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## What's next?

### (Un)learning nothingness and non-events in management education<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Most management and organization theories focus on the full existence and finitude of things. They deal with fullness and the full happening of things. Both organizing and managing mean fully producing something, doing something, or giving value to something. A good manager should follow what is happening and, even better, make things fully happen. But in everyday life, our managerial capitalism makes the world more and more impatient, problematic and incomplete, full of more and more holes, interruptions and voids that permeate experience. This is true both emotionally (as frustration), narratively (as cliffhangers and suspense) and materially (as creative destruction scars our earth). In this essay for ML's 55th anniversary, I argue for a process-oriented perspective on managerial emptiness and incompleteness based on three core interwoven negative processes - representation, narration and materialization. I explain how each of these processes contributes to a nexus of incompleting events at the heart of managerial processes. Paradoxically, I also suggest that different kinds of emptiness and incompleteness might be part of a more resonant experience of the world. Embracing patience, waiting, deep letting go, and the nuanced exploration of non-events within events could foster what Whitehead called a “culture of possibilities”. This perspective on possibilities - considering what might have been and what might yet be - could lead to a more harmonious relationship with nature. Finally, I encourage business schools and the corporate world to (un)learn nothingness and non-events in the context of the negative ontology discussed here.

**Keywords:** Nothingness; Interruptions; Incompleting events; Non-events; Negative ontology; Culture of possibilities; Whitehead; Managerial education.

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<sup>1</sup> Draft version of a paper accepted for the 55th Anniversary Special Issue of Management Learning.

## **Introduction: Exploring Nothingness, Voids, and Emptiness in managerial learning**

Management and organization studies often rely on an implicit ontology<sup>2</sup> that I would like to highlight here: a positive ontology of fullness and completeness (Hansen, 2014; Kelly, 2014; Giovannoni, and Quattrone, 2018; de Vaujany and Aroles, 2019; de Vaujany, 2022, 2024; Pingeot, 2024; Pignot and Thompson, 2024; Pingeot, 2024). Organizing is about filling, fulfilling, realizing and performing things in order to reach a state of finitude. The elaboration of strategic value is itself deeply concerned with the completion, production and manufacture of products and services that are likely to meet (and fulfil) the expectations of customers and overcome the performance of competitors. What happens, continuously or discontinuously, is more important than what does not happen. In this vein, teaching management is more about sensitizing to events than non-events (Cope, 2023). Taking care of non-events, neglecting events and what fills experience would mean missing the point or jumping on the bandwagon (de Vaujany, 2024).

But the everyday experience of valuation processes orchestrated by management techniques follows a very different direction, which is analyzed here. Interruptions, suspensions, emptiness or voids, which are at stake in most innovative, entrepreneurial or marketing processes, cultivate impatience and open up new spaces to be filled by the next novelties. In our ordinary experience of services, products and capitalist processes, non-events matter (de Vaujany, 2022, 2024; Debaise, 2022; Pingeot, 2024).

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<sup>2</sup> By 'ontology' I mean a particular view of what reality means and the implications of that view for the way in which any researcher should describe her fieldwork. Some people emphasize what is (entitativist or emergentist ontologies), others what becomes or comes to be (process ontologies), still others insist on the nothingness of becoming (negative ontologies - which can be part of a process ontology). This results in very different 'ontological' units for describing organization, ranging from causalities, generative mechanisms, practices, presences, absences, events, non-events or moments to images, etc.

Through the continuation of Beyes and Holt's (2020) topological description of organization as "an outcome of a spatial multiplicity that encompasses affects, technologies, voids and absences," I want to point out here some radical implications of a theory of voids and incompleteness. Beyond the crucial issue of space, I would like to suggest that an extensive theory of the ontology of organizing should address the time and process of nothingness that is at stake in organizing and managerial learning, at worst, but possibly for the best, if nothingness is fully re-appropriated by employees and customers. Instead of the emptiness that is now mainly used to accelerate experience, an alternative process of disruption and emptiness could contribute to a more patient, immobile temporality that nourishes a sense of patience, resonance and possibility as part of a careful work of resistance.

In the context of this 55th anniversary special issue of Management Learning, I invite organization scholars to contribute to a 'negative ontology', particularly in their approach to teaching and learning management. In my view, suspensions and interruptions should be more fully incorporated into the way capitalism and management processes are learned critically by students. Paradoxically, as a work of resistance and subjectivation, it should also be taught as a possible alternative towards a more patient relationship with our world. In this essay, therefore, I insist on the "culture of possibilities" proposed by Whitehead (1929, 1938) and Debaise (2022).

**Emptiness and Incompleteness as Paths to Novelty: Our Managerial Capitalism**

Indeed, from the earliest years of management and organization studies as a field, the idea of emptiness, voids and incompleteness has been a (now forgotten) focus of theories. Management has been staged as the ability to start from scratch, to improvise from almost nothing (Person, 1929; Drucker, 1999; de Vaujany, 2022).

Thus, Peter Drucker (1999) noted the value of epistemic voids in the 30s and 40s, with what he called the “value of ignorance”. During the Second World War, the USA became the "arsenal of democracy". In the West, the famous entrepreneur Kaiser built large civilian (cargo) ships, known as Liberty Ships, which were involved in the massive transport of arms to European allies. Significantly, his team could not rely on the knowledge of English engineers who knew how to build them. Indeed, “Kaiser knew little about shipbuilding and was completely ignorant of cargo ships. However, he looked at the British design and proceeded, not with British help and expertise, but out of his own ignorance” (ibid, 80). With his team, he designed a new world of techniques and built ships using mainly welding techniques that would have been sacrilegious to British shipbuilders.

From an organizational point of view, Kaiser also relied on a semi-Taylorian production process based on modules that could be easily assembled by workers. This made the process faster, but also much cheaper: Liberty ships cost about 25% of their English counterparts. Drucker explains that ignorance encouraged innovation, which is often seen as a reassembly - a bricolage achieved with the resources at hand. Here, emptiness dominated the narrative, and organizing took place in the voids of the repositories of skills, knowledge and action needed to solve the problem at hand. In other words, epistemic emptiness demands novelty (see also Roberts, 2013).

Similarly, Adrot and Figueiro (2013) examined the consequences of the 2003 French heat crisis on the health system. At that time, more than 13,000 people died as a result of a dramatic rise in temperatures during the summer. To cope with the situation, hospitals

constantly improvised to treat the influx of dehydrated people. The organizational emptiness of procedures, human resources and immediate treatment contrasted with the state of most emergency rooms, whose rooms, corridors and even cupboards were full of stretchers and dying patients. At the time of the influx, no strategies, policies or learning processes had been developed. People did not know what to do. In many ways, the recent COVID-19 crisis reproduced the epistemic drama of 2003 on a larger scale.

But learning and novelty triggered by organizational emptiness and voids are not only issues of missing or discounted knowledge. Beyond Drucker's epistemic approach, they are also an obvious ontological dimension of the institutional processes within organizations and our global capitalism. They are a negative process that 'matters' (Pignot and Thompson, 2024; de Vaujany, 2022, 2024; Pingeot, 2024).

Schumpeter (1942) has long elaborated a theory of creative destruction, according to which economic growth means both filling the world and erasing part of it in the same dialectical movement. In other words, the process of emptying is interwoven with the process of filling. This type of capitalism described by Schumpeter requires the elaboration of innovative content, but it also involves suspensions, ruptures and voids that are likely to be commodified or to intensify moments of present fullness or to downgrade past fullness (Pingeot and Thompson, 2024; de Vaujany, 2022, 2024).

The negative process mentioned above is not only material. It is also affective. As Deleuze and Guattari's (1983) famous analysis of capitalism shows, our major economic institutions are all about desires and attachments (see Sibertin-Blanc, 2010). These desires are not possessed and exercised by a dominant center over a peripheral world. Rather, they are a decentered, rhythmic and rhizomic process that moves through the world and is projected by the power of difference. *It* continues to desire and cultivate desire everywhere and at all times. Desire occurs at the level of 'ensembles'. Just as a tie is desired as part of a wider outfit, a

trend in color and texture, a brand and what it means in relation to other brands, or the specific way it is presented and enacted by a shop, desire is always relational and differential. Desiring is an affective relationality that gives directions, rhythms and a steady focus of attention as it opens up sites and places. Something that Meta and Tik Tok may have understood better than others.

Ultimately, management is about cultivating, renewing and nurturing possibilities for desire. Desire for a product or service, desire for a brand, desire for a place, desire for an entrepreneurial goal or project, desire for an aesthetic, and so on. But this desire is not expressed by essentialized, pre-constituted subjects. Desire simply flows with constant interruptions, fostering lack and frustration, a sense of something missing, feeding the continuities of capitalist processes and the opening of ephemeral agencies to the world<sup>3</sup>. Contemporary management cultivates above all the differentialities that make desire flow impatiently, and the addition of managerial activities (which are increasingly interconnected) demultiplies the intensity of this desire by enlarging the ensemble of echoing desires on a global scale. Our digital tools commodify the whole world and, in many ways, the whole surface of our experience.

*Thus, in contrast to the widespread dominant theories that assume organizing as exclusively filling, expanding and materializing the world, it is tempting to defend a more dialogical or paradoxical description involving absence<sup>4</sup> and voids in-between as important ingredient of capitalist processes (e.g, as a continuation of Kelly, 2014; Giovannoni & Quattrone, 2018; de Vaujany & Aroles, 2019; de Vaujany, 2022, 2024; Quattrone et al., 2021*

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<sup>3</sup> Interruptions are central to Deleuze and Guattari's (1983) thinking about the machines that animate contemporary capitalism. For them, "A machine may be defined as a system of interruptions or breaks. Every machine, in the first place, is related to a continual material flow (hylē) that it cuts into." (Ibid: 36).

<sup>4</sup> It would be very useful to distinguish between phenomenological approaches to nothingness (using concepts such as absence, presence, lack, frustration, mystery...) and more metaphysical approaches (using concepts such as interruptions, suspensions, voids, folds, affects, propositions...). If the former still involve some form of subjectivation, the latter are more asubjectivist or remain at the level of pre-reflexivity. Both emphasize the inseparability of events and non-events (as rhythm for the former and as becoming for the latter). I will not dwell here on this issue, which will be explored in another paper.

or Pingeot, 2024). Above all, management is about opening, spacing and widening voids, or interrupting, punctuating and 'imperfecting' flows. Offering fat-free, gluten-free or lactose-free foods or sugar-free drinks can add value through absence. Indeed, it is one of the core ethical processes of our contemporary capitalism (Pingeot, 2024). Likewise, managers are increasingly looking for opportunities for disconnection and quiet time at work and outside of work. Non-managerial times are becoming as important as managerial times. What matters are the synergies, rhythms and complementarities between the discontinuities of absence and the continuities of presence. Events and non-events are polarized by managerial processes. Frustration, greed, curiosity and ephemeral adventures are the main affects that constantly reopen the way for the valuation of capitalist processes<sup>5</sup>.

But I would like to emphasize something here that goes far beyond this new ethics of consumption or work, which in the end only feeds our capitalism. Voids are just markets, and very often new materialities or combinations of materialities are likely to help artificially simulate, compensate or suspend the presence of something else (e.g. erythritol, xylitol, stevia to replace the taste of sugar). Similarly, managers and workers can also use specific techniques to protect themselves or prolong the absence of a toxic event, such as mobile phone jammers. Of course, users will have to pay for these services.

Finally, nothingness and the transitional experience of nothingness are always instrumental and even part of broader organizational processes (focused on incompleting events), which I will describe in the next section before emphasizing a more resonant, subjectivizing, careful approach to nothingness that could also be experimented with in business schools and all places involved in managerial learning.

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<sup>5</sup> Symmetrical to the world of consumption.



## **Management and Organizing as Incompleting Events: Implications for Managerial Learning**

To understand the idea of management as an 'incompleting event' or an 'incompleting system of events', it is important to return to the genealogy of modern management, in particular to the systematization of representation and 'representationalism' since the 1930s (Chia, 1996; Tsoukas, 1998; de Vaujany & Mitev, 2017; Lorino, 2018; de Vaujany, 2022). Representing the world is an old Platonic trope. The idea is that we never know directly what the world is; we represent it, its shapes, its perspectives and its movements (as different places that can be represented sequentially). In the 1930s and 1940s, with the cybernetics movement (Flood & Jackson 1988; Jackson & Jackson, 1991; Kline, 2006; Pickering, 2010), and before that with the obsession with visualization (Oberg et al, 2017; de Vaujany, 2022), both of which were gradually incorporated into management techniques (de Vaujany, 2022, 2024), representationalism became a core (implicit) philosophy for management (Touskas, 1998; de Vaujany & Mitev, 2017; Lorino, 2018). Increasingly, managers became obsessed with representing as realistically as possible the cold, passive, external, unaffected managerial reality 'outside' the organizational and decision-making system (e.g. customer expectations, societal trends, competitors' strategies, emerging technologies, etc.). This concern for a continuous correspondence between the content of tools and the world at hand has guided and continues to guide management processes.

Most of the management techniques of the post-war period, from the strategic BCG and MCK matrices to the Porterian forces and the strategic value chain, or more recently the business model canvas or the consultants' KPIs, have thus been aimed at helping a powerful manager to make the right decision by using these techniques more or less creatively. However, this first dimension of management as a series of incompleting events reveals a paradox: the more the world is represented, the more precisely the tools and their parameters

are defined, and the more imperfections and incompleteness will appear as feedback. The more measures are fulfilled by representations, the more deviations and gaps will appear (see Figure 1). In the end, both market-oriented processes (aimed at constantly offering new products and services) and organizational processes (in search of control over the production process) feed an increasingly incomplete world of (past and future) problems, obsolete products, past and future unsatisfied desires, deficiencies and frustrations that are indistinguishable inside and outside the organization and that need to be addressed. The surface of the world becomes a series of holes to be addressed and filled by management processes.

*Insert Figure 1 around here*

In the same vein, representationalism is not only about calculation and computational devices as part of cybernetic tools. It is also about visualization (Lehtonen, 2014; Crooks, 2017). With the development of interfaces, human-computer interaction and, more generally, the digital phenomenon, images themselves are outputs of complex vectorial calculations (Hassan, 2008, 2020; de Vaujany, 2022, 2024). These computed images, less and less analogue and more and more numerical, also aim to represent the world. Representing means controlling and observing it beyond the emplaced time-space of the early twentieth-century workshops and their walls. Here too, on the way to this process of imagining the world, imperfections and incompleteness erupt again and again as gaps between ideal and real images and between real and digital time.

The other kind of incompleting event at stake in managerial processes is narrative. Like the One Thousand and One Nights told by Sheherazade, managerial capitalism constantly interrupts, suspends and renews its narrative before the next revelation. Suspense is a key driver of any internal (e.g. human resources, internal communication or project management) or external (e.g. marketing, communication or public management) change. The

shift from an industrial to a service-oriented economy has made this kind of incomplete event more narrative. Indeed, most digital services are now narrative in nature. Social media tells a story. Web browsers, search engines, enterprise resource planning, immersive techniques (metaverse) and artificial intelligence (AI; ChatGPT epitomizes this) all tell a story that both feeds and drives impatience. Their imagery, arborescence, and modes of interaction (e.g. with fingers, voices, or body movements) foster an autonomous narrative.

The corporate communications of digital companies often follow the same narrative movement. In his famous unveilings of all Apple's major innovations, Steve Jobs would always say “One more thing...” to indicate that what he was saying was not complete, that this feature was not the last, but that it called for another, which called for another. At these moments he would suspend his audience's attention before the next revelation. He also cultivated the infinity and incompleteness of his own entrepreneurial events.

Ultimately, incompleting events are fed by interruptions and the desire to continually accumulate and exploit them (see Figure 2). Not surprisingly, interruptions and suspensions are new time-spaces commodified by capitalism. Escaping them often means moving from a freemium to a premium model. Getting rid of ads on YouTube requires the user to pay for their removal. Accelerating a process in many kinds of freeware requires the user to pay for it. The rhythm of interruptions and the becoming of narrative events are now increasingly and systematically part of the algorithmic management of our world, creating a vision that is increasingly based on “systems of references” (Gasden, 1989), “embedded organizational events” (Peterson, 1999), “action nets” (Czarniawska, 2004), “indeterminate teleological events” (Schatzki, 2010), “fields of events” (Hernes, 2014), “systems of events” (cf. Roulet & Bothello, 2022), but also “systems of incompleting events” and “nexus of events and non-events”, more relevant than ever (see also Parker, 2004 on the seduction of speed).

*Insert Figure 2 around here*

Beyond representation and narration, incompleting events also occur as materializations. The eventuality of events is always concrete, but surprisingly, non-events, voids and emptiness that weave, punctuate and rhythmize capitalist processes are part of this movement (see Schumpeter's 1942). Management, as the nexus of events that gives direction and directionality to collective activity, continuously abrades, consumes and empties the world, present and future. It also opens up holes and imperfections in the present to open up market and strategic spaces in the future (see Figure 3).

*Insert Figure 3 around here*

Planned obsolescence epitomizes this trend. It appeared in practice in the 1920s before being conceptualized as a public policy tool by Robert London in 1932 (de Vaujany, 2022, 2024). His idea was quite simple: companies need to produce fragile, ephemeral objects in times of crisis and more sustainable objects in times of growth. The durability of industrial artefacts was an obvious management lever, both for corporate strategies and for public policy. We know the problems associated with this material consumption of the world: the infinite temporality of constant unveiling and revealing. This 'apocalyptic' process of management requires the infinite spatiality of our planet, which has now become unbearable (ibid).

Today, the very material happening of codes involves the emptiness-fullness paradox at the heart of this essay. Most software today is released after intensive beta testing. During these tests, many bugs are discovered. In the end, companies fix mainly those bugs that are most likely to occur (1) and whose occurrence would be most detrimental to the functioning of a system and the work of its users (2) (see Dolan & Matthews, 1993; Fine, 2022). This means that most of the identified problems are set aside; most of the imperfections revealed by beta testing remain. These imperfections will often be the implicit or explicit space for the

next strategic move and commercialization - the holes of the present and the fullness of the future. Perfectionism does not pay.

More surprisingly, most software contains features that are never used. We use about 15-20% of the functionalities of our hardware and software, and we do not use the majority of the applications downloaded in our system (Saeed and Abdinnour-Helm, 2008; Bagayogo, Lapointe and Bassellier, 2014). In the end, however, it is precisely these (useless and quickly invisible) functionalities that contribute to the purchase process and to the purchase of this or that brand instead of another brand. In particular, they contribute to sophistication and aesthetics. They give value to what is primarily an "artefact". This results in other holes and forms of emptiness, all of which are highly detrimental to our planet.

In short, the three types of incompleting events are shown in Table 1.

*Insert Table 1 around here*

Today, the ubiquitous presence of modalities 1, 2 and 3 has radical implications for management learning. Most courses on strategy, innovation, marketing and management information systems are driven by the three modalities described here. Perhaps business schools should more systematically teach critical approaches to the voids, holes and interruptions at stake in our managerial capitalism. Perhaps they should also cultivate a more resonant kind of emptiness in their pedagogical content and practices (which often overemphasize the search for events at the expense of non-events<sup>6</sup>, see Cope, 2003).

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<sup>6</sup> Organizing is full of events but also non-events, i.e. events that were expected and did not happen, events that failed to happen or almost happened (beyond any expectations). All these non-events open up new possibilities phenomenologically. But more ontologically, all events contain unrealized possibilities (Renouvier, 1876; Whitehead, 1929, 1938; Debaise, 2022; de Vaujany, 2022). And "these unrealized possibilities are the contingencies, the alternatives, the "would be's" that accompany every moment of our experience. For Whitehead [1938], this sense of fact - that a situation could have turned out differently, and that it is always possible for events to take a different turn - is a "major factor in human experience". It is with them that a genuine "culture of possibilities" is invented, a sense of the hypothetical dimensions of situations, an active attention to the possibilities that accompany every event, an anxious sensitivity to the dangers they conceal" (Debaise, 2022: 60). Both events and non-events thus open up new possibilities of experience, as part of a nexus that shares a common becoming. And at the end, "every being carries with it the traces of what it could have

Meaningful, patient hesitations and interruptions are not taught; those likely to cultivate patience, care and openness. Away from traditional teaching and the usual social life of business schools, meditation, yoga or tai chi sessions could help, as long as they do not become merely psychological and individual practices, but also contribute to a different sense of collective rhythms and dynamics.

Above all, de-placing managerial education (de Vaujany and Introna, 2023), drawing on drift and *flânerie* (de Vaujany, 2022; Aroles and Küpers, 2022), encouraging contributions to communities of inquiry beyond the walls of business schools (Lorino, 2018), fostering a “culture of possibilities” (Whitehead, 1929, 1938; Debaise, 2022) and letting go (Chia, 2010, 2014) (before and beyond control) should become central pedagogical stakes. Walking fluidly in public spaces and meeting people (Cnossen et al, 2021), living and enjoying unexpected events (de Vaujany, 2022), exploring and experimenting with non-events<sup>7</sup> (de Vaujany, 2022), thinking about what could have been and what could still be in all entrepreneurial and managerial events (Whitehead, 1929, 1938; Debaise, 2022), could lead to different learning processes for management education. Events and non-events could be depolarized. Interruptions and suspensions could have a different value here. They could be part of a work of resistance and co-subjection between and against corporate events. Hopefully, these movements will be very difficult to commodify and impossible to control. One reason why some managerial institutions are unlikely to subscribe to the views defended here.

Similarly, the teaching of Asian or African philosophies or wisdom could also be a powerful way of valorizing non-events and emptiness as part of the world and its

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been, the marks of the alternatives that could, at any moment of its existence, have steered it in a different direction. Every being carries with it, in its very materiality, the traces of the possibilities that its existence has discarded.” (Ibid: 61). They are ‘propositional’ for all subsequent events, as Whitehead (1938) points out. But management education continues to emphasize events rather than non-events and, above all, separates events from non-events. Negativity is set aside.

<sup>7</sup> See in particular the non-event of the likely encounter between Saint-Exupéry, Burnham and Wiener in chapter 4 of de Vaujany (2022, 2024).

cosmological organization (Dastur, 2020). Indian philosophy thus illuminates, among other things, the phenomenon of Śūnyatā, often translated as 'emptiness', 'voidness' or 'nothingness' (Garfield, 1990; Miller, 2009). The core experience of our world is one of relationality and interdependence. Nothing is, and our being is nothingness (see also Nishida, 1978, 1993). Only emptiness is the core substance of an experience without substance. Our world is constantly changing, unfolding as an infinite process of becoming beyond any possibility of knowledge. Without a “self” (defined here as a substance observing and praising the world), one can simply abandon one's vain attempt to be and instead feel the flow; one can become the flow of all that is happening indiscernibly inside and outside of experience<sup>8</sup>. A profound “semantic transformation” can occur in this direction (Bosma, Chia and Fouweather, 2016). Something beyond experience.

Obviously, management education, as a place, will never make sense of this non-place and inter-temporality (de Vaujany and Introna, 2023). So, let's open up managerial learning and education beyond the institutions that currently 'contain' it. What a great challenge to take up for ML community...

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<sup>8</sup> Phenomenologies of the late Heidegger (see Dallmayr, 1992) or the late Merleau-Ponty (see Berman et al., 2009) offer intuitions very close to Indian philosophy on the issue of voids and emptiness, for example, with the notion of the abyssal ground in Heidegger's work or the concept of flesh in Merleau-Ponty.

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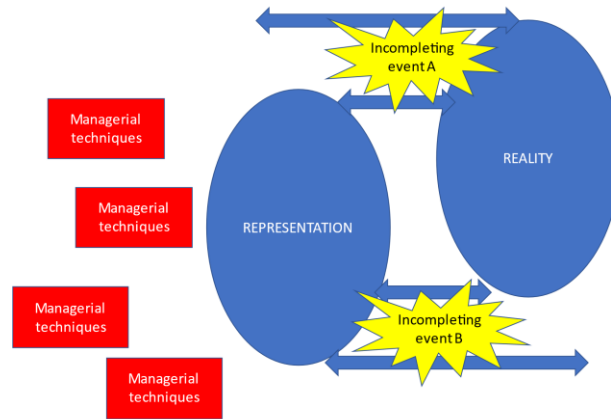
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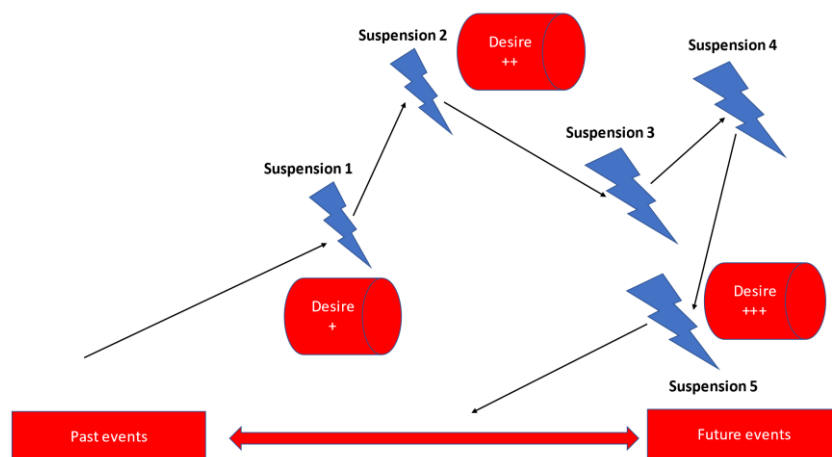
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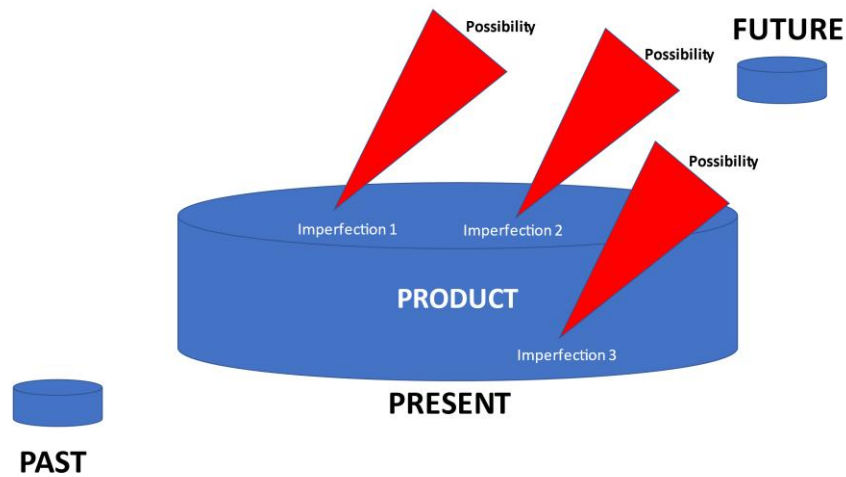
## Figures and tables



- **Figure 1: representationalism, type 1 of incompleting event**



- **Figure 2: Management process as narration, type 2 of incompleting event**



• **Figure 3: Materialization, type 3 of incompleting event**

<b>Types of incompleting events</b>	<b>Type 1: managing via reliable representations</b>	<b>Type 2: managing through dramatic narrations</b>	<b>Type 3: managing through valuable materialization</b>
Nature of incompleteness	The greater the concern for reality, the higher the level of incompleteness of the experience 'perceived'	Interruptions, ruptures, cliffhangers, suspense, unsatisfied curiosity, frustration, lack	Obsolescence, bugs, security failures, recycling and offering unused functionalities
Telos	Being immersive, describing the reality of needs, performance	Cultivating desire and fear	Planning obsolescence, producing interruptions, holes and voids for the next innovation
Control practices	Large scale production, project management, redundant modes of innovation, multiple evaluation (evolutionary modes of assessment)	Propaganda, surveillance and control of behaviors, narrative-grounded-control (play and co-create with us the right narrative), people become pure narratives	Techniques of planned obsolescence, large scale experimentations
<b>The infinite temporality of managerial apocalypses involves the infinite spatiality of our earth</b>			

• **Table 1: Three types of incompleting events at stake in organizing**