by Corbett-Etchevers and Mounoud (2011), that is, some sources for translatable ideas that managers have been using in their everyday sensemaking related to several central notions of modern management. Ann Cunliffe and Chris Coupland (2011) address the issue of reterritorialization by embodied narrative sensemaking. The authors conclude that managers take into account other voices to acquire legitimacy and narrative coherence. This is a temporal and iterative process, occurring in everyday interactions, which are always embodied and experienced, not just realized in formal decision making moments.

> Managers, decision-makers and leaders therefore need to understand that we make sense in every¬day ordinary interactions as well as formal forums because we continually feel, make judgments and evaluations and try to construct some sort of *narrative rationality* (ibid., p. 8).

Embodiment is part and parcel of this narrative rationality, utilized to translate ideas into a new context by sensemaking, which we address in the next section.

The contribution of this text builds on the research cited above, as we propose an additional important vector of propagation of significant management ideas and experiences: grand plots, or the background structures of coherence we identify in the bestselling management books we analyse. Unlike structuralists (Greimas, 1983; Lévi-Strauss, 1962), we do not assume grand plots or any other narrative structures offer primary meanings that override other conceptual considerations. We do, however, believe both the obvious and the obscure facets of the story can matter, if they offer compelling interpretive tools for the reader to use (Iser, 1993). Moreover, as our study demonstrates, the grand plots of management literature are shared with literary genres of much older provenience, and thus our familiarity with, and established scholarship on such genres can help in understanding the rhetorical values of popular management texts.

Methodology

In this article, we present an analysis of the discourse of popular management, as instanced in some of the bestselling books of the genre. In selecting the empirical material for this study, our goal was to establish a sufficient corpus of influential management texts spanning the history of popular business literature to render our investigation worthwhile. We did not attempt to survey the entire field of popular management literature, nor to arrive at a representative sample of this field: such an endeavour would certainly lie beyond the scope of this study, and we are doubtful whether increasing the studied volume would position us better to examine the mechanism of coherence at work.

In the first stage, we collected from twenty-four MBA students, eight non-student management practitioners, and twelve academics involved in executive education and working in Poland, Sweden, and United Kingdom, lists of three to ten popular management books they deemed the most important or influential. Out of these nominations we selected thirty-one books mentioned most.

The selection method does not attempt to provide any definitive list, but ensures that the books we study are all influential texts, widely read (or at least widely bought) by aspiring and practicing managers. While not all of the books we have chosen for analysis remain as influential as they initially were, even the oldest titles, Frederick Taylor's (1911) *The Principles of Scientific Management* and Dale Carnegie's (1936) *How to Win Friends and Influence People* are still commonly used to interpret and evaluate existing organizations, to plan changes, and to justify sweeping managerial decisions. Nineteen-eighties are by far the most prominently represented decade, with thirteen publications, and the newest book on the list is Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean in,* published in 2013.

While the list is certainly biased by the selection process, we are confident that all the analysed books constitute significant tools in the repertoire of organizational sensemaking (Weick, 1995); we see this as a sufficient criterion for conducting our analysis. This approach follows an established tradition of in interpretive social science studies to focus on what is considered useful (and/or beautiful) by the actors in the field (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1995).

The methodological approach we use in the study comes from the broad tradition of discourse analysis: we aim to examine processes by which management texts are made meaningful through careful and structured analysis of these texts (Philips and Hardy, 2002). More specifically, we employ the techniques of distant readings (Czarniawska, 2009), reading the studied material semiotically, with the intent purpose of deciphering the connections between various plot and theme elements in the text.

We proceeded by reading (in most cases, re-reading) each of the selected books, paying attention to how background features of the texts turn into (grand) plots, or overarching narratives of the books , and to the ways in which disparate themes and sections are connected: the sources of coherence in management books. In this, we were guided by Roman Ingarden's (1960) model of phenomenological text analysis, according to which a text should be read on several levels in order to uncover the different layers of meanings and symbols.

The result was a series of short, reductive summaries of the analysed books and a list of categories, or keywords representing our understanding of the structural features of the texts. In comparing these, we have found that we relatively quickly reached data saturation, having established four major genres of grand plots which form the basis of our discussion in the next section. We decided that the best way to describe these grand plots, which we found difficult to delineate, is by showing analogies with established genres of fiction. While we maintain that the analogies between the analysed management books and representatives of fiction genres are structural and present on a number of possible levels of interpretation, the necessary brevity of this text has forced us to sum up these similarities in brief summaries and comparison of pithy quotes from both kinds of works. We hope our Readers will be willing to look beyond the metonymy of the presentation.

Because our analysis yielded four distinct categories of grand plots, and in order to be able to present some context to our reading, we selected just four books out of the thirty-one bestsellers (listed in their own section of the bibliography) used to reach our findings. These serve as exemplars of grand plots of the management genre in the subsequent section.

The subsequent section offers the discussion of our second level of analysis, focusing on the different ways in which management bestsellers achieve coherence. In it, we examine two important sources of coherence: narrative and thematic unity, and show how they are instantiated in the grand plots of popular management literature.

Grand plots of management bestsellers

James Kouzes and Barry Posner's (1995) *The Leadership Challenge* is the most tightly focused of the management books we have analysed, being centred squarely on describing its protagonist, the leader. The book's own recapitulation defines its theme as "about how leaders get extraordinary things done in organizations" (p xvii). Through the text, these extraordinary things are left relatively vague, though they seem to entail getting subordinates working hard to realize goals set by the leader. A few of the examples provided give more specific descriptions of the successes such as creating a voluntary

organization of 100000 members or drastically reducing the cost of production. Though most of the cases described come from business organizations, the word profit does not appear in the book (at least, we haven't been able to find it and it does not feature in the index). Non-profit organizations are discussed (and feature in the index), if not at length.

In terms of its narrative structure, the book starts with an apocalyptic vision of the current, fallen society where

> the cynics are winning. People are fed up. They're angry, disgusted, and pessimistic about their future. Alienation is higher than it's been in a quarter-century (p. xvii-xviii).

Such society is clearly in need of a messianic figure, or at least of strong moral leadership, and thankfully the leader is there to provide it. Most of the book is devoted to delineating the positive qualities of the leader, and it ends with strong praise for the protagonist, envisioned as a Moses-like figure leading the people out of the wilderness:

> We've said that leaders take us to places we've never been before. But there are no freeways to the future, no paved highways to unknown, unexplored destinations. There's only wilderness. To step out into the unknown, begin with the exploration of the inner territory. With that as a base, we can then discover and unleash the leader within us all (p. 340).

The tight focus, and the way in which reported cases are always but illustrations of the leader's transformative powers, means the book can be understood to follow that most rigid benchmark of internal coherence, the rule of three unities which came to dominate neoclassical drama of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. First formulated in Lodovico Castelvetro's *Poetica d'Aristotele Vulgarizzata et Sposta* from 1570 (Spingam, 2011), though derived from Aristotle's comments in *Poetics,* the three unities postulate that a drama should concern a single consistent story (unity of action), take place in one setting (unity of place) and in a continuous span of time (unity of time). Significantly, while Aristotle prescribed the unity of action, he only noted the unity of time (as a prevalent characteristic of tragedies) and did not address the unity of place. The notion of the three unities became popular throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth century, and is particularly prevalent in the plays of the French authors of the era (as well as present in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *The Comedy of Errors*).

In our reading, *The Leadership Challenge* clearly adheres to the three unities. The leader's transformation of the organization provides the unity of action (all of the other characters' described activities are either instantiations of said change or are noted to illuminate the leader's transformative powers). The reference frame of the end times and of the possibility of salvation through leadership fulfils the requirement of the unity of time, and though short reminiscences from other successful leadership process enrich the book with additional background, they do not appear to shift the action to their settings. The unity of place is somewhat more difficult to determine, as there is very little concrete scenery described. Leader's actions take place in relation to their constituents and customers. Some of the reminiscences contain details on their settings, but are always interspersed by generalized statements about the leader (sometimes referred to in the plural) and his or her relationship with non-specific other actors (occasionally divided into constituents and customers).

One more resemblance with neoclassical drama bears further comment, though it does not concern the narrative structure as such: the leader's apparent and highly lauded morality reminds us much more of Molière's Tartuffe, that paragon of hypocrisy, than of any religious figure. Thus, a section entitled *The Secret of Success Is Love* is illustrated by statements from two different army generals (though the military does not otherwise figure much in the book), and includes the following excerpt:

> Vince Lombardi, the unforgettable coach of the Green Bay Packers, believed in love. In a speech before the American Management Association, he made these remarks: 'Mental toughness is humility, simplicity, Spartanism. And one other, love. I don't necessarily have to like my associates, but as a person I must love them. Love is loyalty. Love is teamwork. Love respects the dignity of the individual. Heartpower is the strength of your corporation.' Retired General H. Norman Schwarzkopf emphasizes love as well. When Barbara Walters asked him, during a TV interview, how he would like to be remembered, he replied, 'That he loved his family. That he loved his troops. And that they loved him' (p. 305).

The Spartan ideal of love among soldiers (homosexual relationships within Spartan regiments were strongly encouraged in the belief that they would engender stronger ties and loyalty on the battlefield) benefits, of course, from over two thousand years of history, but it is rare to find Spartan society lauded for its moral composition (even if just because most descriptions of such come from the largely antagonistic Athenians). And just as love is explained through its relation to war,

so the leader's commitment to trust is framed only as the necessity for subordinates to trust the leader, and the leader's desire for constant learning is described only in terms of looking for external sources of expertise and knowledge. The possibility of knowledge beneficial for the leader to learn existing within the organization is not even raised.

Peter Senge's (1993) *The Fifth Discipline* is a much more sprawling book than *The Leadership Challenge.* It features a collective protagonist serving as the active narrator (addressed in first person plural), but also numerous other characters including humans and named business organizations. Various topics, characters, and associated narratives are woven through the book—they appear early on, then disappear for a hundred or more pages, only to reappear again for further insight and perhaps a resolution. The complex story of a Beer Game forms the central topic of chapter 3 (p. 27-54), then vanishes from the book (with a single mention on page 89) only to reemerge around page 390 to inform the argument. DC-3, introduced on p. 5, is mentioned only in passing three times over the next three hundred pages, but resumes central position and makes a significant contribution to the plot on pages 342-343.

At the same time, the story never feels disjointed: while there is no obvious single thread connecting all the varied scenes and characters of the book, there are usually clear links between each scene, its predecessor and its follow-up. Consecutive chapters introduce more abrupt shifts in setting and plot, jumping from the limitations of linear thinking to the movie *Spartacus* or from the horror of self-reflection to the hunting for snakes under a carpet. Nevertheless, threads from previous chapters are picked up in later exposition, and the book clearly tells a single, though convoluted, story.

In this regard, it resembles a realist novel with its convoluted plot and large ensemble of characters who disappear and reappear in the story. While the paragon of the genre seem to be the nineteenth century novels of the writers such as Dickens, Dumas, or Hugo, *The Fifth Discipline* bears the closest resemblance to much more recent writings. The plot structure, charting the protagonists' complex encounters with organizations and organizational actors, leads not just to the inevitable (largely) happy conclusion, but to the transformative apotheosis so often found in the twentieth century science fiction novels of Arthur C. Clarke. *Childhood's End* (Clarke, 1953), written very much in the form of a realist novel, charts the vicissitudes of human encounter with the wider galactic community culminating in the human species' pseudoevolutionary transformation into new form existence beyond the confines of planet-bound biology. Similarly, *2001: A Space Odyssey* shows the almost supernatural transformation of human beings by the encounter with an alien artifact. The concluding sentence of *The Fifth Discipline* could have served just as well as an epigram to either of these books:

> Something new is happening. And it has to do with *it all*–the whole (Senge, 1993: 371).

W. Chan Kim and Renée Mabourgne's (2005) *Blue Ocean Strategy* is even wider in its thematic scope. The book contains a multitude of business success stories, each following an almost invariant pattern: description of a novel market offering sharply different from all the competing products complemented by a glowing review of its success. While purporting to illustrate various aspects of planning a winning strategic move (the titular blue ocean strategy), most of these vignettes could be switched around without detracting from the coherence of the book in any noticeable way. Even the central concepts, blue ocean and value innovation, have an inconstant presence as the reader keeps being distracted (or entertained) by one success story after another.

The authors flit between first person plural, second and third person narration throughout the text, allowing for a clear understanding of who the model authors and the model readers are (to use Umberto Eco's notion of the author and the reader as documented in the text). The authors present themselves primarily as academics at the end of a large research project, characterized by their vast expertise. Thus, the possessive pronoun "our" appears quite commonly, but is usually only applied to research and study, with a single pairing each with assessment, discussion, interviews, and experience (as well as a single mention of "our networked society" and of "our managerial expression of procedural justice theory"). In contrast, the reader stands out as a more complex, and better defined figure, a manager at the helm of a company (possessive pairings such as "your company," "your industry," "your product," and "your strategic planning process" abound), whose possessions can include

> aconsigliere–a highly respected insider–in your top management team, or only a CFO and other functional head heads (ibid.: 168).

But descriptions of innovative products also reveal a more human side to the model reader. Most products, such as cheap wine, books, circus performances or

insulin pumps are described in terms of their appeal to the customer. But time-shared private jets and smartphones are presented as offering their value directly to the reader. Interestingly, the reader also appears to be female, as she shows interest in the offer of female-only gyms, but none in a new line of barbershops.

Overall, the book reminds us of a travelogue—chronicling the authors' tour of what they themselves describe as blue oceans, full of strange and exotic businesses whose activities range from selling cement in Mexico to information systems for New York Stock Exchange traders. While the authors make some attempt to link these into a single story, the connections remain tenuous. There is significant repetition in terms of the sights viewed: after some time, all the innovative products that redefined their industry begin to look alike. There is also a clear degree of choice in terms of business stories recounted, much as most travel diaries focus on the traveler's interests, be it natural beauty, local cultures, or feats of architecture.

The oldest of our chosen exemplars, Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman's (1982) *In Search of Excellence,* stands out from the others through the emotional weight of its contents. The managers described therein (and the protagonists are clearly identified as managers) are full of passion that manifests itself in unexpected and even violent ways. One executive furiously asserts the highest quality of his brand of toilet paper, another endures three years of obsessing about building better skis. An entire organization is "fanatic about service" (p. 159), and another "fanatical about cleanliness" (p . 173). Yet another zealously pursues the building of a better product. Words like faith, transcendence, obsession, zeal, and fanatic appear over and over again. It is not surprising that Peters' next book (Peters and Austin, 1985) was entitled *A Passion for Excellence.*

Paradoxically, because of the strong emphasis on (equally strong) emotions and commitment, the companies and managers featuring in the book tend to blur together—they are driven by the same passions, and it is the strength, rather than the direction, of these passions that lies at the heart of Peters and Waterman's argument. In keeping with the religious imagery of faith and zeal, the main theme of the book is framed as a quest for an ever retreating goal, even as many of the presented companies are described as already excellent. The managers, and the more engaged workers, are shown as continually looking for the possibility of improving their product and their company. There is also no clear plot holding the story together, as the book focuses on attitudes rather than on actions (though, of course, some actions are described—they just do not cohere into a single narrative structure as actions of one manager in one excellent company neither relate to nor reflect the actions of another).

In terms of parallels from literature, *In Search of Excellence* most resembles a hagiography collection—a book of saints' lives such as the late medieval *Golden Legend (Legenda Aurea)* by Jacobus de Voragine. Full of marvelous stories and uplifting moral message, the Golden Legend presents a hodgepodge of accounts held together by sanctity of the subjects and the strength of their faith rather than by any other common theme or narrative pattern. Thus, the reactions of St. Anthony on finding misplaced silver

> After this, as St. Anthony went in desert he found a platter of silver in his way; then he thought whence this platter should come, seeing it was in no way for any man to pass, and also if it had fallen from any man he should have heard it sound in the falling. Then said he well that the devil had laid it there for to tempt him, and said: Ha! devil, thou weenest to tempt me and deceive me, but it shall not be in thy power. Then the platter vanished away as a little smoke. And in likewise it happed him of a mass of gold that he found in this way, which the devil had cast for to deceive him, which he took and cast it into the fire and anon it vanished away (de Voragine, 2012, n.p.).

are not far removed from the actions of Forrest Mars, the chief executive of Mars food empire when confronted with mispackaged candy:

> He is given to fits of unbridled rage, such as the time he discovered an improperly wrapped batch of candy bars and hurled the entire inventory, one by one, at a glass panel in a boardroom while frightened aides looked on (Peters & Waterman, 1982, p. 181).

We have shown how the grand plots in popular management books carry plotlines that are much heavier than the medium of popular literature seems to be. However, as Czarniawska and Rhodes (2006) point out, popular culture perpetuates strong plots from mythologies and other monumental cultural sources. Emplotment of the disparate ideas makes them more than titbits of fashionable knowledge: they hold a content that brings a sensitivity to a whole range of related contexts (White, 1998).

Sources of coherence

In this section we read the analysed books on a second

level (Ingarden, 1960), concerning the ways in which the texts achieve coherence.

Our aim here is to examine the interplay of narrative and thematic coherence in constituting different genres of organizing, the authorial role of different organizational actors, and the temporal organization of the resulting stories. To that aim, we set out by outlining the features of each scheme of coherence and their possible combinations, providing exemplars from the literary tradition that, in turn, can serve as metaphors for the different genres of organizing.

Without even attempting to resolve the dilemma of ontological grounding of narratives (we do not believe any final resolution to the latter dilemma is possible), we can largely circumvent the general problem of the structuring of experience by assuming narrativity as an important, but not the sole, source of coherence found in experiences and stories—understood, after Yiannis Gabriel, as "narratives with simple but resonant plots and characters, involving narrative skills, entailing risk, and aiming to entertain, persuade and win over [the listeners]" (2000: 22). This is reflected in the analysed books where, for example, *The Fifth Discipline* followed a clearly discernible storyline while *In Search of Excellence* did not. Following Karl Weick (1995) we call this source of consistency the *narrative coherence*.

Linguistic research uses the related notions of subject, topic, and theme to denote forms of indicating the referent in a particular utterance or discourse. Subject and topic are usually understood as grammatical categories denoting the direct referent and the context and meaning of an utterance respectively. Theme, the least often used category (and yet the most relevant for the present text), organizes meaning of a larger chunk of discourse (Ochs Keenan and Schieffelin, 1976). It can be explicitly invoked right at the outset, or it can emerge as a common ground for different contributions to the discourse. Theme can thus be understood as the atemporal and non-causal linkage between various ideas that enables them to be interpreted as forming a coherent entity. We call this structuring the *thematic coherence*.

Thematic and narrative coherence coexist within any given discourse, although their importance can vary wildly from genre to genre, and also between different manifestations of any given genre. Nevertheless, a common pattern can be discerned, and the interplay between different kinds of coherence can be analysed to gain a clearer understanding of a particular grand plot.

We can thus establish four basic grand plots named after the literary genres we used as analogies, and distinguished based on the consistency of plot (narrative coherence) and theme (thematic coherence): Classical drama, novel, travelogue, and hagiography.

	Low Narrative Coherence	**High Narrative Coherence**
High Thematic Coherence	Hagiography	Classical Drama
Low Thematic Coherence	Travelogue	Novel

Tab. 1. Literary coherence

We do not claim that narrative and thematic coherence are the only available ways of creating and maintaining rhetorical cohesion, be it within discourse of literature or of organization. One other very obvious feature which does not inform our current analysis is formal coherence: the rules and constraints on permissible discourse within a given context. Thus, a sonnet is circumscribed by the rhythm and structure of its verses. At the same time, the proposed scheme gives us enough information to allow us to comment on the scope and adaptability of each of the examined books.

Of the four literary genres we invoke, classical drama, circumscribed by the three unities presents the highest possible levels of both narrative and thematic coherence. This is the work focused on exploring one particular issue and its manifestation in a concrete setting: Molière's *Tartuffe* is thus an exploration of hypocrisy, but set firmly within the high bourgeois milieu of Ancien Régime France. While the play continues to be performed to this day, many productions involve significant rewriting to update and adapt the work to suit the tastes and the understanding of modern audiences. Similarly, *The Leadership Challenge* is circumscribed not only by its subject matter, but also by the hierarchical corporate governance structure implicitly assumed as the context of leadership (and despite drawing in quotes and illustrations from sport teams and the army). Any attempt to transpose this message to a different setting would require significant adaptation.

The coherence of the novel comes from its narrative structure: its plot cannot be ignored and reading the chapters out of sequence is likely to confuse the reader (in contrast, Peters and Waterman specifically guide the

reader in the introduction in regards to which chapters can be safely omitted). A book such as *Childhood's End* spans many different settings, and cannot be considered a thorough exploration of any of them. In the same vein, *The Fifth Discipline* also tells an engaging story, but a very convoluted one. Even the titular fifth discipline, one of the five areas of competence for building a successful learning organization, is confusing, as it is presented to the reader as the first of the five disciplines. Consequently, the book reads better as an account of organizational learning (and a fascinating one at that) than as its explicit goal of forming a blueprint for a learning organization.

Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend* has had a long history of serving as an indispensible tool for personal inspiration, and as a target for ridicule as to the veracity of its claims. The same can be said of *In Search of Excellence,* where many of the companies singled out for their supposed excellence went into sharp decline soon after the book's publication. Yet does the dubious accuracy of its assessment nullify the passion and zeal forming both books' real contribution? Over one thousand extant medieval copies of the hagiography and continuing sales of the management inspirational point towards spiritual relevance that transcends any criticism, at least in the short term (the decline of interest in the *Golden Legend* coincides with the change of attitudes accompanying the coming of the Renaissance).

	Low Narrative Coherence	**High Narrative Coherence**
High Thematic Coherence	*In Search of Excellence*	*The Leadership Challenge*
Low Thematic Coherence	*Blue Ocean Strategy*	*The Fifth Discipline*

Tab. 2. Coherence in selected management bessellers

Finally, the travelogue and *Blue Ocean Strategy* both share low levels (but not the complete lack) of narrative as well as thematic coherence, and are best seen as collections of entertaining if not very closely linked excerpts. It should be noted that *Blue Ocean Strategy,* like many other management bestsellers of the 1990s and 2000s, had its roots in a *Harvard Business Review* article (Kim and Mauborgne, 2004) expanded (or padded out) to form a book. But a more charitable interpretation sees the book as a grab bag of possible inspirational stories which, while held together by a tenuous claim of explaining value innovation, can nevertheless serve as points of reference and resources for sensemaking in disparate organizational contexts. And, after all, Kim and Mauborgne themselves claim that their research did not uncover any consistently highly performing companies, only occasional successful strategic moves.

Coherence in management grand plots

The four management books are presented as exemplars, illustrating the four modes of achieving coherence and showing how the grand plots of classical drama, novel, travelogue, and hagiography function when used to enunciate the concerns of management literature. While there is some variation that can be found among the thirty-one books forming our study material, we found no difficulty in differentiating between them based on which grand plots they were using. None of the books we scrutinized challenged this typological scheme, though, as noted before, adding additional dimensions of cohesion, such as formal coherence, could have produced a more nuanced categorization and more tightly defined grand plot descriptions. Table 3 summarizes the results of our typologization.

Conclusion

We have presented what we call the main grand plots, situated in the background of much more prominent and well-known readings of the popular writings on management. They provide a rich source for inspiration for managers as ideas for translation of ideas into practices. We showed how two main types of coherence of these plots: narrative and thematic, are kept throughout the composition. We would now like to address the question why we believe their existence provides an important condition for learning of how to make (narrative) sense of management.

Contemporary organizations are a way of life (Czarniawska, 1992), and so is management, the rigorous, focused and purposeful mode of organizing (Sjöstrand, 1998). Seen as part of wider cultural context, learning how to make sense of organizational and managerial realities has to be embedded in a wider context (Argyris and Schön, 1978). Coherence of the grand plot serves this purpose: thematic, by providing a sense of identity (Weick, 2001), and narrative, by offering a sense of action, or meaningful cycles – processes of

	Low Narrative Coherence	High Narrative Coherence
High Thematic Coherence	Bennis (1989) *On Becoming a Leader* Cialdini (1984) *Influence* Fisher& Ury (1981) *Getting to YES* Kaplan & Norton (1996) *The Balanced Scorecard* Mintzberg (1994) *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning* Mintzberg (2009) *Managing* Peters & Waterman (1982) *In Search of Excellence*	Blanchard & Johnson (1982) *The One Minute Manager* Drucker (1954) *The Practice of Management* Hamel & Prahalad (1996) *Competing for the Future* Handy (1978) *Gods of Management* Kouzes & Posner (1995) *The Leadership Challenge* Ries (2011) *The Lean Startup* Sandberg (2013) *Lean In* Taylor (1911) *The Principles of Management* Tichy & Devanna (1986) *The Transformational Leader*
Low Thematic Coherence	Carnegie (1936) *How to Win Friends and Influence People* Covey (1989) *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* Deming (1982) *Out of the Crisis* Hammer & Champy (1993) *Reengineering the Corporation* Kanter (1989) *When Giants Learn to Dance* Kim & Mauborgne (2005) *Blue Ocean Strategy* Mintzberg & Quinn (1991) *The Strategy Process* Schein (1985) *Organizational Culture and Leadership* Welch & Welch (2005) *Winning*	Collins (2001) *Good to Great* Deal & Kennedy (1982) *Corporate Cultures* Kanter (1984) *The Change Masters* Kotter (1996) *Leading Change* Porter (1980) *Competitive Strategy* Senge (1993) *The Fifth Discipline*

Tab. 3. Coherence in management writing

organizing (Weick, 1979). In that way, the grand plots hidden in the background offer a powerful device for organizational sensemaking, both in terms of identities and processes. The constancy of a plot of this kind throughout each of the popular books makes it possible to make sense and engage, while reading the book, in the full translation continuum: deterritorializing an idea, transporting it and reterritorializing it in a different context (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986), to be put into action in relation to a new web of meanings – which is the point of much of organizational learning (Argyris and Schön, 1978). In line with White's (1998) observations on the significance of the narrative form, we argue that the success of translation, and thus of management learning achieved through popular literature, depends on the successful embedding of grand plots in the story presented to the reader.

What this analysis shows is how important for management learning is the existence and availability of books able to provide a more engaged level of reading, one involving a successful grand plot. Standard management textbooks deliver limited and linear representations of managerial work, devoid of context and disembodied (Knights and Willmott, 1999) and are, for that reason, unable to fulfill the role of providers of a contextualized learning experience. Acontexualization is strongly criticized by Parker (2002) as one of the reasons why management is becoming a totalitarian practice, false at heart in its universalizing promises. Bringing back context is very important, if we wish managers to learn polyphony in order to become "talented and creative players in many simultaneous and complex games" (Clegg et al., 2006: 19).

Managers look to popular books to fill in this gap (Pagel and Westerfelhaus, 2005) and so it should, perhaps, cease to astonish us, academic observers, that these not

overly ambitious publications remain so popular (see e.g. Klincewicz, 2005). However, we agree with the critics of fashionable management books that other kinds of ideas would be welcome if we are to look forward to genuine organizational change, through double loop learning (Argyris and Schön, 1978). To achieve this we need what Barbara Czarniawska and Carl Rhodes (2006) call avant-garde management writing which "experiments rather than repeats; it disrespects the canon rather than either following or opposing it; much of it vanishes but that which stays can revolutionize the institutional patterns" (ibid.: 215). It is consciously iconoclastic and refrains from a repetition of strong plots and

> will neither emulate nor reproduce the hackneyed distinctions between popular culture and high culture – instead their exemplarity and originality will lie in their refusal to follow the plots that are handed down to them from either (ibid.: 215).

We need "avant-garde management writing" in order to exercise the imaginative capabilities, which Morgan (2003) regarded as crucial in complex and shifting environments. In order to solve problems under such conditions, inspirational learning based on imagination is necessary. We live in what Bauman (2000) calls liquid times, ever flexible and free from restraining stable structures. The simultaneous fragmentation renders sensemaking a precarious and perhaps futile effort for many, giving the illusion of freedom, yet delivering further injustice and suffering instead. Imaginative management may be our hope for solving some of liquid modernity's accumulating problems, as the current linear and rationalistic methods seem to work in a counterproductive fashion (Bauman, 2011).

It is our contention that the grand plots present in management literature serve as an important source of inspirational learning, based on imagination, which makes it possible to make sense of and act in complex, shifting environments (Morgan, 1993). Morgan proposes to use such methods as mind games or brainstorms to develop this kind of learning; our suggestion is to read management books, but look beyond their superficial narrative line, and towards the grand plots. Not tied to any specific theme or idea, grand plots establish rules for the construction of appropriate, or admirable, plotlines. In this text we have shown the ways in which the grand plots of popular management books are used to achieve coherence in presenting the books' invariably total solutions for organizational problems as adaptable to different environments, contexts, and varied organizational dilemmas. Besides mapping the ways of establishing coherence, we also compared them to the textual strategies of more literary-oriented genres, and postulate the desirability of more conscious use of literary schemata which, even when not consciously invited, find their way into management books.

In other words, we propose that critical management researchers use narrative devices to explore the sources of some management fashions trough the concept of the grad plot. In management education, we believe we should also try to influence these fashions in the directions that Clegg et al. (2006) advocated, i.e. towards a polyphonic and contextualized management mindset. This can be done by the writing of avant-garde management books, with high thematic and narrative coherence, suitable for the development of imagination and inspire a mode of learning leading to greater awareness and change.

Human learning processes rely on stories to provide the otherwise missing experiential context necessary for learning (Bruner, 1986; Neuhauser, 1993). Popular (and, to an extent, high) culture provides many such stories (Czarniawska and Rhodes, 2006), but management books offer a source of relevant narratives that are easier to interpret in regards to management practice. Through this text, we propose a more conscious use of management texts for the stories they tell rather than just for their informational content, in the design and delivery of inspirational management education.

To conclude, while we remain critical of many of the texts we have analysed, we call for more – not less – popular management books. But we call for books engaging in conscious, rather than accidental, storytelling. We ask for inspiring management books (and films, and talks, and articles) that contain more than a simple linear narrative. We need management stories that acknowledge our rich storytelling heritage, stories heedful of their reliance on grand plots of thematic or narrative coherence. We ask for popular texts that enable learning through contextualised sensemaking. We address this call to good and talented academic writers, Critical Management scholars, humanists and artists, all who are willing and able to engage with the imagination of managers. Oscar Wilde once said that life imitates art – observe he did not say: linear logo-scientistic writing – so let us produce texts able to inspire management learning for making life better.

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